

# Two Illustrations, One America

*Reconciling 1776 and 1619 through two New Yorker covers.*

June 10th, 2021



*Ian Falconer's 1996 cover illustration titled "Liberation" (Left), and Bob Staake's 2008 piece, "Reflection" (Right)*

Compelling visual art—regardless of medium, style or genre—deftly uses its visual cues to capture complex ideas, and *The New Yorker* knows this. That is why their covers and cartoons remain respected art genres in their own right. Even as the magazine itself has evolved from a weekly humor publication to a regarded source of reporting and commentary, its art has largely stayed unchanged. It's true that their covers vary week to week, often reflecting what's going on in the present; however look between covers published decades apart, and you'd be surprised by what may be gleaned from their critical comparisons. For example by comparing two covers made in recognition of two distinct, though equally crucial moments in American history, one can gain a better perspective on this history as a whole. Ian Falconer's 1996 Independence Day illustration "Liberation" and Bob Staake's 2008 "Reflection"—made for the issue's election special—do just that: together they highlight the contradictory remembrance of US history, which often celebrates the country's 1776 freedom from Britain while neglecting that African Americans and other racial "others" within its borders then were dehumanized, plundered, and chained. Yet like any dutiful *New Yorker* reader-turned-casual-cover-analyst (or is that just me?), one must first individually observe each piece to understand their relation.

Without analysis applied, here are objective observations about the first cover, Ian Falconer's "Liberation." It was published in the July 8, 1996 issue of *The New Yorker*. Front and center is the Statue of Liberty's arm (as suggested by its green color and iconic crown spikes at the bottom right), holding up what looks to be a sparkler instead of her usual torch. The sparkler itself is yellow and emits a display of sparks shooting out from it in all directions. This image—as well as the green on the Statue of Liberty—contrasts with the cover's solid black background. Against the black, the sparks coming off of the sparkler give off a dazzling effect; similar to how bright stars might appear against the night sky.

Now, the second cover: Bob Staake's "Reflection," published November 17th, 2008. The main subject of this illustration appears to be the Lincoln Memorial, characterized by an off-white, pillared building housing a man's statue overlooking water. This, along with the 'O' in the magazine title and a reflection in the water are the only objects illuminating the otherwise dark scene. The water in the foreground, trees surrounding the memorial, and sky in the back are all dark (though there is some distinction of shade between them). The 'O' in 'The New Yorker' is the same shade of off-white as the monument, and seems to be emitting a soft glow of light. The reflection in the water shows vertical lines of tall, thin columns similar to the pillars of the monument. However the reflection is not a mirror image of the pillars: there are twelve pillars shown at the front of the monument, while there are eleven lines in the water. Additionally, the spaces between the lines are all dark and uniform in color; the background of the outermost columns upholding the memorial are also off-white, while the pillars at its center are the only ones in front of dark backgrounds. A handful of small stars dot the cover's sky.

It's amazing how much detail artists can fit into a  $7\frac{7}{8}$  by  $10\frac{3}{4}$  illustration. But what do these details mean? On the aesthetic level, both pieces' simplistic styles exemplify how bold artistic visuals—namely colors and images—often relay powerful messages. This can be seen in each cover's use of iconography and few, yet contrasting colors. For example the most prominent subjects of covers one and two—the Statue of Liberty and Lincoln Memorial, respectively—are both landmarks, both easily recognizable, and both deeply symbolic. The Statue of Liberty precedes itself worldwide as an emblem of American freedom. The Lincoln Memorial has long been a site of visibility for the Black American struggle. Compare the meanings of these two monuments alone, and a tale of two Americas already begins to emerge. However for Ian Falconer and Bob Staake, illustrating them verbatim is not enough; as with all graphic art, color accentuation is key.

The interplay of light and dark is what makes the subjects of each cover stand out. To Falconer and Staake, it is no coincidence that the landmarks featured in their respective covers stand brightly in the foreground, each lighting up a dark backdrop of sky and/or foliage. This creative choice draws visual attention to these monuments, and in so doing, effectively calls readers' attention to the histories that they represent. Look closer at them and you won't find much intricacy in the landmarks themselves—another decision meant to emphasize the Statue of Liberty and Lincoln Memorial, as well as what they symbolize, rather than the structural parts that make their whole. As Staake himself said on his process, "I try to find a way to really, really boil down and distill a big, complex issue into the most simple image that I possibly can. The simpler the better." For those who like to get technical, it's true that Staake's Memorial contains slightly more illustrative detail than Falconer's Statue; however this is more so due to differences in artistic style and the fact

that the Statue of Liberty's arm in real life doesn't have as much architectural embellishment than the Lincoln Memorial does as a whole.

Aesthetics aside, Falconer and Staake's works both invite viewers to recognize distinct junctures in US history—junctures that, when compared, offer competing narratives of America as oppressed *and* as an oppressor. Take "Liberation," for instance: its July 8, 1996 date suggests the illustration was used as *The New Yorker's* commemoration cover for the Fourth of July. Still, to understand how the holiday's remembrance contrasts with "Reflection," made following the election of America's first Black president, we must first ask a question that continues to elude Americans and Non-Americans alike: aside from independence, what is the Fourth of July even about?

Fourth of July in the US celebrates America's separation from Britain of course, but is that all? Apparently it honors the specific day that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, though the US officially formed on July 2nd when the Continental Congress voted to declare separation two days prior. Most notably the Declaration contains the famous line, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." So, it is on July 4th centuries later that we celebrate the unbounded promise of liberty with a matching, seemingly endless supply of barbecue, pie, and as Falconer demonstrates, sparklers. Yet at the Declaration's time of creation, nearly 500,000 Black lives in the US were bound to the brutality of chattel slavery. How could America have been a free country in 1776 if one fifth of its population was enslaved? And why do we insist on neglecting this fact when we observe the Fourth of July?

Don't get me wrong; I enjoy hot dogs and cheesecake as much as any other red-blooded American. And I certainly believe that the country's founding principles are what make it so exceptional. At the same time however, it is too often that we see the repercussions of slavery play out in modern times. Bob Staake invites us to consider this, as suggested by his cover's illuminated objects and their implicit representations. The magazine logo's large, shiny 'O' succinctly expresses the 2008 election of Barack Obama—America's first Black president in the country's 200-and-something years of existence—through the cover's highlighted letter which simultaneously acts as the 'O' in 'New Yorker' and initial letter of the former president. Though the date of the issue itself gives away much of the political context for Staake's cover, his highlighted 'O' clearly marks Obama's momentous victory—because it's his initial, yes, but also because the letter is a recurring motif on Obama campaign posters. It was often visually emphasized in words like "Vote," "Hope," and more. Staake acknowledges that including such an indirect detail "really required the knowledge of the reader to bring to the table;" however he justifies this by adding, "when you do that as an illustrator, it does give the reader some ownership in the idea." We see a similar train of thought illustrated in the Reflecting Pool which appears to reflect the Memorial's pillars, but upon closer examination, reveal themselves to be bars representing bonds of slavery.

The slightly less obvious symbol is what makes the cover's titular reflection come full circle. It's not enough that viewers know that Obama was elected president; to Staake, his audience must also understand the gravity of his victory given the United States' centuries-old oppression of Black Americans. Many are aware that slavery in the US is so old, it precedes the

country's founding itself: the first slaves are thought to be some "20 and odd" people brought from Africa to Virginia in 1619, as noted in a letter by John Rolfe. Throughout the next couple hundred years, slavery played a central role in developing Southern society, and therefore, America as a whole. It is thought that one-third of antebellum South's population was enslaved. Likewise during this period of American development, cotton cultivated by slaves became the country's most profitable export. It is not surprising, then, that plantations are regarded as the precursor to our country's "brutal" capitalist society. Yet still, many overlook that Black struggle is as American as any plate of ribs or slice of cherry pie. When compared to Falconer's "Liberation," Staake's illustration of bars in the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool seems to be a clear reminder of this notion.

Of course, however, the covers' biggest symbols are the ones front and center—the Statue of Liberty, holding a sparkler, and the Lincoln Memorial. No monument in Washington D.C. may embody the Black American struggle better than the Lincoln Memorial. The parthenon-styled structure, built in 1922, provides symbolism even deeper than the Emancipation Proclamation or March on Washington. That is not to diminish the significance of these events; after all, the Emancipation Proclamation freed Southern slaves and allowed—as the National Archives puts it—the "liberated to become liberators" by means of Union military service during the Civil War. Interestingly the Proclamation's text "that all persons held as slaves... are, and henceforward shall be free" only applied to secessionist states at the time, allowing the practice to continue in Union border states until the 13th Amendment in 1865 banned it there, too—though this should not discount the impact it had on the fight for racial justice which continues today, as suggested by Staake's piece.

Similarly the March on Washington—which started at the Washington Monument and ended at the Lincoln Memorial—is one of the most well-known protests in American history. Not only was the protest aimed at pressuring Congress at the time to pass the Civil Rights Act, but the Lincoln Memorial is where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his world-famous "I Have a Dream" speech after the march. The Memorial was also the site of singer Marian Anderson's 1939 performance in front of 75,000 people, notable because her race had earlier barred her from singing at Constitution Hall. And, though the Lincoln Memorial may have ties to Black freedom which the Statue of Liberty doesn't, perhaps both can be understood through the Memorial's overarching theme: unity.

To be sure, Ian Falconer's "Liberation" honors American Independence Day, a holiday certainly ironic given that hundreds of thousands of lives within the country's borders were bound to slavery. Although surprisingly Falconer's main subject itself, the Statue of Liberty, has more in common with Staake's Memorial than one might think. Much of the world, for instance, easily recognizes Lady Liberty as a symbol of US democracy and of America itself—fitting, as its official name is "Liberty Enlightening the World." But what many don't know of is the Statue's ties to abolition (or French origins, for that matter).

The Statue of Liberty herself was conceived of in 1865 by French abolitionist Édouard de Laboulaye to commemorate the end of American slavery. One of the Statue's original designs by Frenchman and sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi even included broken chains in her right hand, instead of the familiar tablet inscribed with Roman numerals for July 4, 1776. Shackles at the foot of the 151-foot-tall figure are visible, but barely, and the erasure as a symbol of Black freedom in place

of one for immigration was not lost on Black Americans at the time. An 1886 editorial from the Black paper *Cleveland Gazette* encapsulates this view expressively: “Shove the Bartholdi statue, torch and all, into the ocean until the ‘liberty’ of this country is such as to make it possible for an industrious and inoffensive colored man in the South to earn a respectable living for himself and family ... ‘The idea of the ‘liberty’ of this country ‘enlightening the world,’ or even Patagonia, is ridiculous in the extreme.”

Indeed; even after American Independence, after emancipation, after the 13th Amendment; the Statue of Liberty; the Lincoln Memorial; the Civil Rights Movement...Black oppression endures. With the race-related implications of Falconer and Staake’s covers in mind, then, perhaps we should most importantly understand “Liberation” and “Reflection” not as competing narratives of US history, but as two sides of the same coin (preferably a penny).

Earlier I said that compelling visual art effectively portrays difficult ideas solely by image. Well, through their architectural iconographies, calls to history, and visual juxtapositions, “Liberation” and “Reflection” surely compel. And despite their contrasts in attitude and message, the covers offer some sense of reconciliation between their conceptual dissonance. If I haven’t convinced you by now, then maybe one final visual analysis might. Note how both pieces draw attention to their subjects as sources of light; and how the sparkler in Falconer’s work lights up the sky while the ‘O’ in Staake’s cover does too. Though Staake’s dually-symbolic ‘O’ subtly expresses itself as the moon and ‘O’ in Obama, like Falconer’s illustration, it also calls for the appreciation of US history albeit in a more nuanced way. Where “Liberation”—through its flashiness and visual directness—simply celebrates America as an unwavering guidepost of freedom, “Reflection” reminds us that Obama’s 2008 history-making victory may point us towards a future where the centuries-long enslavement of Black lives no longer means ongoing injustice towards Black Americans—but only if we recognize and act to remedy the fact of America’s contradictory founding.