



THE ART OF WAR:

Posters from World War I & World War II

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A LEHMAN COLLEGE
ARTGALLERY

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THE HEROES OF THE GREAT WAR WERE ITS...
publicists of 1917-1918 [who] rallied an unenthusiastic American citizenry to arms in support of a dubious European adventure.¹



7 Harrison Fisher, 1918

World War I, the Great War, was the defining event of the 20th century, and it led to the collapse of Europe's old empires, the rise of Communism, and the birthing of new nations. The fallout from the war would lead to another world war, the Cold War, and, finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first World War was fought with new weapons — the machine gun, poison gas, the airplane, the submarine, and the tank, some that had only tentatively been used before in combat. Another weapon wielded powerfully for the first time was machine-made, widely distributed propaganda — vividly colored, large-scale posters made possible by new printing processes.



6 Alonzo Earl Foringer, c. 1917-1918

A FINE ART: WAR AND THE WAR POSTER

Wartime art showed governmental views of the war in color images and arresting text. Some art critics believed World War I would restore vigor to art. Others saw the war creating a “healthy rivalry” in the “face-off” between America’s naiveté and Europe’s sophisticated modern art. The American war posters at the OSilas Gallery, lent to this exhibition by the Hudson River Museum, gained little from modern trends in European art, such as Cubism. American fine artists such as William Merritt Chase and Childe Hassam were still under the sway of earlier French Impressionism, while the nation’s book illustrators were more likely to feel kinship with earlier American fine artists like Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer, who focused on representation and dramatic narrative.

In the United States few front-rank artists directly engaged the theme of the war in their fine art. One exception was Childe Hassam, who showed victory in his famous flag paintings along New York City’s posh Fifth Avenue. The war’s violent carnage remained discreetly but firmly off Hassam’s canvases.

Although the United States did not enter World War I until April 1917, almost three years after the conflict started, when it joined the ranks of the Allied Powers, a national publicity machine unprecedented in any previous American war was catapulted into being. The United States government realized that Americans were ambivalent about the war before 1917 and that substantial opposition to the struggle remained, even after America declared war. Artists were split, too. Some supported the war. Others, social critics of the United States government, opposed it, both before, and more controversially after, America entered the fray.

Propaganda posters pulled on the people’s conflicting emotions. One of the most evocative of the beseeching posters is *The Greatest Mother in the World*, painted by Alonzo Earl Foringer for the Red Cross Christmas Roll, instantly reminiscent of Michelangelo’s sculpture the *Pieta*, including the sculptural drapings, the over-scale Mary figure, and the diminutive wounded soldier (in this instance in place of Christ brought down from the Cross). The poster creates the analogy of the Virgin Mary as universal caregiver and protector, and equates her caring with the work of a nurse from the Red Cross, the international agency of caregiving [No. 6].

WHAT SHOULD A POSTER DO? AND HOW?

Successful propaganda posters contain key elements, first among them, a focus on a single dramatic message. To appeal to the emotions, one critic notes that because the poster works against “an incalculable mass of inertia and indifference” and competes against thousands of personal immediate concerns, it should “have the power to haunt you for days and weeks and months.”² In time of war, an appeal to the emotions is likely to get action, and he suggests that four basic questions be asked of the poster — *Is it information? Is it education? Is it self-delusion? Is it action?*³

Although message was primary, polished technique was also essential to the poster. World War I posters used as many as twenty different lithographic stones per poster to achieve a rainbow of colors, each color added precisely and separately, rather than the more cheaply produced four-color posters in wide circulation during World War II. Stylistically, the illustrators did not always simplify or eliminate, but strove for detailed and evocative images to bring a printed story to life in images.

Allegorical messages were reflections, too, on the change in fine art between the two world wars. World War I took place as the Beaux Arts movement was drawing to a close, a time when allegorical images were used for everything from architectural motifs to fine arts to soap advertisements. The public, familiar with allegory, identified with these images but by World War II, 20 years or so later, the public had a different frame of reference.

An exception to the fading allegorical figures was the Statue of Liberty, which largely replaced Columbia on World War II posters. The colossal copper statue was more familiar to Americans who had wholeheartedly embraced it as a symbol of the nation. Uncle Sam, the male counterpart of the Statue of Liberty, and an allegory created by Thomas Nast in the 19th century, was carried over in later adaptations such as Leon Helguera's *I'm Counting on You!*, [No. 19], while the images of Columbia, America, and Britannia fell by the wayside.

The propaganda posters produced for World War I tended to be serious, noble, and usually sentimental, and they gripped the nation's psyche. They did not set out to frighten, and were "... stylistically daring, less angry and horror-evoking" than European posters, perhaps due



19 Leon Helguera, 1943

to America's geographical separation from the war. By contrast, works like the Italian *Per la Liberazione sottoscrivete*, which shows the claw-like hand of Austria-Hungary seeking territory, possesses a visceral, almost horror film quality [No. 14].



14 Achille Luciano Mauzan, 1915

THE GOVERNMENT PAYS FOR "PICTORIAL PUBLICITY"

In examining government-sponsored war posters, it is important to note the divide between the fine artist and the commercial artist and illustrator who created most poster art. A defensive view of the snobbish divide is shown by illustrator James Montgomery Flagg, who summed up the differences tartly: "The only difference between a fine artist and an illustrator is that the latter can draw, eats three square meals a day, and can afford to pay for them."⁵

The artists working for the United States government's Division of Pictorial Publicity usually donated their work, an altruistic act, since many could market sketches for prices from \$1,000 to \$10,000. With this first-time use of artists to make war posters, the War Department recognized the value of art to form public opinion — what we recognize today as an aspect of propaganda. The posters, plastered in

every city, called for donations to the American Red Cross, advertised government bonds, and recruited for the military. It is no coincidence that many illustrators working during World War I found tremendously successful careers later in the booming advertising business of the 1920s, as the first decade of mass marketing flowed directly out of the World War propaganda.

James Montgomery Flagg created the most famous propaganda image of World War I (or any other war) in his *I Want You for the U. S. Army* poster that showed Uncle Sam with



WORLD WAR I POSTERS RELIED ON female allegories of Columbia, Justice, Democracy, and Victory for image and message, such as Joseph Christian Leyendecker's U.S.A. Bonds Third Liberty Loan Campaign.



Fig. 1 James Montgomery Flagg, c.1917

doleful countenance and accusing finger. The poster recommends the “Nearest Recruiting Station.” The image on Flagg’s poster was so powerful in its God-like judgmental appearance that it attained immediate fame, and Flagg modified and reused it in several different posters, including some done for World War II. Other artists also used the format, as did Haskell Coffin in his *Joan of Arc Saved France* [No. 3], in which the battling medieval Saint Joan in Uncle Sam-pose holds a sword in the pointing hand and exhorts, “Women of America Save Your Country: Buy War Savings Stamps.”

Howard Christy’s many World War I posters tended to portray wholesome, beautiful young women in various ethereal poses, such as *Americans All! Victory Liberty Loan* [No. 1]. He, like Flagg, “evoked the sumptuous bravura painting style of the 19th century, particularly that of

John Singer Sargent, where bold brushwork and buildup of forms through the juxtaposition of rich colors constituted the ideal.”⁶

Appearing in many guises, including that of motor corps girl, sailor, and marine, Christy’s women are invariably alluring, an effect emphasized by their short curls, male clothing, and cockily tilted hats. There is a whole collection of posters emblazoned with idealized, patriotic beauties in gauzy, diaphanous dresses, and surrounded by the flag. The posters say — “Fight or Buy Bonds,” “Clear the Way,” “Americans All,” and “Patriotic League.”

Harrison Fisher was a popular World War I poster artist, one whose work is reminiscent of Christy’s. Fisher’s women on the posters *I Summon You to Comradeship in the Red Cross* [No. 9] and *Have You Answered the Red Cross Christmas Roll Call?* [No. 7] are even prettier and sweeter than Christy’s, and, perhaps partly for that reason, Fisher’s fame, although wide at the time, has not endured as much as Christy’s. *Have you answered the Red Cross Christmas Roll Call?* plays on James Montgomery Flagg’s *I Want YOU!* design, with a central female nurse whose extended arm and pointing hand addresses the viewer.



3 Haskell Coffin, c. 1914 - 1918



21 Henry Koerner, 1943

THE AMERICAN POSTER PROPAGANDA of World War II recycled World War I imagery and also adapted new international styles in works like United we are strong, United we will win, an image of international industrial might that could simultaneously suggests Fascism, Communism, or American Democracy, depending which flags appeared on the smokestacks.



9 Harrison Fisher, 1918

Beyond the encouraging sex appeal of Christy and Fisher's posters is another category, those infusing dread. Joseph Pennell's 1917 *That Liberty Shall Not Perish From the Earth--Buy Liberty Bonds* [No. 4], shows a silhouetted Statue of Liberty surrounded by flames and their reflected orange light in New York's harbor. The fleet of planes overhead is both apocalyptic and a frightening prediction of a possible American future under German domination, if the Allies lose the war.

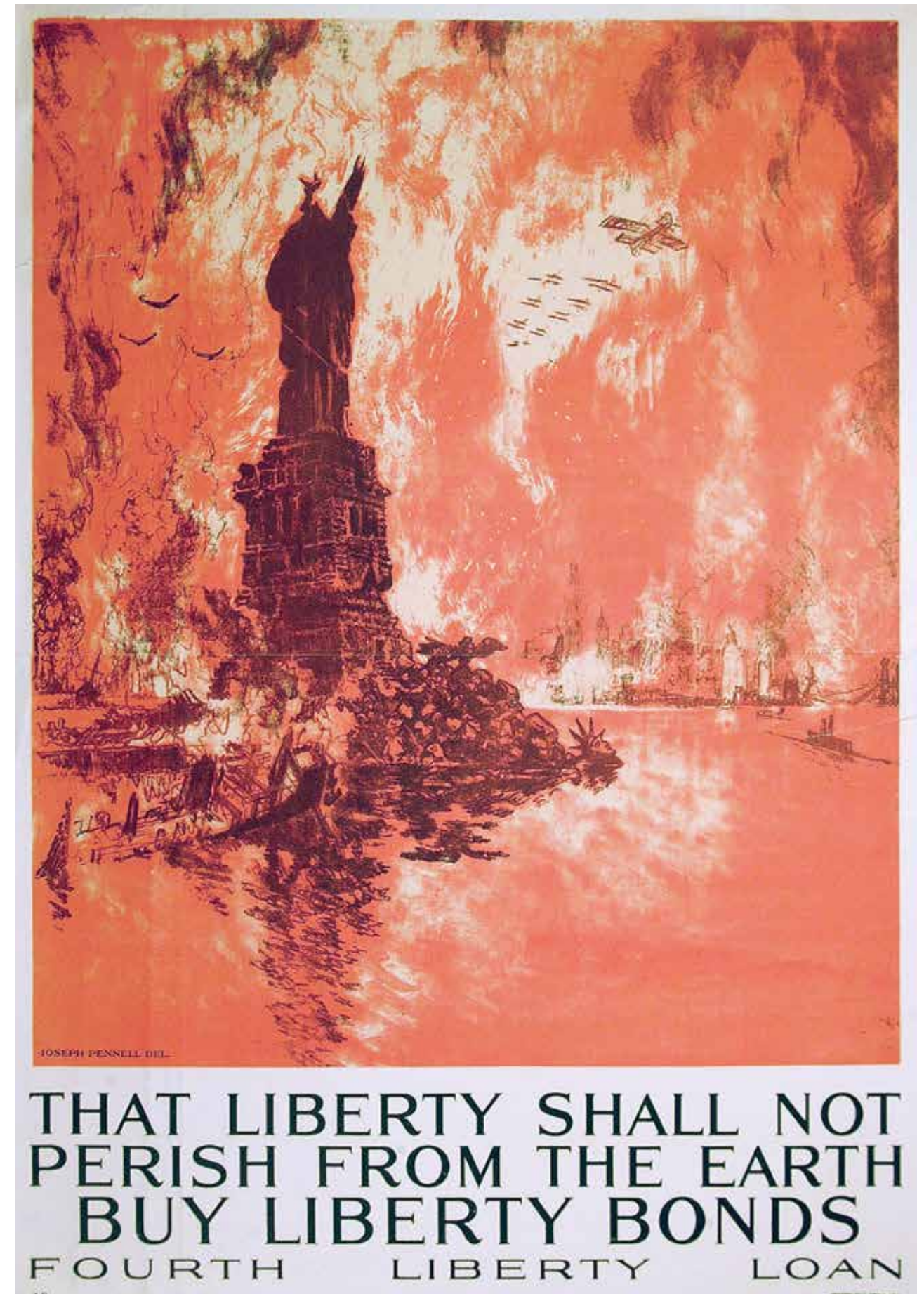
NEW WAR, NEW POSTERS, SAME PSYCHOLOGY

As the political events of World War I planted the seeds of World War II, so the lessons learned from the war posters of the first war greatly influenced the posters of the war to follow. From World War I, the United States understood the impact

of propaganda on mass psychology and that knowledge led to the 1920s fascination with the first mass advertising campaigns and the sophisticated propaganda posters of World War II.

In 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II, the Museum of Modern Art was organizing an exhibition of a defense poster competition (and a look back at posters from World War I). In the fall of 1941, the *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* featured propaganda art that showed the country preparing for war, and also preparing propaganda that used elements of James Montgomery Flagg and Howard Chandler Christy's earlier works:

We [the government] have used that Uncle Sam poster off and on ever since we got it and we're going to use it now' The 'stand behind the country's girlhood' type of poster--now as Columbia, again as a Red Cross Nurse, or just an American girl of sweet sixteen--was a major form of emotional poster appeal ... the artist has brought her up to date with a bit of streamlining and the country may be spotted with her any day now.⁷



4 Joseph Pennell, c. 1917



17 Bernard Perlin, 1942



20 Barbara Marks, 1943

ALTHOUGH POSTER STYLES HAD CHANGED, favoring a bolder more graphic approach, the messages presented remained the same, but works like Avenge December 7 [No. 17] and This is the Enemy [No. 20] carry a simple dramatic power that many of the earlier posters are hard pressed to match.

The powerful memory of certain World War I posters and of its prominent artists Flagg and Christy remained in the public's consciousness. Several critics commented on the long lasting impact of World War I images and considered how to use them in World War II. An exhibition of German propaganda posters from World War I was mounted in New York's Norllyst Gallery in 1944 just three months after D-Day on June 6 that year, when the outcome of World War II was by no means certain. The Norllyst's willingness to show propaganda art produced by the same enemy from the earlier and the current war was remarkable, but also revealed the blunted impact of the World War I propaganda poster.

Times change, styles change. To a 1940s eye, World War I imagery looked *old hat*:

In general, the most striking difference between these [earlier] posters and our modern ones is the somewhat dated illustrators' style of the former. Many of them are not eye catching enough for 1943 when our vision has been conditioned by increasing abstraction in our fine and commercial art.⁸

World War I's Christy and Flagg were simply out of fashion, rather than their work not effective. In fact, its effectiveness was demonstrated by the continuing use of Flagg's Uncle Sam image in World War II. By the time of World War II, however, G. H. Gregory notes, "What American [war] posters lost in seriousness and high moral tone they gained in directness of expression, graphic and mass-appealing images, clever slogans, satire, and humor."⁹

Every age considers its time politically fraught. In our 24-7 news barrage and the frantic, pinging updates of the Internet, propaganda posters can seem quaint. In their day, though, posters represented the new way to reach the public. Posters in the pre-television societies of the two world wars functioned like television commercials that broadcasted much later in the 1980s and 90s — *Army! Be all you can be!*

Stirring "the hearts of all loyal Americans who know their country's history and realize that Liberty is still the issue,"¹⁰ the American poster "joined up" for the war effort and became an immensely important source of information and emotion to those who fought and to those on the home front.

BARTHOLOMEW F. BLAND

NOTES

- 1 Jordan A. Schwarz qtd. in *Therese Thau Heyman, Posters American Style* (New York: Smithsonian Institution with Harry N. Abrams, 2000): 29
- 2 Matlock Price, "War Posters That Get Action, Part 1," *American Artist* (April 1942): 8-9
- 3 Ibid
- 4 G. H. Gregory, *Posters of World War II* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1993), 7
- 5 Walton Rawls, *Wake Up, America! World War One and the American Poster* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 21
- 6 Rawls, 149
- 7 "Posters for Defense," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 6 Vol viii, September 1941: 4-7
- 8 D.B., *Art News*, March 1-14, 1943: 21
- 9 Gregory, 7
- 10 Matlock Price, "The Poster," May 1918: 23

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works on loan from the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York.

BOND POSTERS, WORLD WAR I

- 1 *Americans All! Victory Liberty Loan*, 1919
Artist: Howard Chandler Christy
Chromolithograph
39 ¾ x 26 ½ inches
INV.10630



- 2 *Clear the Way! Buy Bonds Fourth Liberty Loan*
c. 1914-1918
Artist: Howard Chandler Christy
Chromolithograph; 29 7/8 x 19 ¾ inches
INV.10639



- 3 *Joan of Arc Saved France*, c. 1914-18
Artist: Haskell Coffin
Chromolithograph; 28 x 18 inches
INV.5645

- 4 *That Liberty Shall Not Perish from the Earth/ Buy Liberty Bonds*, c. 1917
Artist: Joseph Pennell
Three-color lithograph; 41 x 28 inches
Gift of Mrs. Ernest Weidhaas, 1975

- 5 *U.S.A. Bonds Third Liberty Loan Campaign, Boy Scouts of America*, 1917
Artist: Joseph Christian Leyendecker
Chromolithograph, backed with linen
30 x 20 inches
Gift of Ernest Weidhaas, 1975

RED CROSS POSTERS, WORLD WAR I

- 6 *The Greatest Mother in the World*, c. 1917-1918
Artist: Alonzo Earl Foringer
Two-color lithograph; 27 ½ x 20 ½ inches
INV.10629

- 7 *Have you answered the Red Cross Christmas Roll Call?* 1918
Artist: Harrison Fisher
Chromolithograph; 29 7/8 x 27 ¾ inches
INV.9864

- 8 *Hold Up Your End! — War Fund Week, One Hundred Million Dollars*, 1917
Artist: William B. King
Chromolithograph; 27 ½ x 20 ¼ inches
INV.10628



9 "I Summon You to Comradeship in the Red Cross," Woodrow Wilson, 1918

Artist: Harrison Fisher

Chromolithograph; 39 ¼ x 28 ¼ inches

INV.5646

10 *Where Columbus Sets Her Name*

Let Every One of You Follow Her

(Red Cross Christmas Roll Call

December 16th to 23rd), 1918

Artist: Edwin Howland Blashfield

Chromolithograph ; 40 ½ x 55 ⅝ inches

INV.9853



OTHER USA POSTERS, WORLD WAR I

11 *U.S. Marine, Be a Sea Soldier*, 1917

Artist: Clarence F. Underwood

Chromolithograph ; 38 ⅞ x 29 ⅞ inches

INV.9868



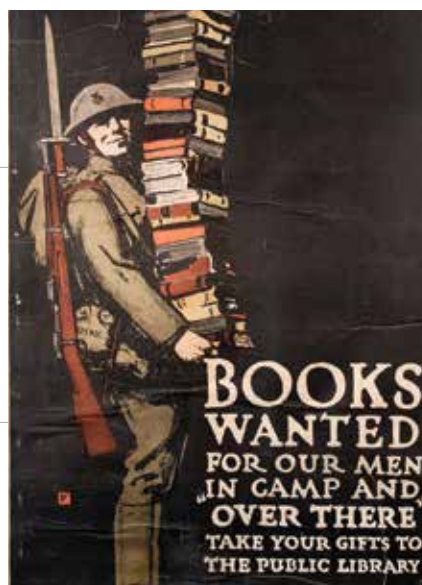
12 *Books Wanted for Our Men In Camp and Over There*

c. 1918

Artist: Charles Buckles Falls

Chromolithograph; 42 x 28 inches

Gift of Ernest Weidhaas, 75.24.15



FOREIGN POSTERS, WORLD WAR I

13 *Souscrivez pour hater la paix par la victoire*, 1917

Artist: Paul-Albert Besnard

Chromolithograph; 31 x 44 ½ inches

INV.9866



14 *Per la Liberazione sottoscrivete!* 1915

Artist: Achille Luciano Mauzan

Chromolithograph; 54 ½ x 37 ⅝ inches

INV.9860

15 *Sottoscrivete al Prestito*

(Subscribe to the National Loan), 1917

Artist: Unknown

Publisher: Istituto Italiano D'Arti Grafiche

Chomolithograph; 54 x 38 ½ inches

INV.9865



16 *Cittadini Fatevi Soci Della Croce Rossa Italiana*

(Citizens Be Members of the Italian Red Cross)

1914-1918

Artist: Unknown

Printer: Richter & C.

Chromolithograph; 54 ½" x 38 ½ inches

INV.9854



USA POSTERS, WORLD WAR II

17 *Avenge December 7, 1942*
 Artist: Bernard Perlin (1918-2014)
 Publisher: Office Of War Information
 Offset lithograph poster; 28 x 22 inches
 INV.8021

18 *Enlist in a proud profession!*
Join the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, 1943
 Artist: Carolyn Moorhead Edmundson
 Publisher: U.S. Public Health Service,
 Federal Security Agency
 Offset lithograph poster; 28 x 20 inches
 INV.10632.01



19 *I'm Counting on You! Don't Discuss: Troop Movements, Ship Sailings, War Equipment, 1943*
 Artist: Leon Helguera
 Publisher: U.S. Office of War Information
 Offset lithograph poster; 28 x 20 inches
 INV.10650

20 *This Is the Enemy, 1943*
 Artist: Barbara Marks
 Printer: US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC
 Publisher: US Office of War Information, Washington, DC
 Offset lithograph poster; 28 x 20 inches
 INV.10634

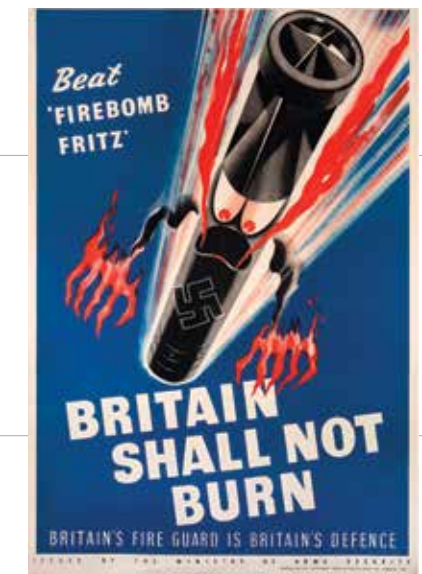
21 *United we are strong, United we will win, 1943*
 Artist: Henry Koerner
 Publisher: U.S. Office of War Information
 Offset lithograph poster; 55 3/4 x 39 3/4 inches
 INV.9867

22 *Woman's Place in War; The Women's Army Corps 1944*
 Artist: Irving Cooper
 Publisher: Recruiting Publicity Bureau,
 United States Army
 Offset lithograph poster; 38 x 25 inches
 INV.10631



BRITISH POSTERS, WW II

23 *Britain Shall Not Burn, 1939-1945*
 Artist: Unknown
 Publisher: Her Majesty's Stationery Office
 Offset lithograph poster
 29 7/8 x 20 inches
 INV.10664



24 *Tighten Your Grip, c. 1942*
 Artist: Frank Newbould
 Offset lithograph poster; 20 x 13 3/8 inches
 INV.10667



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