

Rosie the Riveter, a Reluctant Symbol of Patriarchy

The Evolution of an American Icon

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How do certain images become icons within a society? The answer: A lot of work, and some cultural evolution, if you will. In this report, I analyze the invention, evolution, and cultural significance of my favorite American icon: Rosie the Riveter. A contemporary symbol of women's advancement, Rosie was created at the peak of advertising in the United States, by men with a very male-centered agenda.

“She is ‘Rosie the Riveter,’ with movie-star looks, hair pulled up in a colorful bandana, sleeves rolled up high, ready to take rivet gun in hand. Everyone knows Rosie. She had not worked before the war. With ‘her man away fighting,’ however and ‘not much else to do,’ she was cajoled into taking one of those dirty wartime jobs—out of patriotism or boredom (or both). Attired in new-found overalls and bandana, she riveted away for the duration of the war, dreaming of a time when she could return to her home and tend to her domestic chores.”

~Sheila Tobias, *Faces of Feminism*

Overview

While the familiar image of Rosie the Riveter standing tall with her bicep bared, exalting “We can do it” is currently viewed as the iconic embodiment of women’s rights, the purpose for which Rosie was created was much more patriarchal. Originally a symbol of traditional femininity and housewifery, Rosie was created both to recruit women for the war effort and persuade them to return to their domestic duties at war’s end. Over the years she has become a feminist icon and, more recently, a hopeful symbol for our American youth after her appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine in 2007. In this report I seek to examine the War Advertising Council’s Women in War Jobs Campaign of the 1940s and its creation of Rosie the Riveter. The tactics they used, the historical reality behind the image, the evolution Rosie has undergone, and why it is important to me as a Professional Writer and a feminist will all be discussed.



Figure 1 J. Howard Miller, the Original Rosie, (1942)

Introduction

As a Professional Writer I study semiotics, which is the way words, images, and objects are employed to convey meaning. Text and images are complimentary, and their individual abilities to persuade and imply meaning are strengthened with the use of both simultaneously. It was a combination of ad slogans and visual propaganda from WWII that promoted the myth that working women during the war were white, middle-class, patriotic housewives ready to leave the workforce as soon as they were no longer needed. By employing both of these different mediums, visual and textual, the War Advertising Council helped preserve the national mindset that despite women's accomplishments during the war, they were still unfit for the workforce.

Despite the sexism that promoted Rosie the Riveter and other war women ads, the tactics that advertisers used are still being used today to persuade viewers to accept dominant cultural meanings as unfiltered reality. In professional writing, editing, and publishing, an understanding of how to create visuals that compliment a piece of text and work to extend its meaning is indispensable. People *do* judge by appearances, and visuals can act as the tipping point when it comes to someone's interest in a piece of writing. Using the right visuals is the key to creating successful pieces of writing whether you are a writer, editor, publisher, or a combination of the three.

Analysis and Results

New Times Call for a New Rosie

The American public was greeted by a familiar figure in September of 2007, on the cover of *Time* magazine. Rosie the Riveter was standing proudly, just as she had in her original representation

by J. Howard Miller in 1942. She had retained her familiar profile, with her muscular arm displayed proudly to viewers, inviting them to remember her as a symbol of American pride, innovation, and of course, the strength of American volunteerism. She was still unambiguously Caucasian, thin, attractive, and wearing the colors red, white, and blue like a true patriot. A few alterations to her appearance, however, made her look at home on the modern newsstands of today: a blue tee-shirt to replace the classic work suit, headphones implying an iPod, a tattoo on her forearm, and long hair in a modern style. In place of her classic catch-phrase, “We Can Do It,” her vocal bubble encompassed the word “Time,” creating a play on the article for which the icon had been revived, “A Time to Serve,” by Richard Stengel. The cover caption next to Rosie invoked readers to look inside for a plan that would put the currently all-time high altruistic impulses of Americans to national use.



Figure 2 Modern Rosie (2007)

In his article, Stengel argued that in order for our society to remain free we need to enlist ourselves, as American citizens, to make our own improvements. His plan involved compulsory military or civilian service for every “young American” for the period of at least one year, for which they would receive 16,000 dollars towards their higher education. He believes that this would give America’s future generations a more leveled playing field in an increasingly diverse nation, and resorts to the classic if you invest in your country, your country will invest in you slogan (Stengel). In the context of this article, Rosie not only represents women workers, as she did in the War Advertising Council’s Women in War Jobs campaign of the 1940s, but America’s youth in general and the future of America. The fact that Rosie was chosen as a symbol for this innovation and preservation of American freedom proves that the spirit of patriotism still radiates from her.

Advertising Tactics and the Context of Rosie's Beginning

The War Advertising Council of the 1940s was created for the purpose of keeping the nation's advertisers from slipping into bankruptcy due to a national labor shortage. Turning their attention to recruiting much needed help from women in the labor market they created approximately 125 million advertisements, of which Rosie was just one (adcouncil.org).

According to Maureen Honey, author of *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during WWII*, the ad council fully expected that the majority of women entering the labor market would be women who had never worked before and who, therefore, would gladly return to their acceptable lives of domesticity after their men returned (Honey).

These assumptions began the "myth of the woman war worker," as the white, middle-class, patriotic housewife that she most certainly was not in the majority of cases (Honey). In reality, most of the women who took jobs that had previously qualified as "men's work" had already been working for years prior to the war. Many war working women were single or widowed, and couldn't wait around for the day when their war hero would come and "rescue" them from their new job that paid better than any "women's work" ever would. Many of the Rosies, in fact, were not middle class *or* white. At this point, women were being hired because of an overwhelming necessity, and sometimes not even then. Many employers refused to hire women as late as the end of 1942, because they believed women were unfit for the majority of the work that needed to be done (Honey).

While Rosie the Riveter herself was not portrayed in the home, many of the war advertisements aimed towards women were. Advertisers used the home as a symbol of everything our country had to lose if it lost the war. All-American family values and patriotism were portrayed as the sustenance our country would need to come out on top. Women were expected not only to enter the workforce to save their country, but also to remember their responsibilities as homemakers to save their country. This created a dichotomy of identities for women in ads from the period. Women were simultaneously encouraged to be brawny and strong (like Norman Rockwell's interpretation of Rosie which will be discussed later) so they could do the

grueling industrial work that needed to be done as well as feminine and ready to take care of their families as they were meant to do.

According to Honey in her article, “The ‘Womanpower’ Campaign: Advertising and Recruitment Propaganda during WWII,” the reason gender roles remained so rigid after the war was over was because,

“Propagandists infused new life into the very image that the glorification of Rosie the Riveter contradicted: the vulnerable home maker who depended on a man for her livelihood. The successful ploy by advertisers in linking homemaker images with national aspirations for stability, victory, and prosperity—when added to the domestic identities associated with war workers throughout the recruitment campaign—insured the disappearance of strong, confident, wage-earning women from the public mind (Honey).

The advertising tactic of equating the home and femininity with what American soldiers were fighting to protect was responsible for the lack of sex role fluidity in the workforce by the war’s end, despite the progressive attitudes the war campaign is now believed to have promoted. In her article “Gender, Consciousness, and Social Change: Rethinking Women’s World War II Experience,” Ruth Milkman argues that since many working women were not housewives as advertisers portrayed, “The issue was not so much women’s postwar confinement to the home, as their ghettoization in poorly paid ‘women’s jobs’ far inferior to their war jobs” (Milkman).

The Beginning of Rosie

Rosie herself became a symbol of the housewife out in the workforce for the first time doing her part for her country. The first, and most famous, Rosie was created by J. Howard Miller in 1942 (pictured, page one), and originally had no connection with a person named Rosie, but that label shortly snowballed into effect. Miller’s “Rosie” was followed by Norman Rockwell’s in the Memorial Day issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* from 1943 (Harvey).

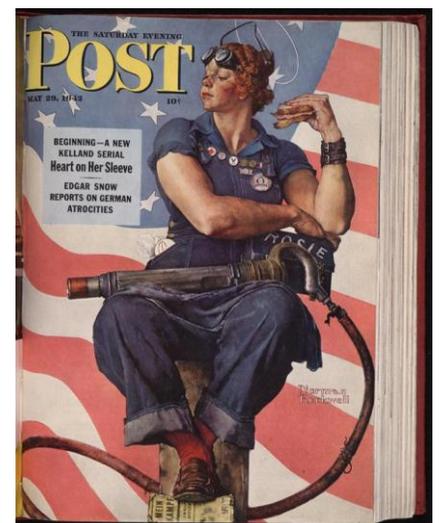


Figure 3 Norman Rockwell (1943)

Rockwell's representation is somewhat different from both Miller's Rosie and the modern one modeled after her. She is filled with more pronounced contradictions between what is masculine and feminine in order to encourage women to work hard for the war effort, while simultaneously encouraging them to remain feminine for their post-war homemaking salvation. She is masculine; her frame is large and burly (not nearly as slight as Miller's Rosie), her arms are large and strong and she holds a riveting gun that is slung phallically across her lap, she is dirty and wearing men's clothes while stepping on a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Conversely, she is still feminine; her hair is in neat red curls, she has a compact and a handkerchief peeking out of her right pocket, she is wearing lipstick, rouge and nail polish and her shield almost looks like a halo around her head, reinforcing her image as a martyr of sorts for sacrificing her natural place in the domestic sphere for the dirty workshop. Most significantly, however, she is not portrayed in the middle of her toils. She is depicted eating her lunch, in a passive "womanly" way (Loughery).

Rosie's make-up, not only in Rockwell's representation but Miller's as well, is worth noting. Advertising make-up as a commodity that was "essential for women's well-being" was a tactic used to keep women hung up on their femininity and domesticity despite the new manly shoes they were filling (Delano). Curiously, despite the fact that make-up was often made from petrochemicals and dyes, it was never added to the list of rationed items. Make-up became publicly associated with women's power—their own personal war paint.

In her essay "Making up for War: Sexuality and Citizenship in -Wartime Culture," Page Dougherty Delano illustrates the hold make-up had on American women as a result of advertising when she writes, "Make-up helped inscribe what Elizabeth Arden advertised as a 'war face' for American women on the home front as well as in theaters of battle . . . hardly any American text, poster, advertisement, or film of the era depicts a woman without including her make-up—or connoting a meaningful absence" (Delano). Women were promised washrooms in advertisements, and "Ads and brochures [went] out of their way to assure women that war work, particularly work in factories, [would not] impinge on their femininity" (Tobias).

The truth of the matter was that good pay was more important to the majority of women war workers than the abundance of washrooms, yet women were spoon fed a reverence for feminine beauty, just as they are today. In his book *Movies and Mass Culture*, John Belton argues that the female body in advertising is the “prototypical object of commodity fetishism,” which is the disassociation between the context of a commodities’ production and the meaning breathed into the commodity by way of advertising. She was invented and turned into a commodity to recruit women to the workforce while associating the preservation of femininity and beauty with some warped kind of service to one’s country.

Conclusions

After my research, I have concluded that in the context of the actual war years of the early to mid-1940s, Rosie represented the myth of the white, middle-class, housewife war worker. This misrepresented view of women war workers remains attached to our American psyches even now. Over the years, however, she has taken on new meanings, as icons often do. While she still represents patriotism and volunteerism (which is why she was chosen to compliment *Time’s* article “A Time to Serve”) she also has become a feminist icon despite her patriarchal roots. During the women’s rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, new life was breathed into Rosie as a symbol of past, present and future women’s liberation. Rosie the Riveter was destined to be a commodity from the beginning, particularly J. Howard Miller’s representation—which can be seen on everything from Tee-shirts to mouse pads—and a commodity she remains. Her status as an American icon has made it easy for people to adapt her image to suit their own purposes and causes. It’s as easy as changing the words in her bubble, as *Time* magazine did. The evolution of Rosie the Riveter shows how visuals are living documents that do not have fixed connotations. Connotations change with time and as professional writers it is imperative that we understand how to compliment and extend the meaning of our writing by using the most effective visuals possible.

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