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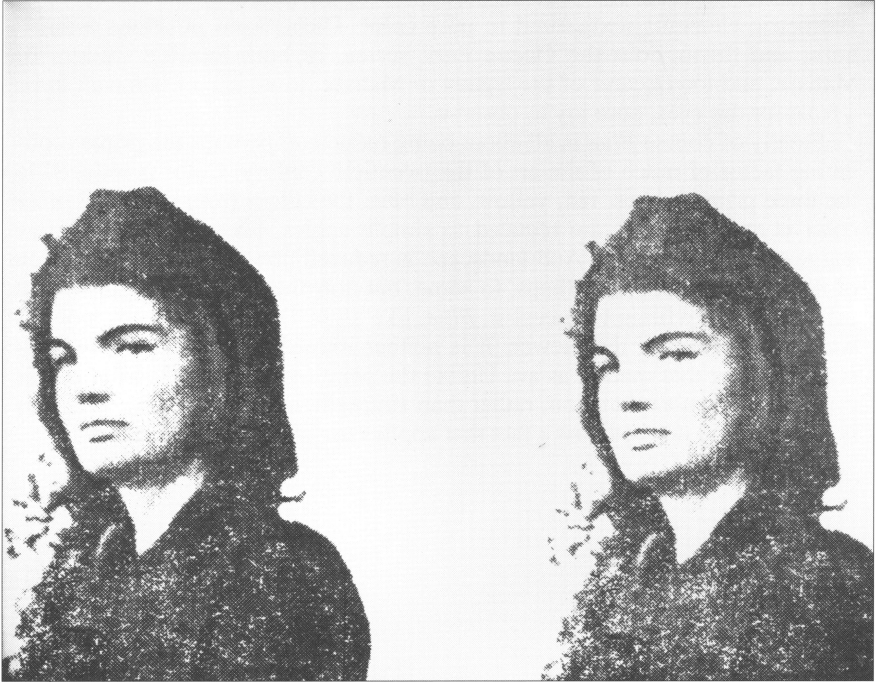


Plate 1

Andy Warhol, *Jackie II*, 1966. Photosilkscreen, 24 x 30 inches.  
Colby College Museum of Art. Museum purchase from Jere  
Abbott Acquisitions Fund.

## Andy Warhol's Jackie II (1966)

By DAVID M. LUBIN

THE NEOCLASSICAL AURA of Jacqueline Kennedy at the funeral of her slain husband, President John F. Kennedy, was inscribed into the history of modern art by a most unlikely figure, the pop artist Andy Warhol. Starting soon after the assassination and returning to the project again and again over the next few years, Warhol produced the Jackie series, a large number of black-and-white or monotone silk-screened acrylic paintings of the president's widow. Colby's screenprint *Jackie II* (Plate 1, left) from 1966, belongs to this series of single and multiple images of the widowed first lady.<sup>1</sup>

The Jackie paintings and prints derive from eight separate wire-service photos of Jacqueline Kennedy taken over the course of the November 22-25, 1963, weekend and cropped by the artist to headshots. Two of these news photos, one from immediately after the Kennedys' arrival by Air Force One at the Dallas airfield and the other from the presidential motorcade, show a beaming and happy Jackie Kennedy, her face the essence of youthful joy. The rest depict a woman devastated but resolute as she witnesses the swearing in of her husband's successor on Air Force One, waits on the steps of the White House for her husband's casket to be carried to the Capitol, marches in the funeral procession, and stands at his grave.

Warhol sometimes used one shot alone, multiplying it; at other times he mixed different shots in varying combinations and arranged them in a horizontal sequence, like a comic strip (*Jackie Triptych* (Plate 2, p. 376), or in a grid (*Four Jackies*, *Sixteen Jackies*, *Twenty Jackies*, and so forth). *Nine Jackies* resembles a tick-tack-toe board in which a diagonal line of three smiling "before" Jackies triumphs over the gloomy pairs of "after" Jackies. *Jackie II* reproduces the shot of Jackie on the White House steps, with all background information removed. The first lady's face, turned in noble three-quarter profile, has been optically enlarged by Warhol to emphasize the grainy, newsprint-like quality of the medium he has reproduced. He then doubles the headshot, placing the two side by side, the one to the right even less sharp and defined than its counterpart. Both are covered in a mauve wash that feels appropriately funereal.

The first lady's stoic deportment at the time of her personal and the nation's collective grief for the fallen leader reminded some observers of the

1. The following material is drawn from David M. Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003) 197-201.

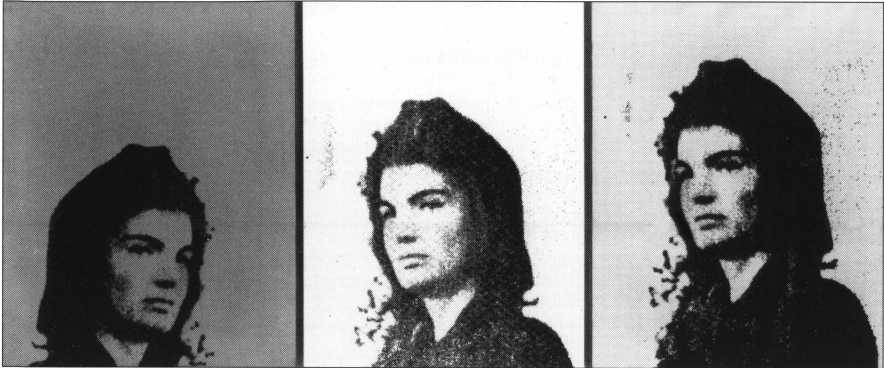


Plate 2

Andy Warhol, *Jackie Triptych*, 1964. Silkscreen on  
canvas, three frames, 21 x 49 inches.  
Ludwig Collection, Cologne.

classical heroine Agrippina described by the first-century Roman historian Tacitus. Agrippina was the wife of the brilliant young general Germanicus who was assassinated while the couple resided in a foreign land. "Her misery," Tacitus relates, "was unendurable," but this did not prevent the widow from making the arduous journey back to the Italian mainland with remarkable courage and dignity: "Agrippina, with her two children, stepped off the ship, her eyes lowered, the urn of death in her hands." Though she maintained her decorum, "the cries of men and women, relatives and strangers, blended in a single groan.... Even people from towns far away came to meet the procession, offering sacrifices and erecting altars to the dead man's soul, and showing their grief by tears and lamentations."<sup>2</sup>

In London in 1768, the precocious young Quaker artist from Pennsylvania, Benjamin West, envisioned the scene described by Tacitus. His *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (Plate 3, p. 378) is one of the earliest examples of neoclassicism, the artistic style that swept European intellectual circles in the second half of the eighteenth century. West contributed to the emerging style an emphasis on archaeological research and historical accuracy in the imaginary re-creation of scenes from the classical world.

Yet the germinal neoclassicism of *Agrippina* goes beyond historical accuracy and sculptural style. Like Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Tacitus's *Annals*, West's painting offers moral instruction. It provides a "secular sermon in paint," according to the art historian Jules Prown: "On one level the picture is a tribute to a hero who has sacrificed his life for his country—*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. But more importantly it dramatizes the admirable performance of Agrippina carrying her husband's ashes in a cinerary urn and followed by her grieving children. Her courage, stoicism and dignity in the face of tragic circumstances, normative behavior in classical times, is presented here to inspire emulation."<sup>3</sup>

Two centuries after West, amid the neoclassical architectural splendor of the American capital, the Kennedy funeral proceedings also embodied the classical ethos. When Professor Jules Prown lectured on West to his Yale undergraduates shortly after JFK's funeral, students wept when *Agrippina* appeared on the screen, so clearly did it echo the events they had all watched transpire on television.<sup>4</sup>

During its heyday in the early sixties, pop art blatantly avoided high moral purpose (whether humanist, socialist, or avant-gardist), rejected historicism in favor of immersion in the consumer-culture present, and reveled in the bright, splashy colors and forms of comic books, movies, magazine advertising, commercial packaging, and supermarket display. All the same, the Jackie paintings are neoclassical in that unlike most other instances of pop art, including

2. Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. and intro. Michael Grant, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959) 117-18.

3. Jules David Prown, *American Painting: From Its Beginnings to the Armory Show* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980) 39.

4. Prown relayed the *Agrippina* anecdote in personal conversation.



Plate 3

Benjamin West, *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus*, 1768. Oil on canvas.

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Gift of Louis M. Rabinowitz.

Warhol's, they depict a morally significant historical occasion with emotional restraint, muted tones, and architectonic control (the arrangement of the various headshots into balanced grids and schema). Moreover, insofar as the artist turned to news photographs as the basis for his depictions, he anchored his work, like any good eighteenth-century neoclassicist, in "historical" research.

Whether the various Jackie paintings tell a didactic story or merely juxtapose iconic images of a celebrity remains a matter of critical debate. Warhol's own account of his reaction to the assassination suggests that he was emotionally detached from the national trauma and did not aim to produce an edifying response to it:

When President Kennedy was shot that fall, I heard the news over the radio while I was alone painting in my studio. I don't think I missed a stroke. I wanted to know what was going on out there, but that was the extent of my reaction.... I'd been thrilled having Kennedy as president; he was handsome, young, smart—but it didn't bother me that much that he was dead.

To this bold assertion of personal indifference about the killing he adds: "What bothered me was the way the television and radio were programming everybody to feel so sad."<sup>5</sup> That statement supports the view of some critics that pop art in general, and Warhol's in particular, was concerned not with the "real" world but rather with the mass media's conventional and repetitive representations ("simulations") of that world.

From this perspective, the Jackie series is not about Jackie Kennedy or her husband's assassination, or more enduring subjects, such as sorrow, grief, isolation, and mortality, but about the sign systems by which we communicate and in which we are enmeshed. That is, Warhol didn't paint Jackie Kennedy in mourning. He painted wire service news photos of her in mourning. In some of the works in the series, the black-and-white panels appear smudged or blurry, reminiscent of newsprint. The blocking of multiple individual panels over a larger surface area calls to mind, in various instances, a celluloid film strip, a comic book, or even *Life* magazine's layout in grids across double-paged spreads, selected frame enlargements from Abraham Zapruder's inadvertent home movie footage of the assassination.

Some panels in the series emit a cool electric blue glow, giving them the aura of a television screen. Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964), published at the time Warhol was painting these works, expounded on the inherently "cool" qualities of TV as a medium of communication. The assorted Jackie panels, stacked up in a grid of some sixteen or twenty headshots, resemble a display of TVs in an electronics store, with the sets tuned to four or five different stations, broadcasting the same celebrity, each from a different distance. Unlike cinema, the medium of television favors medium-range shots and close-ups. These best suit its purpose of eliminating extraneous visual information and concentrating the viewer's attention on either the head and shoulders or the face of the actor, newscaster, or newsmaker in question.

5. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 60.

The Jackie series supports the view that Warhol's true subject was not *history* (something that relies on the "long shot" of context) but *news* (which banishes history to "background" and concentrates on the here and now).

One of the first and most complex assemblages in the Jackie series, the only one to use all eight of the prototype news photos and possibly the only one that Warhol himself arranged, is called *Jackie (The Week That Was)* (Plate 4, right).<sup>6</sup> The parenthetical title, which may have been added by art dealer Leo Castelli, alludes to the trendy BBC television program of the early 1960s, *That Was The Week That Was*, which premiered in a domestic version on American television in the fall of 1963. *TW3*, as it was called, used a faux-TV-news format to satirize the news of the week. *Jackie (The Week That Was)* is not in any discernible way satirical. Nevertheless it too constitutes a sort of news wrap-up, giving viewers the vertiginous sensation of having absorbed four days of nonstop newspaper, radio, and TV coverage and chatter with the same handful of obsessively rebroadcast images pinging off the walls of their minds.<sup>7</sup>

For some viewers, however, the Jackie paintings belie Warhol's blasé response to the death of JFK and his scoffing at the collective grief "programmed" by the mass media. The poet, curator, and art critic Frank O'Hara said of one arrangement of Jackie paintings: "It's absolutely moving and beautiful. Not sarcastic, and it's not some sort of stunt. It really is a complete, compelling work when shown in the way [Warhol] wanted it to be shown."<sup>8</sup> Describing the Jackie paintings as "elegiacal," David Bourdon, a onetime member of Warhol's inner circle, suggests that they attest to the artist's deep emotional investment in the Kennedy tragedy:

By cropping in on Mrs. Kennedy's face, Warhol emphasized the heavy emotional toll upon her during those tragic closing days of November. The so-called Jackie portraits, far from displaying any indifference on Warhol's part to the assassination, clearly reveal how struck he was by her courage during the ordeal.... The mixed multiple portraits often make viewers feel as if they were walking along a modern-day Via Dolorosa as they relive the First Lady's agony in a new, secular version of the Stations of the Cross.<sup>9</sup>

In the *Jackie Triptych* Warhol positions a three-quarter profile shot of the young widow low in the first panel, reverses and centers it in the second, and elevates it in the third, implying a gradual lifting up, an "ascension of the Virgin," that would be in keeping with his devotions as a practicing Roman Catholic. This literal rising of the images in this sequence enacts the figurative change in Jackie's status in the eyes of most transfixed viewers.<sup>10</sup> In Colby's *Jackie II*, however, something of an opposite effect occurs. As the double image is read from left to right, the first lady, or, more specifically,

6. Sidra Stich, *Made in the U.S.A.: An Americanization of Modern Art, the Fifties and Sixties*, exh. cat. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987) 206 n. 23.

7. For a critical assessment of the Jackie series along these lines, see Keith Tester, *Media, Culture and Morality* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 109-16.

8. Frank O'Hara, quoted in Victor Bockris, *Warhol* (New York: Da Capo, 1997) 181.

9. David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York: Abrams, 1989) 181.

10. Klaus Honnef, *Warhol, 1928-1987: Commerce into Art*, trans. Carole Fahy and I. Burns (Cologne: Taschen, 1990) 66.





Plate 4

Andy Warhol, *Jackie (The Week That Was)*, 1964. Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, sixteen panels.

Walker Art Center. Minneapolis, Art Center Acquisitions Fund.

her effigy, seems to diminish in clarity and resolution, suggesting perhaps an emotional or spiritual deterioration, or at least attenuation of strength, over the course of the long, traumatic weekend.

To see the paintings this way, as authentic expressions of grief and explorations of its effects rather than coolly ironic glosses on the mass media and the cult of celebrity, accords with biographical evidence that Warhol, despite his hip posturing in public, was privately undone by the weekend's events. John Giorno, an intimate friend, rushed over to Warhol's house as soon as he learned of the assassination. "We sat on the couch watching the live TV coverage from Dallas," recalls Giorno. "I started crying and Andy started crying.... Andy kept saying, 'I don't know what it means!'"<sup>11</sup>

Warhol, whether distressed over the assassination and prompted by empathy for the widow or cerebrally detached, motivated only by his ongoing fascination with death, fame, and the consumer culture, left a series of paintings and assemblages that, in their icy classicism, constitute the most complex and provocative American art to emerge from the shooting in Dallas. Other notable artists of Warhol's generation, among them Wallace Berman, Elaine de Kooning, Audrey Flack, Ed Paschke, and, above all, Robert Rauschenberg, used ready-made images of one or both Kennedys or Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby as the basis for works of modern art, but it was Warhol, in the Jackie series, who most powerfully conveyed the piercing trauma of that November weekend.<sup>12</sup>

In later years Warhol became acquainted with "Jackie O," by then the chief love object and quarry of the paparazzi, and they were even spotted together at Studio 54. To those who cherished Camelot, this was a sorry case of tragedy giving way to banality. But from another point of view, Camelot itself was a banal construct, and Warhol's multiplication of the beautiful widow's grieving countenance into large decorative arrangements simply kept faith with the media cult of celebrity that her late husband had so assiduously nurtured.

11. John Giorno, quoted in Bockris, 186.

12. Art Simon, *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), examines some of the art of the sixties and seventies that was produced in response to the Kennedy assassination. On the social and psychological implications of Warhol's forms, see Thomas Crow, "Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol," *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 49-65, and Hal Foster, "Death in America," *Who Is Andy Warhol?*, ed. Colin MacCabe with Mark Francis and Peter Wollen (London and Pittsburgh: British Film Institute and Andy Warhol Museum, 1997) 117-30.