



Raymond Jonson  
American, 1891 - 1982

# *Variations on a Rhythm-- U*

1933

oil on canvas

overall: 83.8 x 73.7 cm (33 x 29 in.)

framed: 91.4 x 81.3 x 4.7 cm (36 x 32 x 1 7/8 in.)

Inscription: lower center: 33 / Jonson

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert Fishman 1988.72.1

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## ENTRY

A pioneer in American abstract painting, Raymond Jonson studied at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts before attending the Art Institute of Chicago. While at the Academy he was deeply influenced by the Swedish-born painter B. J. O. Nordfeldt, a teacher who was sympathetic to progressive art. When the Armory Show went on view in Chicago in 1913, Jonson responded to the works of the European avant-garde art and, in particular, the proto-abstractions of the American painter Arthur Dove, which proved crucial to his development. In 1924 he became disillusioned with urban life and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he devoted himself to painting, organizing exhibitions, and teaching at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. He founded the Transcendental Painting Group of abstract artists in 1938.

During the late 1920s Jonson began to paint increasingly abstract views of the New Mexico landscape. In 1929 he continued the gradual process of freeing himself from the conventions of representational art by embarking on his Growth Variant and Digits series. The 10 paintings in the latter series consisted of numerical subjects chosen because, to quote Jonson's biographer Ed Garman, "they did not come out of a reactive emotion and therefore offered the possibility of freer action in reference to invention and organization of the painting." [1] Each of the compositions features an arabic numeral personified by an abstraction of the human figure set amid an assemblage of forms that were variations of its design components.

The Digits are the direct predecessors of the 28 pictures based on letterforms in the Variations on a Rhythm series that Johnson executed from 1930 to 1936. *Variations on a Rhythm--U* is typical of the works in the sequence and exemplifies Jonson's ongoing efforts to transform familiar, conventional symbols, such as numbers and letters, into pure abstractions.

The central, dominant element of the composition is a stylized, silver letter U surrounded by designs that resonate with and reassert its shape. While there may be no specific sources for these essentially abstract elements, their crisp, precisely defined forms are suggestive of machinery. Jonson's Variations lack the anthropomorphic quality of the Digits, and thus represent a further move away from representational painting.

As the title of the series suggests, rhythm was integral to what Jonson called the "unifying principle" in art. Garman explained that Jonson defined the term rhythm as "the flow of order through a painting." He went on to discuss the role of rhythm in Jonson's works as follows:

The work of art presents itself to him as a sensation of rhythmic order. Rhythm results from relationships. Flow and movement depend on the various ways in which relationships are established through the use of space, shapes, colors, lines, edges, and contrasts. . . . *Rhythm* is ordered variations such as intervals, spacing, recurrence, and regularities, but it is also built of opposing forces whose interplay can alternate tension and release. Hence there is a dynamic contribution to the overall aliveness of the work and a contribution to the integration of the unity of the work in its entirety. [2]

Influenced by pioneer abstractionist Wassily Kandinsky's chromatic theory, Jonson, in addition to his understanding of rhythm, believed that the color of each painting in the Variations on a Rhythm series had its own emotional significance. Although subjugated to the dictates of design, color (in this case the unusual mauve tone) was intended to serve an emotionally expressive purpose throughout the series.

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

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## NOTES

- [1] Ed Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter* (Albuquerque, NM, 1976), 80.
- [2] Ed Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter* (Albuquerque, NM, 1976), 138.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined painting was executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric. It is still stretched onto its original stretcher, although the stretcher was modified by the artist. [1] The canvas was prepared with an off-white ground; however, it is uncertain whether it was applied by the artist. Infrared reflectography revealed no changes or alterations to the design beneath the paint, indicating that Jonson planned out his composition with extreme care. It seems that a pencil was used to outline the composition, as there are pencil lines that extend from beneath the paint visible at the edges of the work. The painting was executed using abrupt, textured brushstrokes of heavily impastoed paint, with the exception of the circular elements, where the brushwork is continuous as it follows the curves and arcs. No X-radiographs were taken, but no textural indications exist on the surface of the painting that would indicate that extensive artist's changes lie below. The painting was coated with a thin, evenly glossy, clear layer of synthetic resin varnish, applied by the artist in 1976. [2] The painting is in excellent condition with no areas of significant loss.

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] Four long, thin strips of wood have been adhered along the inner edges of the stretcher members.
- [2] Written on a label adhered to the backing board: "This work has been under glass ever since it was painted and is in perfect condition. For various reasons and the nuisance of the glass I have now removed it and sprayed the work with matte Soluvar, an acrylic varnish. In the event of simple

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cleaning use lukewarm distilled water and if necessary, pure soap suds and rinse thoroughly with distilled water. For a major cleaning and restoration remove the Soluvar with mineral spirits or turpentine. This work should be done only by someone experienced in such work. Jonson [signed] November 1976.”

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## PROVENANCE

Purchased from the artist by Dr. and Mrs. Robert Fishman, New Mexico, and Keswick, Virginia; gift 1988 to NGA.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 215, repro.

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