

Trial by Jury in the Court of Public Opinion:

Phoenix Reacts to Flag Art Exhibition

Phoenix Art Museum, March 16 – June 16, 1996

Carita M. Culmer

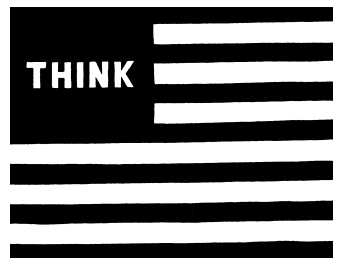
Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art, is an 80-piece exhibit displayed in Phoenix, Arizona in 1996. It examines the use of the American flag as an image in contemporary art from the 1950s to the present. This exhibit documents a period of social upheaval in America, and it displays artists' responses to major socio-political events. The flag, like the Bible, can be used by almost anyone to stand for almost anything, including political opinions, ideals, and even hatred.

Phoenix is a conservative community in a conservative state, and the flag art show has generated more rhetoric than any other single cultural event in recent history.¹ The show's theme is *THINK*, to examine one's own perception of the values that make America great. Many of the pieces offended many people in some way. But they also stirred emotions and generated discussions. There was admirable creativity and more than one put-on. Many of the items in the exhibit were not attention-getters, as evidenced by the fact that they were not mentioned in the newspaper, or in the comment books provided by the museum. In the interest of time, only a few of the most thought-provoking items will be discussed.

The basic premise, the whole idea, really, is to THINK. Think about what we, as a country, have been through this past half of the twentieth century. Toward this end, William Copley created a new model for the American flag, in which the familiar red and white stripes remain, but the blue canton no longer has any stars. Instead, the word 'THINK' fills the field.² It works. It gets our attention.

The exhibit begins with a historic overview, a well-done, easy-to-follow history of the American flag back to 1775.³ The exhibit itself continues the lesson, taking us on a walk through these last forty-plus years of American attitudes toward America. No one could have anticipated that this simple overview of recent history would cause such a ruckus.

From *Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art*. Used with permission.



¹ *Arizona Republic* 14 April 1996; *Catholic Sun* 4 April 1996.

² *Arizona Republic* 7 May 1996; *Phoenix Gazette* 22 June 1996.

³ *Arizona Republic* 23 March, 7 May 1996.

Beginning Tuesday, April 9, I visited the exhibit once a week until it closed on June 16th. During each visit, I went through it as though for the first time, the better to observe other museum visitors and eavesdrop on their conversations. Most were very quiet, reading the information cards and moving on. Some parents with children explained the significance of items which might otherwise escape their attention. Still others took offense at what they saw as flag desecration.

If ever there were a portrait of hate, Ronnie Cutrone very successfully painted it



From *Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art*. Used with permission.

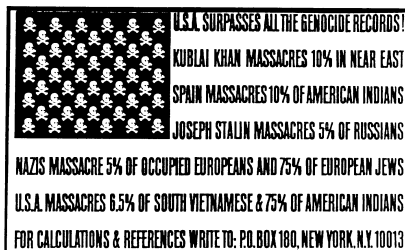
directly onto an American flag. Using the flag as a canvas, Cutrone depicts a man in Ku Klux Klan garb holding a baby. The hooded and draped Klansman seems to be admiring his very pink infant.⁴ Is he filled with love at this point, or is the child receiving its first indoctrination? The work has all the subtlety of a political cartoon.⁵ Many museum visitors were offended by it, because they seemed to think that its presence indicated approval of the Klan. This despite the fact that it was clearly labeled *Hate*.

Perhaps a close relative of hate are those fateful words *Separate but Equal*. The long and bitter struggle for school desegregation is very clearly illustrated in a three-dimensional piece consisting of an old, beat-up wooden row desk and bench. The hole for the inkwell holds a thick wooden flagpole with flag, a familiar sight in school classrooms.

But this flag is tightly furled and lashed to the pole; it has been partially burned. This is Mel Roman's 1964 commemoration of three youngsters killed in a civil rights demonstration.⁶

While the flags used for *Hate* and *Separate but Equal* are real American flags defaced to illustrate certain concepts, other flags are purely imaginative. One such creation symbolizes a self-righteous, war-mongering America that committed genocide on Native Americans.

This America is graphically illustrated by George Maciunas in his accusatory piece labeled *USA Surpasses all the Genocide Records*, a flag in which skulls replace stars and accusations form the stripes.⁷ It is a biting indictment, strong food for thought. Other pieces in the exhibit range from the light-hearted to the dead-center serious.



From *Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art*. Used with permission.

⁴ *Arizona Republic* 17 March 1996; *Phoenix Gazette* 26 April 1996.

⁵ *Arizona Republic* 14 April 1996.

⁶ *Arizona Republic* 23 March 1996; *Catholic Sun* 2 May 1996.

⁷ *Arizona Republic* 23 March 1996.

Purple Ritual features the well-known photograph of Lee Harvey Oswald, framed by bunting resembling the American flag. An overlay of purple suggests mourning.

One which really struck a chord in this librarian's heart was a flag within a glass case, which was topped by four smaller flags. The complete text of the First Amendment is etched on the glass. The flags and case perched atop a stack of newspapers, which rested on a pyramid of burned books and videos.

Those Who Fail to Remember the Past Are Condemned to Repeat It consists of tiny flag-draped coffins in a box of mirrors, which creates the impression of a huge field covered with thousands upon thousands of coffins. This is a 1970 piece created to protest U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

An *African-American Flag* utilizes the familiar stars and stripes pattern, but the red, white, and blue have been replaced by the red, black, and green African-American colors.

Who's Afraid of Red, White and Blue #13 is a simple straight-back chair frame completely wrapped in American flags.

A simple black and white photograph titled *Fourth of July, Jay, New York* shows a holiday picnic, with a vertically suspended flag filling most of the picture.

The Spirit of '76 in this case is not the well-known Archibald Willard painting, but rather a cartoon-like rendition of it, done with cute-ugly characters in day-glo colors.

DIS-pense & DIS-tribute consists of a vending machine filled with pieces of Old Glory in place of candy bars. The pieces have been flavored with vegetable oil and spices, and are individually wrapped in cellophane.

Have You Attacked America Today? takes a rather light-hearted look at flag burning in a window display featuring a thirty-something, clean-cut couple with innocent looks and bright smiles holding up a flag. The woman is holding a cigarette lighter to one corner of the flag.

Another spoof features a flag made entirely of as-yet-unburned matches.

In all, there are 80 pieces of art in this exhibit. Only two were so disturbing to viewers that the museum was asked to remove them. One, titled *The American Dream Goes to Pot*, features an American flag draped over the edge of a toilet.⁸ The hoist is partially in the bowl, the fly hangs over the side, and rests on the floor, all enclosed within a cage of wooden bars. It is a finger jabbed in the eye of American politics, created by feminist Kate Millett in 1970. This is one of two pieces that outraged military veterans. Museum Director Jim Ballinger, in response to mounting criticism, pointed out that this was a period piece, reflecting widespread disillusionment with American government in general and the Vietnam War in particular. For many, the American dream had indeed gone to pot.

Ballinger's words fell on deaf ears. For many of the veterans, the pill was just too big and too bitter to swallow. They had put their lives on the line for the freedoms we all treasure, and now they were seeing those freedoms exercised in ways that made a mockery of their efforts.

Early on, veterans picketed the Museum and a number of peaceful protests were staged. One, on March 24, drew about 300 protestors. Another, on April 28, drew

⁸ *Arizona Republic* 26 March - 30 June 1996; *Phoenix Gazette* 5 April - 17 June 1996; *Catholic Sun* 4 April, 2 May 1996; *Contemporary Forum* Winter 1996; *New Times* 2 May - 12 June 1996; *New York Times* 29 April, 8 June 1996; *Phoenix Home and Garden* April 1996; *Uptown Central Skyline Newsletter* June 1996.

about 750 people, mostly veterans, mostly against the exhibit.⁹ There was one notable exception. One veteran, wearing an Army first lieutenant's uniform, stood quietly holding a hand-lettered sign that read, "As a Vietnam War vet, I served to preserve our democratic values, most importantly our freedom of speech." He did not return any of the jeers or catcalls coming from his fellow veterans.¹⁰ In response to a reporter's question about how many other veterans felt as he did, he answered "It's pretty lonely out here."

Speeches fanned the flames of outrage in the sweltering weather. The group moved en masse into the air-conditioned museum. They moved quickly past the historical display, past the *THINK* flag, past quite a number of interesting renditions of Old Glory, looking neither right nor left. They had not come to look at the exhibit. They crowded around Kate Millett's imprisoned flag in the toilet and vented their anger physically, though not violently, as one of their number reached through the bars and removed the flag from the toilet. Two of them folded it ritualistically, then placed it atop the eight-foot tall bars.¹¹ They thought that would keep it out of the commode for a while, but a very tall young woman, who identified herself as an artist, reached up, took the flag down, shook it out, and, reaching through the bars, draped it over the toilet bowl. Cheers came from a substantial group of First Amendment defenders. The flag was again removed, folded and put up high, and again the young woman took it down, shook it out and replaced it in the toilet.¹²

Once again, a veteran took it out, but before he could begin folding it, the woman attempted to take it from him. A tug-of-war ensued, and it began to look like the flag would be torn asunder. Angry words were coming from both camps, as the combined crowd pressed in around the cell. The veterans backed off, not wanting to risk damaging the flag. The verbal exchange continued for some time, but without the physical intervention. The flag was replaced in the toilet.

Later, a reporter asked the museum's director, Jim Ballinger, why he let the veterans

dismantle the exhibit.¹³

The reporter did not explain how he thought a handful of museum guards were supposed to stop an angry crowd of several hundred. In point of fact, the protesting veterans were adhering to a code of peaceful protest fairly common in America. They gathered, they spoke their minds, they got a



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⁹ Arizona Republic 25 March, 29 April 1996; Phoenix Gazette 26 April 1996.

¹⁰ Arizona Republic 29 April 1996.

¹¹ Ibid; Phoenix Gazette 26 April 1996.

¹² Ibid.

little bit physical, but made sure that things never got out of hand.

Meanwhile, just around the corner, there was another highly controversial piece: Dread Scott's *What is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?* This participatory piece features a photo collage, which includes a U.S. flag being burned and a group of flag-draped coffins. The collage is hung above a stand holding a notebook inviting comments from museum visitors. An American flag is spread out on the floor in front of the stand, so visitors must decide whether to stand on the flag for the privilege of writing in the book.¹³ Many did; many others chose to take an awkward stance off to one side and reach to write their comments.¹⁴ There was yet another choice: directly opposite the stand, clear of the flag, was a long table with three comment books. There were plenty of people taking advantage of the opportunity.

It seemed rather odd, to me, that there should be so much outrage expressed over a perfectly clean flag draped into a sparkling white porcelain toilet, protected from dirt and grime by a cage which kept dirty feet at a distance, while right next door people were walking on, standing on, stomping on, wiping their feet on and even dancing on another flag. To be fair, it must be noted that earlier demonstrations had grouped around this part of the exhibit, and the flag was picked up a number of times.¹⁵ Those actions were duly noted in the press, but I did not witness them, and nothing of the sort happened at this very large demonstration, the only one I personally observed.

Museum guards, who have become accustomed to such outbursts over the flag in the toilet and the flag on the floor, managed to keep the peace simply by maintaining a presence. Although it is against museum rules to touch exhibits, no action was ever taken against the protestors. No damage was done, both veterans and artists had exercised their First Amendment rights, and the museum took it all in stride.

Even so, the flag in the toilet and the flag on the floor both provoked a tremendous amount of debate, which kept the exhibit in the news for the entire three-month run.

One other item in the exhibit generated considerable outrage: a flag made entirely from pieces of human skin, sewn together with human hair.¹⁶ A natural and common reaction is the thought of the Holocaust, so it came as a surprise to learn that the artist is Jewish and that members of his own family were victims. Andrew Krasnow expresses his concern over man's inhumanity to man by creating art from human materials, obtained through legal channels. His *48 Star Flag #5* is intended to remind viewers of American skin-related abuses, such as the branding of slaves and scalping, radiation warfare, and napalm bombing.

Overshadowing the many other thought-provoking but inoffensive or less offensive pieces, these three flags brought the wrath of city, state, and federal lawmakers/politicians.

Phoenix Vice Mayor Frances Emma Barwood stated that the flag should be revered—not desecrated, stepped on, or put in a toilet. In her outrage over these two items, she proposed selling the museum and using the proceeds to build a teen center.¹⁷

¹³ *Arizona Republic* 23 March - 30 June 1976; *New Times* 9 May - June 12 1996; *Phoenix Gazette* 27 March - 29 April 1996.

¹⁴ *Arizona Republic* 11 May 1996; *Phoenix Gazette* 29 March, 29 April 1996.

¹⁵ *Arizona Republic* 23, 25, 26 March, 14 April 1996.

¹⁶ *Arizona Republic* 17 March - 11 May 1996; *Phoenix Gazette* 19, 26 April, 24 June 1996.

¹⁷ *Arizona Republic* 13 April 1996; *Phoenix Gazette* 3 June 1996.

Although Barwood is a Phoenix resident, and the exhibit ran for a full three months, she never got around to seeing it.

The exhibit also drew criticism from GOP presidential hopeful Bob Dole and House Speaker Newt Gingrich, both of whom issued strong statements declaring that it should be shut down.¹⁸ Bob Dole's comments came from a distance; he never came to town, never saw the exhibit.

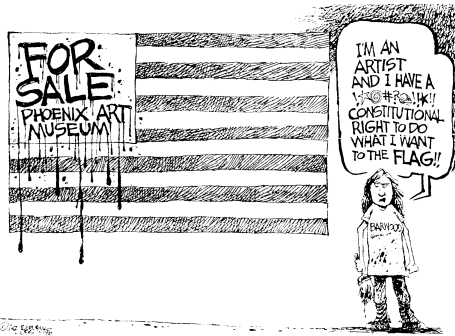
Gingrich actually appeared at a news conference in Phoenix, during which time he endorsed a protest by the American Legion, declaring that "... it is reasonable for people to feel that the United States flag thrown on the ground ... is a desecration ..."¹⁹ However, he turned down an invitation to visit the museum and see the entire exhibit for himself.

At the state level, a group of 25 Republican lawmakers called for an investigation, citing a 1978 state law that prohibits the 'abuse of venerated objects.'²⁰ The press labeled the law unconstitutional. City prosecutor Kerry Wangberg did investigate, and found that the law had been nullified by the 1989 Supreme Court decision in the Gregory Johnson case, upholding the legality of burning the flag as a form of political protest.²¹

The press kept us informed, first with feature articles describing the exhibit, then with reports of veterans' protests over the ill treatment of our national symbol. One vets' group urged a boycott of the museum. An

editorial cartoon reminded us that freedom of expression is guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution. Letters to the editor started rolling in. Newspaper columnists, politicians, and military officers wrote commentary pieces. In all, during the three-month run of the flag art exhibit, local publications ran 38 feature articles, 6 editorials, 17 guest columns and staff commentary pieces, 14 editorial cartoons, 2 mentions in non-related articles, and 89 letters to the editor. The furor even rated at least two feature articles in the New York Times.

Members of the press, staunch defenders of the First Amendment, castigated the veterans, politicians, and other protesters, snapping at them like hyenas going in for



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¹⁸ *Phoenix Gazette* 25 April, 3 June 1996.

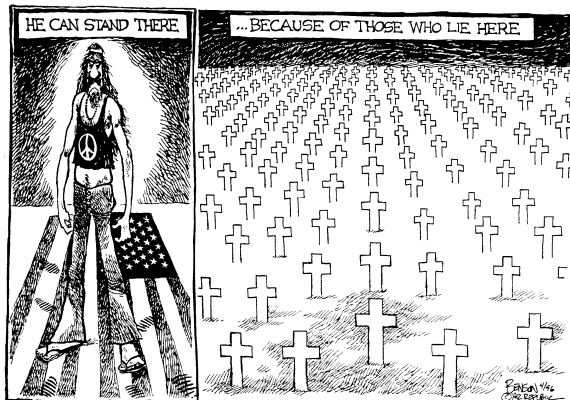
¹⁹ *Arizona Republic* 27 March 1996.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Arizona Republic* 4 April 1996.

the kill. Editorial cartoons ridiculed the very veterans who had once fought to defend the rights of all American citizens. But other editorial comments took on the arts community and other defenders of free speech. Editorial cartoonist Steve Benson in one cartoon pictured veterans as pot-bellied yahoos determined to censor artistic freedom of expression, but in another cartoon, he portrayed a defiant, hippie-type young man who could stand on the flag only because of the veterans who had died in defense of his freedom.

Some demanded that the entire flag art exhibit be shut down, or at least the most offensive pieces removed. Others complained that tax monies were being used to fund the exhibit.²² They were countered by information that the city owned the building, but the museum itself was privately funded.



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Defenders of First Amendment rights declared the museum should be tax-supported, that values cannot be bought or sold.

The museum does receive considerable funding from major corporations, some of which threatened to withdraw funding.²³ On the other hand, donations to the museum increased during all the turmoil, and 210 new members swelled the ranks of museum supporters.²⁴

Day after day, letters to the editor kept the presses running hot. Flag desecration was declared a disgrace; freedom of expression was deemed an inalienable right. Some suggested that just removing the offending items would make everyone happy; others decried the very suggestion of censorship. Many who spoke out against the exhibit openly admitted they had not seen it; Newt Gingrich declared that he did not have to see it to know it was all wrong.²⁵

While feature articles are supposed to be unbiased, every one mentioned the two most controversial items in the exhibit—the flag in the toilet and the flag on the floor. Also frequently mentioned was the third most controversial flag, the one made of human skin and hair. It was reasonable to keep mentioning these three, because they were the objects of protest. The press gave ample coverage to all protests, and there were plenty.

Editorials and commentary pieces generally placed their emphasis on the importance of our First Amendment rights to freedom of expression. Eleven of the seventeen guest columnists, while defending free speech, also took sides, five expressing approval of the exhibit, six disapproving. Two columnists wrote about the experience

²² Arizona Republic 25 March, 28 March, 1 April, 5 April, 16 April, 1996.

²³ Arizona Republic 13 April 1996; Phoenix Gazette 17 April 1996.

²⁴ Arizona Republic 9 Sept. 1996.

²⁵ Arizona Republic 3 April 1996.

of viewing the exhibit and actually standing on the flag that was spread on the floor. Both confessed that they did so with some misgivings but were thankful to live in a country where such actions were tolerated.

Of the 14 editorial cartoons, twelve emphasized freedom of speech by poking fun at protestors exercising their own freedom of speech. One reminded artists that many soldiers had died fighting to defend the very freedoms which the artists were now flaunting. One cartoon simply depicted citizens saluting the flag.

Letters to the editor predominantly opposed the exhibit. Forty of the 89 letters voiced disapproval, five of the writers identified themselves as military veterans. Only six writers expressed approval, one of whom was a veteran. Twenty-two made strong statements in favor of the First Amendment, five of whom said they were veterans. Of those 22, eighteen declared that artists had a right to express themselves, but protestors had no business expressing dissenting opinions. Two of the First Amendment supporters stated that they believed in freedom of expression, but not artistic abuse of that freedom. Two writers, both veterans, stated that they had fought to defend everyone's rights, period. The remaining letters said nothing about the exhibit itself. Their choice was to argue with what others had said. Only a handful of the writers stated that they had actually seen the exhibit. Others might have seen it, but it was impossible to determine from what they had written.

Published accounts are, of necessity, filtered through the corporate culture of the publishing agency. Even letters to the editor, while not edited beyond shortening for allowable space, are written with a certain amount of restraint. And, without doubt, many of the letters were written by people who never saw the exhibit.

During the course of the exhibit, two opinion polls were conducted. In April, a poll conducted by Channel 8 television (KAET) asked 864 registered voters whether they had an opinion on whether the exhibit should be closed or kept open. Fifty-three percent said it should be closed, 36 percent said to let it stay open, and 11 percent had no opinion. In May, the Rocky Mountain Poll asked 602 voters essentially the same question. This time, only 27 percent thought the show should be shut down, while 68 percent said it should stay open on the basis of First Amendment rights.

Opinion polls are built upon carefully worded statements, and those being polled must respond in one of three ways: "yes," "no," or "no opinion." In contrast, statements written in the comment books at the museum are totally unfettered.

To learn the opinions of people who actually saw the exhibit, it was necessary to read the comments written in notebooks provided for that purpose at the museum. The value of these comments lies in the fact that they are spontaneous, written while the person is physically in the museum, surrounded by the very works of art which invite comment. In addition, what was written stands as it was written, uncensored, unedited. A notebook was provided for museum visitors at Dread Scott's *What is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?* Three additional notebooks were available at a nearby table.

Approximately 14 reams of paper were used in books on the table, for a total of about 7,000 pages. Some pages carried only one comment, others as many as five. Some writers took more than one page. The book above the flag used perhaps another 3,000 pages, again with some pages containing anywhere from one to five com-

ments. 51,337 people attended the exhibit over three months. I estimate that at least 17,000 of them wrote comments.

While I could not read and analyze all of the comments, I examined 614 comments from the table notebooks and 171 in the flag-on-the-floor notebook. It was like reading a cross-section of Americana—absorbing, compelling, thought-provoking, and sometimes heart-breaking.

There simply was no way to neatly pigeon-hole the comments, but a few patterns did emerge. Of the 614 comments in the table books, 346 clearly expressed approval of the exhibit, while 149 disapproved. Eight of those who approved identified themselves as military veterans, as did seven who disapproved. Sixteen writers stated that they were all for freedom of expression, but not this kind of expression. Six identified themselves as minorities, for whom the flag was only a symbol of a power structure that held them down. Given the option of signing their names, 342 did so, 155 did not. Others provided first names, initials, or some sort of sign. A few gave obviously fictitious names, such as Joe Blow, Dr. Mike, and Abe Lincoln. If Kilroy was there, I did not find him.

Ninety-five writers commented on one or more specific works in the exhibit. Seventy mentioned First Amendment rights for either artists, protestors, or both, and 27 flat-out declared that any consideration of censorship was wrong. There were eight statements castigating the museum for having the exhibit. There were those who pleaded respect for the many veterans who had given their all to protect our rights, and there were veterans who liked the exhibit.

The general tone of those writing in the book above the flag was somewhat different from those who wrote on the table. To write in Dread Scott's notebook, the writer had to decide whether to stand on the American flag, which was spread out on the floor. Of the 171 writers whose comments were read, 32 made it clear that they chose not to stand on the flag. Instead, they stood off to one side and stretched to write in the book. Only 67 chose to sign their names.

Those who did not stand on the flag were generally critical of those who did, but favorable toward the museum. Many who stood on the flag expressed contempt for it and all it stood for. Some felt disenfranchised because of race, ethnicity, or sexual preference. Many of them considered they were not now, and never would be, a part of the American dream. One writer expressed his anguish over the demise of his hero, Superman (Christopher Reeve), brought down by a broken neck and kept down because the government does not adequately fund research on spinal cord injuries.

There was strong language in the Dread Scott books, anger and disillusionment. Some writers were not accomplished in written expression, writing with poor penmanship, poor spelling, poor sentence structure. Some lacked adequate vocabulary. And yet, they managed to express themselves very well, in a way which commanded both attention and respect.

But, it did not all come from minorities. There were some obviously mainstream types, who saw the whole thing as a lark. There were adolescents testing the limits of their freedoms, most notably by vying with one another to see who could express themselves the most strongly, limiting themselves to mostly unprintable comments. These people vented their spleens without actually saying much.

Some who stood on the flag were thoughtful, articulate, and a little in awe of the experience. For them, it was a case of appreciating the opportunity to challenge their own concepts of free speech.

In both the table books and the Dread Scott books, many writers thanked the museum for the exhibit. Others wrote that, while they would not stand on the flag, they were thankful to live in a country where they had that choice. A few indicated that, while anyone had a right to stand on the flag, such a person was no friend of theirs. Many ended their comments with “God bless America.”

Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art, certainly drew attention to the Phoenix Art Museum. People who were never aware of it before now know exactly where it is located. Attendance figures for this exhibit far surpassed those for any of the last ten special exhibits. Total attendance was 51,337, which compares to 39,414 for *Latin American Women Artists*, 35,085 for *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japanese Art*, 33,599 for *Picturing History*, or 25,580 for the ever-popular *Cowboy Artists of America*. While some corporate sponsors threatened to withdraw financial support, donations to the museum increased by 40 percent. New memberships also increased dramatically.²⁶

Although many people acknowledge that the flag is only a symbol, this experience certainly demonstrates the power of that symbol. Those who commented on the symbolism expressed perceptions ranging from all that is good in America to all that is bad. What emerged was a composite picture of us — US, warts and all.

Finally, this report would not be complete without some first-person comments. What did I think of the exhibit? On my first visit, I was impressed by the potential for education. Starting with the capsule history of the flag from 1775 to the present, and continuing with the display of historic photographs featuring such events as the flag raising on Iwo Jima and placing the flag on the moon, I thought there was great potential for teachers of Social Studies or American History. As I toured the exhibit, reading the information cards for each item, I saw our national emblem in ways I had never before imagined, gaining insight into the importance of unfettered expression. Some of it was protest, clearly. Protest against injustice, against our collective shortcomings. There were poignant memorials to those who fought in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf, and those who struggled for civil rights. There was whimsy and wicked humor and pure crass commercialism. I was deeply touched by some, while others didn’t do a thing for me.

I personally was not offended by the highly criticized flag in the toilet. From all accounts in the press, I expected to be thoroughly disgusted, but it was all so clean and so well protected, and so logical as a Vietnam War protest, that I actually appreciated it.

The Vietnam War memorial, *Those Who Do Not Learn From the Past Are Condemned to Repeat It*, moved me to tears. Looking into that mirrored box, seeing a field of thousands upon thousands of flag-draped coffins, each representing an American life given for a lost cause, weighed heavily upon my heart. I wondered why the protesting veterans made no mention of it.

The display was divided by portable walls. On my first visit, as I moved past one wall and turned the corner, there was the oft-mentioned Dread Scott piece *What is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?* Someone was standing on the flag, writing in

²⁶ *Arizona Republic* 9 Sept. 1996; Phoenix Art Museum’s Public Information Office.

the book. My instant reaction was an involuntary and audible sucking in of breath, as my whole body flinched. I stood, rooted to the spot, watching three adolescent boys pacing on and off the flag, casually chatting as a fourth boy wrote in the book. Each of them took a turn at the book. My determination to be a detached observer was put to the test. I saw that scene repeated each and every one of my visits. It was not always adolescents. There were kids of grade school age, adults in their twenties, thirties, maybe up to fifties. Every time I saw it, a voice within me cried out “How can they do that?” And it hurt. I was not angry, only hurt. Well, yes, once, thinking about it at home, I imagined myself confronting one of them, a man about my own age, late fifties, who had seemed especially smug about standing on the flag. I wanted to stand before him and ask in the sweetest voice “What would you like to do, when you grow up?” I suppose that says something about my own limit of tolerance.

Much later, reading the comment books, I gained some understanding of why and how they could do that. I could not; I would not even consider it for myself.

Right next to the flag on the floor was a leather flag. Looking at the information card, the words “human skin and human hair” stopped me cold. Horrific visions of the Holocaust came to mind. Even after reading that it was a protest against human rights abuses of blacks and other people of color, I still didn’t like it.

But there was so much to like about the flag art exhibit—real flags used in novel ways that teach us something about ourselves, and imaginative renditions created to make a point. Seeing the explanations behind each creation, I saw America in a whole new light. Our national emblem became a mirror, reflecting all of us: the good, the bad, the indifferent. It was an important exhibit.