



## Hanging Papers

# Independence Days.

The American Artist Untethered from the National Myth.



Attributed to Frederic Edwin Church, *Our Banner in the Sky*, ca. 1861 Oil on paper mounted on paper board 7 13/16 x 11 13/16 inches, de Young Museum, San Francisco.

## I. Flag Speculation.

On April 12, 1861, the Confederacy attacked Fort Sumter, the first battle of the Civil War. The next day, the fort's tattered Union flag was lowered in surrender, and spirited away. By April 20th, it was flown from the statue of George Washington in Union Square in New York before a crowd of 100,000. It was the first of many rallies for the Sumter flag, and speculation began immediately. The flag was auctioned off to benefit the Union cause. The winning bidder immediately donated the relic back to the Union, whereupon it was auctioned off again, and again, in town after town on a grand tour.<sup>1</sup>

Patriot, Unionist, and shrewd businessman, Frederic Church, must have admired the artifact's post-sale monetization. Church was in the midst of negotiating the sale, post-sale residuals, and sale of copyright on his blockbuster painting, *Heart of the Andes*. (He settled on an arrangement that allowed him to sell the painting, like the Sumter flag, multiple times). The British printmaker Charles Day & Son were at work on the reproduction of *Heart of the Andes*, and his newest painting was already in the care of a local print-publisher, Goupil and Co. — so Church was receptive when Goupil approached him for a patriotic image to print. The oil he dashed off on a small sheet of paper is thought to be that in the collection of the de Young Museum in San Francisco, a hallucinatory vision of the shot-through Sumter flag. The famously fast-working Church sent the tiny flag painting to Goupil and went back to fretting over the debut of his next big painting, scheduled for later that week — April 24th. *Our Banner in the Sky* earned Church \$200 in cash from Goupil, but the “blockbuster” picture in the showroom — of icebergs — wouldn't sell until the end of the war.<sup>2</sup>

It was a poor time to launch a painting of icebergs, but Union supporters wanted any contact with the Sumter relic. They competed for the right to briefly own and return the flag itself; the losing bidders could take home Goupil's lithograph, and soon another publisher, William Schaus, printed a charmless knock-off of Church's image. Currier & Ives and Kellogg ran their own increasingly hack tributes to the flag, and by June, the newspapers observed that “flag-mania” had seized the nation.<sup>3</sup> A national holiday was proposed.

The Sumter flag's tour of duty was far from ended. The abolitionist preacher Henry Ward Beecher raised the flag four years and a day after it was lowered at Fort Sumter, in 1864, delivering a speech which aligned it with divine forces:

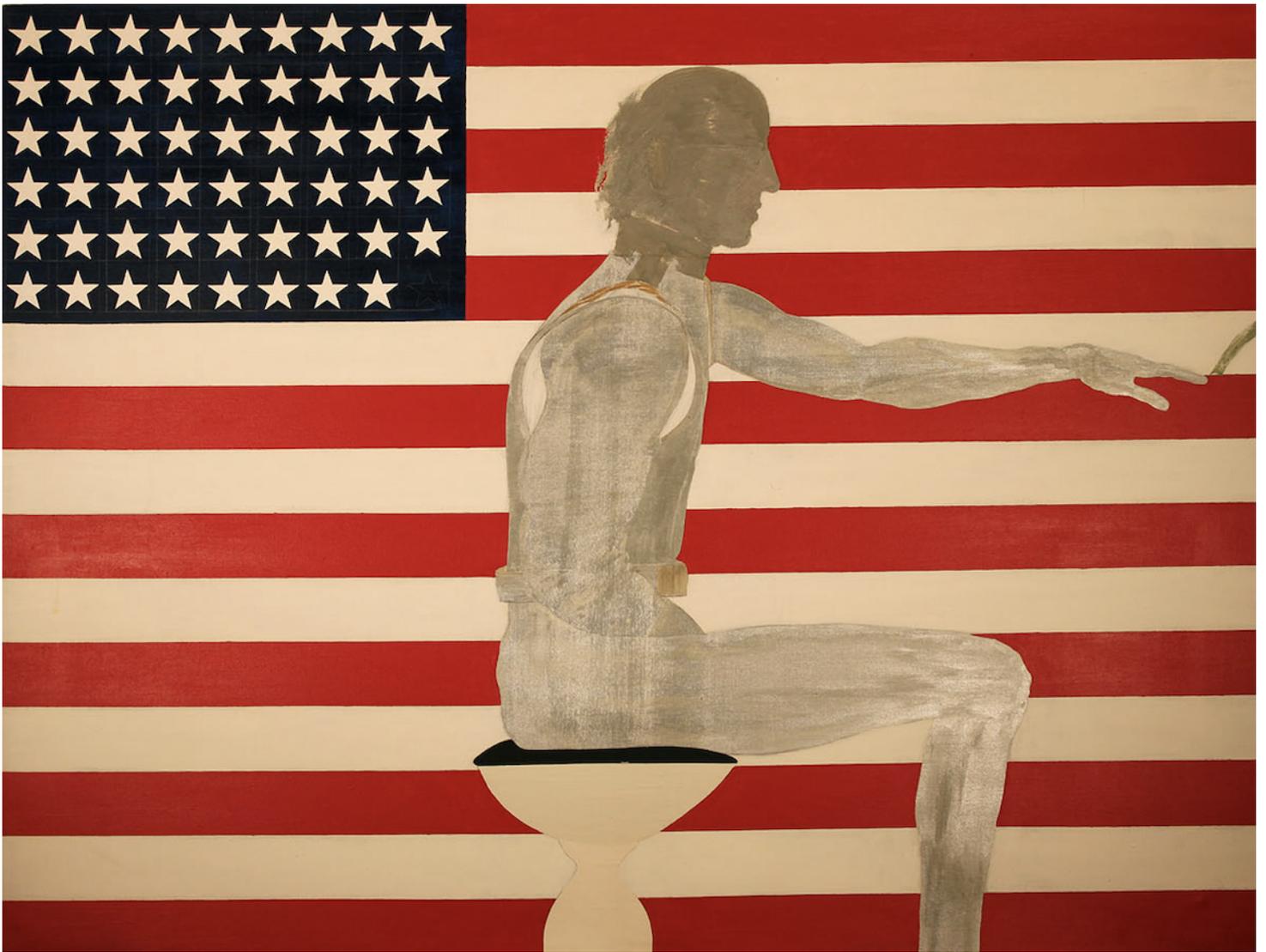
“On this solemn and joyful day, we again lift to the breeze our fathers’ flag, now, again, the banner of the United States, with the fervent prayer that God would crown it with honor, protect it from treason, and send it down to our children . . . Terrible in battle, may it be beneficent in peace as long as the sun endures, or the stars, may it wave over a nation neither enslaved nor enslaving . . . We lift up our banner, and dedicate it to peace, Union, and liberty, now and forevermore.”

Forevermore would have to wait: a few hours later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

## **II. New Banners in the Sky.**

A century later, Leonard Rosenfeld placed his own banners in the heavens — both higher and lower than Church’s vision. Rosenfeld was an expressionist painter, chumming with de Kooning and others at the Cedar Bar. He never embraced the “action painting” of his peers, hewing to muscular, gestural views of the urban world around him. In the 1960s, with the space race on, he turned his view toward the stars. The effort to plant an American flag moon defined the national identity as the Sumter flag a century before. By bringing Democracy to the moon, the average American would also gain a stake in the glamorous *Lost in Space*-esque future. Rosenfeld, a veteran of World War II and of wise-guy Brooklyn, cast a skeptical eye on the space-flag-mania. He’d seen the military industrial complex at work first hand — agog to realize, in basic training, that the army was segregated; devastated to learn of the destructive force of the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan. He painted flags and slathered on silver paint, but he also meditated on the gritty quotidian details.

Where would the great American Space Man defecate?



Leonard Rosenfeld, *American Astronaut*, 1971, oil on canvas.

### III. I'll Be Your Mirror.

Rosenfeld wasn't a political cartoonist — the goal wasn't critique or ridicule, but he bore witness to the vast forces of the national identity across his long and career. The space race, the decay of civic infrastructure; the first Gulf War and then 9/11 — with rugged sincerity, he held up a mirror. He understood his role as an artist to be outside the parade of national celebration and commerce that propelled Church:

“I am an outlaw, against society because I am not doing something that can make money.”

What changed between Church and Rosenfeld wasn't just the turn of a hundred years or the shift of political winds: the role of the artist changed. In 1865, arts institutions were aligned

to nurture a unified vision. That vision was the highest expression of American values, connecting people, land, country, state, military, and God — suitable for framing in a households of means across America. The credentialing institutions trained and licensed artists with this mission; museums were devised to acquire their fruits, and galleries, studios, and print-makers rose up to finance the public spectacle.

By the following century, all those organs of public virtue had been scrambled. The institutional shift is summarized in Rosenfeld's own career choices. Returning from the Pacific theater, he joined a generation of returning service men with money to spend on education under the GI Bill. The aspiring artist in 1865 would have had a few choices of where to study, but all of them were in Europe. In 1946, Rosenfeld made an easy calculation: New York was the place to be. He would later lament not studying in Paris — he was, after all, a New York native, so why not see some more of the world, if it was Uncle Sam's dime? But the easy choice was the Art Students League of New York, where he could study with Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Jon Corbino. Rosenfeld was right: New York was the defining art capital in the post-war years, and the education in brisk modernism at the Art Students League was as good as any in the world.

The upshot of these institutional shifts was that the American artist moved from chief spokesman of American virtue to something entirely oblique to it. The artist, now far from the center of the American self-image, was free to render more complicated, nuanced expressions — let NASA put the flag in the heavens. That broadened expressive horizon is easy to see when Church's painting is compared with the most famous flag painting of the twentieth century — Jasper Johns's 1955 *Flag*.<sup>4</sup> While Church's meaning is manifestly clear, Johns's is not. It's a painting of a flag, but what does it mean? Critical? Celebratory? Ironic? Sincere? A mirror, or a cipher? It is the shift of the role of the American artist: from total clarity to total ambiguity.

*Happy Independence Day. Thanks for reading,*

*Jonathan*

---

- 1 The details on Church's painting and prints can be found at the [de Young's collection site](#) and on a parallel work at the [Terra Foundation](#).
- 2 Read our article on [Church's Icebergs here](#).
- 3 Charles Dudley Warner, in the *Hartford Evening Press*, June 10, 1861, proposed making June 14th a national holiday to celebrate the flag's "birthday," as Jonathan Flynt Morris recalled in 1891, "I said the flag and the constitution were both on trial, and it was the duty of every loyal man to sustain them." Eerily relevant remarks 150 years later, [summarized here](#).
- 4 Well, a whole bunch of flag paintings from the mid-50s, with a great example at [MoMA](#) and another at the Whitney. In any career but Johns's it would have made a one-hit wonder, but Jasper Johns's genius, over seven decades, has never flagged.

## **Subscribe to Hanging Papers**

By Jonathan Spies · Launched a year ago

A History of the Value of the American Artist.

With permission, Jonathan Miller Spies, Hanging Papers, July 5, 2022