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Art1020

# James Montgomery Flagg

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There's no doubt that you have seen James Montgomery Flagg's art. His most famous piece is perhaps the most well known single piece of American political propaganda in history. Flagg showed signs of artistic talent at a young age and went on to be one of the most successful and beloved American artists to date.



## Birth & Early Life

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June 18, 1877, James Montgomery Flagg was born to Elisha and Anne Elida Flagg. In his home of Pelham Manor, New York, Flagg began drawing at a very early age showing astounding talent before the age of five. Indeed a prodigy, at 12 years old, he sold his first piece of art to a prestigious children's periodical *St. Nicholas Magazine*. Shortly thereafter, he continued to prove his proficient artistry. At just 15, he was on staff at two premier magazines, *Life* and *Judge*, having several of his illustrations published in the articles.

Next, Flagg studied abroad making his way over to London & Paris from 1898 to 1900. In London, he studied at the Hubert Herkomer School and in Paris, he studied with Victor Marec, a popular illustrator and painter in Europe at the time.

Back in the United States, Flagg went back to work for both *Life* and *Judge* magazines and also added *Harper's Weekly* to his busy schedule. He was whipping out illustrations at a remarkable rate for much of the early twentieth century. *Life* also

released a couple series of Flagg's poetry which were commonly accompanied by his illustrations. Flagg was proving to be a successful artist.

Around 1905, James Montgomery Flagg and ten others founded the Dutch Treat Club—made up of illustrators, writers, performers and other artists—in which they met every Tuesday and reviewed the art of its contributors over lunch. Flagg was considered one of the major contributors.



## WWI Era

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The U.S. enters the Great War and New York names James Montgomery Flagg their official state artist in 1916. This is when he began his war-propaganda art. The “I Want You” poster portraying Uncle Sam pointing to the viewer to inspire military enlistment first appeared on July 6, 1916, on the cover of *Leslie's Weekly*, a popular magazine at the time. Although this is today's defining portrait of America's favorite uncle, Flagg was actually not the creator of the Uncle Sam character. Contrary to popular belief, Uncle Sam is based on a real person, Samuel Wilson. Wilson was a New York meatpacker responsible for sending meat products to U.S. Soldiers during the war of 1812. He would stamp “U.S.” onto the barrels of meat to label the destination of the product. When soldier's received the barrels they would joke that they received “a gift from Uncle Sam.” Other cartoonists used this Uncle Sam character for nearly a century before Flagg created his popular portrayal.

When coming up with a new face for Uncle Sam, Flagg says the facial features were his own. He drew the face to look like himself and created a new image of Uncle

Sam that would become his definitive appearance for the rest of history. After the illustration was featured on the cover of *Leslie's Weekly*, it was later revamped for the War. The poster was undoubtedly designed after a successful British poster featuring Lord Kitchener (a British war general) pointing to the viewer. The British poster also had the print "Wants You" beneath the illustration. When the Uncle Sam posters were made, they distributed an estimated 5 million copies. Flagg went on to create an astounding 46—perhaps more—posters during the period of the war. Through all this success, James Montgomery Flagg became the highest paid artist in America.



## **Post-WWI Era**

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With James' success through the first twenty years of the century, it would seem he could retire around 1925. He stopped contributing art to the Dutch Treat Club and magazines for much of the late 1920s, but when the Depression came around, Flagg found it necessary to dust off his kits and get back to work.

Flagg's back and the Dutch Treat Club couldn't be happier. Soon after his return, they began having annual dinner parties displaying the best arts of the year. The club became quite a success in its purpose. Flagg changed the flavor a little when he decided to go a bit more risque occasionally featuring elements of nudity and symbols of mystery & death. The Dutch Treat Club continues doing art reviews at weekly luncheons to this day in New York.

America was turned on to the new raunchy style and it lasted until somewhere around the late 1940s. Perhaps America had been a bit desensitized by the second World War.

World War II came about and Flagg seized the opportunity to produce more war-related material. Flagg constructed a fabulous portrait of President Roosevelt that was used in magazines to recruit women for war jobs. He did another Uncle Sam poster portraying a Sam with vengeance in his eyes and a wrench enclosed in a tight fist as he rolls up his sleeve readying confidently for a fight.

James seemed to be back on top as America's artist. Following World War II he stayed very busy. He published an autobiography which he titled "Roses And Buckshot." Through "Roses And Buckshot" is how America got to know the mysterious artist as a person. He said of becoming an artist, "First, you have a hell of a lot of talent, then...experience, [knowledge, and taste]; then, you have understanding, intuition, imagination, craftsmanship, red blood, philosophy, a fine canvas, the best paints and someone or something that demands your entire concentration." Through this statement, we can tell Flagg was confident and cocky in his work. He was a self-proclaimed—although hardly arguable—Bohemian in his lifestyle and prolific artist in his work.

Out with his personal life he came. In "Roses And Buckshot," he mentions his family life. He was married in 1899 to Nellie McCormick and remained so until her death did they part in 1923. He remarried in 1925 when he fell in love with Dorothy Virginia Wadman, one of his models with whom he conceived a child. When their daughter, Faith, was born in 1925, Dorothy suffered a severe psychiatric breakdown.

Following this, I'm not sure of their involvement in one another's lives; although, I do know she outlived James passing away in 1967. Their daughter Faith is still alive, today.



## **Death & After**

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The great American Flagg waves goodbye on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1960. In the last months of his life, heart problems gave him difficulties and after a second heart attack, he lost his vision. He was survived by his wife Dorothy and daughter Faith. He is still indisputably one of America's most successful and favorite artists to date.



## **What I Think**

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I am a big fan of James Montgomery Flagg's. When I was 14, my family and I were cleaning out my grandmother's old house when I found a couple of the Uncle Sam "I Want You" posters. I asked my grandmother if I could have one. She said yes, and I excitedly placed that poster in a frame on my bedroom wall. I studied the poster and read the artist's signature, "James Montgomery Flagg." I memorized the name and did a small amount of research online to see some of his other works. I decided then, that he was one of my favorite artists.

Clearly I'm a fan of his art. What Flagg is so talented at is capturing and illustrating the attitude in his characters through more than just facial features. He does so through their clothing, their stature, their gaunt, etc.

His style is so broad, too. Sometimes artists don't have enough of an artistic range to keep peoples interest over long periods of time. This is certainly one of Flagg's strengths. He proves this by having been successful for much of seventy years. You can see his style change throughout his career. It changed through personal preference and the influence of society. He knew he had to illustrate in a way that connected to his audience and he did this very well. For example, his World War II portrayal of Uncle Sam on the "Jap...You're Next" poster was to appeal to the average young American Male who sought revenge on Japan for the attack on Pearl Harbor. He reinvented the way America dealt with political propaganda.

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