

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: A RIVETING “ROSIE”: J. HOWARD MILLER’S *WE CAN DO IT!* POSTER AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN VISUAL CULTURE

Hannah Wai Ling Wong, Master of Arts, 2007

Directed By: Professor Sally M. Promey, Department of Art History and Archaeology

J. Howard Miller’s World War II poster depicting a woman who flexes her arm, displays her bicep, and declares, “We Can Do It!,” has been reproduced in the form of bobbleheads and action figures and on surfaces ranging from totebags to human skin. Strangely, while this well-known image has been addressed prolifically in popular culture materials, it has not received much scholarly attention. Scholars have published very little about the poster itself, its creator, J. Howard Miller, his body of work, the poster’s function, place in history, and even its subject matter. The purpose of this thesis is to construct this much-needed overall historical and theoretical framework for interpreting Miller’s poster within its World War II milieu and its usage in current American visual culture. While my thesis is concerned with gathering basic information about the poster and its immediate 1943 context, my project also explores the object’s “second career,” its post-war rise to celebrity.

A RIVETING “ROSIE”: J. HOWARD MILLER’S *WE CAN DO IT!* POSTER AND  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN VISUAL CULTURE

By

Hannah Wai Ling Wong

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor Sally M. Promey, Chair  
Professor Renée Ater  
Professor Joshua Shannon

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## Preface

Intended for display from February 15 to February 28, 1943, J. Howard Miller's poster illustration of a female war worker flexing her right arm and declaring, "We Can Do It!," has been variably interpreted and reappropriated over the years. At the time of this writing, a search on *Google images* under the subject "Rosie the Riveter" produced over 47,000 objects.

Strangely, while this well-known image has been addressed prolifically in popular culture materials, it has not received much scholarly attention. Scholars have published very little about the poster itself, its creator, J. Howard Miller, his body of work, the poster's function, place in history, and even its subject matter. The purpose of this thesis is to construct this much-needed overall historical and theoretical framework for interpreting Miller's poster within its World War II milieu and its usage in current American visual culture.

Although this project more directly addresses gender issues, this by no means indicates that issues of class and race did and do not exist in Miller's poster. The following discusses what the artist has made apparent—that the white, middle-class, physically-attractive woman is the wartime ideal—but it only indirectly points out what the poster, if only by insinuation, did *not* consider the ideal. This depiction of the ideal, and more notably, its acceptance as a representation of the ideal and the wartime worker, is a microcosm of larger race and class issues. Despite significant wartime labor participation from working-class and minority populations, Miller's *We Can Do It!* figure and many other illustrations of wartime working women did not represent the full spectrum of women who actually riveted, welded, flew planes,

served as administrators, etc. Fortunately, evidence such as Gordon Parks's photography (fig. 1) has bridged some of that gap.

Chapters one and two address this wartime artifact's various contexts; these determined the manner in which it was created and interpreted by its original viewers. In particular, chapter one considers the role of the poster in wartime and industrial contexts as well as the social and labor concerns that illustrators hoped to address. It also recounts the development of and need for a "Rosie the Riveter" concept during the war. Chapter two analyzes two seemingly incongruous visual "languages," which Miller used to communicate with his viewers. The third and final chapter examines the ways these languages are still intelligible today as demonstrated in the image's current popularity and repeated reappropriation. While my thesis is concerned with gathering basic information about the poster and its immediate 1943 context, my project also explores the object's "second career," its post-war rise to celebrity.

My project relies in many ways on David Lubin's argument that history's "familiar images"<sup>1</sup> draw on other familiar images for their intelligibility and power. As he suggests, such images are often deceptively simple and are viewed as an "innocent" part of the historical record of their time. An image's sustainability in society depends upon how well it participates in and elaborates the visual culture of which it is a part. Thus, what Lubin calls the "iconic" pictures of John and Jacqueline Kennedy—the familiar images—became so by borrowing from popular culture as well as more traditional art historical forms such as ancient Greek and Roman statuary. From the mountain of photographs taken during the Kennedys' lifetime, the

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<sup>1</sup> David Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), xi. Lubin describes familiar images as being "among the best-known, most-often-reproduced pictures of the past century."

pictures that are still recognizable today are deeply “*historical*—not because they offer eyewitness reports on history but rather because they have a history, are part of a history, and further extend that history.”<sup>2</sup>

Much of the same may be said of Miller’s figure of the female war worker, which I argue, drew upon “high” and “low” forms of art in its composition, subject matter, medium, and style. The poster’s ability to incorporate particular aspects of visual culture allowed it to become an “iconic” picture. Of the many strands of visual history that run through Miller’s image, my thesis focuses on two, arguably among the most important: the visual language, so to speak, of the Christian icon, particularly Byzantine depictions of the Madonna and Christ, and the American pin-up tradition, such as the images developed by Alberto Vargas. Using these two visual traditions, Miller depicted an image of the feminine ideal that could be sold to his viewers during the war, and perhaps, to his viewers after the war.

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<sup>2</sup> Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*, xii.

## Dedication

I dedicate this project to the “Rosies” in my life, who, by doing their jobs with kindness, passion, intelligence, and probably too many hours overtime, have served as my mentors and role models for numerous years. These women have literally changed the course of my working life, either by introducing me to the joy and beauty of academia, which has become my “factory” of choice, or by encouraging me to be myself, and not another, in it. (Usually both.) I thank them with heartfelt gratitude and devotion. They are listed in order of appearance: Hansuk Wong (a.k.a. Mom), Dr. Natalie Ruth Wilson Eastman, Professor Lynne Greeley, Dr. Marsha Guenzler-Stevens, Traci Dula, Professor June E. Hargrove, Professor Rose-Marie Oster, Professor Nancy Forsythe, Kathy Canavan, Professor Gwenfair Walters Adams, Professor Alice Mathews, Professor Sally M. Promey, and Professor Meredith J. Gill.

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I thank the members of my thesis committee, Professors Renée Ater and Joshua Shannon, and my advisor, Sally Promey, who has supported this project from the beginning with nary a trace of canonist snobbery but rather, a characteristic respect for historically-significant objects, no matter how many times these get called “kitchy.” Professor Promey’s support and correction have been invaluable. Many thanks go to the Smithsonian museum staff who graciously carved out *hours* of their time to provide me access to materials in their collections and files. Their readiness to work with researchers is exemplary. In particular, these are National Museum of American History curators, Larry Bird, Debra Hashim, and Harry Rubenstein, and Carol Harsh, Director of Museums on Main Street. During my year as a University of Maryland Museum Fellow at the National Portrait Gallery, I have been the recipient of much aid, particularly from those in the Department of Prints and Drawings including Amy Baskette and Anne Collins Goodyear, who first introduced me to the department’s poster collection. In particular, Curator Wendy Wick Reaves has been the perfect balance of grace and accountability as I worked on this project. Her perspective, and that of Smithsonian Fellow Kerry Roeder, were a great help. Last, but far from least, I thank God, my constant guide and comfort throughout this process, along with my family, Christina Powell, Christina Lee, Joanne Kee, Ashley Philemon, and Joannah Cook for their regular support and care. It’s very hard to imagine doing this without their calls, emails, and conversation over dinner.

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## Chapter 1: Why “Rosie the Riveter”?<sup>3</sup>

During WWII, about 6.6 million women entered the labor force, increasing the total number of working women from 13.84 million in 1940 to 18 to 19 million during the war.<sup>4</sup> Female labor participation rates climbed from 27.9 percent immediately before the war in 1940 to 36.5 percent just four years later.<sup>5</sup> By 1944, women made up one in every three persons in America’s labor force.<sup>6</sup> With millions of working men already participating in the military and the country under great production stress, the government launched a variety of intensive labor recruitment and propaganda campaigns. Targeting women and other untapped labor demographics, the government established branches such as the War Manpower Commission and the Office of War Information to expedite the process.

J. Howard Miller’s<sup>7</sup> *We Can Do It!* woman (fig. 2) has become a symbol of the women who responded to this call for wartime labor outside the home. The government called this its “womanpower campaign.” With manicured nails, painted

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<sup>3</sup> In the last stages of this project, a valuable article published in Winter 2006 and titled, "Visual Rhetoric Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster" has come to my attention (James Kimble and Lester Olson, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9.4). While I am unable to fully engage with the article in the main body of my text at this point, I attempt to address related issues from their article principally in the footnote section of this project.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory, *Women in Defense Work During World War II: An Analysis of the Labor Problem and Women's Rights* 3.

<sup>5</sup> Leila Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 186.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory, *Women in Defense Work During World War II: An Analysis of the Labor Problem and Women's Rights* 3.

<sup>7</sup> Very little has been published on J. Howard Miller, however, Kimble and Olson note that Miller was a Pittsburgh-based freelance artist, who “produced at least 42 posters for an advertising agency commissioned by Westinghouse during the war years” (Kimble and Olson 535). The Smithsonian American Art Museum’s website suggests that Miller’s life dates are c. 1915 to c. 1990, but there is no indication as to where the museum obtained this information (Smithsonian American Art Museum, *Posters American Style*, “Advice to Americans,” 4 April 2007 <<http://americanart.si.edu/collections/exhibits/posters/objects/aa-index.html>>.) To date, I have not been able to locate Miller’s obituary or any other published information on the artist.

lips, powdered cheeks, thick mascara and evidence of a perm that peeks neatly from beneath a red and white headscarf, the figure depicts the patriotic white middle-class female dressed temporarily in the blue “costume” of the factory worker during the war. Her presence fills most of the picture, both figuratively and literally. The red, white, and blue of her costume and visualized speech in the voice balloon emphasize her patriotic service as a war worker and the picture’s yellow-gold background, which recalls the gold-leaf background of Byzantine icons, highlights her status as a role model.

Though Miller assigns the worker the declarative statement, *We Can Do It!*, her mouth is set firmly closed. Her capability, embodied by her upraised fist and flexed arm, is literally the center of the image. In a performative act, she rolls up her sleeve for the viewers’ benefit, unveiling a right arm that is capable of handling “it.” Her makeup and striking physical features firmly anchor her in traditional roles of the feminine, while her posture, work shirt, and speech quote a traditionally male role. The masculinity of her pose and her confident declaration also appear in the clearly male 1942 General Motors poster of clenched masculine fists “declaring” that they can do “it” (fig. 3).

Sponsored by Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company’s labor management committee, J. Howard Miller’s illustrated poster measures 17 x 22 inches<sup>8</sup> and was most likely initially displayed in Westinghouse factories<sup>9</sup> in 1943 to

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware of only two original *We Can Do It!* posters in existence today. Both are located in Washington, D.C. at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History and the National Archives. Kimble and Olson confirm this (567). The measurements are based on those provided in two sources published in cooperation with these institutions. The first is William L. Bird, Jr. and Harry R. Rubenstein, *Design for Victory: World War Two Posters on the American Home Front* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998) 110. This is from the National Museum of American History’s collection of Miller posters, which were sold to the NMAH by the artist himself.

encourage higher war production rates. Although the dating for Miller's poster is problematic and oscillates between 1942 and 1943, the 1943 date makes the most sense as the poster's year of display in the Westinghouse factory.<sup>10</sup> Had the poster been created in 1942 and assuming that the information printed directly on the image itself is correct ("Post Feb. 15 to Feb. 28"), Miller would have made and published the womanpower posters three months after Pearl Harbor had been bombed in Dec. 1941. On the other hand and in favor of the 1943 dating, the government kicked off its official "women doing necessary civilian jobs" campaign that year, which was part of its overall "womanpower campaign."<sup>11</sup>

### **THE LABOR POSTER'S POLITICIZED BACKGROUND: GOVERNMENTAL, INDUSTRY, LABOR UNION, AND ARTISTIC INTERESTS IN THE POSTER**

The *We Can Do It!* image was situated in a tumultuous social context and much of the rhetoric of WWII posters regarding "cooperation" was directly related to the labor-management struggles of the day. Production posters such as Miller's

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The second is from Therese Thau Heyman, *Posters American Style* (New York: National Museum of American, Smithsonian Institution in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998) 106.

<sup>9</sup> Bird, *Design for Victory* 78.

<sup>10</sup> In my research, the few published instances where Miller's illustration carries a date point to either 1942 or 1943. For example, Heyrman dates the work to 1942 in *Posters American Style*, while Penny Coleman dates it as 1943. Kimble and Olson also date it to 1943 and place the poster in a fairly convincing chronology in relation to other Miller posters. Furthermore, they note that Miller produced the poster late in 1942 (535). Unfortunately, none of the authors indicate where they obtained their dating information. (The National Museum of American History's files do not give a date for their poster, and the Archives' online record dates it c. 1942-1943. <http://www.archives.gov/global-pages/larger-image.html?i=/research/arc/education/images/rosie-1.gif&c=/research/arc/education/images/rosie.caption.html>. Accessed 21 April 2007.)

While Feb. 1941 or 1945 are either too late or too early in the womanpower campaign, 1943 and 1944 are entirely possible, especially as the womanpower campaign was in full swing from Sept. 1943 to June 1944. Maureen Honey notes that many *Post* stories with "persuasive messages regarding war work... were printed largely between March 1943 and June 1944, when the recruitment campaign was at its peak." Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984) 62. I accept the 1943 date in particular as it fits with the c. 1942-43 date offered by the National Archives and with Kimble and Olson's thoughtfulness regarding chronology throughout their article.

<sup>11</sup> Office of War Information. United States Government, *Magazine War Guide*, Sept./Oct. 1943: 4.

illustration played a prominent communicative and strategic role in labor-management relations before and during the war.

As the labor force emerged from the Depression of the 1930s, tensions between management and unions ran high. Labor strikes and violent protests were common before the war.<sup>12</sup> The country's involvement in Europe, however, provided an unnatural but temporarily effective resolution to pre-war labor-management conflicts. Both management and labor unions recognized that these conflicts would hinder production rates in the converted war production factories. In the name of patriotism, both sides struck a truce and urged the American labor force toward diligent work habits and increased efficiency.

[The posters'] main thrust was to convince workers, many of whom participated in the violent labor conflicts of the 1930s, that they were no longer just employees of GM or U.S. Steel, but rather Uncle Sam's 'production soldiers' on the industrial front line of the war...the underlying...message that was repeated hundreds of times over was the relationship of production patriotism, and the transformation of employees to factory combatants.<sup>13</sup>

However, company posters such as those by Miller for Westinghouse exemplified only one of a variety of sources (and agendas) for WWII poster creation. Along with company-developed posters, labor unions and the U.S. government created their own production posters. These posters urged workers to "work, fight, give" knowing that "every front [is] a CIO front" or to believe that factory workers toiled alongside soldiers on the front lines.

Government and union labor posters agreed with these production line and front line parallels. However, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the

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<sup>12</sup> Bird, *Design for Victory* 52.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 66.

American Federation of Labor (AFL) posters differed in that they emphasized the importance and agency of the workers and the labor unions, while corporation posters emphasized cooperation, hard work, and efficiency and avoided any suggestion of changes in workplace hierarchy.<sup>14</sup>

The war also forced tentative collaborations among previously private-sector “artists” and advertisers who held different methodologies for communication with the public. American advertisers, armed with surveys and a philosophy of “true and literal representation, in photographic detail, (though not necessarily a photograph) of people and objects as they are,”<sup>15</sup> created posters modeled after advertisements. Others, criticized by these same advertisers, developed “sophisticated, more painterly ‘war graphics’”<sup>16</sup> with “symbolic designs.”<sup>17</sup>

A study for the government by advertisers at Young & Rubicam, Inc. entitled, *How to Make Posters that will Help Win the War*, interviewed men and women from various income groups regarding 33 Canadian war posters and drew two conclusions that appear representative of their “poster philosophy” throughout the war—the necessity of emotional appeal and literal depiction.<sup>18</sup>

All war posters, no matter what they are, can help. But good war posters can do the job quicker and better. Anyone whose job it is to select war posters can be sure of getting only the most effective posters

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Young & Rubicam, Inc. for the Office of Facts and Figures, National Advisory Council on Government Posters of the Graphics Division, *How to Make Posters That Will Win the War* (Washington, D.C.: 1942), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Bird, *Design for Victory* 27.

<sup>17</sup> Young & Rubicam, *How to Make Posters*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> The advertisers eventually “won” at the governmental level. The “artist” versus the advertiser “realism” controversy erupted in the Office of War Information, which was responsible for the government’s publicity efforts media. Whereas the government retained the advertisers’ services, the “war graphics” party was ousted for claims that their images were ineffectual.

by asking two simple questions: 1. Does the poster appeal to the emotions? 2. Is the poster a literal picture in photographic detail?<sup>19</sup>

This clear, literal approach is apparent throughout the Miller poster collection housed in the National Museum of American History (NMAH). The artist relied heavily on words in his posters, which were present either to visualize the speech of the figures as in the case of the *We Can Do It!* poster, or to clearly communicate the overall message which undergirded the action of the poster. The wording often carried a didactic, sometimes moralizing tone. Posters of such activities as putting away tools (fig. 4) or being kind to returning veterans (fig. 5) used words first and pictures second. For example, a poster of a veteran walking through a door labeled “Employment Department” (fig. 5) relied on its textual label for its clear communication.

Also, the majority of the posters depicted human figures rather than inanimate objects or the abstracted body parts of Jean Carlu’s famous image of a hand working (literally) at production (fig. 6). The NMAH’s collection include some exceptions such as posters depicting a piece of machinery covered in cobwebs that has fallen into disuse and disrepair due to the carelessness of a worker (fig. 7), a woman’s hands holding a gilded box of keys (fig. 8), and airplanes in the swirl of an intense dogfight (fig. 9). However, in all three, human presence is more palpable and “realistic” than Carlu’s image of the floating glove, tightening the bolts of “production.”

These Miller posters do not include human figures (or full ones). Nonetheless, they depict “real” situations such as a machine left alone due to its disrepair. Or the posters depict figures’ hands in close up rather than detached and

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<sup>19</sup> Young & Rubicam, *How to Make Posters*, 16.

floating. The posters also strongly insinuate the gravity of human action and human presence, even when unseen. Thus, corporations exhorted factory workers to care for their machinery or produce “the best” because they were responsible for the life or death of the unseen pilots flying the planes.

The importance of humans was all the more direct when Miller actually depicted human figures. His figures were generally not abstract or cartoonish but relatively naturally rendered. For instance, Miller accounted for the play of light across the *We Can Do It!* woman’s rumpled shirt and the figure’s carefully shaded cheek powered with rouge. But while the Miller’s poster figures demonstrate the qualities of a “literal picture in photographic detail” suggested in the Young & Rubicam survey results, the backgrounds are less “literal.”

They are often monochrome or filled with words or, in one case, question marks (fig. 10) rather than specific settings such as the supervisor’s office. However, these backgrounds did less to obscure the propagandistic message than it did to spotlight it. By omitting many situational details, Miller was able to focus the viewer’s attention on the central figure. For instance, the factory setting is missing from the *We Can Do It!* poster. This blank background lent Miller’s images a broader context—the figure was the everywoman and not a specific woman—while also being realistic and accessible.

In keeping with a convention of American advertisers at the time, Miller latched onto the idea that pictorial literalism was a more effective propagandistic tool than abstraction. Those in authority wanted viewers to digest propagandistic messages uniformly, rather than take their own meaning from the posters. This meant

privileging clarity and directness. Miller used an artistic style that emphasized explicit signification and fostered accessibility and legibility by including words, focused on human figures rather than floating body parts, and worked with simple compositions.

Judging by the degree of attention given to the medium, the government acknowledged the poster as important to the war production effort. Along with government issue posters, a variety of government publications, such as the *Poster Handbook: A Plan for Displaying Official War Posters* and the *War Production Drive Official Plan Book*, provided a “straightforward production plan...geared to practical engineering potentialities”<sup>20</sup> and specific strategic instructions for using posters. One publication even quoted a recommended ratio of posters to workers.<sup>21</sup>

Noting that posters were “valuable and should be treated as real war ammunition,”<sup>22</sup> the government argued that posters required strategic placement and should to be seen together and frequently. The *War Production Drive’s Informational Materials* pamphlet issued in 1943, written for factory management and labor, suggested the following:

Posters should be given full display throughout your plant. A poster is only as good as the number of people who can see and read it easily. Arrangements should be made for effective display of posters and streamers in each department of your plant.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *War Production Drive Official Plan Book* (War Production Board, United States Government, Washington, D.C.: 1942), 3.

<sup>21</sup> War Production Board, United States Government, *Poster Catalog* (Washington, D.C.: 1942). “Experience has demonstrated that posters put up in a ratio of less than one for each 100 workmen on the shift are usually too thinly spread to be wholly effective (18).”

<sup>22</sup> Office of War Information, United States Government, *Poster Handbook: A Plan for Displaying Official War Posters* (Washington, D.C.: 1943), 6.

<sup>23</sup> War Production Board, United States Government, *Informational Materials* (Washington, D.C.: 1943), 3.

The Miller poster illustration of the female war worker most likely followed suit and was seen with other Miller creations. According to William Bird and Harry Rubenstein, these groupings served to define what the “it” meant in the *We Can Do It!* image: “follow orders and work harder.”<sup>24</sup> The Government and industry intended production posters to be seen together to create a choir of voices that urged workers to produce more.

With fewer specific signifiers, Miller’s *We Can Do It!* image accommodated a variety of propagandistic messages, requiring *all* workers, not simply the riveters, to put away tools (fig. 4), treat veterans well (fig. 5), etc. Miller’s poster served as a platform for other posters and propagandistic messages including its own message that industrial workers were collectively empowered to do their wartime jobs. In other words, the poster had, and I argue, still has, a visual ambiguity that enabled it function in concert with other posters, which defined and redefined the “it” in the “we can do it” assertion.

#### **THE *MAGAZINE WAR GUIDE* AND THE NEED FOR ROSIE (AND WENDY AND TILLIE)**

As the need for wartime labor increased, or perhaps, became more apparent, the government and industrial employers increasingly encouraged women to join the wartime workforce. To this end, propagandistic efforts addressed not only the poster medium but also popular literature, music, and other aspects of American culture. Monthly wartime government publications such as the *Magazine War Guide* advised free-lance writers, magazine editors, writers, and illustrators on the type of messages,

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<sup>24</sup> Bird, *Design for Victory* 78.

including those related to the womanpower campaign that would be most productive for the war effort.

Published between July 1942 and late spring 1945,<sup>25</sup> the *Guide* reached four hundred to six hundred magazines, and by the end of 1943, the government had sent it to more than nine hundred magazine staffers and four hundred government information officers.<sup>26</sup> What is more significant still is that editorial staff actually appeared to have read and implement the *Magazine War Guide's* suggestions.

According to the *Guide*, which published the results of an October 1943 questionnaire on its usefulness to American publications, “163 editors [of the 328 replies] said they read the *Guide* thoroughly and 166 others said they found it at least helpful in selecting material for publication.”<sup>27</sup>

In a statement about how to interact positively with wounded soldiers, the *Guide* explained that “this attitude can be conveyed in fiction more effectively than in articles. In fiction, we think, the subject can be handled by example, without preaching.”<sup>28</sup> The statement was characteristic of the government’s advice to magazine staff regarding the womanpower campaign. The *Guide* wanted *depictions* of women performing war work, whether in word or visual form, and not didactic prescriptions. This suggestion manifested itself in posters, magazine front covers, and fictional short stories. In honor of the 1943 Labor Day, the *Guide* even ran a campaign challenging magazine cover illustrators to depict “women doing necessary

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<sup>25</sup> Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter* 37.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* 38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* 41. Given the source of this information, the survey results were most likely biased and inflated. Nonetheless, scholarship has demonstrated the *Guide's* impressive impact on publications. In *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, Maureen Honey traced the ways in which the short story fiction of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *True Confessions*, a magazine directed to a working-class women, often moved lock-step with the *Guide's* recommendations during the war.

<sup>28</sup> United States Government, *Magazine War Guide*, Nov./Dec. 1943, 4.

civilian jobs...who do the humble,...strenuous, [and] humdrum jobs on the homefront.”<sup>29</sup> Apparently, a total of 186 magazines participated in this cover campaign.<sup>30</sup> (Norman Rockwell’s entry ran on the cover of the September 4, 1943 issue of the *Post* [fig. 11]). The Museum of Modern Art sponsored a contest alongside the campaign and offered citations and honors to what they deemed “the most outstanding” covers.<sup>31</sup>

It was most likely this same impulse to create various personae for the womanpower population that resulted in catchy labels such as Rosie the Riveter. In fact, there were a variety of other wartime persona labels such as Wendy the Welder (fig. 12) and Tillie the Typist.<sup>32</sup>

### **THE BIRTH OF “ROSIE THE RIVETER” AND THE “ROSIE MYTH”**

In *Rosie the Riveter: Working Women on the Home Front in World War II*,<sup>33</sup> Penny Colman suggests that a song entitled, “Rosie the Riveter,” written by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb and copyrighted in 1942, first developed and popularized the image concept for the public.<sup>34</sup> This depiction of the fictional Rosie,<sup>35</sup> a patriotic

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Sept./Oct. 1943, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Dorothy Ducas, foreword to *War Guide*, December 1943/January 1944.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> These titles occasionally appear in newspaper articles of the time. For instance, see “White-Collar Help Increased Despite War-Work ‘Glamour’,” *The Christian Science Monitor* July 9, 1944. Wendy the Welder also went by Winnie the Welder in “A New World Now Beckons Riveter Rosie,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 8, 1945. Also see Mamie J. Meredith, “‘Amanda the Administratress’ and Other Women Workers,” *American Speech* 27.3 (1952).

<sup>33</sup> Though directed primarily to a young adult readership and subject to possible factual discrepancies, Colman’s book is one of the few sources currently available, which deal so directly with depictions of Rosie the Riveter and the history of the Rosie concept. For more on the extent of her research, which include interviews with John Jacob Loeb’s widow, the sitter for Rockwell’s Memorial Day cover illustration (Mary Doyle Keefe) and the possible sitter for Miller’s poster (Geraldine Hoff Doyle), see Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter* 115-6.

<sup>34</sup> While Colman argues that the song was first released in Feb. 1943 and originally sung by the *Four Vagabonds*, Kimble and Olson alternately argue that it was heard on national radio in 1942 in a

war worker, served to both promote and explain to America the “phenomenon” or “problem” of women performing traditionally male jobs. Lines from Evans and

Loeb’s song articulated an image of Rosie as the model female citizen:

*While other girls attend their fav’rite cocktail bar,  
Sipping dry Martinis, munching caviar  
There’s a girl who’s really putting them to shame  
Rosie is her name.  
All day long whether rain or shine  
She’s part of the assembly line  
She’s making history working for victory  
Rosie Brrr<sup>36</sup> the riveter [...]  
That little frail can do more than a male can do [...]  
Berlin will hear about, Moscow will cheer about  
Rosie, Brrr, the riveter.<sup>37</sup>*

The song, sung by a variety of artists,<sup>38</sup> was heard on the radio and via record probably as early as 1942, and was even featured in two wartime movies.<sup>39</sup> Whether

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rendition by Kay Kyser. James J. Kimble and Lester C. Olson, "Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9.4 (2006): 535. The sheet music for the song provides the copyright date. (Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb, *Rosie the Riveter*, Paramount Music Corporation, New York. For images of the sheet music, see <http://www.umkc.edu/lib/spec-col/ww2/WarNews/rosie.htm>.)

A search for the term “Rosie the Riveter” between 1939 and the end of the war in *Historical ProQuest*, a newspaper database of major U.S. newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune*, suggests that the title was in common parlance as early as Dec. 28, 1942. This 1942 article supports Kimble and Olson’s argument and leads with the sentence, “Rosie the Riveter and Joe the Jig-builder yesterday showed the folks how they build dive bombers at Northrop” (“Northrop Workers Show 35,000 Visitors How Planes Are Built,” *Los Angeles Times* Dec. 28, 1942). In Jan. 1943, another article includes a wonderfully informative description of a Rosie’s work under the heading, “Rosie the Riveter Speaks Up,” written by a “Rosie” at the time; “It isn’t glamorous. Not all the girls look like magazine covers, and Rosie the Riveter is just doing a steady everyday job,” (Lee Shipley, “Lee Side o’ L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times* 1943).

<sup>35</sup> If, indeed, the title originated with the song, then according to an interview with John Jacob Loeb’s widow, Janet Loeb, the song was not based on a particular woman. Penny Colman, *Rosie the Riveter: Women Working on the Home Front in World War II* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995). Given all the alliterated titles, however, there is a good chance that the “Rosie” was not based on a real person, regardless of its relationship to the song.

<sup>36</sup> Sounds imitating a working riveting machine.

<sup>37</sup> Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb, *Rosie the Riveter* (NY: Paramount Music Corporation) 3-5.

<sup>38</sup> Newspaper articles tout the *Vagabonds’* version of the song around early spring of 1943. See “Popular Recordings,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* Feb. 21, 1943. In addition, a 1943 *Washington Post* article highlighted Allen Miller’s version of “Rosie the Riveter,” and noted that the *Vagabonds* had a version with “provisions for the boys in the back room to imitate a riveting machine” (Bill Gottlieb, “Every One a Hit,” *The Washington Post*, Mar. 7, 1943.) *The Four Vagabond* version of the song is still available today in CD compilations such as *Flag Waver: 21 Red, White, and Blue Favorites*.

or not the song was the source for the Rosie the Riveter persona, I suggest that it gave this particular alliteration the momentum to set it apart from others such persona as Tillie the Typist. In all probability, the song also served as the inspiration for Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter* (fig. 13), which ran on the front cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on May 29, 1943. In light of the *Post's* high readership,<sup>40</sup> which increased whenever Rockwell illustrated its front covers, Library of Congress' Women's Studies Specialist Sheridan Harvey contends that this image did much to promote the concept of Rosie the Riveter.<sup>41</sup> The song, along with a string of national newspaper articles featuring real-life female riveters named Rose,<sup>42</sup> only solidified the Rosie persona in the public's eye.<sup>43</sup>

The concept of Rosie the Riveter most likely originated with Redd Evans and John Loeb's song and was perpetuated by newspaper articles and illustrators such as Norman Rockwell. As Rosie's cultural usefulness and prominence expanded, the title evolved beyond a name into a conceptual category for the American female WWII war worker, regardless of her particular wartime career.

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<sup>39</sup> According to Colman, these are *Follow the Band* (1943) and *Rosie the Riveter* (1944).

<sup>40</sup> Harvey quotes an average of over four million American readers. Sheridan Harvey, *Rosie the Riveter: Real Women Workers in World War II*, Feb. 18, 2005, Internet, Library of Congress, Available: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/journey/rosie-transcript.html>, April 16, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Harvey, *Real Women Workers*.

<sup>42</sup> For instance, a Feb. 1943 *New York Times* article mentions a meeting between First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Rose W. Sheriff, Linden, New Jersey's own "Rosie." "First Lady Spurs War Plant Staff," *The New York Times* 1943.

<sup>43</sup> Harvey, *Real Women Workers*.

## Chapter 2: Not Only Wearing the Pants: Miller's We Can Do It!

### Figure and Traditionally Male Roles

*In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female [...] In contrast to the woman as icon [...] the male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action.*

–Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"<sup>44</sup>

However prevalent they were in society, propagandistic images of women during WWII walked a tricky tightrope. While women were urged to fill "male" production positions that had previously been unavailable to them due to their gender, society encouraged women to preserve their coiffed, domestic "feminine" side for the men who would come back.<sup>45</sup> Despite America's desperate need for labor, certain populations demonstrated a reticence toward women, particularly married women, taking "male" jobs.

The Department of Labor's Women's Bureau acknowledged this gender-role anxiety in a post-war report on WWII and the "Womanpower Committee." As Committee leaders described their wartime activities, they carefully noted their "equal concern for women as wage earners and for women as fulfilling their appropriate roles in the family and community" during the war.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975) 2186-8.

<sup>45</sup> Colman, *Rosie the Riveter : Women Working on the Home Front in World War II*. At one factory, women could take courses in "proper dress, makeup, poise, and personality to help women workers maintain their 'FQ' (Femininity Quotient)" (67).

<sup>46</sup> "Womanpower Committees in World War II," 1953, 47.

They were not alone in this balancing act. In 1943 governmental study based on 1099 interviews with women, 79 percent of those who were ages 21 to 39 and unwilling to take war jobs explained that they were needed at home.<sup>47</sup>

While infusing women with enough “male” agency to pick up a riveting gun, propagandistic images of women war workers needed to maintain enough “feminine” qualities and gender signifiers in order to combat societal concerns that women would become too masculine or violate gender-role boundaries. The well-manicured Rosie the Riveter had to assure both husbands and wives that women were simply doing their part to help win the war, not subverting male-female hierarchies.

Such concerns prompted WWII posters such as John Newton Hewitt’s *I’m Proud—My husband wants me to do my part* (fig. 14). Published in 1944, the image argues that war work performed by a married woman was not only acceptable but admirable. At the same time, the poster insists on an underlying hierarchy of the husband in power over the wife, both in the text and in the male figure’s paternalistic position behind the woman.

Artists took different paths in creating this ideal war working woman who took supposed gender-crossing roles. In light of this gender-anxious climate, Norman Rockwell’s depiction of Rosie for the *Post*’s Memorial Day issue is particularly notable. For his version of the ideal wartime woman doing a “man’s job,” Rockwell quotes one of Michelangelo’s male figures from the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the *Prophet Isaiah* (fig. 15).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> “Willingness of Women to Take War Jobs,” 1943, 3.

<sup>48</sup> According to a few sources, Rockwell’s original viewers appeared to be aware of the Michelangelo quotation. See “Rockwell’s Rosie the Riveter Painting Auctioned” <<http://www.rosietheriveter.org/painting.htm>> (accessed 28 April 2007) and

Here Rockwell converts an art historically prominent male subject into a confident, muscular, and clearly female one. The figure's posture communicates nonchalance as she steps on a copy of *Mein Kampf* and munches on a sandwich. With her broad shoulders and thick biceps, Rosie assures viewers that she can wield the massive riveting gun on her lap.

Interestingly enough, Rockwell chose not to quote Michelangelo's almost equally brawny female subjects, the sibyls such as the *Libyan Sybil* (fig. 16), who are also located around the Sistine Chapel. Instead, Rockwell modeled his ideal female war worker after Isaiah and maintained the prophet's basic build and graceful pose while adding feminine traits. Her face, though smudged with grease, was complete with rouged lips and framed by ringlets of red hair. Aiding her made-up state, a compact and tissue peek from the right pocket of her coverall pants.

These elements read as specifically "female" signifiers meant to balance the figure's overall powerful "male" physique and dress. These also indicated the possibility of a male and female traits co-existing in one figure. This male/female evolution recaptures the spirit of Michelangelo's *Libyan sibyl*, which began as a male figure (fig. 17) and evolved into a female one, possibly for the purpose of creating the balanced and "ideal" human.

Nearly all fictional depictions of women war workers, whether literary or visual, made it a point to tout evidence of the woman's femininity. This was accomplished by any number of devices, but two were particularly popular. The first was that the woman demonstrated a "female" concern for her physical appearance and attractiveness; though Rockwell's version of Rosie had gotten dirty on the job,

she was conscious enough about her appearance that she wore makeup and carried a compact in her pocket at work. The second was that she had a boyfriend, or garnered significant male attention, and was extremely devoted to the men overseas. “Rosies,” like the women in *Post* fiction and in Evans and Loeb’s song demonstrated as much commitment to their boyfriends as to their country, and sometimes these coincided.

*Rosie’s got a boyfriend Charlie,  
Charlie, he’s a marine—  
Rosie is protecting Charlie,  
working overtime on the riveting machine.*<sup>49</sup>

Miller took a different approach than did Rockwell with his version of the female war worker. As with other propagandistic depictions of women during WWII, Miller’s illustration portrays a woman dressed to work a “man’s job.” Her blue-collared workshirt and rolled sleeves mirror the costume of a male factory worker. However, Miller cleverly incorporated other aspects of traditional “maleness” in this image, which went beyond categories of costume and physical appearance. Instead of endowing her with a thick, muscular body as Rockwell did with his depiction of Rosie, or simply dressing her in menswear, Miller imbued this female war worker with three traditionally “masculine” signifiers while maintaining a particularly female physique.

First, Miller assigned the war worker with a flexed right arm, which recalled images from early 20<sup>th</sup> century’s Physical Culture movement and Charles Atlas mail-order ad. In a circa 1930 advertisement (fig. 18) that suggested that at least a portion of one’s masculinity resided in the physical form, Atlas, the emblem of the “New Man,” flexed his arm for viewers. Atlas’s body, and flexed arm in particular, served

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<sup>49</sup> Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb, *Rosie the Riveter*, Paramount Music Corporation, New York.

as the evidence for his brand of masculinity. Another Atlas advertisement (fig. 19) claimed much the same thing. As the result of Atlas's "New Man" regimen, the initially "skinny" male protagonist in the advertisement's cartoon became noticeably more muscular (viewers observe this as he flexed both arms in front of the mirror) and was empowered to fight back against a bully. His love interest then declared him "a real he-man" and the phrase, "What a man," exploded in the background the cartoon strip's final panel.<sup>50</sup>

Second, Miller depicted the war worker with a particularly intense stare, which confronted the voyeuristic eyes of the viewer—the "male gaze"—with her own knowing gaze and demonstrated a position of power traditionally owned by the viewer and not the viewed. As with the male gaze, Miller imbues the figure with a third trait commonly reserved for depictions of men—the figure's active, literal "can-do" spirit of one "free to command the stage" and one who "creates the action."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The clenched fist element of the woman's flexed right arm may have an additional symbolic element. According to Kimble and Olson, the clenched fist appeared in Westinghouse publication photographs (fig. 42-43) and print; "With *Let's Show Them* as their slogan and a clenched fist as their symbol, the East Pittsburghers rolled up their sleeves and worked out a program that not only thrilled more than 25,000 East Pittsburgh Division employees [*sic*] in a three-day, round-the-clock series of rousing rallies, but also became a pattern for many other plant rallies" (*Westinghouse Magazine*, Sept. 1942 quoted in Olson, "Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster," 551). Their suggestion becomes problematic, however, when the authors also argue that the gesture would have "functioned as a means of communal identification" *as well as* one that "would have *excluded* other [non-Westinghouse] viewers" because they would have lacked the "specific understanding of the raised fist as a gesture affirming their backstage solidarity" (emphasis original, Olson, "Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster," 554). Though this may have been true to an extent as the upraised, clenched fist had Westinghouse-specific ties to rallies, the hand is linked to a *flexing arm*, to which there were visual links in the larger American society. Given famous Charles Atlas poses, posters such as the clenched fists of the General Motors poster (though the fist are not raised, fig. 3), and the cover of a 1944 AFL-CIO magazine (fig. 44), the pose was probably a well-known signifier with an added Westinghouse "communal identification."

<sup>51</sup>As Margaret Olin describes it, "The gaze of the man in the audience and the gaze of the man active within the narrative, with whom the audience identifies, are both fixed on her...Woman is the image; man is the bearer of the look. Power is on his side" ("Gaze," *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003] 322).

In Miller's illustration, the figure prohibits the voyeuristic stares of others by proactively doing her own looking. *She* is the one who initiates and defines the interaction between herself and the viewer and not the viewer alone. Unlike the passive portrayals of women, the factory worker is not the unknowing subject of the male gaze. Rather, she challenges the viewer's gaze and then co-opts it by confidently staring back. The depicted female figure takes on the role which Mulvey argued is regularly given to male viewers. The figure's ability to stare back challenges the "female as passive" characterization as well as the power hierarchy of the viewer over the pictorial object. The war worker's gaze, an "active/male" gaze, is conversely *not* "passive/female." Instead, her gaze takes on Mulvey's description of the male gaze, which "articulates the look and creates the action."<sup>52</sup>

Of course, previous artists as well as illustrators contemporary to the Miller poster had portrayed women returning the viewer's stare. However, the intensity, context, and priority of the gaze in this illustration are notably different from contemporary depictions of WWII women. Her sober expression and set lips (in spite of her verbal declaration) are decidedly *not* the playful glance of the women in illustrated pin ups created the war (fig. 20). There are no sideways glances or coy looks that flirt with the viewer. Rather, the figure raises her eyebrow and stares intensely at the viewer with an expression that borders on a challenge.

Yet so do her words, which declare her activity and presumably that of other women, as anything but passive, as does her posture. Her flexed right arm and sleeve rolled to reveal her bicep declare her physical ability to "do it!" as clearly as her gaze

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<sup>52</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 2187-8.

and the declaration above her head. Her gaze, words, and posture are as “masculine” as is her clothing and her role as a factory worker.

With the other posters in the NMAH’s Miller collection as a baseline, I suggest that Miller visually and verbally foregrounded the *We Can Do It!* figure’s superlative abilities as a worker, though this is less the case with the figure in *Sure, We’re in the War, Too!* (fig. 21) While the figure’s big blonde curls were tied by a small red bow, the factory worker’s hair was swept up in a practical scarf. She wore makeup in muted tones, and much like her hair, her makeup was economical and everything in its proper, neat place. Even wispy curls at the base of the *We Can Do It!* woman’s neck appeared tidy. Unlike the *Sure, We’re in the War* figure’s nails, which are painted red, hers fade back into her hands as if to “confirm” her femininity but not make a show of it. Likewise, she clearly wears lipstick, but not ostentatiously so. In fact, the war worker’s lipstick fails to reach the edge of her lip, while her foil’s lips are exaggerated with color, which expand beyond the lines of her lips. The factory worker’s only excess in makeup is her eyelashes. Miller’s uses thick strokes of black to outline her intense eyes and create her lashes.

#### **THE “TRUE WOMAN” OR THE “NEW WOMAN”?**

In a sense, Miller’s *We Can Do It!* figure was a negotiation with America’s concept of the feminine ideal, and more specifically, women’s “place” in society. As society struggled to keep up with the changes initiated by the Industrial Revolution, the United States also seemed preoccupied with women’s roles, particularly with regard to work outside the home. I suggest that Miller’s image of the war worker was

both a reaction against and accomplice to attitudes toward women's identity and activities/work outside the home.

According to Barbara Welter's oft-quoted essay on the "True Woman," the mid-nineteenth-century female ideal was based on the concept of separate "spheres of influence" in which women were assigned the home and men the outside world. Welter suggested that True Women were characterized by "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."<sup>53</sup>

The turn-of-the-century ideal woman, or the "New Woman" as she was labeled by her contemporaries, stood in contrast to her predecessor. Though also middle-class and white, they characterized the New Woman as independent, educated, and interested in having a career and experiences outside the home. Charles Dana Gibson depicted these women as tantalizing men with their confidence and talent (fig. 22).<sup>54</sup>

The New Woman bypassed blatant violations of domestic virtue by remaining single and living with other women. She remained independent of the domestic sphere, as it was traditionally conceptualized, by avoiding marriage, at least for a time. Still somewhat attached to True Woman virtues, they often felt the obligation to choose between their careers and "keeping house" for husbands and children.<sup>55</sup>

When certain of the four virtues were "compromised," the situation was more acceptable—to an extent—if the other virtues could compensate for the absence of

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<sup>53</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18.2 (1966).

<sup>54</sup> As Ellen Wiley Todd discusses in the introduction to *The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street*, though, this label "encompassed many meanings." As generations of New Women came and went, so did the meaning of the label (xxvii). See Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

<sup>55</sup> In fact, there were dramatic changes even within the New Woman movement between the pioneering New Women and their daughters, who were also considered New Women.

the one. For instance, though the True Woman's and New Woman's places were held to be in the domestic private sphere, it was somewhat acceptable, if her pious nature (a cardinal virtue) rather than her *ambition* compelled her to work against the social injustices in the world beyond her front doors. In later years, the Flapper would create an uproar, because she challenged all four virtues, most notably those related to conservative views of sexuality. After the more sexually frank age of the 20s Flapper and the sobriety of the Great Depression, which barred or laid-off women from paid work, propagandists faced an interesting challenge. How would they depict women working outside the home?

I suggest that the *We Can Do It!* figure recalled images of the confident New Woman, a feminine ideal, by relating necessary war work (done outside the domestic sphere) to conservative Victorian ideals of piety and purity and using pseudo-religious visual imagery to do so.

Written and visual propaganda conflated piety and patriotism with participation in factory work and many other governmentally-defined wartime needs. Propagandists depicted members of the Women's Army Corps (fig. 23), female factory workers, and other necessary war-work women as a secularized, but pious, or dutiful, "saints" of American patriotism. "Piety" as a wartime worker meant dedication to one's war-related job. Of course, the converse was also true according to propaganda. Purchasing war bonds, growing a home "Victory garden," and conserving gas became a *moral* obligation along with a patriotic one.

Within this framework, the government could even assign guilt to non-participants. As the dutiful war worker, an American was patriotic and “good,” while the citizen not working according to these standards should be somewhat ashamed.

Eventually the neighbors are going to think it very strange if you are not working. They’ll be working too. In fact, any strong, able-bodied woman who is not *completely occupied* with a job and a home—is going to be considered a ‘slacker’ just as much as the man who avoids the draft (emphasis original).<sup>56</sup>

Labor recruitment propaganda, like Miller’s poster, combined war jobs, patriotism, and religious imagery by creating figures who signified all three categories. In the *We Can Do It!* image, the female figure represents war work, patriotism, and piety.

Unlike Rockwell’s Rosie, Miller’s image omits the more blatantly patriotic flag background but uses the American red, white, and blue to compose the figure and her words, which between them occupy the entire space of the image. The colors of the American flag literally wrap themselves around Miller’s figure. Her red head scarf is spotted with white, the crinkled blue shirt textured in waves across her body, and her identification badge in white and blueish-grey on her collar. These, along with her boldly projected words in white against a blue background, her lips (highlighted with red lipstick), and her clear, blue eyes, take on the flag’s colors. Miller’s figure is the color of American patriotism. She speaks, wears, and acts patriotically. In other words, the red, white, and blue clad and speaking female war worker *is* the American flag in this image.

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<sup>56</sup> Quoting from “U.S. Government OWI Womanpower Campaigns,” RG 208, Box 156, File “Womanpower” (Rupp 97).

## PIN-UP CULTURE

Though the parallel is initially surprising, aspects of the *We Can Do It!* woman reiterated the physical appearance of the contemporary commercially illustrated women found in advertisements and pin ups.<sup>57</sup> Though her makeup, dress, and posture set her apart from these images, she, like the women of the advertisements and pin ups, was representative of the delicately-featured, well-groomed female. This active factory worker or riveter possessed smooth skin without blemish, lightly rouged cheeks, lips painted within well-defined lines, and carefully plucked eyebrows. Her glossy permed hair curled neatly from beneath the red headscarf. Her lightly shadowed lids and thick lashes outline her eyes, and as her left hand indicates, even her nails were perfectly manicured, despite handling a riveting gun or other factory machinery. Her face with large eyes, defined brows, and a symmetrical nose, maintain the sort of crispness and fine lines apparent in pin up and advertising illustration.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> I thank William Bird for initially pointing me to the relationship between the Varga Girls and Miller's larger portrayal of women in his poster illustrations.

<sup>58</sup> While it is unclear whether Kimble and Olson understand the *We Can Do It!* poster, in particular, as being related to pin up imagery as I do, they argue that many of the women in Miller's posters "continue to be subjected to men's gaze" (particularly, *It's Tradition With Us, Mister!*) and share similarities with the "voluptuous" pin up like the Varga girl (Olson, "Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster," 560). Consequently, they argue that the other posters and their historical context provide a corrective to modern ways of viewing the *We Can Do It!* poster, particularly the view that it represented a feminist statement. "To say that this poster was a source of empowerment specifically for Westinghouse women is to ignore the poster's placement in a series, while simultaneously projecting a modern desire for feminist self-empowerment onto a population that was very different both socially and culturally" (Olson, "Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster," 562). I agree. However, as Kimble and Olson noted, Miller's *We Can Do It!* poster was exceptional, particularly in relation to the other Miller posters. In other words, the *We Can Do It!* poster's stark contrast with his other images is telling. For instance, the figure's gaze out at the viewer *is* assertive and traditionally given to males, as is her flexed arm position and aura of proactivity. Though its original context would have muted these elements, these *are* meaningful signifiers and should not be lost amidst the corrective.

Before, during, and after the war, visual culture was rife with the illustrated depictions of women characterized by similar physiology and features. Such illustrations sold everything from makeup (fig. 24) to drinking glasses (fig. 25) to swimwear (fig. 26). Perhaps more famously, however, these “women” sold magazines such as *Esquire*. Unlike the black-outlined features of the spunky Gibson Girl, these scantily-clad, scandalously-posed women were women with “curves,” “fullness,” and “finely-drawn voluptuousness,” who were regularly color-printed in the magazine for male and female visual consumption.<sup>59</sup>

In fact, even the military appeared particularly keen on the pin up’s usefulness. Some soldiers were taught navigational skills using a grid pattern over the picture of a pin up woman (fig. 27). Pilots took images of pin up women directly from magazine pages and painted these onto their planes; then posed by them (fig. 28). A West Point Military Academy’s publication for its cadets, *The Pointer*, featured the work of pin up artists such as George Petty and Alberto Vargas (fig. 29) on their front cover. As a testimony to their popularity among the soldiers, *Esquire* created and then donated a special issue of the magazine full of pin up art, and without advertising, to the military.<sup>60</sup>

Illustrators such as George Petty drew *Esquire* pin ups as well as advertisement spreads for Jergens. Petty’s *Esquire* and advertisement spreads featured similarly coiffed women, albeit in dissimilar states of dress (or undress) and sometimes ran within the very same month or even week of each other.<sup>61</sup> It was the

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<sup>59</sup> Reid Stewart Austin, *Alberto Vargas: Works From the Max Vargas Collection* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 1997).

<sup>60</sup> Austin, *Alberto Vargas: Works From the Max Vargas Collection* 55.

<sup>61</sup> George Petty and Alberto Vargas are two prominent examples of this.

pin up, however, which enjoyed phenomenal prominence around and during WWII, particularly in a wartime culture anxious to please the boys overseas. Surprisingly, American society, including women, appeared supportive of and comfortable with the pin up's popularity.

Female audiences, too, consumed pin ups, whether directly through the magazines, or more indirectly through the culture of advertising that surrounded them. The line between the two was not always clear. In 1939, one *Esquire* reader complained that quality of Petty's artwork had gone down, because "Petty's best work is done for *Old Golds* [cigarettes]." <sup>62</sup>

To a certain degree, advertisers did well *not* to distinguish between the two. The pin up was a seemingly innocuous guilty pleasure afforded to the male gaze whose goals were not completely divergent from advertisers. Both depicted a socially-acceptable ideal, white, young, single, coiffed, and strikingly attractive woman. In the case of *Esquire* pinups, however, the Petty and Varga girls sold magazines. Most likely, this ideal figure was middle class, considering the expense of her makeup and manicure, her ability to buy the products she advertised, and the leisure time she had to enjoy these products. Thus, in one instance, advertisers blatantly conflated the pin up and advertising figure and urged women to "Be his pin up girl!" (fig. 30).

In her article "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.," Joanne Meyerowitz traces the

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<sup>62</sup> Reid Stewart Austin, *Petty: The Classic Pin-Up Art of George Petty* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1997) 66.

history of male, and particularly female, attitudes toward the depiction of the female body in American society.

From the late nineteenth century on, advertisers in popular magazine, including *Ladies Home Journal*, used idealized, artful images of the female body to promote such products as soap and corsets. By the 1920s, they appealed to women with frankly erotic images. They speculated (correctly, it seems) that sexual representations of women would encourage women to buy the attraction seen in the ads.<sup>63</sup>

Also pointing out that Hollywood studios and magazines expanded pin up distribution by sending them to WWII soldiers overseas, Meyerowitz also argued that “by the 1940s, the American public generally hailed the ‘pin-up girls’ not as prostitutes but as patriots who boosted the morale of the soldiers.”<sup>64</sup>

#### **THE WWII PIN UP AS THE “ABSOLUTE” IDEAL**

Given that the traditional pin up symbolized an ideal, it is not surprising that religious language and a sense of other-worldliness seemed to attach themselves to pin ups created during and around WWII. While religious imagery in text and visual material have long been used to describe ideal women as goddesses, angels, or visions, pin ups during this period seemed particularly preoccupied with converting the mortal woman into a mythical ideal. The pin up was a human at the societal apex of female beauty, who, through the attentive male gaze, became a supra-terrestrial

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<sup>63</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.," *Journal of Women's History* 8.3 (1996): 12. Summarizing an argument made by Martha Banta in *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History*, Meyerowitz notes that “according to Banta, in the late nineteenth century, women (clothed or not) came to represent desire (sexual or not) in both high art and popular culture.” See footnote 13 in Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.," 29. Also, Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

<sup>64</sup> Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.," 12.

being. A 1940 *Esquire* advertisement introducing the Varga Girl to its readers described Alberto Vargas' version of the pin up using the following language<sup>65</sup>:  
“Every once in a while a new girl is born, fully grown and partially clothed, like Venus fresh risen from the sea. She becomes a legend.”<sup>66</sup>

The magazine advertisement, which ran on for six short paragraphs more, is an extraordinary example of the extent to which pin ups were described using mythical and religious imagery. In addition to introducing the Varga Girl to its readers, the advertisement, published in the magazine prior to the Varga Girl's October 1940 appearance, included an overabundance of religious references. The ads compared the Varga Girl to goddess figures from Venus to Vishnu, and even used Hebrew and Arabic emphatics related to religion such as “selah” and “salaam” while describing the Varga Girl's effect on her viewers. The Varga Girl also established a new standard of measurement. *Esquire* explained that she was a “new yardstick for your phantasies [sic],” which inspired men to take on superhuman tasks and to “set sail on the evanescent quest of the Absolute.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The artist's last name is spelled with an “s,” however, in a move that he would financially regret later, Vargas agreed to call his *Esquire* pin ups, “Varga Girls.” See Austin, *Petty: The Classic Pin-Up Art of George Petty* 52.

<sup>66</sup> The first Varga Girl painting in *Esquire* ran in its October 1940 issue. The *Esquire* advertisement is reproduced on page 52 in Austin, *Alberto Vargas: Works From the Max Vargas Collection*. The advertisement is also transcribed in the next footnote.

<sup>67</sup> Austin, *Alberto Vargas: Works From the Max Vargas Collection* 52. The extraordinary extent to which the advertisement titled, “Esquire Introduces the Varga Girl,” uses mythical imagery and religious language throughout the body of the text makes it worth reproducing in a lengthy footnote:

Every once in a while a new girl is born, fully grown and partially clothed, like Venus fresh risen from the sea. She becomes a legend; and she disturbs men's sleep.

To the sinuous and faintly-perfumed ranks of such women, whose bodies have had nowhere any flaw, whose pictures have stirred men to deeds of derring-do, and whose names have been magic symbols conjuring away dullness, melancholy, and all hope of contentment, *Esquire* introduces the Varga girl.

With the October issue, her name joins those which over the centuries have made men stir uneasily in their beds, look critically at their wives, and wander to distant parts—pretending to seek a Golden Fleece, a Holy Grail, a Fountain of Youth, or a Northwest Passage.

Though the advertisement used overinflated language describing the ideal and the supernatural as a means of playful exaggeration and giving the pin up an aura of forbidden fruit, it also sought to imbue the depicted women with a power that captured men's attention.

From color to content, Miller's *We Can Do It!* poster exhibited the elements of good design outlined by advertisers and poster design manuals during and around the war. Arguing that "Americans of today move faster, see faster, think faster, [and] comprehend faster,"<sup>68</sup> Merle Penney recommended that illustrators reach their audiences "quickly and forcibly" in his 1948 essay titled, "Poster Production."<sup>69</sup> Penney further argued that "the layout and composition must be forceful and as simple in form as possible."<sup>70</sup> In *Making a Poster*, Austin Cooper explained that a poster's necessary "quality of carrying" often relied on eye-catching color schemes such as black against a yellow background (or vice versa). These were the most

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The girl may well do to you what the image of the Goddess Vishnu did to a certain Hindu lute player. Strumming a passionate ode while in front of her picture, he made the unfortunate mistake of burning himself up...

Perhaps we are playing with dynamite. Perhaps the curves, the fullness, the finely-drawn voluptuousness of the Varga Girl, like the head of the Medusa, should be looked at only on the reflecting surface of the polished shield—and perhaps we ought to pass our polished shields with each forthcoming copy of *Esquire*.

These are technical points we can't go into, now. If shields, Polaroid glasses, or sedatives are going to be necessary—Selah! If work is disrupted throughout the country, and a disproportionate number of men set sail on the evanescent quest of the Absolute—Salaam!

Meanwhile, we invite you to plan both your feet hard on the ground, take a firm grip on your *raison d'être*, and raise high your glass to the lush and succulent, delight which will first unfold before you in the pages of the October issue.

We guarantee you a new superlative for your vocabulary, a new yardstick for your phantasies [sic], and much singing in the sails that is not of the wind.

IN THE OCTOBER ISSUE

<sup>68</sup> Merle D. Penney, "Poster Production," *Eighth Graphic Arts: Production Yearbook* (New York: Colton Press, Inc., 1948) 285.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

“popular and hackneyed” of all schemes, because they were also the most “effective and legible.”<sup>71</sup>

Such qualities appeared in the *We Can Do It!* poster’s uncluttered composition. Miller omitted the tools (riveter, wrench, etc.), figures (husbands or supervisors), and background that provided specific vocational details about the female figure. Instead of John Hewitt’s relatively “simple” composition featuring a woman and her husband (fig. 14), Rockwell’s full-view version of a seated Rosie (fig. 13), or a photographic image of a woman with machinery and tools (fig. 41), Miller focused the viewers’ attention on one human figure flexing her arm against a monochromatic background. Unlike many other illustrated riveters, the *We Can Do It!* figure had no particular task aside from doing “it” with her flexed arm. Rather, Miller spotlighted the woman, her flexing arm, confident expression, and bold declaration by placing her against a bright yellow background and tightly cropping her torso using the frame of the poster. Miller highlighted the war worker herself.

The *We Can Do It!* poster functioned on levels beyond color choice and composition. Miller’s poster reflected an additional poster illustration adage of the day: “To be convincing, a poster must appeal to one or more human emotions.”<sup>72</sup> The previously discussed Young & Rubicam study also urged poster illustrators to ask themselves whether their poster appealed to the emotions when evaluating its potential effectiveness. Ideally, the wartime illustrator had to capture their viewers’

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<sup>71</sup> After all, one of the poster’s main goals was to capture the viewer’s attention, particularly in color choice, as noted in Austin Cooper’s 1938 guide to making posters:

It is important that the poster should have a quality of carrying. This is very largely a matter of selecting the most suitable shades of colour or tones, and studying their relationship and juxtaposition. Bright yellow upon a black background—or black upon yellow—is the most popular and hackneyed of all colour schemes for posters, because it is demonstrably the most effective and legible (26).

<sup>72</sup> Penney, “Poster Production,” 285.

attention and make their message immediately clear, palatable, and memorable. By appealing to emotion and sentimentality, illustrators could “in that fleeting period, imprint the pictorial and word messages on the minds of observers in a manner that will give a much stronger [sic] compelling and lasting impression.”<sup>73</sup>

### **RIVETING THE ORDINARY INTO THE EXTRAORDINARY**

*Scenes of ordinary everyday life can be made of great importance artistically—try to make the extraordinary out of the ordinary.*  
—Steven Spurrier, *Illustration: Its Practice in Wash and Life*<sup>74</sup>

Appealing to the emotions by converting the ordinary in the extraordinary, production posters such as the *We Can Do It!* poster were particularly strong embodiments of Steven Spurrier’s illustrational advice. These posters needed to make the “everyday” exciting for factory workers who performed unglamorous but necessary tasks for the war effort. According to propaganda, riveting did not simply fuse together sheets of metal, it kept American pilots in the air to fight for freedom. Everything down to the length of work breaks supposedly impacted the life of soldiers overseas and the country as a whole. Via the production poster, workers were empowered to function, or “do it,” on a higher level, becoming their own inspectors or help returning veterans. For her sacrifice, the otherwise “ordinary” war worker woman could become as extraordinary as Rosie.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Penney, "Poster Production," 285.

<sup>74</sup> Steven Spurrier, *Illustration: Its Practice in Wash and Life* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd., 1933) 109.

<sup>75</sup> The necessity of Rosie’s “sacrifice”—doing what she would choose not to do under peaceful circumstances—may also account for the dearth of minority, working-class and/or previously employed women depicted as “Rosies,” even though they made up the majority of the workforce. Women who financially needed or wanted the higher paying “male” jobs that were available during the war made poor “righteous” Rosies, because their “sacrifice” for America would have been perceived as being too small.

This conversion of mundane tasks into dramatically interesting ones or “ordinary” workers into heroic figures such as Rosie the Riveter, a woman who was making history on such a scale that “Berlin will hear about it,” was no easy task. In search of the sentimental, illustrators plumbed “high” and “low” cultural sources for ideas, from pin up imagery to, I argue, religious iconography. Emotionally charged examples of a glorified humanity with extraordinary character and powers were close at hand in the form of the “old masters” and traditional Western Christian imagery.

Spurrier passionately urged his readers to study the “masters,” in addition to contemporary art and life, not only to learn composition and form but to discover how these design elements created “intense drama” and “wonder to us all.”

In no matter what medium the student elects to express himself for illustrations, he cannot do better than study those marvelous compositions by that master of all time, Rembrandt. His sense of the intense drama in form or volume, in the play of light and the balance of shadow, is a wonder to us all.<sup>76</sup>

Spurrier went on to examine Rembrandt’s *Death of the Virgin* in his chapter, “Necessary Study” and later, Rembrandt’s *Christ Shown to the People* in a section on the “master’s” compositional techniques.<sup>77</sup> Though fellow illustrator and author Henry Pitz recommended life study and “frequent[ing] the motion picture houses”<sup>78</sup> as heartily as Spurrier did a study of Rembrandt, illustrators were clearly urged to study “the great designs in the pictures of all the masters” for their “incomparable

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As Kimble and Olson point out, the idealization of the female wartime worker masked certain historical realities; “Today’s understandings of Miller’s posters are for the most part mythic in a strong rhetorical sense in that they deflect attention from the material and symbolic realities of World War II factories” (Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 561).

<sup>76</sup> Spurrier, *Illustration: Its Practice in Wash and Life* 67.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 74-8.

<sup>78</sup> Henry C. Pitz, *The Practice of Illustration* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, Inc., 1947) 25.

source of unending inspiration.”<sup>79</sup> From these presumably Western “old masters,” illustrators could find depiction after depiction of saintly figures such as the Virgin and Christ who had worthy and exalted tasks.

Indeed, illustrators incorporated blatantly religious text and imagery in their designs. Some posters demonstrated both. Borrowing a line from a Christian hymn, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (fig. 23) depicted a woman staring into the heavens with an expression and posture echoing that of Christian saints in Western visual culture. While not depicting the Women’s Army Corps member as a literal Christian saint, the poster certainly attempted to make a comparison or connection between the two.

These formal parallels do not necessarily create a one-to-one equivalency between a religious image and its secular counterpart. Instead, a secular image’s quotation of a religious image’s formal qualities may only aim to evoke similar emotions from its viewer. In *Shooting Kennedy*, David Lubin discusses this phenomenon while explaining how a particular photograph of John Kennedy “clicked with viewers and entered the canon”<sup>80</sup> while others did not. According to Lubin, the photo worked not because it simply mirrored ancient forms but because, “like them, it strikingly summarized Western culture’s most deeply ingrained notions about youthful grace, leadership, and nobility.”<sup>81</sup>

In the Christian era, artists depicting Christ triumphant looked to ancient Greek and Roman statues...as a template for the gesture of power and benediction. The photo of Kennedy at the inaugural ball plays upon this centuries-old Christian tradition, endowing him with a Christly charisma.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>80</sup> Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* 97.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Similarly, war production posters such as Miller's *We Can Do It!* female borrowed formal elements from religious works and other images that transported ordinary subjects to the "extraordinary" category in order to exalt the contributions of the woman war worker. Rockwell did something of the same, albeit more blatantly, with his image of Rosie the Riveter by quoting Michelangelo's depiction of the prophet Isaiah.

Rather than the mythological patroness of love, Venus, or the Hindu goddess, Vishnu, the Miller's WWII illustration formally paralleled Byzantine depictions of the Virgin Mary (fig. 31) and the Christ (fig. 32). Like these older Christian images, Miller's poster depicts a dark-haired figure set against an abstract yellow-gold background and framed from the waist up. Head covered (unlike the woman working machinery in fig. 41) and body turned to the right, the blue-clad war worker fills up most of the picture frame with her torso and looks out at the viewer with a knowing gaze much like the Byzantine Madonna. Additionally, Miller highlighted the war worker's exemplary character and not the details of her particular task with the aforementioned monochromatic background, which mirrored the gold-leafed background distinctive to Byzantine iconography. The only color in Miller's poster that does not appear on the American flag, the yellow appears to glow around the figure. The background serves to capture a viewer's attention and spotlight the figure while communicating Spurrier's sense of the extraordinary.

The abstract background also lends the figure a sense of timelessness. Much like the Byzantine icon, this gold background served to set the figure outside a specific place and time and into a heavenly or otherworldly plane. Its power and

presence appears predicated solely on itself, not her task or her surroundings. She has been made, or makes herself, “Other,” or different from the rest. Even her token wartime costume transforms into the extraordinary due to her radiance. Similar to Rockwell’s Rosie,<sup>83</sup> Miller’s figure wears headgear that alludes to the presence of a halo and the sleeves of her blue workshirt serve as curtains that temporarily veil the supernatural power embodied in her biceps.<sup>84</sup> In the place of lilies or the Christ child but mirroring the Madonna’s traditionally bent right arm, the Miller figure flexes her right arm and balls her right fist.

Considered individually, the single figure cropped around the torso by the picture frame, a yellow color scheme, an abstract background, the absence of a particular task, bold wording, and even the intense gaze out at the viewer were relatively common elements of “effective” design. However, the *We Can Do It!* poster’s combination of these elements was surprisingly rare, if not unique, when compared to WWII posters, including the National Museum of American History’s other Miller posters. Posters with monochromatic backgrounds, even yellow ones (fig. 4), often depicted figures engaged in a task or holding tools. Those posters depicting women from the waist up often portrayed these women with others whose presence dominated or equaled their own (fig. 14). Depicted female poster figures also lacked the *We Can Do It!* figure’s confident, aware gaze out at the viewer (fig. 21). Though individual design elements such as the background were common, their

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<sup>83</sup> Harvey, *Real Women Workers*.

<sup>84</sup> The “supra-time-and-space background” technique was not used uniformly and may very well have been the sort of “abstractness” discouraged by the advertiser-run poster committee associated with the government’s Office of War Information.

total combination was not. Surprisingly few posters contained as many Byzantine Madonna icon elements as Miller's *We Can Do It!* poster.

Again, a point of clarification is necessary here. Although Miller's *We Can Do It!* poster uses visual language traditionally used in religious imagery, such as one dominant female figure set against a gold yellow background, this may say less about Miller's use of such language than it does about the society in which it was produced. (Even when Miller directly raised issues of faith [literally in fig. 45] in his work, the artist used religious language not as a means for worship but to further his propagandistic message.) American culture during and before WWII used what might be called "pseudo-religious" language, or language that takes on religious literature's or imagery's formal or stylistic characteristics, without a direct relationship to religion itself in order to denote Spurrer's sense of the "extraordinary." Pseudo-religious language placed its object on a pedestal as the historic concepts of the feminine ideal had placed women on a pedestal.

## Chapter 3: We Can Do It, Again

*'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;/Thou art thyself though [...]/What's in a name?  
that which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet...*  
–Juliet Capulet, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II. Scene II, Lines 42-8

Common historical misconceptions surround Miller's *We Can Do It!* poster and revolve around the poster's problematic relationship with the "Rosie the Riveter" label, with its original viewers, and with feminism. Ironically, these misconceptions actually highlight the ways in which the Miller poster gained and sustained its popularity.

### **A COMPLEX FEMINIST HERO**

As depicted on the front cover of a British feminist magazine (fig. 33), feminists have claimed this image as one that symbolizes female empowerment and capitalizes on the figure's lifted and flexed right arm, firm gaze out at the viewer, and confident declaration that women can do it (!). Read in isolation, these powerful symbols dominate the image, but read in the context of Miller's other depictions of women and in light of American traditions and culture in illustration, one gets a more complex view of the figure. These complexities mirror the complexity of the concept of Rosie the Riveter, which, at a limited level, supported traditional Second-Wave feminist ideals, particularly women's right to equal employment.

Although Miller's depiction challenged the male/female gender boundaries which characterized the male gaze and the Charles Atlas bodybuilding pose, his was not a traditionally feminist declaration of female independence. Instead, Miller created the poster amidst workplace hierarchies and mixed messages about women's

role during the war. In historical reality and in the posters, supervisors were male, and as Bird and Rubenstein argue, these men determined the “it” that women were “do”-ing. In addition, not all of Miller’s images mirrored the *We Can Do It!* figure’s gaze, posture, and assertive statement. As with Miller’s *Sure, We’re in the War, Too!* poster and other Miller posters depicting wartime workers with demure expressions (fig. 34), women did not always own the male gaze nor did their professional abilities foreground their sexual appeal. Nor was Miller aiming purely to subvert traditional gender roles as demonstrated in *Make Today a Safe Day* (fig. 35), which pictures a woman standing by the door to a house and waving goodbye to a man (presumably her husband) who walks toward a factory in the distance.

Furthermore, Miller’s image, much like the messages in the *Magazine War Guide* and in *Post* short story fiction, focused on the collective good and avoided, even condemned, independence and individual professional ambition.

[The female war worker’s] apotheosis as a soldier-oriented, self-sacrificing martyr, however, reinforced notions about woman’s traditional family role as supporter of the husband, without personal ambition or drive to make a lasting mark on the world...War work became a vehicle for women to show their civic and moral responsibilities as good citizens rather than a way to become more independent and powerful.”<sup>85</sup>

Divorced from the other Miller posters and from its own historical context, the *We Can Do It!* poster’s formal characteristics challenge the traditional concept of the female as passive.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter* 6.

<sup>86</sup> Kimble and Olson use more adamant language to challenge the *We Can Do It!* poster as an “unequivocal” feminist symbol. Although they point to the rest of Miller’s posters such as *Make Today a Safe Day* and the discriminatory realities of the Westinghouse context during the war (for

## A “ROSIE” BY ANY OTHER NAME WOULD SMELL AS SWEET

The Rosie the Riveter action figure (fig. 36), a three-dimensional and full-body reproduction of Miller’s illustration, is identified with bold white lettering against a blue background. This, and the yellow set behind the figure itself, mirror Miller’s original design of bold white *We Can Do It!* lettering against a blue speech “bubble” as well as the yellow background outlining Miller’s depiction of a woman war worker from the waist up. In addition to legs and a full torso, the action figure gains (or borrows?) a familiar set of accessories from Rockwell’s 1943 Memorial Day *Post* front cover. This figure’s straightforward signifiers, a black lunchbox with Rosie’s name painted in white across the lid and a riveting gun, appear with Miller’s now three-dimensional image as appropriate accoutrements for a “posthumously” named illustration.<sup>87</sup>

Though Miller’s image appeared to have no original connection with a “Rosie” or riveting,<sup>88</sup> the illustration has become so linked to both the name and job

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instance, unequal pay) to do so, they less convincingly discuss the “exceptional” (562) nature of the image itself, which they, themselves, so rightly identify (Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 548-60.

<sup>87</sup> Action figures are not the only evidence for this conflation. Addressing what they consider one common misconception surrounding Miller’s *We Can Do It!* figure—that Rockwell illustrated the *We Can Do It!* image and not Miller—Kimble and Olson quote WWII munitions worker, Betsy Ramelkamp who reminisced after the war about “the original print of the Norman Rockwell poster, which appeared on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* on May 29, 1943 [and] sold recently for almost \$5 million.” Saying that she “remembered that poster well,” Ramelkamp claimed that she “had seen it everywhere during World War II: on billboards, on building walls, and in newspapers. It showed a comely Rosie, in a blue-denim shirt, baring her muscular arms while eating a sandwich. Above were the words, ‘We Can Do It!’” (Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 538. quoting from “Rosie Was So Riveting I Decided to Join Her,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 31, 2002, 19.)

<sup>88</sup> According to Westinghouse historian and museum curator Charlie Ruch, Westinghouse did not employ male or female riveters (Charlie Ruch, “NOT Rosie the Riveter,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Aug. 14, 1995, V6 as quoted in Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 551). Kimble and Olson note that this re-defines the “it” in the “We Can Do It!” statement for much of the American public. The misconstrued, “it,” as well as the misconstrued “we,” which is popularly seen as *all* female wartime workers rather than Westinghouse workers, “makes it much easier for modern audiences to reconstruct

that these additions seem entirely natural. The bold and unquestioning labels and conflation with the Rockwell image also appear natural. However, its current, relatively undisputed title as “Rosie the Riveter,” is a misidentification. Though certainly “Rosie” in spirit, function, and inspiration—the government and industry’s push for womanpower—the female figure depicted in Miller’s *We Can Do It!* poster was most likely not named Rosie or specifically a riveter until after it was created.

Numerous examples of the mislabeled Miller image as “Rosie the Riveter” exist on the internet and as popular culture objects. For instance, a barcode sticker placed on the back of a metal *We Can Do It!* placard simply labels the product “Rosie the Riveter” (fig. 37).

Another reappropriation (fig. 38) assumes that viewers see the figure in the Miller illustration as “Rosie.” Replacing the image’s face with that of comedian and talk show host, Rosie O’Donnell, this visual pun is only effective if viewers know the names of both “Rosies.” Here, the face of one popular icon is replaced by another easily recognizable face and the “joke” is complete.

Rather than an embodiment of the Rosie concept for the public during the war, the poster became a symbol of the war for primarily *post-war* audiences. It served as an emblem of an already well-established fictional persona—Rosie the Riveter—used to identify and characterize a phenomenon in American history. Thus, the poster’s popularity is in part due to the strength and prominence of the Rosie the Riveter concept, not *simply* the image. Even with its lack of specificity, Miller’s poster may have fit so seamlessly into the popular concept of a self-empowered Rosie the Riveter

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her as a sort of wartime Everywoman, casting her as a famous representative of women’s empowerment on the home front” Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 551.

that it needed no label. Both the widespread popularity of the concept and the government's effective womanpower campaign created a powerful, appealing back story for the *We Can Do It!* woman. But why did Miller's illustration, and not the countless other images of "Rosies" even more directly related to the concept, emerge as the Rosie emblem?

Despite its status as one of the most prominent, if not *the* most prominent, visual representations of Rosie the Riveter today, Miller's *We Can Do It!* poster illustration most likely rose to such heights of recognition decades after WWII. Miller's poster, labeled with a Westinghouse logo and War Production Co-Ordinating Committee credit line, was a war production poster, not a recruiting poster meant for wider public viewing.<sup>89</sup> Like many of Miller's other illustrations, the *We Can Do It!* poster aimed to motivate Westinghouse employees and to encourage production. As indicated by the dates on the poster itself, the artist created this particular poster for a short, two-week viewing period. Miller knew a limited audience would see the poster for a limited time.

This, and the almost non-existent literature on Miller and the small number of surviving original posters, indicate its relative obscurity. In fact, evidence suggests that the poster became popular even as late as the 1970s. Colman argues that the poster has been "mistakenly labeled as Rosie the Riveter" since the 1970s.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> In their article, Kimble and Olson devote a section titled, "Misconception Three: 'We Can Do It!' Was a Labor Recruitment Poster" to this subject (Olson, "Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster," 545-6).

<sup>90</sup> Though understandable in relation to her reading audience, the author, unfortunately, does not provide further reasoning for this assertion. Colman, *Rosie the Riveter : Women Working on the Home Front in World War II*, 69.

But the National Museum of American History's collection of 45 Miller posters<sup>91</sup> and related records provide the most compelling data for the poster's later rise to prominence.<sup>92</sup> As indicated in the NMAH's accession file for the Miller collection and in an interview with NMAH Curator William Bird, Jr. who functioned as a liaison between the museum and Miller, the purchased collection "represent[s] a virtually complete wartime corporate production campaign," which "provides opportunities to study wartime themes of corporate industrial relations."<sup>93</sup> The NMAH had not understood the poster or illustrator as being particularly popular at the time of purchase.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, in the same 1985 memorandum requesting that the museum acquire the Miller posters, Bird makes no mention of the *We Can Do It!* poster and briefly notes that Miller "of Glenshaw, Pa." is a "commercial artist who prepared [the posters] for the Westinghouse Corporation's Headquarters for Industrial Relations

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<sup>91</sup> The NMAH's Miller collection represents one of the largest public Miller poster holdings of which I am aware. The artist sold the posters to the museum in 1985 and 1986 with little fanfare and at minimal cost. (The NMAH purchased 13 in the 1985 fiscal year and the remaining 32 in 1986. According to the museum's accession file on its Miller collection, this separate purchase appears to be a bureaucratic technicality since correspondence indicates that the posters were agreed upon for purchase as a group.)

As four are repeats, there are a total of 41 Miller images at the NMAH. According to Kimble and Olsen, there are eight Miller posters represented at the National Archives' collection, and all but one of the eight Archive posters are also at the NMAH. Thus, they calculate that Miller did at least 42 posters for Westinghouse (Olson, "Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster"). In footnote 10, they also indicate that some of these same posters can also be found at the Heinz History Center and Museum in Pittsburgh. They do not specify the exact number of posters located at the Heinz Center.

In addition to those in private collections, there may be others. In a 1985 memorandum found in the NMAH Miller collection file, curator William Bird noted that Westinghouse had eight of its own Miller posters. I do not know if these are the ones located at the Heinz Center or additional posters. Larry Bird, *Memorandum Re: Miller Collection of WW II Westinghouse posters* (National Museum of American History, Division of Political History, 1985).

<sup>92</sup> Larry Bird, *Memorandum Re: Purchase of Miller World War Two Poster Collection* (National Museum of American History, Division of Political History, 1985). To my knowledge, this information has gone unpublished.

<sup>93</sup> Larry Bird, *Memorandum Re: Miller Collection of WW II Westinghouse posters* (National Museum of American History, Division of Political History, 1985).

<sup>94</sup> William L. Bird, personal interview, 23 Mar. 2006.

and War-Producing Coordinating Committee from 1942 to 1945.”<sup>95</sup> Also, museum records show that Miller did not price the *We Can Do It!* poster any differently from the others he sold to the museum. Each poster, including the *We Can Do It!* poster, sold for \$75.<sup>96</sup>

Bird suggests that the poster was virtually unknown before museums such as the National Archives, the NMAH, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, popularized the image through exhibitions and traveling shows.<sup>97</sup> In particular, the instigator of the *We Can Do It!* poster’s fame appears to have been the National Archives. According to James Kimble and Lester Olson’s “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” the Archives staff looked for period posters to reproduce on souvenirs and selected the *We Can Do It!* image around 1983.<sup>98</sup> Soon thereafter, Bird purchased the posters from Miller in 1985.

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<sup>95</sup> Bird, *Memorandum Re: Miller Collection of WW II Westinghouse posters*.

<sup>96</sup> *National Museum of American History Accession Memorandum: World War Two production and incentive posters produced by the artist [J. Howard Miller] for the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company* (National Museum of American History, Division of Political History, 1986).

<sup>97</sup> William L. Bird, personal interview, 23 Mar. 2006. The role of the museum in popularizing this image bears much more mining. To my knowledge, the poster appeared in the May 1994 to February 1995 National Archives’ exhibition, *Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II*, and in the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s (SAAM, then called the National Museum of American Art) *Posters American Style*, which exhibited from March to August 1998 at the museum, then traveled to three additional venues until August 1999. (At least portion of both shows have been converted to online exhibitions. The National Archives’ 1994-95 exhibition is online at [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers\\_of\\_persuasion/powers\\_of\\_persuasion\\_intro.html#](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/powers_of_persuasion_intro.html#). *Posters American Style* is located at <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/exhibits/posters/index.html>.

Exhibition dates for the Archives show may be found on the website and for the SAAM show’s dates and travel itinerary, see the copyright page of the its exhibition catalogue Therese Thau Heyman, *Posters American Style* (New York: National Museum of American, Smithsonian Institution in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998). However, I am more familiar with the two exhibitions organized by the NMAH and Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), which also included Miller’s poster, and which, I believe, further broadened its viewership in America.

<sup>98</sup> Kimble and Olson piece together the provenance of the Miller posters located at the Archives. According to the authors, eight Miller posters were submitted to the War Production Board’s 1943 poster contest. Kimble and Olson argue that these were most likely the eight included in the War Production Board’s records preserved at the Archives. (See footnote 52 in Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and

From there and in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), Bird and co-curator Harry Rubenstein developed two related traveling exhibitions of WWII poster images, including the *We Can Do It!* illustration, which were designed to show around the country.<sup>99</sup> The first show included the museum's original poster and traveled nationwide beginning in June 1993 and ending at the NMAH in 1995 in honor of the anniversary of the war.<sup>100</sup> The second, a traveling panel show, which derived from the first show, was titled *Produce for Victory: Posters on the American Home Front 1941-1945*.<sup>101</sup> Begun in Sept. 1994 and ending in July 2007, this panel show will have traveled to 23 states in an average of six small venues in those states.<sup>102</sup>

It is notable that the museum played such a critical role in popularizing the image and did so with such ease. Not all the posters found in the exhibition have been as popular.<sup>103</sup> While the combination of a strong background narrative (the

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Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster," 567.)

<sup>99</sup> These shows were the basis for Bird, *Design for Victory*.

<sup>100</sup> Noting that the show ended in Washington, D.C. at the NMAH, the traveling itinerary is as follows and was obtained in email correspondence with Carol Harsh, director of SITES' Museum on Main Street, via Ed Liskey. Letter to the author. 18 April 2007.

06/05/1993-08/01/1993 The Paterson Museum, Paterson, NJ

08/28/1993-10/10/1993 Sloan Museum, Flint, MI

01/15/1994-02/27/1994 Alyce de Roulet Williamson Gallery, Pasadena, CA

03/12/1994-04/24/1994 Old Courthouse Museum, Santa Ana, CA

05/14/1994-06/25/1994 Federal Reserve Bank, Kansas City, MO

09/10/1994-10/23/1994 Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, MA

11/12/1994-01/01/1995 Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, MA

01/14/1995-02/26/1995 Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT

03/18/1995-04/30/1995 Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT

05/20/1995-07/02/1995 Miami-Dade Public Library, Miami, FL

<sup>101</sup> This show was the basis for Rubenstein, *Design for Victory*.

<sup>102</sup> Carol Harsh. Telephone interview. 18 April 2007. According to Harsh, there are five copies of the panel show available for travel.

<sup>103</sup> Kimble and Olson also marshal an impressive cache of evidence to support the poster's much later rise to popularity. (Most of this information is located in the section titled, "Misconception Four: 'We Can Do It!' Was Famous during World War II" Olson, "Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster," 546-48.) First, they

Rosie the Riveter “story”) as well as national exposure through traveling exhibitions and the feminist movement<sup>104</sup> drew it from relative obscurity, I suggest that the image itself provides most of the necessary elements for its popularity in current visual culture.

### **FLEXIBLE, INTELLIGIBLE, AND REPLICABLE: MILLER’S *WE CAN DO IT* POSTER AS THE IDEAL LOADING DOCK**

Miller’s image is notably spartan with regard to specific signifiers of the figure’s identity and the image’s historical context. Though the woman wears the blue workshirt, a factory-friendly hairdo, and an identification badge on her shirt collar, very little about the image demands a specific time or purpose aside from the

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agree with Westinghouse historian and museum curator Charlie Ruch and others that a very limited number of people saw the poster, probably all Westinghouse employees, given that it was a “shop poster” (Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 546) and wartime security was very tight. Ruch notes that the poster appeared “on about 1,800 company bulletin boards across the country” (Charlie Ruch, “NOT Rosie the Riveter,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Aug. 14, 1995, V6 as quoted in Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 547), but Kimble and Olson suggest that the number may have been less as company posters print runs may have been “1,000 or less, as compared with literally millions of war bond posters sponsored by the government” (Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 547).

Second, according to Kimble and Olson, the poster does not appear in Westinghouse publications, or many other publications for that matter, during the war and after until the mid-1980s. I have also found this to be the case. In fact, according to the NMAH’s files, Westinghouse was not interested in acquiring Miller’s poster collection at the time that the museum purchased it. (The authors do admit that it appeared in a 1944 *Labor-Management News* article, which mainly circulated among factory personnel (Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 547).

Third, Kimble and Olson point to a June 1943 War Production Board poster contest to which Miller submitted eight posters. Since these go unnamed and unpictured in *Labor-Management News* articles on the show, Kimble and Olson argue that Miller’s poster was not widely celebrated from the start or as a result of this contest.

Finally, the authors note that April Cass, Miller’s artist friend and mentee in the postwar years, claimed that Miller “did not live to see his poster gain fame” Olson, “Visual Rhetoric and Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster,” 547. (Incidentally, the NMAH’s accession files for the Miller collection and my interview with William Bird suggest that Cass served as a point of contact for the Millers.)

<sup>104</sup> I am grateful to Sheridan Harvey, who initially suggested the connection between the feminist movement and Miller’s image.

“Westinghouse” logo and “War Production Co-ordinating Committee” lettering in white.<sup>105</sup> Even the date on the bottom left fails to specify a year.

By way of contrast, Rockwell’s portrayal is rife with identifiers placing the figure in a specific time and place. It includes Rosie’s name on her black lunchbox and prominently displays her oversized riveting gun in the center of the image. Her factory-safe wardrobe of denim overalls, blue workshirt, identification badges lining the bib of her overalls, goggles on her forehead, protective face mask, and leather wristband, complete with a face smudged with work, emphasize her role as a factory worker. The background, an enormous waving American flag, confirms her citizenship. And if the title “Rosie the Riveter” weren’t enough to place her in World War II, Rosie’s foot rests on a battered copy of Adolf Hitler’s autobiography.

Along with its flexibility as an image, the poster illustration is endlessly reproduced and reappropriated in current visual culture, because it uses concepts and a visual language which are still intelligible and *attractive* to the contemporary viewer today. Its concept of female beauty, the female use of the male gaze, its arm-flexing posture, the pseudo-religious visual language to denote “other,” and the assertive statement, “we can do it!,” still functions using language relevant and palatable to the modern viewer.

As modern reenactments of the Miller poster attest (figs. 39 and 40), women *want* to be the *We Can Do It* figure, while propaganda such as the *I’m proud—my husband wants me to do my part* poster might be interpreted as patronizing or sexist to a post-Second Wave Feminism culture. Others, such as the figure in *Women in the War, We Can’t Win Without Them* (fig. 41), have less coherent content (what is the

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<sup>105</sup> Even this is often omitted in contemporary reproductions of the image.

woman doing and to what?) and appear less confident. Instead of being the subject of an interpellating male gaze, viewers of *Women in the War* are interlopers supervising the worker's progress.

Over half a century later, viewers can still read the *We Can Do It!* figure as an attractive, assertive woman who can take on traditionally male roles as gazer, initiator, or riveter, while maintaining her femininity. With male *and* female traits that appeal to modern sensibilities, the figure represents the ideal woman who has it all. Put another way, the *We Can Do It!* woman still demands both respect and a response from its viewers. Yet with all her extraordinariness, she remains a flexible symbol and has become, I suggest, an ideal loading dock for contemporary message makers.

## CONCLUSION

Given the poster's relative obscurity during the war, it is doubtful that Miller's poster originated the visual symbols often repeated in WWII propaganda and imagery. Rather, many of these symbols, such as the flexed arm and the confrontational gaze, predated Miller's poster: Miller drew from already existing tropes on masculinity and femininity in the culture at the time including the bared and flexed arm as a symbol of strength, the male gaze, the use of a pseudo-religious visual language, and the coiffed, physically attractive illustrated female figure as the ideal woman. Miller's skillful *combination* of these tropes set this image apart from other images of Rosie the Riveter. Blending male signifiers such as the flexed arm and male gaze with evocations of female piety (Byzantine iconography) and commodified

female sexuality (pin ups and advertisements), rather than WWII-specific signifiers, Miller created an “ideal” woman performing a man’s job, during the war and after.



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