

Paper Mache for 7-3-26 by David Read

In addition to being my birthday, tomorrow is the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Well, actually, not quite. July 4, 1776, was the day Congress approved the final text of the United States Declaration of Independence. The document was dated July 4 and ordered to be printed. This is the date that appears at the top of the Declaration, and it became the date Americans have celebrated ever since. It wasn't until August 2, 1776 that most delegates signed the parchment copy that now resides in the National Archives Building. Enough for the history lesson.

As our nation celebrates its 250th birthday, we'll all spend a great deal of time reflecting on history, politics, military victories, and the remarkable people who shaped this country. All of that deserves celebration. But as an arts guy, I find myself asking a different question. What are the greatest artistic creations America has given the world? The list is almost impossibly long. In just two and a half centuries, U.S. artists have produced an astonishing body of work that has influenced virtually every corner of the globe. It is hard to imagine American culture without the literary voices of Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Emily Dickinson, Toni Morrison, John Steinbeck, or Harper Lee. Their stories continue to define not only America but the universal human experience. Whether it's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*, these books remain as relevant today as when they were written.

Music may be America's greatest cultural gift. Jazz was born here. Blues emerged from unimaginable hardship and became a language understood around the world. Rock and roll changed popular culture forever. Country music, gospel, Broadway, hip-hop, and countless other genres all trace their roots to American creativity. It is difficult to imagine modern music without figures like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, George Gershwin, Bob Dylan, and Aretha Franklin. The visual arts tell an equally compelling story. Winslow Homer captured everyday American life with honesty and beauty. Georgia O'Keeffe transformed flowers and Southwestern landscapes into icons of modern art. Norman Rockwell painted the hopes and humor of ordinary families, while Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol completely redefined what art could be.

Architecture deserves a place on the list as well. Frank Lloyd Wright changed residential design forever with homes that blended into the landscape rather than dominating it. His influence can still be seen in buildings around the world.

And then there is the uniquely American art form that has become perhaps our most influential export of all, motion pictures. Films like *Citizen Kane*, *The Godfather*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*, and *Casablanca* have become shared cultural touchstones across continents and generations. Even animation, once dismissed as children's entertainment, has produced masterpieces that speak to every age. Disney's classic films and the innovations of Pixar have shown that cartoons can tell stories every bit as profound as live-action films.

Of course, any list like this is necessarily incomplete. One person might nominate a painting, another a jazz standard, another a Broadway musical, another a novel or a film. That is precisely the point. For 250 years America has been a laboratory of creativity. Artists from every background, every ethnicity, every religion, and every corner of the country have borrowed from one another, challenged and inspired one another. The result is a cultural legacy far greater than any one individual could have imagined. As fireworks light up the sky this year, perhaps we should celebrate more than our independence. We should also celebrate the artists, writers, musicians, architects, filmmakers, dancers, actors, and dreamers who have spent 250 years reminding the rest of the world that one of America's greatest natural resources has always been its imagination. That may be our finest masterpiece of all.