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Spectacular Living Pictures

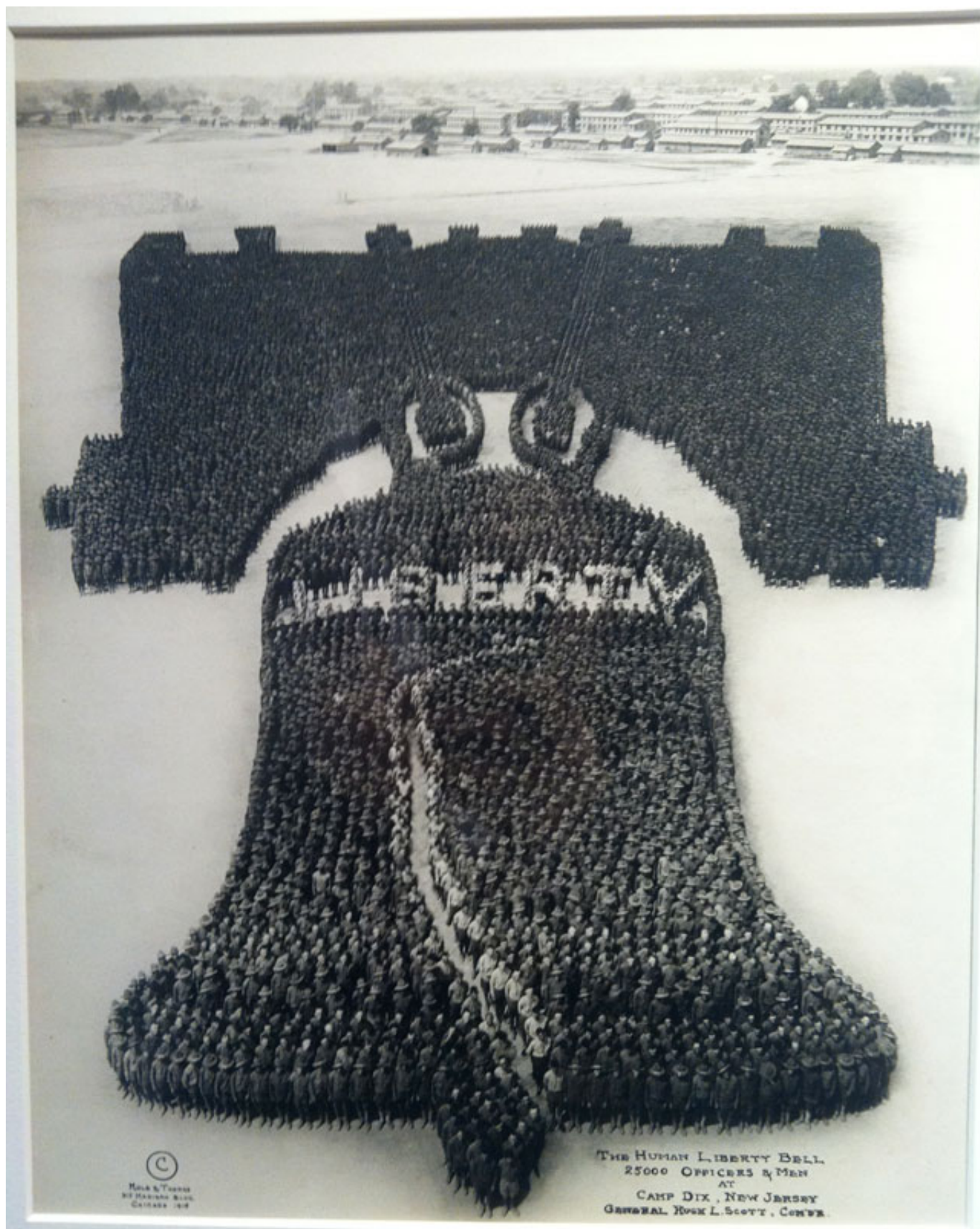
by [Jillian Steinhauer](#) on October 26, 2012



Photographer unknown, “1st Field Artillery Brigade” (1914) (all images by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

Yesterday on my rounds of Chelsea, I stumbled upon three amazing photographs on the walls of Andrew Edlin gallery. Included as part of *Collectors of Skies*, a wonderfully eclectic if somewhat theoretically abstract group show, each is a photograph of thousands of soldiers brought together to form a larger image — so for instance, 25,000 officers and men forming “The Human Liberty Bell.” The photos are all still, black-and-white vintage prints from 1918, 1918, and 1940, so this is no mass moving spectacle on the order of [North Korea](#). But the human compositions are built around shapes as well as light and dark areas, and the results are completely mesmerizing. Your eye gets caught in a sort of push-pull, switching between looking at the larger whole and trying to suss out individuals — a bit like looking at a Pointillist or

Impressionist painting, actually.



Arthur Mole and John D. Thomas, "The Human Liberty Bell" (1918)

Two of the photos were taken by unknown photographers, but the earliest, the "Human Liberty

Bell” image, is credited to Arthur Mole and John D. Thomas. A bit of research reveals that this was, in fact, Mole and Thomas’s thing. An article by Louis Kaplan in [Cabinet](#) about Mole’s quite literally spectacular photographs, which he called “living pictures,” explains:

In these mass ornaments, thousands of military troops and other groups were arranged artfully to form American patriotic symbols, emblems, and military insignia visible from a bird’s eye perspective. During World War I, these military formations came to serve as rallying points to support American involvement in the war and to ward off isolationist tendencies.

Kaplan goes on to detail the photographers’ process:

Mole and Thomas ... began by tracing the desired image on a ground-glass plate mounted on Mole’s camera. Using a megaphone, body language, and a long pole with a white flag tied to the end to point to the more remote areas where the bulk of the troops had to be stationed, Mole would then position his helpers on the field as they nailed the pattern to the ground with miles of lace edging. In this way, Mole also figured out the exact number of troops required. These steps were preliminary to the many hours required to assemble and position the troops on the day of shooting.

As it turns out, there are many even more amazing pictures in this genre than the ones at Edlin gallery: Mole and Thomas staged a profile portrait of Woodrow Wilson, the Statue of Liberty, and the Human U.S. Shield, which was their largest undertaking (30,000 men) and is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Photographer unknown, "Entire Personnel 1st Division, Formed a Living Insignia" (1940)

The thought of planning, arranging, and then assembling all the men for these pictures is just sort of incredible. How long did the soldiers have to stand there, perfectly still, waiting for the picture to be taken? This was the army, so discipline wasn't an issue, but one gets the sense that there was a high level of dedication and patriotism in these photo-events. It's partly inspiring and partly —

invoking the example of North Korea once again — disturbing. Which is of course what makes the photographs so powerful — this tension between individuals and the mass, humans dissolved into something much bigger than themselves.



Arthur Mole and John D. Thomas, “Living Portrait of President Woodrow Wilson” (1918) (image via [Cabinet](#), courtesy Chicago Historical Society)



Arthur Mole and John D. Thomas, "The Human U.S. Shield" (1918)
(image via metmuseum.org)



Arthur Mole and John D. Thomas, "Living Emblem of the United States Marines" (1919) (image via 35mm.instantfundas.com)

[Collectors of Skies](#) is on view at Andrew Edlin (134 Tenth Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 3.

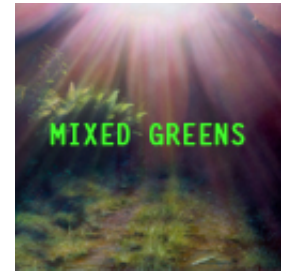
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