

1.16

Flag-Raising, Iwo Jima, 1945

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It is not true that Joe Rosenthal staged his famous flag-raising photograph taken atop Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima on 23 February 1945.¹ The persistent skepticism, however, illuminates an important and until now overlooked quality of the photograph.

This quality is the distinctive composition of Rosenthal's picture. That it should even have a composition at all is remarkable and an ongoing source of suspicion for some, given how instantaneously and almost inadvertently the image was made. Rosenthal shot the photograph at 1/400th of a second, having glimpsed the flag-raising out of the corner of his eye before swinging his camera around to get the shot. We are left then with the question of how the flag-raising achieved such monumental clarity in his lens.

The answer will be familiar to artists. Like any skilled picture-maker, Rosenthal carried a bank of images in his mind, pictorial designs and themes he collected not as a set of conscious sources but as a background—a visual lexicon—on which he could rely without thinking when out in the field. The Mount Suribachi photograph intuitively draws from his image bank.

What is the source that allowed Rosenthal to compose the photograph instantly, without thinking? I propose it is Douglas Tilden's monumental sculpture of 1901, *The Mechanics Fountain* (Fig. 1.16), located at the corner of Market, Battery, and Bush Streets in San Francisco, where Rosenthal had lived since 1930. Rosenthal worked in the city as a photographer soon after he arrived, covering events such as the Longshoreman's Strike of 1934, and when he left for the Pacific, he did so from San Francisco, on 27 March 1944. My research has not located a Rosenthal photograph showing Tilden's sculpture, but such a photograph is not necessary to see a connection between *The Mechanics Fountain* and the flag-raising picture. It is plausible that Tilden's well-known sculpture—operating in some intuitive, background way in Rosenthal's mind—gave his photograph the instantaneous good gestalt that has made skeptical critics doubt its genuineness.

Of course there are many differences between the two works. Tilden's sculpture, showing apprentices and master craftsmen operating a massive punch-press, is a recognizable turn-of-the-century fantasy: the near-naked apprentices dangling from the giant lever are a combination of Peter Pan and Tarzan. Nothing like them appears in Rosenthal's picture. Yet the similarities are notable—the comparable angles of the punch-press lever and the flag pole, and the concerted effort of the men, culminating in a steadying



Figure 1.16 Douglas Tilden, *The Mechanics Fountain*, San Francisco, 1901. Photo © 2003 Lee Sandstead.

figure or figures at the base (the master craftsmen in Tilden's work; Harlon Block anchoring the flag in Rosenthal's picture).

The fact that Rosenthal's photograph was turned into a sculpture is fitting. In 1954 in Arlington, Virginia, Felix de Weldon unveiled his colossal bronze of the flag-raising—an acknowledgment that the photograph itself had always been sculptural. Rosenthal himself sensed this, recalling how atmospheric conditions on Iwo Jima that day gave “the figures a sculptural depth.”² Others saw the photograph the same way almost as soon as it appeared in 1945. Plans were afoot right away to create public sculptures based on it in Los Angeles and Columbus.³ A newspaper editorial in March 1945 proposed the same idea for San Francisco.⁴ If that San Francisco sculpture had gone up, a comparison with Tilden's *Mechanics Fountain* would have been impossible to miss. As it is, the connection to Tilden's work has continued to escape notice.

That connection opens up two unexpected meanings of Rosenthal's picture. One is its relation to a long history of American–Japanese imperial competition in the Pacific. Tilden's sculpture commemorates the ship-building prowess of the Donahue family in San Francisco; the massive press might be punching holes in the sheet armor of warships; the sculpture pays homage to San Francisco as a center of the early twentieth-century American imperial fleet.⁵ Not far from it is the monument to Admiral Dewey, hero of Manila, at Union Square; and about twelve blocks up Market Street is Tilden's heroic equestrian group extolling white American valor in the Spanish–American War.

Rosenthal's photograph follows from this rhetoric. Made in a fraction of a second, it had a long run-up dating to the first years of the twentieth century, the origin of its lexicon of American battle valor in the Pacific. With a logic surpassing the photographer's own ambitions and intelligence (just as Hamlet is smarter than Shakespeare), the Mount Suribachi photograph refers to a whole history of American military ambition in the Pacific.

The second meaning is more important but more difficult to define. It is the photograph's relation to space—specifically, the many thousands of miles' distance between Iwo Jima and San Francisco. The photograph was always about spatial command: the large 8 × 4-foot flag went up on Mount Suribachi so that all those on the island and on the surrounding ocean could see it (the smaller flag that had gone up earlier was not visible enough for this purpose). Rosenthal's photograph, transmitted to the American media, grandiosely followed through on the flag's initial semaphore—extending the range by thousands of miles back to the mainland American press and its readers. Tilden's sculpture is a homing signal within Rosenthal's photograph—an implicit acknowledgment of the picture's homeward-seeking energy.

At the same time, there is something plaintive in that great distance. That sadness of space evokes the mortal peril of the soldiers Rosenthal photographed during a respite in the weeks-long battle that three of them would not survive.⁶ The photograph asks that we contemplate the whole expanse known as the Pacific Theater as a wide emptiness traversed by small human signals: the flag-raising at one end, Tilden's sculpture at the other. The Iwo Jima photograph sends back feelers to the first American shore it can find, suggesting that the goal of the picture—a goal obscured amid the official hoopla that made it a propaganda masterpiece—is not to show a feat of heroism, writ loud and clear and sledge-hammered upon the skies, but to indicate some delicate quality of sending a small signal, human and frail, contingent and mortal, against an overwhelming blankness.

Notes

- 1 For the history of skepticism about the photograph and for information about Rosenthal's biography, see Andrew Ratchford, "Joe Rosenthal (1911–2006)," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American World War II Correspondents*, ed. Jeffrey B. Cook (Detroit: Gale Cengage, 2012): 229–35.
- 2 Joe Rosenthal, "The picture that will live forever," *Collier's* (13 February 1955): 66.
- 3 "Iwo picture will be model of memorials," unspecified newspaper clipping, stamped 28 March 1945. Joe Rosenthal File, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
- 4 "Memorial art," unspecified newspaper clipping, stamped 17 March 1945. Joe Rosenthal File, California Historical Society, San Francisco. The editorial begins: "If the art of sculpture can capture in the dimensions of bronze the spirit that Joe Rosenthal caught in his photographic masterpiece of the Marines on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima, it would make a magnificent war memorial for San Francisco."
- 5 For an account of the commission and iconography of Tilden's sculpture, see Melissa Dabakis, "Douglas Tilden's *Mechanics Fountain*: Labor and the 'Crisis of Masculinity' in the 1890s," *American Quarterly* 47 (June 1995): 204–235.
- 6 For the identities and fates of the men in the photograph, see, for example, James Bradley with Ron Powers, *Flags of Our Fathers* (New York: Bantam, 2000) and Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall, *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).