

Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

Put Out the Flags

The Use and Abuse of the Star Spangled Banner

By  Antwaun Sargent

critic and writer

Published 6 July 2017 in [Other Insights](#)

"One night I dreamed that I painted a large American flag," said the artist Jasper Johns, revealing the inspiration behind *Flag* (1954-55). The work, considered Neo-Dadaist by some, predates aspects of Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual art, bucking the wave of Abstract Expressionism that had developed in New York during the 1940s and 1950s. In taking on of America's most significant symbols, Johns—who would go on to paint more than 40 iterations of the work—inspired countless contemporary artists to engage with the image in both patriotic and subversive ways.

Johns never spoke directly about his intentions in creating *Flag*, which is now part of the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. Yet, in an interview in 1990, he recalled a childhood memory that may have been formative: "In Savannah, Georgia, in a park, there is a statue of Sergeant William Jasper. Once I was walking through this park with my father, and he said that we were named for him. Whether or not that is in fact true or not, I don't know. Sergeant Jasper lost his life raising the American flag over a fort."

When I first encountered Johns' work as a young adult, a wave of patriotic pride washed over me, transporting me back to elementary school, where small American hands fall over hearts whenever the flag flies. *Flag* is a largish object, measuring 42.2" by 60.6", created using the fast-drying Ancient Egyptian wax technique encaustic, together with oil paint and newsprint collage on three separate canvases set on plywood. It reflects the shape of America in those years: 48 white stars symbolizing the states in the Union (Alaska and Hawaii are omitted); and 13 red and white stripes, an homage to the original colonies that broke free of British rule.

AA Bronson's was inspired by Johns' *White Flag* (1955) to create a series of the same name in 2014. His version is given a grim twist: by covering his flags in a chalky, white powder, he refers back to the dust that covered New York as the Twin Towers fell on 9/11. The name of the works also alludes to a plant called white flag, a flower that has been popular in Muslim and Christian cemeteries for thousands of years.