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# Imagining a New York City Flag for the 21st Century

By SAM ROBERTS

Everyone knows the old joke about what has four wheels and flies. The answer, of course: a garbage truck. But what's blue, white and orange, festooned with beavers, flour barrels, the blades of a windmill, a sailor, an Indian and an eagle? And flies, too?

If you guessed New York City's official flag, you're among a select group of Gotham's cognoscenti.

A century ago, 250 years after the transfer from Dutch to English government, the city formally adopted the tricolor flag, which incorporates a seal (a crest or emblem, not a marine mammal) dating to the late 17th century. With the city now poised to mark the 350th anniversary of that turnover, a civic group has commissioned artists, architects and graphic designers to whimsically reinvent the city flag for the new century. (The official city flag will remain unchanged.)

The reimagined flags will be auctioned at Sotheby's New York on Feb. 25 by the NYC Landmarks50 Alliance to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the city's landmarks law by increasing public awareness of the city's architectural resources. Proceeds will be managed by the Fund for the City of New York.

"This select group of thoughtful, iconic, humorous and ironic re-imaginings of the New York City flag for the 21st century suggests that we all march under our own banners," said Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, chairwoman of the alliance and of the Historic Landmarks Preservation Center.

"These delightful works created with warm appreciation for New York City's

historic past make this event a landmark occasion in itself,” she said.

The contributing designers include John Baldessari, Luisa Caldwell, Ivan Chermayeff, Francesco Clemente, Kenneth Cole, Norman Foster, Milton Glaser, Richard Meier, Michele Oka Doner, Clifford Ross, Tom Sachs, Robert A.M. Stern, Peter Tunney, Diane von Furstenberg and Willy Wong.

None of them took their assignment to reinterpret the flag for modern times too literally (or seriously). The barrels do not contain gluten-free flour. Nor do the flags feature politically correct female sailors or fully clad Indians, cockapoos instead of beavers or modern wind turbines that generate electricity.

Only a few of the proposed flags retain the date, which is probably just as well. In 1977, it was officially changed from 1664 (when the English takeover began) to 1625 (an approximate date of Dutch settlement) at the behest of the Anglophobic City Council president, Paul O’Dwyer.

“The idea is, in an increasingly virtual world in the 21st century flags are one of the remaining symbols of shared virtues and beliefs,” Ms. Diamonstein-Spielvogel said.

A worm protrudes from an apple in Mr. Baldessari’s version, because, he said, “I distrust the perfect apple.”

Ms. Caldwell’s features a floral bouquet instead of the traditional seal to represent “the bursting nonstop energy” of the city.

Mr. Chermayeff gives dogs their due, depicting one holding a city flag and asserting: “I have thousands of friends and all their owners vote.”

Mr. Cole’s is of black leather. Mr. Foster’s frames the circular seal in an apple. Mr. Glaser deconstructs the seal altogether.

Mr. Stern’s “explodes the original into a dashing 21st century encounter between a businessman and a tourist, two of the modern-day archetypes that come together to make our city strong.”

Mr. Wong submitted two designs, a monochromatic “Black Tie Flag: For the City That Never Sleeps” and another in which five horizontal bands represent the

boroughs and vertical bands signify “a tale of two cities . . .all united.”

The benefit auction, titled “Unflagging Commitment,” will be preceded by an exhibition viewing for vexillologists and others at 6 p.m.

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*This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: February 6, 2014***

*An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of one of the contributing artists. She is Michele Oka Doner, not Michelle.*