

ART ACTIVITY

Recruiting Women to the War Effort

Background

Mainly consumed through newspapers and color magazines, visual media in the form of illustrations and photographs reached wide audiences in the early 20th century. However, poster art and film advertising, which are considered more serious forms of advertising today, did not expand until WWI in response to the global conflict.

Painters, commercial artists, and illustrators whose freedom of speech was drastically suppressed by the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918 found profitable work creating propaganda poster art designed to “sell” the war to the American public. War posters, with a variety of messages and themes, saturated the American landscape. Found in libraries, municipal buildings, factories, schools, places of worship, and stores, they were a constant reminder that every small action was essential to the war effort. Women were specifically targeted as essential war-time contributors on the homefront, and many were instrumental in producing and disseminating the posters themselves. Although most poster artists were men, a small number of women contributed designs, including Laura Brey’s iconic image [*Enlist—On Which Side of the Window Are You?*](#)

To be successful, posters had to be persuasive, direct, and visually engaging. Artists combined bold, pithy text with dynamic images, often playing upon stereotypical gender norms. Themes of sympathy, horror, pride, humor, and sometimes even guilt were used to engage people on an emotional level.

Task

Taking inspiration from authentic WWI posters, students will act as poster artists to design a reimagined war poster that more accurately represent wartime roles of diverse women on the homefront.

Materials

- Posterboard (white or various colors)

- Water cups
- Paper towels
- Additional drawing materials

Art Vocabulary

- **alignment:** A principle of graphic design concerned with arranging elements in line with one another.
- **balance:** A principle of graphic design concerned with the arrangement of one or more elements in a work of art to create a sense of stability.
- **contrast:** A principle of graphic design in which elements are set in opposition in order to emphasize differences.
- **hierarchy:** Placing higher emphasis on the most important messages or elements within a design.
- **repetition:** Repeating design elements to create an organized, consistent design.
- **space:** An element of art that describes the area around, within, or between images or elements in a work of art.

Steps

- Distribute or display one or more of the posters in the *Recruiting Women to the War Effort* resource. Discuss the following:
 - Subject matter – Who is represented? What is going on?
 - Validity of the imagery – Is this an accurate portrayal of women and their roles during the war? Who or what is missing from the image?
 - Artistic choices that contribute to a successful design including color palette, placement of text and objects, and imagery – How has the artist deployed these here?
 - Emotional response – How do you think it made women feel during WWI? How does this poster make you feel?
- As a class, make a list of changes that can be made to more accurately portray women during the war. This can include racial diversity, realistic representations of work and home life, and diversity of jobs.

- Invite students to imagine they have been hired as poster artists during the war. Individually or in small groups, students will create a poster that more accurately represents women on the homefront.
- Provide each student or group with rough draft paper to brainstorm ideas. Posters should not only reflect an understanding of women's roles on the homefront, but effectively use design principles to convey their message.
- When students have completed their rough drafts, distribute painting materials: paint, brushes, water, paper towels, and posterboard. Students should redraw their drafts onto the paper before adding paint.
- While artwork dries, instruct students to write an artist statement using the following prompt – *Imagine you are submitting your poster to the U.S. government for approval. Write an explanatory letter that describes the subject matter and message exhibited in your poster. How do your artistic choices make this an effective and convincing poster? How does your poster more accurately represent women during World War I? How can accurate representations help in the recruitment effort? Why else is realistic portrayal important?*
- Invite students to share their posters. This can be done as a gallery-walk around the classroom or formal presentations.

Artmaking Tips

WWI poster art exhibits qualities of modern advertising. Use contemporary advertisements from magazines or billboards as examples of effective design. Essential principles of good graphic design include: hierarchy, alignment, balance, color, space, contrast, and repetition.

Rather than purchasing a myriad of color paints, provide students with the three primary colors (red, blue, and yellow) from which they can mix all other colors. Also provide students with white and black.

If students struggle drawing complex images or figures, provide them with a document camera or projector to enlarge imagery to trace onto their poster.