

This painting is inspired by propaganda directed towards women during World War II, and how that affected American women during and after. In my painting, I wanted to display the contrast between the industrial professions women worked in and the expectations of a housewife in the 1940's and 50's. I included small details that relate to the different types of traditionally male fields that women took on during WWII, like welding and building hand grenades. Many of the factories that women worked in had oil on the floor and all over the buildings, leading them to wear headscarves, which the woman in my painting is wearing. The WWII era was instrumental in the long term of feminism and women's rights because women could support themselves on their own paycheck. Along with this, working women grew to question the gender roles set by society, resulting in many women fighting the companies they worked for to get equal pay. This time period was an integral stepping point in the longstanding battle for equal rights of women.

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Working Women in WWII

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WWII occurred between the years of 1939 and 1945. With the men off at war, women were heavily encouraged to join the labor force. The resources in the country were running low; there were rations on many foods, as well as rubber and gas. Although there were women working before the war, the majority of those professions were traditionally female: seamstresses, typists, secretaries, etc.¹ During the war, they worked in factories, engineering, welding, and did other traditionally male work. Despite their successes, when the war ended and the men returned, many women were laid off from their factory jobs. Even though 75% of women stated that they wanted to continue working after the war ended, the female employment rates dropped drastically². However, this new concept of women in the workforce changed many women's views on gender roles, impacting feminism in the future.

¹ "American Women and World War II," Khan Academy, 2016, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/rise-to-world-power/us-wwii/a/american-women-and-world-war-ii>.

² "American Women and World War II," Khan Academy, 2016, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/rise-to-world-power/us-wwii/a/american-women-and-world-war-ii>.

At the start of World War Two, there were 335,000 people enlisted in the United States military. Six years later, in 1945, that number rose to 12 million, only 3% of which were women³. Traditionally, women have not been put at the forefront of wars, and have not been encouraged to join the military. They were thought of as only useful for domestic duties, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. This mindset was demonstrated in the draft of World War Two, where the US only recruited men and boys into battle. The result of this was millions of women being left at home to provide for their families and perform domestic chores, without any independent source of income. With so many men being shipped off to war, there was no one to work in factories or the farms. In order to combat this, the United States Government, along with non-governmental organizations and manufacturing companies, created propaganda to get women working. Their efforts were a great success. Between 1940 and 1945, over 5 million women joined the workforce. WWII was a was the first time in history that women were encouraged to take up traditionally male professions, bringing up issues of equal pay and treatment of women. Propaganda produced by the United States government, as well as other organizations during WWII inspired women to stay in the workforce and combat stereotypes, fight for equality, and question gender roles.

Although the result of the propaganda was a rise in women's independence, the intention was to boost the U.S. economy while mass producing weapons and tools that were used in war. Most of this propaganda manifested itself in posters, but there were also movies and comics made that had the same overall message. The posters were effective because they incorporated four different methods for persuasion: patriotism, sentimental messages, humor, or negativity. Patriotism is and was often portrayed with a flexed forearm, the American flag, or just the inclusion of red, white, and blue. Darlene Mahaney comments on patriotic propaganda, saying it "[shows] a determined and optimistic America fighting a just and right cause."⁴ This inspires the viewer to contribute to the fight in any way possible in order to feel that they are a part of a meaningful community. One of the most presently famous examples of this is Rosie the Riveter, a poster displaying a woman with a flexed forearm, wearing factory clothes and her hair up in a headscarf, along with the phrase *We Can Do It!* above her. This poster was first created by a manufacturing company to put up in their factories to keep women motivated to continue working. However, not all organizations used this type of tactic. During the mid 1900's and before, women were thought of as emotional, gentle, and sensitive. Because of this, there were many posters that conveyed sentimental messages. The most common displays during that time were depictions that evoked strong emotions: people waiting for their loved ones, reading mail sent by someone in the military, or a reunion of a family after the war. On the opposite end of this spectrum is the humorous posters. This type of propaganda was usually presented in newspapers or magazines in the form of comic strips. Often, the comics had caricatures of infamous enemy figures and were meant to make fun of them. The last type of propaganda was less used to persuade women, but more to encourage men to join the war. There were many posters that communicated negative messages, where there were depictions of men fighting and dying, serving as warnings to the viewer. In World War Two specifically, there were many "visions of the horrors of Fascist takeover, or demeaning stereotypes

³ "Research Starters: US Military by the Numbers," The National WWII Museum | New Orleans, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-us-military-numbers>.

⁴ Darlene C. Mahaney, "Propaganda Posters," *OAH Magazine of History* 16, no. 3 (2002): 41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163525>.

of the Axis leaders.”⁵ All of these different tactics displayed themselves in different ways throughout the posters, but the result was significant, with incredible successes for many of the organizations who utilized the techniques.

This piece is trying to empower women by making them feel like they are doing something to help their country during wartime - just like their husbands. It is basically saying both men and



women are soldiers, but the men have guns, whereas the women working in factories have an equal impact. This promotes equality between men and women in this way - saying that men and women are soldiers. It also has three women on it, one being a welder, one a factory worker, and one perhaps a government worker. By doing this and having this kind of representation, the women who are in those types of professions (which the majority who were working were) are being inspired and feel like they are being thought of by the government. By seeing this appreciation from the government, which they haven't really ever seen throughout history, many women would feel like they were doing a good job and are being recognized for all of their hard work.

⁵ Darlene C. Mahaney, "Propaganda Posters," *OAH Magazine of History* 16, no. 3 (2002): 41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163525>.



During World War Two, almost all of the branches of military created a faction that was all for women, which was also encouraged by many propaganda posters. This piece refers to the WAC, or the Women's Army Corps, the specialized group for the army. The idea that women could be part of the military in any way was very radical for the time. In the past, women were very rarely fighting in wars, but staying home and taking care of the domestic tasks. This piece has a lot of patriotic symbolism. Not only does it have an American flag and depicts a woman in an army uniform, the text coloration is also red, white, and blue. It reads 'Are you a girl with a Star-Spangled heart?' Asking the viewer to question their devotion to the United States as well as their sense of patriotism. Another notable feature of this poster is that the woman looks as if she is wearing makeup and has her hair done. The government did not want women to lose their femininity in fighting or working. They wanted to preserve the standard for women, and not make them seem more masculine, even though they were working in traditionally male professions. Some factories even "gave female employees lessons in how to apply makeup," all in

an effort "to reassure men that the demands of war would not make women too masculine."⁶ It was believed that if American women looked their best, the morale of the country would be sustained. Along with the lessons, makeup and cosmetic products were never rationed during the war. Although women did not want to lose their femininity either, the reasons for doing this was primarily for the men, yet another indicator of the inequality women faced daily during that era.

Life as a working woman during this era was not easy. They worked all day and took care of the home all night, just to do it all over again the next day. Beth Puckett, a woman whose husband Lewis was in the Navy, wrote letters to him about her day. On January 3rd, 1945, she wrote, "I have worked like a sailor today-hard and mean!"⁷ She wrote about her life at home and how it was hard for her to handle finances and the household without him. She writes about missing him: "this month's American has a picture of a sailor holding some mail,"⁸ which she related to. This type of sentimental propaganda made women miss their loved ones and therefore want to bring them home faster and think about what they could do to help. There were many posters that would portray the message that the way to get loved ones back was to work in the factories and

⁶ "American Women and World War II," Khan Academy, 2016, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/rise-to-world-power/us-wwii/a/american-women-and-world-war-ii>.

⁷ Beth Puckett, excerpt from "Letters from Beth Puckett to Lewis Puckett," Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/6524c893091ea09fd83b893c7491f798>.

⁸ Beth Puckett, excerpt from "Letters from Beth Puckett to Lewis Puckett," Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/6524c893091ea09fd83b893c7491f798>.

farms. One woman who worked in the factories in World War Two was a woman named Pearl James Hill, who used to work in the ammunitions depot where she built hand grenades, as well as a shipyard as a welder. In an interview, she recalled her time in the workforce during the war, saying that she was “proud of what [she] did.”⁹ When asked about her environment working in the ammunitions depot, she recalls that a lot of times she was scared but she wanted to work and make a contribution. She said “there was a lot of young girls out there like me, everybody, trying to work, and most of the supervisors were gentlemen.”¹⁰ Ordinarily, men were in the positions of power in the industrial professions, overseeing all the women. Because of this and the general sexism that surrounded women in the workforce, the women working in the factories did not get fair treatment or wages.

The wage that women earned during the 40’s and 50’s was significantly lower than men in the same field. It was hard for women to combat this however, because the people who had the power to raise their pay were all men, who did not particularly care about women in the workforce, and thought of them as less than men. Women fought for equal pay throughout the 50’s, with some success, usually from jobs where women and men were in the exact same positions, such as educators or civil servants. In 1946, “1.6 million women workers were unionized...24% of all women workers.”¹¹ This number rose 4% by 1969. Women went on strike in order to receive equal pay, to some avail, and some failure. However, the influence of their actions remains the same. The experience in the workforce that women got in World War Two was essential in motivating women to feel more confident in their abilities and to see themselves as equal to men. They discovered how integral they were in the success of the economy and the war, and wanted to feel the same importance and patriotism that they did during the war.

On September 2, 1945, World War Two ended. The men who were fighting overseas returned, and the government as well as other large organizations decided that they had no need for women to be in the workforce anymore. Millions of women were laid off, despite their desire to continue to work and earn their own paycheck. More propaganda was created, promoting large families and the message that women should go back to their roles that they had before the war, like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. However, many women enjoyed working and felt like they were making a bigger difference in the world. Despite this, it was common that women would give in to the propaganda and the social pressures to return to the role that they left just five years earlier. In order to satisfy their desire to work while also doing their ‘duties,’ many women started to volunteer. They would help out at churches, schools, and libraries. Along with this, enterprises like Tupperware and Mary Kay would give their products to women, who would in turn sell them to their friends. This way, they could stay at home and do their job in a way that “didn't really conflict with their homemaker role,”¹² but they still got to earn their own money and be in the workforce.

⁹ “Pearl James Hill, Interview by Rebecca Michaud, 16 March 2011,” Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/a24e503e0823b2f8c140369304ab177b>.

¹⁰ “Pearl James Hill, Interview by Rebecca Michaud, 16 March 2011,” Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/a24e503e0823b2f8c140369304ab177b>.

¹¹ “Striking Women,” World War II: 1939-1945 | Striking Women, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.striking-women.org/module/women-and-work/world-war-ii-1939-1945>.

¹² Elaine Tyler May, “Women and Work,” Historylink.org, 3, accessed April 22, 2019, https://www.historylink.org/Content/education/downloads/C21curriculum_Unit5/C21curriculum_Unit5%20resources/Unit5_READINGS_WomenandWorkAfterWWII.pdf

World War Two era propaganda directed towards women completely changed feminism. It put in the back of women's minds that they could be in the workforce and they should be able to earn their own money and get a paycheck. It was integral in the women's rights movements because it opened so many doors in their minds and taught them that they weren't less than men and they are/were capable of doing hard physical labor and be extremely successful. That they are worth more than what they can do in a kitchen or a home.

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