Screamin' Jay Hawkins is a vibrantly colored image of the well-known rhythm-and-blues performer of the same name. Artist Karl Wirsum, whose works are characterized by flat areas of bold color, geometric shapes, organic patterns, and symmetry, created the work as a tribute to one of his favorite musicians. Hawkins, born Jalacy J. Hawkins (1929–2000), is best known for his outrageous attire, theatrical stage antics, and screaming lyrics. His music created a charged vibrancy of sound and imagery that radiated through his listeners. Wirsum wanted to evoke the same kind of wild energy in his painting that he experienced when listening to the music of the legendary singer.

Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’s energetic lines, repeated forms, and bold colors merge together to form an active composition. It resembles a circus poster, with playful details, brilliant color, and powerful design elements. The main figure—presumably Hawkins himself—stands frontally with arms and legs outstretched, appearing at once as a monster and a comic superhero. On his face, two eyes in the shape of fried eggs stare unblinkingly forward. His mouth appears open and trembling, as if an enormous sound vibrates outward from within. The figure’s body is made up of a large abstract, geometric form, perhaps a reference to the cape that Hawkins sometimes wore as a prop during concerts. The jagged, bright yellow edges of this shape seem to suggest frenetic bodily movement. His hairy legs end in funny rounded, circus-clown-like shoes, which may have been modeled on an actual pair of shoes the artist found in a thrift store. The figure’s outstretched arms, with patterned bands of color and sharp claw-like fingers, resemble the human and animal figures seen on ancient vessels from South America, such as the Art Institute’s Nazca ceramic vessel from Peru (see page 81).

Floating around the figure are dark amoeba-shaped blobs. These large organic shapes may represent drops of sweat and refer to a phrase another famous singer, James Brown, used to describe his own plentiful perspiration. Brown released a song and album entitled “Cold Sweat” the year before Wirsum painted this image. Between the large figure’s legs stands a small man who rep-
resents the singer's adoring audience. Encased in a black rubber suit and labeled "Armpitrubber," this man is protected from the massive drops of sweat flying from the singer's body.

**WIRSUM'S ARTISTIC INFLUENCES**

Much of the inspiration for Wirsum's paintings comes from the artist's experiences as a young child and art student. He credits a comic strip with spurring him to get involved with art in the first place. As a child, Wirsum was hospitalized with a skull fracture, and his father, who was not an artist but created objects like cards and silhouette cutouts, created a comic strip about elves to cheer him up. This homemade comic made him want to become an artist.11 Wirsum soon began attending Saturday classes at the Art Institute, and in 1957 he enrolled as a student at the School of Art Institute. Many of the works that Wirsum saw in the Art Institute as a child and student influenced the shapes, forms, and ideas in his own paintings.

In the 1960s, Wirsum traveled to Mexico and Europe, journeys he also credits with influencing the forms, textures, and colors in his works. In Mexico, he was drawn to the decorated and brightly painted storefronts, shop signs, cars, buses, and houses, whose colors make an appearance in his Hawkins painting.12 During his travels in Europe, he was drawn to the highly stylized figures in Byzantine art—art from the Byzantine Empire (Turkey and surrounding Eastern European nations during the years 500 through 1500). In this type of art, human figures are depicted in flatly rendered color and are draped in fabrics that do not reveal the volume of the body underneath. This influence is evident in the artist's simple, geometric representations of human and animal forms. During his travels, Wirsum was also struck by the fact the European women did not shave under their arms, a curious fact that inspired him to create a series of works in which he painted or glued tufts of hair into the armpits of the figures he painted. This may also have influenced his choice to name Hawkins's sidekick "Armpitrubber." Wirsum also draws inspiration from a vast collection of popular images he keeps in his studio, including jigsaw puzzles, medical journals, metal toys, canvas awnings, striped pajamas, and comics. For him, observation of the ordinary reveals the extraordinary, and many of his works begin as sketches of shapes that come together later to create full compositions. The shape formed by a piece of broccoli might become a hand. Drawing that shape and saving it for later is like writing a reminder note. Wirsum has a collection of sketches of heads, arms, legs, and hands that he uses to assemble into various configurations. When looking at Screamin' Jay Hawkins, it is possible to see how the composition might have been formed through the comparison of separate parts.

Wirsum's painting technique is equally based on accumulation. He creates this painting in a similar manner to printmaking (see page 29)—one layer of color on top of another. For Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Wirsum began by painting his entire canvas yellow and then layered other colors on top until shapes formed. The bottom layer of yellow shines through the above layers of blue, green, and red, creating a vibrancy of color as well as design.

**WORD-PLAYS, VISUAL PUNS, AND THE CHICAGO IMAGISTS**

Wirsum, who has lived in Chicago most of his life and is currently an instructor at the School of the Art Institute, is primarily associated with a 1960s group of artists known as the Chicago Imagists and was part of small group within the movement called the Hairy Who. This group included other Chicago artists Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Suellen Rocca, James Falconer, and Art Green. Wirsum's works, like those of his colleagues, draw from popular sources such as cartoons and comic books. Words and puns also play an important role in their compositions. Love of the absurd characterized the Hairy Who, whose collaborative exhibitions at the Hyde Park Art Center between 1966 and 1968 demonstrated the same playfulness. The shows included catalogues in the form of comic books, large tags with ridiculous prices hanging from the artworks, and gallery spaces dressed up to look like gaudy hotel lobbies, complete with cheap gift-store items.
Several word-play and visual puns are present in the image of Hawkins. The dark drops of sweat play on James Brown's phrase “cold sweat” which is usually meant to describe the sensation of being frightened. “Armpitrubber” refers to the origins of this sweat as well as the material that might protect you from it. Another detail playing on word and image appears at the top of the painting. Two toothed, prehistoric-looking green jays (a reference to the singer’s name) flank the words “because is in your mind.” The phrase references lyrics from Hawkins’s song “I Put a Spell on You,” in which he wails the line “because your mine.” Wirsum’s spin on the phrase reflects his own interest in humorous, thoughtful, yet unconsciously created images.

Like Doris Lee, (see page 19) Wirsum won the Frank G. Logan Prize from the Art Institute for Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, which he painted in 1968. Two years later the image appeared on the cover of a record album entitled Because is in Your Mind (Armpitrubber) by Hawkins, a fact that points out Wirsum’s close connection to the worlds of both popular media and fine art.

“I Put a Spell on You”

Hawkins was an eccentric celebrity who promoted himself as a voodoo man and master of macabre performances. His most well-known song is “I Put a Spell on You,” (1956) a work that was banned by several radio stations.15

I put a spell on you because you’re mine
You had better stop the things that you do
I ain’t lying, no I ain’t lying
I just can’t stand it babe
The way you’re always running round
I just can’t stand it
The way you always put me down
I put a spell on you because you’re mine, you’re mine, you’re mine
I put a spell on you because you’re mine
Classroom Applications
Transparency 6

Karl Wirsum. Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, 1968

1. Heroines and Heroes
Karl Wirsum took ideas for his artworks from popular sources like comic books, movie ads, and circus posters. Ask students to identify the details of the painting that remind them of these things. Have students create a picture of their favorite comic book or movie hero using bold colors and lines like Karl Wirsum.

State Learning Standards: 25A, 26A, 26B

2. Shake, Rattle, and Roll
Engage students in a discussion about the five senses. If you could touch the figures and forms in the painting (e.g. shapes on the left and right sides; Screamin’ Jay’s face, legs, hands, and armpits), how do you think they would feel? How did the artist create that sensation?

Looking at the painting, predict what Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’s music sounds like. Ask students whether they would want to see him perform. Why or why not? Play samples of Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’s music. Ask the students to move to the rhythm of the music in a freestyle fashion. Does the music’s rhythm match the boldness of the colors and shapes and the symmetrical design of the figure? Are the sounds in the music loud or soft? Does the rhythm repeat itself in equal time? Does the music make your body quiver like the image in the painting?

State Learning Standards: 25A, 25B

3. I Am a Star
Instruct students to create their own CD cover or movie poster using themselves as the central figure. Tell students to include words, details and colors that represent them. Make sure students give their CD or movie a title and include it on their final product. Have students write a critical review of their movie or CD, based on samples from newspapers or magazines. Display the artworks and reviews together around the classroom.

State Learning Standards: 3C, 26B

4. Inspire Me
During Wirsum’s years of training at the School of the Art Institute, he had the opportunity to closely study many artworks in the Art Institute. He used some of the styles, colors, and subjects he found in these artworks in his own paintings and drawings. He later traveled to Mexico, where he was influenced by the
colorful work of artists who weren’t formally trained. Following that experience, he traveled to Europe and saw many objects, such as Byzantine painting, which had an equally profound effect on his artwork. Discuss how the works of other artists can influence artists. Ask students to differentiate between being influenced by someone and copying from them.

Have the students visit the Art Institute to study the similarities between Screamin’ Jay Hawkins and some of the artworks that Wirsum may have seen at the museum (figure 20). Give each student a color copy of Wirsum’s painting. Ask them to pay careful attention to the similarities they see between these works and Screamin’ Jay Hawkins. Have the students record what they observe in a journal during their museum visit. In addition to the suggested works of art, students may find other works to include in this comparative study (for example, the artwork of Diego Rivera or other Mexican artists, Byzantine-styled artwork, or the art of Ed Paschke). Back at school, have students prepare an essay outlining the similarities between Wirsum’s painting and one of the images they observed at the museum. As an extension, have students create a work of art inspired by Wirsum or another work of the student’s choosing. Host a student exhibition entitled Inspiration. Have the students prepare labels explaining why their selected work of art most influenced their creation.

State Learning Standards: 25A, 26B, 27A

5. Hawkins’s Spell on Me
Provide the students with the lyrics of Screamin’ Jay Hawkins song, “You Put a Spell on Me” (see page 51). As a class, have the students analyze and share their interpretation of the words much like they would a poem or sonnet. Ask the students to create their own painting based on the words. Have the students prepare labels explaining their image.

State Learning Standards: 25A, 26B, 27A

6. Right Angles, Acute Angles, and Free Forms
Make a photocopy of a transparency of Wirsum’s painting for each student. Instruct them to locate and outline the different shapes they see in the painting. As a class, discuss the differences between geometric and organic shapes. Instruct students to create a collage of the Wirsum painting using the shapes they identified. Compare these with the painting.

State Learning Standards: 25A, 26B, 27A
*Brushstroke with Spatter*, 1966. Oil and magna on canvas;
68 in. x 80 in. (174.98 x 204.8 cm)
Barbara Neff Smith and Solomon Byron Smith Purchase Fund, 1966.3

Piet Mondrian (Dutch, 1872–1944).
*Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray*, 1921.
Oil on canvas; 23 5/8 in. x 23 5/8 in. (60 x 60 cm)
Gift of Edgar Kaufman, Jr., 1957.507

Mary Cassatt (American, 1844–1926).
*The Child's Bath*, 1893. Oil on canvas;
39 1/2 in. x 26 in. (100.3 x 66.3 cm)
Robert A. Waller Fund, 1930.2

Joan Miró (Spanish, 1893–1983).
*Personages with Star*, 1933.
Oil on canvas, 78 in. x 97 in. (198.1 x 246.4 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Maurice E. Culp, 1952.512

**Figure 20**
Art Institute artworks that may have inspired Karl Wirsum.