Public Display of Affection

The sculpture titled “Embracing Peace” by J. Seward Johnson depicts the iconic kiss between a sailor and nurse from August 14, 1945, otherwise known as V-J Day or Victory Over Japan Day which celebrated the end of World War II.1 Locals and tourists alike come to the sculpture to admire it, take pictures with it, recreate the famed kiss, and other reasons...

While it is commonly thought to be that the classic photo “V-J Day in Times Square” by Alfred Eisenstaedt2, was the inspiration for Johnson’s sculpture, this is a mistake as he claims it was actually based on another photo capturing the same kiss which was taken by Victor Jorgensen.3 The sculpture was computer generated by Johnson as opposed to more traditional methods.

The sculpture was first installed in Sarasota, Florida in 2005 to commemorate and honor the Navy’s service during WW2 in the lingering battle against Japan specifically. There have been numerous duplicates of this sculpture created such as the one being presented right now which was erected here in San Diego, California back in 2007. When the sculpture was first displayed in 2005 it was originally titled “Unconditional Surrender” in reference to Japan’s unconditional surrender to the US on V-J Day which prompted the original photo to be taken. However, a decade later, Johnson officially changed the title to “Embracing Peace” as a sort of

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soft double entendre.⁴ Some people find it ironic that the sculpture is titled “Embracing Peace” when it is next to a massive aircraft carrier navy ship. The USS Midway has since been repurposed as a museum for civilians to learn about the US Navy, but it’s hard to not be intimidated by it as it looms over the whole park. While this new naming scheme does take away some important historical context of the sculpture it does allow it to better stand on its own as a piece of artwork rather than simply a historical photograph turned into a sculpture.

It might seem odd to some that a sculpture of a photo taken in New York would be standing in San Diego, California, but this can easily be attributed to San Diego’s status as a military town.⁵ San Diego features a huge Navy community today, and did even back during World War II. For many Navy soldiers heading into the Pacific to battle Japan, San Diego was their last stop on US soil before they embarked to fight the enemy.⁶ The statue honors the many brave Navy sailors who fought and died in World War II, and the dutiful nurses who cared for them during this period of great turmoil. Instead of the usual stoic stances soldiers are typically portrayed in, this sculpture depicts more of a candid moment which captures the jubilation these fighters felt at having returned home from the war at last. As the number of surviving WWII veterans and nurses continues to dwindle, the demand for statues like this to honor the bravery and remember the legacy of these fighters and their service has only increased.⁷

Strangely enough the couple featured in the sculpture is kept anonymous on the plaque. This could be done for several reasons. The most honorable and innocent reasoning for this could be that viewers are not meant to focus on the individuals in the sculpture, but are instead meant

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⁶ ibid.
⁷ ibid.
to liken their display of love and sincere emotion to all those who served in WWII. However, diving deeper into the background of the couple reveals a more unpleasant background for the original photo which could also explain why the identities of the couple are omitted from the plaque. The man in the picture is believed to most likely be a Navy sailor named George Mendonsa and the woman has been confirmed to be a dental assistant, not a nurse, named Grete Zimmer. Mendonsa and Zimmer were not only never romantically involved, but also never knew each other in the first place. Mendonsa recalls the story as him celebrating the war ending by having “a few drinks” when he then saw Zimmer walking on a New York Street and mistook her for a nurse and proceeded to take her into his arms and kiss her. Zimmer has stated quite explicitly that the kiss was not a consensual one, but an entirely forced one on Mendonsa’s part. The body language of the pair is very telling of the non consensual kiss between them. The man is quite literally bending the woman into a position where he can kiss her, and she seems to be much more in shock or surprise at the man kissing her than she seems to be engaging in the kiss as her arms make no effort to embrace the man back. She instead grips her skirt and purse, which Johnson has taken the liberty of changing to flowers for the sculpture to make the act seem more like a consensual one than the brutish one it actually was. Despite Zimmer repeatedly pointing out that Mendonsa forced the act, strangely enough she does not outright denounce the sailor for kissing her. Zimmer has gone on record saying she has mixed-feeling about the kiss, and she

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appears to empathize with the sailor as she claims he was not trying to be romantic but was instead displaying his gratitude that the war was over.\textsuperscript{12}

Whatever Zimmer might have thought about the kiss does not change the fact that it was blatantly assault as the sailor forced her into his arms and went right in for a kiss. Despite all this information being publicly available people still choose to admire this sculpture and the photograph it was inspired by. Of course, not everyone knows the dark history of the kiss, but certainly the sculptor who created it and the city councilman who approved its placement in the city did. The kiss scene from V-J Day in Times Square is certainly one of the most iconic photos in American history, but after unearthing the nasty truth behind the photo can we still possibly celebrate it, and the works it has inspired such as the sculpture? Are we to turn a blind eye to sexual assault for the sake of patriotism? Should we celebrate what the kiss stood for while acknowledging the flaws in how it happened? Should we stop celebrating the kiss scene all together? The statue has faced some scrutiny from the #MeToo movement in the past,\textsuperscript{13} but it still remains standing in San Diego and other cities with no foreseeable plans to remove it, so it seems for the time being at least city leaders are fine with keeping it up and feigning ignorance to the troubling past behind it.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{14} A. Pawlowski, “Love It or Hate It? ‘Kissing Statue’ Returns to San Diego, Ignites Debate.” \textit{TODAY}, February 21, 2013, \url{https://www.today.com/money/love-it-or-hate-it-kissing-statue-returns-san-diego-1c8471733}.
Bibliography


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