

The Government's Girls: How the United States Government Used War Poster Art to  
Recruit Women to the Workforce During World War Two

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## ABSTRACT

“The Government’s Girls” discusses the recruitment of women via the medium of posters during World War Two (1941-1945). The purpose of the paper is to illuminate predominant practices by poster artists and argues that poster artists recruited women by creating two types of poster imagery, Static and Active. The article is informed by a comprehensive review of literature, including primary and secondary sources and several visual analyses conducted by the author. The article concludes that poster artwork shares visual traits with commercial and illustrational artwork created for female viewers prior to the war.

## Introduction

As the U.S. military joined World War II (1941-1945), the slogan of John Falter's *To Make Men Free* would have echoed contemporary recruitment slogans. Recruitment slogans called for women to replace males in stateside occupations, which were previously denied to females. Factories and the military recruited women to "free men" to fight on the front lines of war.

A fundamental cultural problem surfaces throughout literature and rhetoric on this topic. How could male-dominated factories, the Army and Navy recruit women to fill vacancies when American society snubbed women who worked in "men's" jobs? One government survey conducted in 1944 revealed that middle-class society looked down on women who worked and that women feared the loss of social status that employment could yield (Office of War Information, 1944, p. 13). Further, Americans considered WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service) and WACS (Women's Army Corps) lesbians, husband stealers or federally sanctioned prostitutes for soldiers (Alsmeyer, 1982, p. 17; McGraith, 1988, p. 49). This essay explores the recruitment of women via posters during the years of 1942 through 1945.

My work results especially from the study of World War Two posters, government documents, public letters, and magazine articles contemporary to the creation of war posters and secondary sources. My research confirms many conclusions established by other scholars of war posters, but my proposal of Static and Active types of imagery is entirely my own. Specific conclusions regarding the dates and production of artwork by John Falter are also my own. This presentation proposes that artists created two types of imagery, which I call Static and Active, to recruit women.

## Static and Active Imagery

Until the summer of 1942, the Office of War Information (OWI) floundered as it attempted to prescribe a government sanctioned visual arts style. Afterwards, the OWI, Army and Navy prescribed that poster designers use the style of civilian mass culture. This style often took the form of a photo-representational style, or an approach to visual art that simulates the three dimensional relationships of photographs found in advertisements and illustrations that were made for female readers. The OWI, Army and Navy used this commercial style to direct women from the familiar middle-class culture of female domesticity to a worker's war culture in unfamiliar, possibly frightening, factory and military occupations.



Figure 1. *To Make Men Free*, John Falter.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, pp. 2-3. Digital image courtesy of the Naval Historical Center and the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

In *To Make Men Free*, presented in Figure 1, John Falter employed the Static Type of imagery, in which the artist displays the motionless head and shoulders of a generalized, idealized female figure. Women in the Static Type of imagery are covered in symbols and depicted in a photo-representational style that approximates reality but lacks the unpleasant details of real life. Static Type females, like most women depicted in war posters, lack the pimples, scars, wrinkles, sagginess, stray hairs, and sweat of an ultra-realistic depiction. Instead of depicting such details to communicate the reality and individuality of the female figure, Falter altered the facial features of models to make them conform to wartime standards of beauty and glamour. He dressed his fictive females in attributes of femininity. Attributes of femininity are items such as heavy make-up, manicured and polished nails, perfectly coifed hair, exceptionally clean, youthful, blemish-free skin, jewelry or wedding rings that denote the figure's female gender and marital status. Notably, the idealized figures in posters are fair-skinned, white women, although common knowledge confirms the inclusion of hundreds of African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Native Americans in factory and military operations during the war.

The Static Type of woman stands in front of an ambiguous setting, laden with symbolic meaning. Falter depicted this generalized woman in front of a flag, which denotes a relationship between the Static Type female figure, the American nation and nationalism. The presence of the flag also connotes patriotism. Hence, Falter created a timeless image of a dutiful, patriotic woman in a style that approximates, rather than copies apparently real life.

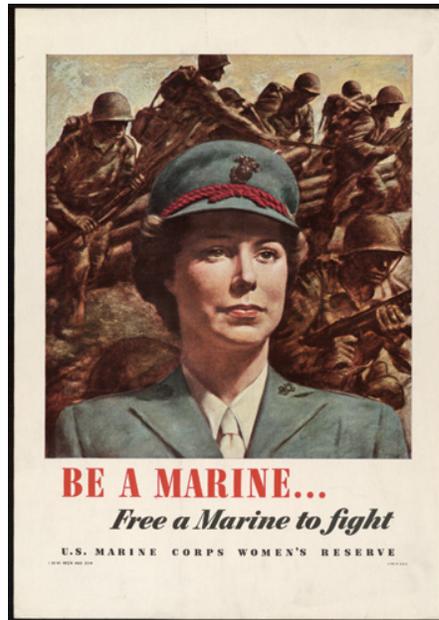


Figure 2. *Be a Marine...Free a Marine to Fight*, Artist Unknown.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 5. Digital image courtesy of the Naval Historical Center and the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

Contrast the static pose of the woman in *Be a Marine...Free a Marine to Fight* in Figure 2 with the active poses of the men behind her. The iconic status of the female figure seems more obvious after this comparison. Her motionless arms rest at her sides while the soldiers charge *en masse* behind her. How remarkable the differing treatments that the artist used here to depict the male and female body.

The second type of imagery, which I call the Active Type, shows an iconic female figure similar in body to Static Type figures. Both Static and Active women wear attributes of femininity and possess generalized, idealized portraits. An Active Type figure, however, engages in a process of action, especially a work-related action.

In both types of imagery, women look away from or above the viewer. In the Static Type, women look into the distance while in the Active Type, women look at their hands as they work. The close-up cropping of the figure is also typical to both types, as is the ambiguous setting. Artists employed all of these shared features to communicate a war message that might have otherwise seemed unfamiliar, frightening or confusing.



Figure 3. *Do the Job He Left Behind*, P. G. Harris.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 6. Digital image courtesy of the University of Minnesota Library and the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

#### “Realism” or the Photo-representational Style

How did the U.S. government define so-called “realism,” or photo-representational styles, and to what extent did it codify realism as a style useful in recruiting women to the workforce?

*How to Make and Reproduce Posters*, presented in Figure 3, a wartime publication by the Office of War Information, addressed elements of design that private poster artists could use to create posters for local settings. The book advocated an emphasis on clarity and rapid legibility common to advertisements used in women's magazines before the war and in wartime recruitment posters for women. The prevailing theory prior to and during the war suggested that photo-representational styles, or "realism," made posters readily comprehensible to the average American.



Figure 4. *Produce for Victory*, Artist Unknown.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 7. Digital image courtesy of the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

William Bird and Harry Rubenstein have discussed the series from which this poster came, saying that poster-makers intended the series to speak to the so-called “Common Man” and the woman who fit the definition of the ideal female war worker (Bird & Rubenstein, p. 81). Notice in Figure 4 that the Active Type of woman in this poster from the *Produce for Victory* series possesses all of the attributes that connote her femininity. She wears make-up, has bright red, perfectly coifed hair, manicured nails, and exceptionally clean hands, in spite of her work with machines. Her form is not abstracted. Rather, she is shown as a recognizable form doing recognizable actions in a photo-representational style.

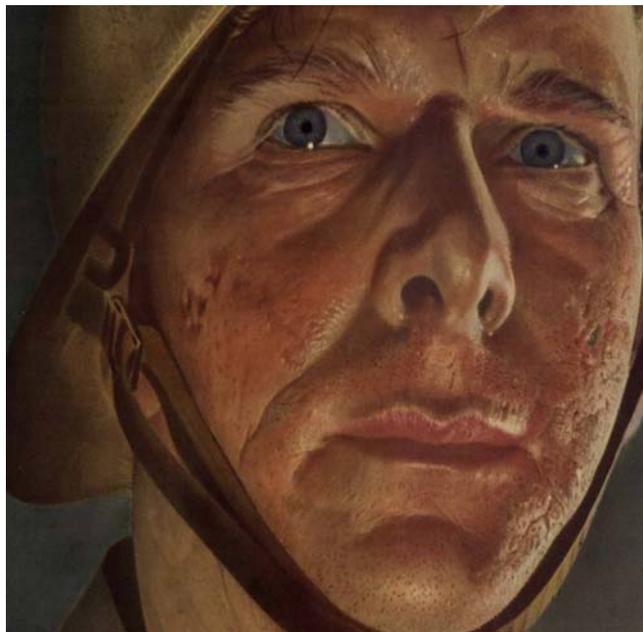


Figure 5. *Produce for Victory*, Artist Unknown.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 8. Digital image courtesy of the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.



Figure 6. *Produce for Victory*, Artist Unknown<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 9. Digital image courtesy of the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

Notice in Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8 how the males depicted in this series have blemishes, flaws, wrinkles, dirty hands, sweaty brows, hairy arms, and tattered clothes. I would call this photo-representational style ultra-real, because the artist has chosen to depict the small details of each man's face in order to heighten the apparent believability of the poster. Contrast the scarred face of this soldier and the sweaty dirty brow of this worker with the smooth, blemish-free visage of the female war worker. They are quite different.

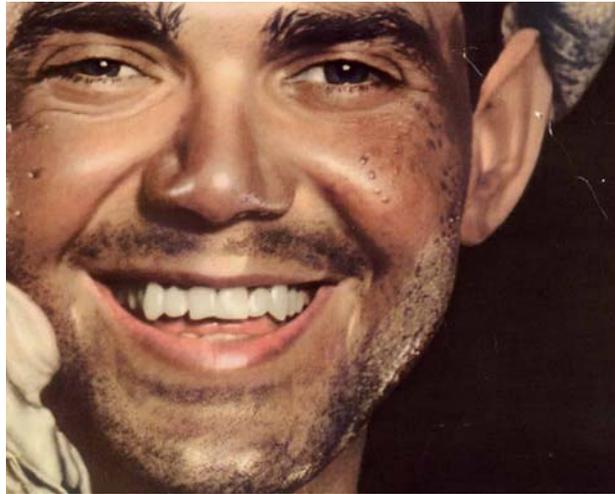


Figure 7. *Produce for Victory*, Artist Unknown.

<sup>7</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 9. Digital image courtesy of the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.



Figure 8. *Produce for Victory*, Artist Unknown.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 9. Digital image courtesy of the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

### Contextual Idealism of Women's Roles

Not surprisingly, artists employed a certain degree of contextual idealism to frame recruitment messages. The federal government sought to recruit childless, domesticity-minded middle-class women, because poor women already worked in factories, as they had during the years before the war (Women's Bureau, 1941, p. 5). One study conducted in 1944 by the Women's Bureau, an agency within the U. S. Department of Labor, revealed that very few middle-class housewives and single, middle-class women comprised the factory workforce. This study concluded that most war workers had factory work experience prior to the war. The agency's study of factories in New Jersey revealed that approximately twenty percent of the female workers lacked any form of work experience (Women's Bureau, 1941, p. 11). In other words, four out of five female war workers did not fit into the government's definition of the ideal recruit, because she already worked and would have continued to seek work after the war. Further, agencies, such as the Navy, employed women conditionally and created clauses that allowed for the expulsion of women on the grounds of marriage or pregnancy. Women enlisted for the "duration and six months," a common phrase that appears in most biographies, oral histories and memoirs from servicewomen. Hence, artists, including the Navy's recruitment artist John Falter, designed countless images that emphasized occupational features other than long-term career benefits.

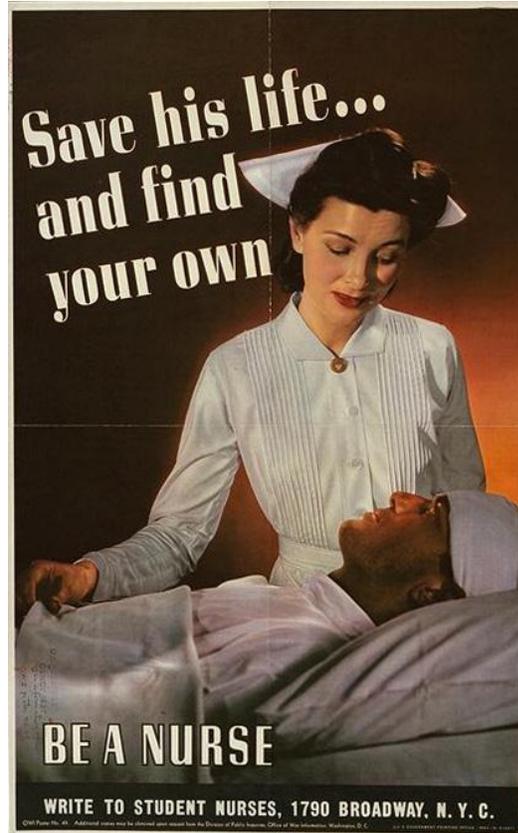


Figure 9. *Save His Life to Find Your Own*. Artist Unknown.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 7. Digital image courtesy of the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

A further illustration of the previous point can be seen in Figure 9, *Save His Life and Find Your Own*. This poster reflects the dominant middle-class, gender roles that artists used to frame their war imagery. The artist has chosen to depict a nurse benefiting from taking care of the soldier, not from the paycheck or professional advancement that real women enjoyed (Field, 1987).

Poster artists often framed women's advancement in terms of service and caretaking, especially by portraying women in front of large groups of men, in the service of men or receiving approval from male onlookers. Additionally, depictions of women

serving men suggest that artists sought to further emphasize the gender role of females in factories and the military. That is, artists appear to have furthered the notion that women involved themselves in factory or military service in order to temporarily replace men, not to compete with men for career-track jobs. This point took on major significance in the Navy, where, initially, female officers were relegated to commanding women and could not give orders to males of lower rank. One example of the Navy artist John Falter's conception of male approval is the poster "Proud-I'll Say," presented in Figure 11. The father shows viewers a picture of his WAVES daughter. Perhaps artists thought that they could successfully persuade women to enter the workforce if they used illustrations that framed war work in terms of its similarities to caretaking and nurturing, and the social dynamics of male-female relationships. It is as if the artist has chosen characteristics of the female recruit's home life before the war and included versions of them in poster designs. One survey conducted by the OWI summarizes this point well. Here, in her own words, one housewife states that, "The disapproval of people they [women] respect, especially of men, is said to keep a good many women from industrial employment (Office of War Information, 1944, p. 13)."



Figure 10. *My Girl's a WOW*, Artist Unknown.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 12. Digital image courtesy of the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

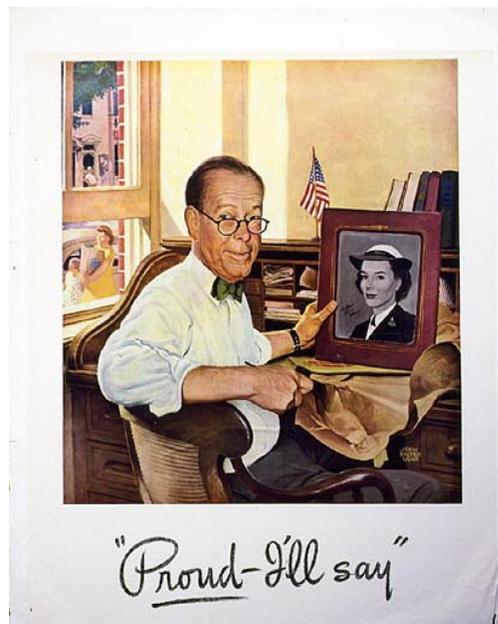


Figure 11. *Proud-I'll say*, John Falter.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 11. Digital image courtesy of the Naval Historical Center and the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

### The Advertising Style

Artists used symbols and styles that they employed before the war to make art for female viewers. The creation of gender attributes in art for female audiences during the 1930s by magazine and advertisement illustrators allowed artists, like John Falter, to include symbols and styles that women understood already. Michele Bogart, author of *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art*, asserts that many artists, art directors, advertisers, and business people believed that women comprised a large portion of the pre-war viewing audience, especially because shopping was an activity that advertisers had associated with women since the 1920s (Bogart, 1995, p. 126). Advertisers catered to female viewers and customers heavily after the World War I (Bogart, 1995, p. 126). Bogart continues with her point, adding that some critics of fine art “felt that the use of Modernist imagery in advertising violated the sanctity and purity of art because advertising was created for women (Bogart, 1995, p. 141).” In other words, artists believed that high-art was created for intellectual males, while advertising was designed for less intellectual females. Seventy percent of the poster artists I studied created illustrations or advertisements for women’s and general interest magazines that catered to female viewers before the war. The tendency of the generation of artists that worked during the 1930s and the war to disregard distinctions between advertisement and magazine illustration allowed artists then to develop photo-representational styles in illustrations and advertisements before making recruitment posters for women (Bogart, 1995, p. 128).

Francis Brennan, leader of the Graphics Bureau that designed war posters, said that he did not consider war posters a channel for advertising style (Brennan and Davis,

1942, p. 5). Brennan said that he would not use a “slick advertising style” nor a fine art style to illustrate war posters (Brennan and Davis, 1942, p. 5). Be that as it may, recruitment posters made for women have a style strikingly similar to billboard and magazine advertisements made before the Second World War.

In its 1942 publication, *How to Make and Reproduce Posters*, the OWI advocated sparse designs that rejected the use of anecdotal details. This rejection of detail was typical of billboard advertisements, which the Outdoor Advertising Association and the federal government considered large posters (Outdoor Advertising Association of America, 1944, p. 7).



Figure 12. *It's a Woman's War, Too!*, John Falter.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>From Office of War Information, 1943, *Women in the War Campaign*, p. 13. Digital image courtesy of the Naval Historical Center and the Government Documents Department of the University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX and cannot be reproduced without written permission from Government Documents, UNT.

In *It's a Woman's War, too!*, John Falter used light and shadow to simulate a three-dimensional face in a photo-representational style. Like other poster artists, Falter depicted recognizable objects and figures that resemble a photograph in its simulation of

a three-dimensional space. The use of this style is consistent with the prevalent belief by artists, critics, and connoisseurs alike that photo-representational, not abstract, styles appealed to the general viewing public for mass print media, which was predominantly female (Bogart, 1995, p. 142). Furthermore, Falter idealized the female model used for the poster, altering her facial structure and hairstyle to conform to wartime standards of glamour and beauty. Although she appears “real,” her image is a contrived fiction.

Artists used a style that simulated photographs, but did not provide the unpleasant details found in daily life. Artists depicted men in vividly real styles that provided portrait-like depictions, although they did not depict women in a similar style. Realism approximated a photographic depiction of space. As of today, I have not found any recruitment posters that employ abstract art to communicate their recruitment messages. Not surprisingly, artists, art directors, and advertisers used photo-representational styles before and during the war for posters and advertisements.

### Conclusion

My research reveals that the U.S. government solicited particular types of poster art to recruit a particular type of female viewer. This art possessed a specific style, elements of design and relied heavily on gendered symbols and styles developed prior to the war. Artists relied on symbols, styles and subject matter that catered to women to define the government's girls as perfectly beautiful, perpetually young, selfless, and servile.

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