

# Just a Kiss?

THE REAL STORY BEHIND S.D. HARBOR'S CONTROVERSIAL "UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER" STATUE

BY GERALD "DEX" POINDEXTER

**I**t was here and then it was not here, and now, it has returned. Artist Seward Johnson's "Unconditional Surrender" sculpture looks the same, but it is also different—sturdier, heavier and since February 2013, permanently installed along the waterfront, in the shadow of the floating USS Midway Museum. As one of San Diego's most storied works of public art, it has endured a headline-stealing journey in recent years—capturing the hearts, imaginations and criticism of many in its presence. Is it art or an eyesore?

When a traveling version of "Unconditional Surrender" debuted in San Diego in September 2007, it was a welcome, albeit temporary addition to the local landscape. Art imitated life in the form of a striking visual—an American sailor and nurse locked in a celebratory kiss and sweeping embrace. Johnson, a Navy veteran, drew inspiration for the 25-foot-tall sculpture from a moment in New York's Times Square on August 14, 1945, Victory Over Japan Day (aka "V-J Day"), the day Japanese forces surrendered, effectively ending World War II. Similar moments were immortalized in famous photographs by Alfred Eisenstaedt and Victor Jorgensen, published in *Life* magazine and *The New York Times*, respectively.

Johnson's interpretation, part of his *Icons Revisited* series, reflects "the beginning of peace and prosperity, and resonates with that sense of excitement and romance," says Allan Tait, manager, public art for the Port of San Diego, which leased the sculpture. "That was a watershed time—a euphoric, historic moment that appeals to a variety of demographics."

Such poignant memories made the sculpture a natural fit in San Diego, a city with an active and longstanding military culture. The Midway, a legendary, post-World War II aircraft carrier-turned-naval aviation museum, represented the perfect background. Veterans and their contemporaries flocked to the sculpture. It also became a destination for a constant stream of local residents and tourists seeking photo opportunities to replicate "the kiss." Soon enough, a nickname emerged: the "kiss statue."

Ironically, "Unconditional Surrender" always had specific conditions attached to its time in San Diego. Foremost, it was a temporary exhibit on a one-year loan from the Sculpture Foundation, which provides exhibitions and

contemporary landmark public artworks. However, the work epitomized the idea of "by popular demand" and on that basis, its exhibition was extended several times. It remained installed through May 30, 2012, when it was finally removed and returned to Johnson's New Jersey facilities for restoration. Several months before then, a proposal to purchase a permanent version of the sculpture through public donations was brought before the Port's Public Art Committee of artists, curators, architects and administrators.

The proposal, spearheaded by the Midway, had strong public support. But despite its unquestioned appeal, the sculpture's extended stay had its share of controversy. As art is subjective and meant to inspire dialogue, some members of local art circles and the media wanted to see the sculpture leave—forever. Their voices were in the minority but did not go unheard. Robert Pincus, the city's most visible art critic, wrote in the *U-T San Diego*: "The figures look like something from a cheap souvenir factory, blown up beyond any reason." Users of sites such as Yelp.com weighed in with mixed reviews. One called it "ugly, tacky and just generally in very bad taste. Everyone who steps up to the statue looks up the nurse's skirt. It does no justice to the iconic photograph, WWII veterans or the U.S. It is a grotesque white elephant on San Diego Harbor."

Even at the Port of San Diego, which by State of California mandate determines the best use of the public lands surrounding San Diego Bay, controversy existed. Disagreements among the organization's Public Art Committee and its supervisory Board of Commissioners about whether the statue's purchase and installation met planning criteria and approval processes. The dispute resulted in two members of the committee resigning their positions in protest.

Ultimately, the sculpture's unique combination of sentiment and substance prevailed. Led by the Midway's "Save the Kiss" campaign, more than \$1 million was raised in only eight weeks to replace the temporary, traveling urethane version. The new, permanent bronze sculpture, at 25 feet, 14,000 pounds and durably colorized, not only depicts a national triumph, but also the resilience borne of its own unexpected San Diego saga.

"It's a chosen, universal image," says Paula Stoeke, director and curator of the Sculpture Foundation. "It's a narrative of when and where. The emphasis is on the universal concept of spontaneous joy."

The new "Unconditional Surrender" sculpture was unveiled in Tuna Harbor Park, next to the Midway museum, on February 16, 2013 as part of the Port of San Diego's Greatest Generation Collection. Loved or loathed, "The Kiss" remains much more than just a kiss.

THE HARBOR'S  
HEADLINE-MAKING  
"UNCONDITIONAL  
SURRENDER"  
STATUE (RIGHT).

