



IMPORTANCE OF ART DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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World War II was a difficult time for the leaders of the United States. These leaders had just begun to rebound from a devastating First World War and the Great Depression. As war loomed on the horizon and became inevitable, the leaders began to come up with a plan for success. There needed to be more soldiers, more supplies, and more money toward the cause. Art unexpectedly became a useful tool in order to gain resources for the war. Most commonly known for its ability to characterize unique nations, art had an important role in World War II for the United States. Through the propaganda during the adversity of war, art became one of the most motivating aspects for the success of the country.

Scholars may wonder how something as refined as art could have led a country through a war as gruesome as the Second World War. The art itself may not be the most physically powerful tool for war, but the strategic use of it proved to be the most influential. The artists used their work in the form of propaganda; the use of art to influence and motivate viewers. Propaganda came in many forms during this era, and each had its own way of affecting different viewers. Movies, short films, billboards, music, and radio programs. All different forms of art were powerful, but the most powerful form came from the poster campaigns.

According to Christina Jarvis writing for *Americans at War*; “Thanks to New Deal programs such as the Federal Art Project (FAP, 1935-1945), a close working relationship between the federal government and American artists already existed when the United States entered World War II.”¹ This coalition between artists, the government, and manufacturing companies only grew stronger after the war started. The country as a whole saw a great rise in patriotism after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Many young men and women felt a natural call to action, and did their part in assisting the military however they could. The Office of War Information created an alliance with artists and companies to create a powerful art campaign to create internal motivation in the viewers of the posters.

Propaganda posters and billboards were made to mold a variety of demographics. Each poster had its own powerful message that was aimed at a certain group of people, to provoke a certain type of action. Careful analysis of these posters can unveil a deep meaning behind a simple message that people unconsciously understood when they viewed the poster. A well-known iconic American figure that appeared in many illustrations at the time of World War II was Uncle Sam. In the figure below, he is displayed in a popular recruitment poster that was a part of the propaganda during World War I, but served as a powerful example for those artists working in WWII.

¹Christina Jarvis, "Visual Arts, World War II," in *Americans at War: Society Culture and the Homefront*, vol 3. 1901-1945, ed. John P. Resch (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale, 2005), 195.



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This poster was used in WW1, but similar posters were used two decades later for WWII. This picture seems straightforward with its message: to join the United States Army and to help fight the good fight overseas. While this was its main purpose, it was not the only message displayed. This picture doesn't show just any character displaying the army's message. It is the main figure for patriotism proclaiming the message. His face shows older characteristics; a white beard and wrinkled skin that portray wisdom. Uncle Sam appealed to patriotism and made young men feel a real call to action when viewing the poster. Its constituents knew that their freedom was at stake, and this poster created a passion for their country which led to a great amount of people joining the army. The top hat on his head was almost the same hat that Abraham Lincoln wore during his time in office. This reminded citizens of bravery and devoted patriotism that he

² Color Poster No. 44-PA-71, "I Want You For The U.S. Army Enlist Now," Record Group 44: Records of the Office of Government Reports, 1932 – 1947, Office for Emergency Management. Office of War Information. Domestic Operations Branch. Bureau of Special Services. Available at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/513533>.

displayed in their words and actions in times of adversity, similar to the situation that they were living in. Author Robert Westbrook published a statement of his thesis in *American Quarterly*. It states “My working hypothesis (consistent with the expectations derived from political theory) is that, with some exceptions, Americans during World War II were not called upon to conceive of their obligation to participate in the war effort as a political obligation to work, fight, or die for their country. By and large, the representatives of the state and other American propagandists relied on two different moral arguments, neither of which constituted a claim of political obligation. First, they appealed to putatively universal moral values -such as those enumerated in the Atlantic Charter or Franklin Roosevelt's ‘Four Freedoms’ speech-values such as ‘freedom,’ ‘equality,’ and ‘democracy’ transcending obligations to the United States as a particular political community. Second, and more interestingly, they implored Americans as individuals and as families to join the war effort in order to protect the state that protected them, an appeal, philosophers have argued, characteristic of liberal states and one that, at bottom, is an appeal to go to war to defend private interests and discharge private obligations. Over the course of the war, this latter sort of prescription became increasingly prominent, and the more elusive evidence of the felt obligations of Americans suggests that it was this sort of appeal that was most compelling for them and coincided most often with their own notions of ‘what we are fighting for.’”³ Westbrook states that a large amount of propaganda did not command people to action. The art was more of a gateway to internal reflection and analysis that made people question why they were not helping the cause. All subliminal messages were a strong motivator

³ Robert Westbrook, "I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl That Married Harry James": American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II," *American Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1990): 588.

for the poster's viewers, even though some may not have noticed the message without careful analysis.

Recruitment was one of the most important issues that propaganda was utilized for towards the beginning of the war. Most branches of the military had many different posters made. The poster below is an Army Air Force recruitment poster.



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This poster shows a great deal of detail with a simple scene of artwork. Planes and aviation were still somewhat new to average American citizens. The planes in the picture provoke mysterious thought and bring to life the dream of flying a plane in many young men during World War II. The main focus of the drawing is of a young man holding a bomb in his

⁴ Color Poster No. 44-PA-1434, "O'er The Ramparts We Watch. United States Army Air Forces," Record Group 44: Records of the Office of Government Reports, 1932-1947, Office for Emergency Management, Office of War Information, Domestic Operations Branch. Bureau of Special Services. Available at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/515097>.

hand. He is wearing an Army Air Force uniform with an aviator jacket to give him a heroic appearance, while his face and features display him as an average young man who applied himself to do something great. The words at the top of the poster “O’ER THE RAMPARTS WE WATCH” are words pulled straight from the national anthem. This appeal to patriotism continued to light the fire that the Japanese started when they bombed Pearl Harbor.

One of the more famous Marines recruitment poster is shown below:



The artist behind this poster went a slightly different route artistically than the other branches, but still made a strong appeal to patriotism. The flag with 48 stars is a symbol that most people at the time felt the need to protect. In this illustration the well-dressed marine stood

⁵ Color Poster No. 44-PA-1980, “The U.S. Marines Want You,” Record Group 44: Records of the Office of Government Reports, 1932-1947, Office for Emergency Management, Office of War Information, Domestic Operations Branch. Bureau of Special Services. Available at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/515672>.

in front of it, waving a finger to the poster's viewers to join him and to do the civic duty of war at the time. Author Martin Herz wrote for *The Public Opinion Quarterly* that "The marginal man in propaganda is the man who does not believe everything we say, but who is interested in our message because he does not believe everything our opponents say either. In war, he is the man who distrusts us and has reasons for fighting, but who also has good reasons for not fighting. He is the potential waverer."⁶ These posters attempted to gather the attention and foster motivation for the common man to find the internal desire to help the country in this time of adversity.

While recruitment was the most pressing issue at the beginning of the war, it was overshadowed by the need to produce more weaponry for the soldiers overseas. Major companies who manufactured planes, ammunition, weapons, bombs and clothing made independent campaigns to employ more people to meet the high demands of a World War. Boeing had their own campaign that was designed to attract women and minorities to be a part of their production line. A pamphlet at the beginning of their campaign read, "Who are these people, the builders of the Fortresses? They are people just like you and your neighbors. They are housewives, students, store clerks, former business men, teachers. They are middle-aged, elderly; they are youngsters in their latter teens. They are a cross section of all America."⁷ This was a call to action for everyday people to unite and join a company who made one of the most elaborate planes of the era. The flying fortress bomber was a massive plane for the time that hosted a large crew and could attack using many different weapons. Most people understood the

⁶ Martin F. Herz, "Some Psychological Lessons From Leaflet Propaganda in World War II." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1949): 475.

⁷ Polly Reed Myers, "Boeing Aircraft Company's Manpower Campaign during World War II." *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 98, no. 4 (2007): 183.

importance and uniqueness of this machine, and mentioning it in the pamphlet got people motivated to join the surge of manpower.

Minority and women were not the only groups targeted, every able body was targeted in campaign ads. The poster below seeks to unify both the upper level management and floor workers.

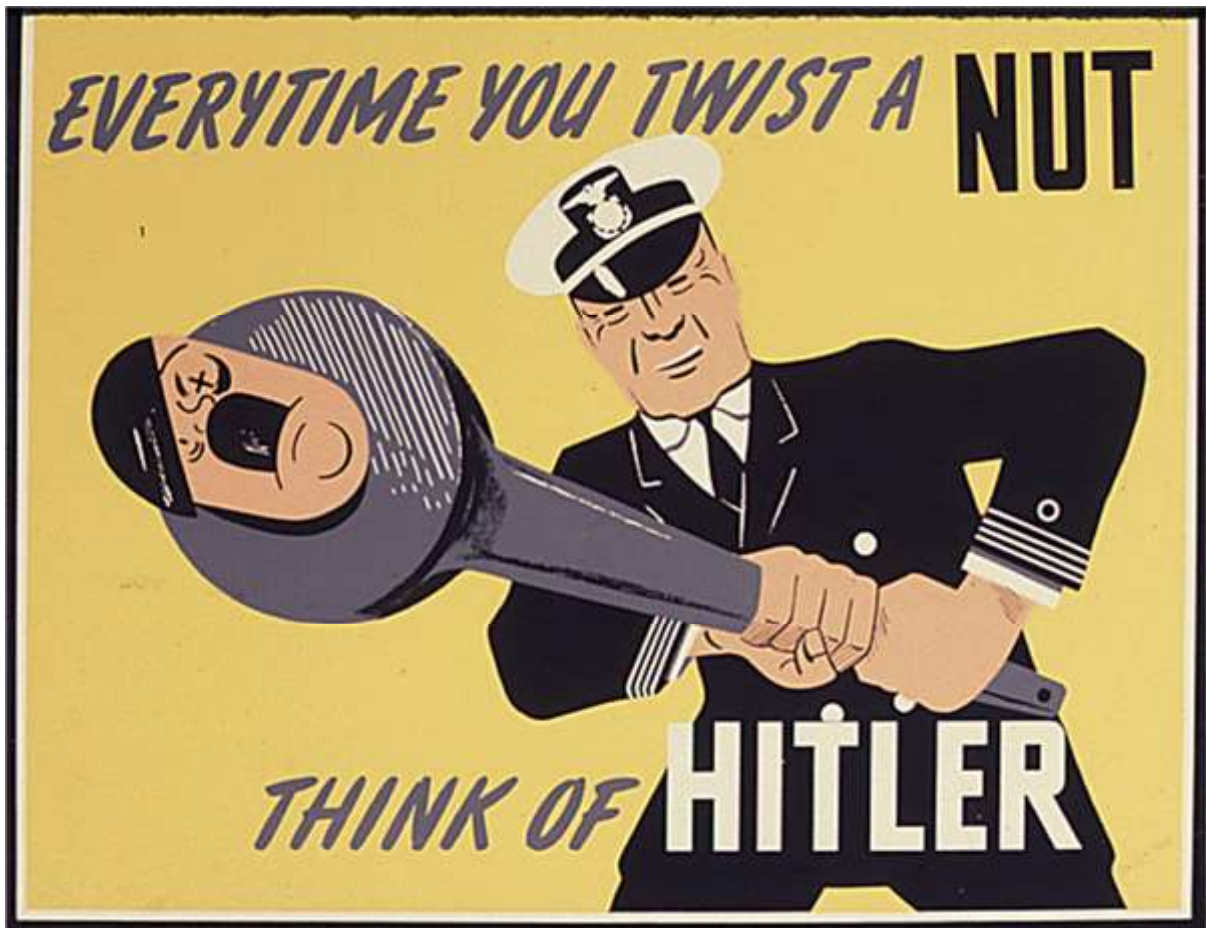


This poster is moving because of the amount of unity and patriotism shown in the art. Both fists (one white collar worker, one blue collar worker) have minimal differences. The similarities were included to show that while they both have different responsibilities within a company, they are both working towards a common goal. It is not difficult to know the final

⁸ Color Poster No. 44-PA-2153, "Together We Can Do It – Keep 'Em Firing," Record Group 44: Records of the Office of Government Reports, 1932-1947, Office for Emergency Management. Office of War Information. Bureau of Special Services. Available at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/515856>

goal, because it is written clearly at the bottom of the poster: “KEEP ‘EM FIRING!” This was written in relaxed language that also attempted to put both management and laborers on the same level. The stars, tank, and plane appeal to patriotism. This artwork purposefully blends unity and patriotism to create a powerful message to citizens and provoked a great surge of workers into production.

Not only were unity and patriotism used as recruitment and hiring tools; hatred was also used for motivation during these strenuous jobs. The poster below displays this vividly.



⁹ Color Poster No. 179-WP-1044, "Every Time You Twist a Nut Think of Hitler," Record of the War Production Board, 1918-1947, Record Group 179, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. Available at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/534895>

Hitler was a large source of hatred for the United States as a whole, and especially those working in the factories during the war. Most of them had friends and/or family who were fighting Hitler's forces overseas, and they were deeply concerned for their friend's safety during battle. The poster above appeals to emotion and hatred and convinces people to work hard even when the days are long and the work is tough. The wrench shown in the picture is displayed to be torquing Hitler's head, and his face displays an injured eye and pain from the twisting. The artist uses a nut to portray Hitler for more than one underlying reason. First of all, a lot of Americans would be familiar with twisting nuts because they were working to produce goods for the military. The hatred of Hitler fueled much of the call to action that most Americans felt during World War II.

Women played an intricate role in the production of military goods at the time of the war. Companies aimed campaigns straight for unemployed females. Author Maureen Honey states in the journal *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* that "By selling the war to the American public, advertisers could perform an important service both for businesses manufacturing war materials through keeping brand names before the public eye, and for government agencies through persuading the public to make needed sacrifices in wartime. One of the results of their efforts was the creation of an ideological framework for the employment of women in male-identified blue-collar jobs, a framework which simultaneously acknowledged that women were capable of filling jobs requiring 'male' characteristics and preserved essential features of the feminine role."¹⁰ The ideological framework for women to work normally male-driven blue-collar jobs was paramount to the success seen in the Second World War.

¹⁰ Maureen Honey, "The 'Womanpower' Campaign: Advertising and Recruitment Propaganda during World War II." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 6, no. 1/2 (1981): 50.

One of the most common propaganda characters at the time was a fictional character named Rosie the Riveter. Seen below is a picture of art containing Rosie:



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Rosie the Riveter was an extremely famous fictional character that appeared in artwork during the Second World War. In this famous poster she is seen rolling up her sleeves, getting ready to work. Her dress gives her male characteristics, showing that females were stepping into many male production roles. While she does display some male characteristics, she retains her feminine side with smooth looking skin, and a beautiful face. The reason behind the artists decision to make her beautiful is to show that even though women are working in the factories, that doesn't make them any more masculine.

¹¹ Color Poster No. 44-PA-1434, "We Can Do It!," Record Group 179: Records of the War Production Board, 1918-1947, Office for Emergency Management, War Production Board. Available at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535413>.

Not all people could work in a factory or join the military to help the war effort, and the military found another way to utilize this group of people. The military molded these people with art; convincing them to buy war bonds. These War Bonds were a way for the government to find currency to fund the war. In a chapter of the book *Beyond Our Means*, author Sheldon Garon states, "Axis or Allies, the parties to the Second World War shared some critical assumptions. Financial planners were determined not to repeat the mistakes of the previous world war. They all planned for a lengthy struggle, obsessed with preventing the sort of inflation that had traumatized postwar Germany and weakened other economies. Rather than rely overwhelmingly on borrowing as before, belligerents resolved to pay for the war to a much greater degree by tax increases. To finance the balance, the warring states launched new waves of savings campaigns."¹² The United States was not the only country worried about finances during a world war. Many nations suffered economically from the First World War and did not want a repeat of those failures. The United States utilized art and created many propaganda posters to display their reasoning for buying War Bonds. The picture below is an example of a poster encouraging people to help financially.

¹² Sheldon Garon, "Save Now, Buy Later: WORLD WAR II AND BEYOND." In *Beyond Our Means: Why America Spends While the World Saves*, 194-220. Princeton University Press, 2012.



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This poster was aimed directly at women. It reminded many women of the men they had fighting overseas. Husbands, brothers, dads, sons, and friends all were overseas, and this artist appealed to the love that they had for those men. The picture is dark, with the people being the only items illuminated. The viewers focus goes directly to the gaze that the young man and young women are giving each other. They look scared, but also strong at the same time. These feelings are portrayed to mirror the feelings that young women were feeling across the nation at the time. Young women may be reminded of watching their loved ones departing overseas. Older women may be reminded of when their men and they themselves were young and held each other the same way as the characters in the poster. Once the viewer becomes touched by these

¹³ Color Poster No. 44-PA-528, "Buy War Bonds," Record Group 44: Records of the Office of Government Reports, 1932-1947, Office for Emergency Management, Office of War Information, Domestic Operations Branch. Bureau of Special Services. Available at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/514007>.

feelings, their eyes move to the only words on the poster: “BUY WAR BONDS.” The emotional response that this elicits is a powerful motivator for the viewer to buy war bonds.

The previous World War had caused all of the countries involved a lot of economic stress. As the Second World War developed the government came up with a few different plans of actions to help fund the war. Author Sheldon Garon wrote the essay found in the anthology “Save Now, Buy Later” in *Why America Spends while the World Saves* that “Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, National Defense Savings Bonds were renamed War Savings Bonds. The United States thus fought the Second World War with a far more coherent savings campaign than in the previous war. Instead of running competing drives for small savers (stamps) versus large investors (Liberty Bonds), the war bonds campaign of 1941–45 united the two. Like the British, U.S. leaders financed the war roughly half from taxes and half from borrowing, a large portion of which came from people’s savings.”¹⁴ The various forms of bonds served as ways for citizens to help the war financially if they couldn’t in any other way. These authors fostered patriotism and creating a sense of responsibility within the members of the nation.

These examples of propaganda solidify the impact that art had on motivating the public in America during World War II. In a time of unrest, unsureness, and instability, art was used as a tool to effectively persuade people to act upon natural emotions and feelings in order to help the greater cause. The posters use patriotism, unity, anger, love, perseverance, and feminism to convey important messages and to unite the most effective nation possible.

¹⁴ Sheldon Garon, “Save Now, Buy Later: WORLD WAR II AND BEYOND.” In *Beyond Our Means: Why America Spends While the World Saves*, 194-220. Princeton University Press, 2012.

Patriotism was seemingly the most utilized emotion that artists attempted to appeal to. This was probably the easiest to reach because of the other aspects of the home front during the war. Not only was the government pushing the importance of patriotism, the people were feeling it naturally. This war that had been in Europe was no longer a distant thought. It became an immediate reality after Pearl Harbor and the American people were all in. Ladies saw a lot of men going overseas to contribute, and felt an internal desire to help in as many ways as possible. Men who did not go overseas found ways to help the cause on the home front as well. There was a unifying feeling of patriotism throughout the entire nation.

Unity was brought forth from patriotism through the artwork of propaganda artists in the era. The strong feelings of patriotism were mutual in many citizens, and this brought people closer together. The feeling of togetherness gave people a sense of comfort in unsettling times. The poster artists fostered to these emotions and gave people actions that would induce more of this togetherness feeling, much like the blue collar/white collar poster working in collaboration. The United States turned into a team like atmosphere thanks to the art used to motivate United States Citizens.

Many artists used anger to persuade people to join their cause, because of the intense nature of the emotion. This may have not been as prevalent as some of the other emotions but it carries its weight in strength. Americans had heard the atrocities that had taken place at the control of Hitler and were very angry. The “Every time you twist a nut, think of Hitler” poster reminded people that the work they were doing was important, while also using their anger as a fuel for revenge. Timing was very important when artists wanted to appeal to anger or other strong emotions. Art was the tool that allowed this fuel to be accessed, and turned into patriotism.

A lot of the anger was out of fear for loved ones involved in conflict. Artists at the time knew that love is just as powerful as anger. The artists created the posters that included couples being split up by the war, to induce an internal call to action in as many citizens as possible. The artists not only used romantic love, but also brotherly, motherly, fatherly and love for the country. If the artist is appealing to individual love, they are also appealing to love of the country because the individual in danger represents the country in some form. The artists create a common love for the country, patriotism, through appealing to love.

When those artists were attempting to unify the nation using love as their prime component, they were a lot of time trying to target women. World War II was a time in which women became empowered to contribute. The signs featuring Rosie the Riveter appealed to a woman's feeling of self-worth and independence. Rosie was a symbol of women leaving the home sphere and venturing out into the public spheres to factories and other jobs producing goods for the government on the home front. These artists gave women a sense of unity and patriotism by offering motivation to become involved in the fight at home, and to become independent with a lot of their male partners overseas.

The artists and posters of the 1940s were monumental towards unifying the nation. This accomplishment is not a small one; the nation was under great adversity and stress. Art served as a way for leaders to get their message across. It served as a way for people to understand that they were not alone, and their internal feelings were not much different than many other Americans living down the street. Art gave artists a chance to personally impact a lot of people in a lot of different ways. This impact helped the government and companies reach goals that would have been much more difficult to do without the powerful posters and the artists behind them.

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