

Painting a Picture of Womanhood: Images of Rosie the Riveter

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World War II is often thought of as a revolutionary time for change in the lifestyles of women. Men were duty bound by their country to join the War, and this left a gap in the workforce for the war productions industry. Into this chasm fell women, who were allowed to carry the mantle of male work outside of the house. This marks a significant change in American history, for the first time women had an acceptable and encouraged reason to function outside of the domestic sphere. Women were recruited specifically in the defense industry and were responsible for creating and maintaining essential military goods.

Media and popular culture follow and document this change in lifestyles for women. Such evidence can be found in clothing, music, and newspaper articles, but none embody the movement as well as Rosie the Riveter. Most Americans imagine the “We Can Do It!” image of Rosie the Riveter. However, this historical myth is the combination of several artistic works; Redd Evan’s song “Rosie the Riveter” and album cover, Norman Rockwell’s Rosie the Riveter, and Howard J. Miller’s ‘We Can Do It’. These three forms of popular imagery form a common history that unites several unique portrayals of women. This “Rosie the Riveter” character will later serve to inspire modern women, but during the time period it did little to celebrate women’s empowerment. This essay will explore the way the mediation of these images fails to accurately represent women of the time and ultimately undercuts the importance of women in World War II.

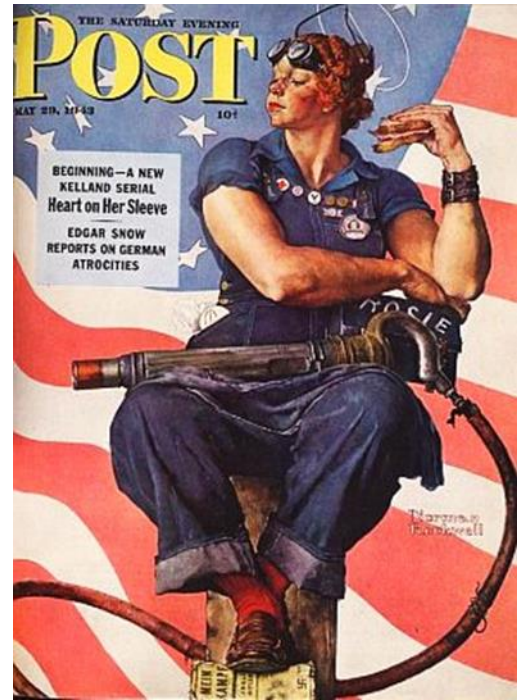
The first form of media that introduced Rosie the Riveter to mass culture was of the musical variety. Writers Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb joined the war movement in the way that many artists of the time did, by centering lyrics on aspects of war life. In “Rosie the Riveter” Evans and Loeb craft a story that will function as the basis for mass culture’s understanding of women in the war. This

song seems positive, and for the most part it celebrates the life of a girl working for the defense industry, but lying beneath the song’s benign exterior are some undeniable stereotypes. By claiming, “That little frail can do more than a male will do/Rosie the Riveter” (Evans 1943) the authors assert women's underlying weakness, and even surprise in their abilities. Furthermore, as the song states, “Rosie's got a boyfriend, Charlie/Charlie, he's a Marine/Rosie is protecting Charlie/Workin' overtime on the riveting machine”(Evans 1943). By relating Rosie to Charlie, her importance is only linked to her ability to work while he is away. This hints at the assumption that women in the workforce are only a temporary adjustment. Such feelings are compounded by the artwork that accompanies this song. It is important to note that an album cover would have reached a wide audience, as it was on the slip envelop for the record. This means people would have examined the cover far more than in today’s digital age. The Rosie that is presented in the album is really the first image that the public saw. She is extremely sexualized, with protruding breasts and red lips. In addition, her make-up and hair are flawless, and she appears dressed for shopping in a fitted blouse and slacks. Finally, she is not working hard at all, and she appears completely without muscle. These physical characteristics enforce the idea that beauty is the most important part of a ladies life.



Both the song and resulting album cover speak to the way the public is being presented with the idea of women in the defense industry. This cover was produced before the following iconic images that history pairs with the name “Rosie”, but all of these images will relate and draw reference from the corresponding song cover. The mediating influence is seen not just in the way it presents women, but also in the precedent it will set for the next images.

The next image that tackles the portrayal of women in the World War II work force was created by an artistic giant of time, Norman Rockwell. Rockwell was well known for humorous images portraying life in America. Critics assert he often portrayed life as he wished to see it, and had very little time for advancement of women in his work (Kitch 256). However, Rockwell put the full force of his work behind World War II support, and used his position as artist for Saturday Evening Post to depict positive war propaganda. Rockwell created the first artistic representation of Rosie the Riveter on the May 29, 1943 cover. As Kimble suggests, the image was rife with symbolism, “Rockwell's print depicts women in the workforce as a vital part of patriotic war efforts, suggested by the flag enveloping the entire background as well as the symbols across the top of this Rosie's bib overalls, such as a V button for Victory and a Red Cross button” (Kimble 593). This complex image also features a masculine physique, which demonstrates strength, but this negativity is offset by some feminine accents such as a delicate hankie in her pocket. Rockwell's Rosie also recognizes and challenges the enemy, as Rosie's foot is balanced upon a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Such a defensive move invokes power and portrays Rosie as capable and necessary to the war movement (Kimble 356). The audience for this image was relatively large, but was mainly middle class, white families. The Rockwell's Rosie patently ignores minorities, and does not address the many immigrant workers of the war movement. Despite these failings, Rockwell's portrayal seems to promote a positive aspect of women in the work force.



However, the grim reality is that this image was taken to be fairly humorous. The Saturday Evening Post cover images were mostly made for people to laugh at and enjoy without much seriousness (Kitch 257). The most telling aspect of Rockwell's image's importance is that it is relatively unknown in today's culture, and never associated with Rosie the Riveter. This positive mediation was not celebrated nor reflected by what history chooses to remember. While this poster embodied reality for many women, it did not become a collective historical image.

In comparison, the “We Can Do It!” poster gained far more popularity, but is the best example of the way women's empowerment was undercut by media. The image that most of America associates with the name “Rosie the Riveter” was in fact never originally associated with Rosie. While this image might invoke feminist feelings today, it was unknown by the public in World War II. The “We Can Do It!” poster was created by artist Howard J. Miller, for the Westinghouse Company (Kimble 539). This company produced many war products, and was therefore crucial to the country's success. Westinghouse commissioned images from Miller for a series for the Westinghouse War Production Committee. At first glance, Miller's image appears to be a positive image and a supporter of women's rights. The lady is pulling her arm up and seemingly making a fist to show off her muscles. Such a position implies strength and a collective desire for

the improvement for women. The text furthers this assumption by implying the rally call “We Can Do It!”. The composition of the image is far more elementary than the Rockwell Rosie, and features only a few colors.



Despite all of the positive symbols, even a visual assessment of the image raises some stereotypes of women. Her hair is well coiffed and the prominently displayed eyes, lips and cheeks are “made-up” with cosmetics. Her fingernails are well manicured with a long dainty nail that has obviously never held a real riveter gun. These characteristics question the ability of this poster to help further women in the workforce. To fully understand the historical significance of this image the context in which it was released must be examined.

Unlike the Rockwell Rosie image on the cover of Saturday Evening Post, the “We Can Do It!” poster had an extremely limited audience. This poster was shown in the company for a limited amount of time, instructed to be posted “FEB. 15 TO FEB. 28” on the original poster. Since it was never publicly displayed, the public never would have been exposed to the image, and it would not have been displayed to any riveters. In fact, the image does not surface publicly until the 1980s (Kimble 536). This still leaves the position and text’s meaning in question. Both of these aspects also undercut the importance of the image. Since

the words are addressing workers of the Westinghouse Company, they fail to incite women to action. Instead, they are encouraging factory workers to continue their drudgery. Furthermore, the arm symbol had little to do with empowerment,

“Because the gesture took place on the backstage for Westinghouse employees’ eyes in the presence of management, it was a sign of their team unity within the organization. However, the gesture may be mistaken today as a front stage performance by one self-possessed woman, transforming the gesture from a vernacular performance unifying men and women workers alike into an individualistic, feminist icon” (Kimble 554).

As Kimble demonstrates the information that puts this image in context detracts from its revolutionary air.

While all of these factors paint a far different impression of Miller’s image, perhaps the best way to understand this time period is found in other images that would have accompanied “We Can Do It!” Miller created many more war themed posters to go along with this one. However, this is the only example of an image with any sort of feminist leanings (Kimble 538). Few posters even featured women, and were mainly aimed towards men. Kimble suggests that the few female images, “revealed a clear pattern of traditional and conventional femininity, including some characters who were emphatic in their devotion to home life over work life” (Kimble 555). Examples of these include “Make Today a Safe Day” (1945) which feature a man going off to work while his wife waves from the front door of the home, or “It’s a tradition with us Mister!” (Shown right) which invokes Revolutionary War imagery. This poster is especially limiting because it compares the women with their conservative and restricted forbearers. The model for this poster is also eerily similar to the “We Can Do It!” image, and may have even been the same person.



All of the images discussed helped to form the creature that is Rosie the Riveter. However the stories that these images tell fail to impress upon the public the importance of the actual women who worked in the defense industry. New York University has begun to collect video interviews of such women in their project entitled "The Real Rosie the Riveter Project". Within these videos unfolds a story that is not about make-up or dramatically burly women, but instead tells of the fantastic opportunities and independence these jobs afforded women. Several interviewed women speak of their joy at leaving the house and working, but also the pride they felt doing something significant and worthy for their country. But these stories also tell of the harsh post-war reality, which handed the jobs back to men. This is where mediation of images becomes truly significant. They failed to convince the public that women in the workforce were a necessary and vital aspect of society.

These images were recycled by a different generation of women in the 1980s, but the images that graced feminist posters, such as "We Can Do It!" were only significant in a modern and forward thinking context. As Kimble summarizes "'We Can Do It!' has become part of our collective memory Rosie has ascended into the timeless category of 'culturetypes'—tangible 'fiction which often passes for history' even as they 'remind us of what

it means to be American'" (Kimble 535). Such stardom allows women to identify with feelings of independence and empowerment when thinking of Rosie the Riveter, but it is important to note only our modern social structure allows such an interpretation.

References

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