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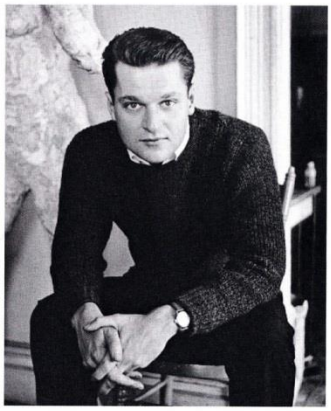
JOHN ASHBERY
1927–2017



RICHARD DEMING

DECADES AGO, Harold Bloom declared that after the death of Wallace Stevens, in 1955, we entered the "age of Ashbery." That may be one of the bolder pronouncements made by a famously bold literary critic, but there remains an undeniable truth to it, as one can encounter John Ashbery's poems seemingly anywhere in the world—from Winnipeg to Berlin to Beijing.

Born in 1927 in Rochester, New York, Ashbery became the most influential poet of his generation. Like his New York School confrere Frank O'Hara, Ashbery possessed a deep affinity for music, art, and film, and indeed he was arguably one of the finest ekphrastic poets to have ever lived. His first volume of poems, *Some Trees*, published in 1956, was selected as a winner of the Yale Younger Poets Prize by W. H. Auden. In collections such as *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), and *Three Poems* (1972), he honed his gift for balancing wit and insight, élan and melancholia; yet it was the 1975 collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award, that established Ashbery as a writer of incalculable significance.

Seemingly everyone who met Ashbery commented on his memory, dazzling as it was not only for its facility with dates, literary bons mots, and historical details, but also for its seemingly effortless recall of such things as forgotten Hollywood films, vintage wallpaper, and radio advertisements from the 1930s. In conversation and in his poems, he was as comfortable quoting Charles Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* in French as he was Edgar G. Ulmer's 1957 schlock movie *Daughter of Dr. Jekyll*. From his capacious memory, Ashbery fashioned an inclusive poetics that accommodated all levels of culture. Everything from Disney cartoons and film noir to the lyric poems of the sixteenth-century British writer Thomas Campion and the Surrealism of Giorgio de Chirico flowed into his work, along with a disarming sense of surprise that these elements could all be brought to coexist. Ashbery seemingly thought with the whole of culture.

To a certain degree, his range arose from a restless curiosity that allowed him to find delight in combining wide-ranging materials, images, and forms of discourse, but this curiosity also had epistemological and ethical implications. Ashbery once characterized his poetics as a means of inclusivity: "My idea is to democratize all forms of expression, an idea which comes to me from afar, perhaps from Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*—the idea that both the most demotic and the most elegant forms of expression deserve equally to be taken into account." Thus, an Ashbery poem typically shows that, however useful distinctions between high and pop culture may or may not be, the entire spectrum fashions a person's consciousness and shapes his, her, or their subjectivity. "Most of my poems are about the experience of experience," the poet once explained, adding, "The particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through me." His poems display the sheer delight of discovery guided by curiosity, yet they also often catalogue details to form an archive of impressions and realizations not hidebound or set in amber but responsive to new, unfolding possibilities brought about by the imagination's ability to juxtapose and cleave disparate materials. One also sees this in the visual collages that he became increasingly devoted to producing. Over the past decade, many of these pieces have been exhibited at New York's Tibor de Nagy Gallery and will be collected in *John Ashbery: They Knew What They Wanted*, a volume to be published by Rizzoli this coming spring.

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From top: **John Ashbery, New York, 1957**. Photo: Harry Redl. **John Ashbery, *P.K.*, 2015**, collage, 10 × 8¼".

Across the entire body of Ashbery's work, what remains ever luminous is the way in which art itself, whatever form it may take, imparts a deep pleasure to its audience in the act of attention. The legacy of the age of Ashbery is perhaps the recognition that the imagination is a synthesizing organ that creates a habitable world. If Ashbery's poems never provide lessons or morals, they nonetheless constitute a consistent series of shocks and revelations of complex wit, pathos, intimacy, and intimation—such stuff as our human lives are made on. Now that the poet himself is gone, the poems will have to guide us. Is this enough? It's what we have. □

RICHARD DEMING TEACHES AT YALE UNIVERSITY. HIS NEW BOOK, *ART OF THE ORDINARY*, IS FORTHCOMING FROM CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS.