

The 25 Best Artworks About the U.S. Flag, From the Patriotic to the Provocative

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In 1970, at the Judson Memorial Church in New York, Jon Hendricks, Faith Ringgold, and Jean Toche opened “The People’s Flag Show,” an art exhibition that has gone down in history not for what was on view but for what happened once the exhibition let visitors in. Shortly after it was inaugurated, police arrived at the show, which itself was intended as a protest against the widespread practice of charging people for desecrating the U.S. flag amid the Vietnam War. As it happens, the organizers would go on to face those very same charges.

Hendricks and Toche were arrested when police arrived at the church; Michele Wallace, Ringgold’s daughter, was very nearly detained, too, but Ringgold stepped in and called on officers to arrest her instead, since Wallace was a minor. In 1971, the three were made to pay \$100 each. They narrowly avoided a jail sentence, and though they had gained what was technically a victory, they still used the occasion to sound an unpatriotic sentiment. “We have been convicted, but in fact it is this nation and these courts who are guilty,” they said.

As these events and the exhibition itself go to show, the American flag has been a poignant symbol for artists across the centuries. For many, it has been a way of rousing national pride and speaking to the country’s resistance in the face of adversity. For many others, it has been a means of critiquing the nation during times of war and a way of pointing out longstanding histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and homophobia that are still unfolding.

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This list collects 25 important works that involve the American flag in its many forms. The artistic responses here range from the uplifting to the shrewdly critical, from the beautiful to the ugly. They include a Civil War–era plea for unity, a dance performance in which flags become clothes, a classic of postwar art history, and an unsparing critique of this country’s violence against Native Americans.

The 25 greatest works about the American flag follow below.

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Dread Scott, *What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?*, 1988



Photo: Courtesy of Dread Scott

This conceptual piece is one of the rare artworks in U.S. history to have been decried by a sitting President. “I don’t approve of it all,” George H. W. Bush said, sounding a similar sentiment being voiced at the time by conservatives across the country. Bush’s comments came as controversy *What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* swept the nation, roiling both the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where it was first presented while Dread Scott (then known as Scott Tyler) was still a student, and the U.S. art scene writ large.

What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag? drew such ire because it tackled a history of flag desecration in this country. The work consists of a photomontage of pictures depicting South Korean students burning the titular national emblem and the stars and stripes set over coffins, beneath which lies a book where viewers can record their responses and, on the floor, a flag that was produced in Taiwan. Scott reportedly purchased the flag that he exhibited for \$3.95. To write down their reactions, viewers had to tread on the flag.

Because the piece was construed as encouraging flag desecration, it received protests from veterans, who rolled up the flag and later brought the work national attention. After the Senate almost entirely defunded the Art Institute of Chicago and made flag desecration illegal, Scott, artist Shawn Eichman, and Vietnam War veteran David Blalock took to the steps of the U.S. Capitol, where they burned flags. They faced the threat of being charged with a crime for doing so, and so they appealed the case to the Supreme Court. Ultimately, a decision handed down by the Court in *United States v.*

Eichman (1990) found that flag desecration counted as a form of free speech, paving the way for future landmark works building on Scott’s legacy.