

The Guardian

Jasper Johns Flags I print worth at least \$1m donated to British Museum

Acquisition is one of the most valuable modern prints ever donated to the museum

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Jasper Johns: Flags I Photograph: Jasper Johns/British Museum

An American flag artwork worth at least \$1m (£770,000) and made by one of the world's most celebrated living artists has been donated to the British Museum.

With just days to go before the US presidential election, the museum announced that an edition of Jasper Johns's *Flags I* (1973) had been gifted to them by the New York-based collectors Johanna and Leslie Garfield.

It is one of the most valuable modern prints ever donated to the museum and curators said

they were thrilled.

“This is a hugely important print,” said Catherine Daunt, a curator of modern and contemporary art. “It is beautiful, complex and technically a great achievement. We now have 16 works by Johns in the collection, all of which are outstanding in their own way, but visually this is undoubtedly the most spectacular.”

The print was a highlight of the museum’s 2017 American Dream exhibition, used on tube adverts and the catalogue cover.

“It came to symbolise not just that exhibition but our growing and very good collection of American prints at the British Museum,” said Daunt. “At that point we didn’t own it ourselves so it is fantastic to now say that is part of the collection.”

Johns’s print was technically complicated, said Daunt. It shows the flag on both sides, with one having a matt finish and the other gloss.

It was produced in an edition of 65. Three other impressions of the print have been sold for more than \$1m at auction in recent years. Christie’s in New York sold one for \$1.6m in 2016.

The edition given to the British Museum, which is home to the national collection of prints and drawings, is in near-perfect condition and is likely to be of the same value.

Johns, aged 90, has used the American flag as a repeated motif since the 1950s. He told one interviewer the idea had come to him in a dream when he was 24.

Some people have interpreted it as a political statement, but Johns has always insisted that it is what it is: a flag. It is up to the viewer to take away what they want from it.

“He was interested in the flag being an image that people saw but didn’t always look at, he felt it was something that the mind already knows,” said Daunt. “He knew it was a familiar image and he wanted to play with that.”

The flag print is currently part of a three-venue tour of Spain delayed by the pandemic for the American Dream show. It will return to the museum once that finishes.

Hartwig Fischer, the director of the British Museum, thanked the Garfields and the American Friends of the British Museum for the gift. “American art, like American politics, has always had an influence far beyond the borders of the USA.

“As the country heads to the polls in just a few days’ time, this important acquisition reminds us of the global influence of the United States and how crucial it is for an institution like the British Museum to collect contemporary works from America.”

America has chosen Joe Biden ...

... to be the 46th president of the United States. The American people have disavowed four years of a thuggish presidency. They have chosen decency over dysfunction, fact over fiction, truth over lies, and empathy over cruelty. They have rejected the last four years of ugliness, divisiveness, racism and sustained assaults on constitutional democracy. And even as Trump plots legal challenges and levies unfounded claims of fraud, it is clear America is moving on.

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