America at War: *The Art of Propaganda, 1942-1945*

I teach history at Green River Community College, including a very popular course on World War II. The course includes a field trip to the White River Valley Museum for an immersion into how the local community experienced the war. Students read soldiers’ letters home, hear first hand testimonies of an internment survivor, peruse period newspapers, and view wartime black and white photo images depicting local home front efforts. During Winter Quarter, 2006, Museum Director Patricia Cosgrove and I were impressed by the rich poster collection the Museum holds, inspiration struck, and we began planning a wartime poster exhibit. The fruits of our labor, an exhibit titled “America at War: The Art of Propaganda, 1942-1945” will remain on display at the Museum through January 20. This article presents highlights from the exhibit. I hope you are impressed with the artistry and great symbolic meanings of these images. America was a nation entirely engaged in the experience of war, fully participatory and committed on the battlefield and on the home front.

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**“To Tojo With Love”** Hideki Tojo, General of the Japanese Imperial Army is featured in this imaginative storefront window, c 1942, Fredrick & Nelson.

Pemco Webster Stevens Collection, MOHAI

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**Museum Volunteers**
We need a few more good men and women to work as docents and tour guides. Training provided, one, three-hour shift is the minimum monthly duty. For information call Janet Wells, 253 804-5010.
The Historical Context

“Guns, tanks, and bombs were the principal weapons of World War II, but there were other, more subtle, forms of warfare as well. Words, posters, and films waged a constant battle for the hearts and minds of Americans just as surely as military weapons engaged the enemy.” From FDR’s radio Fireside Chats, to newspaper cartoons and editorials; and from wartime posters displayed on every street corner: the message of Total War reverberated across America from 1942-1945. Americans needed answers to the question of “Why war?”. Film, radio, posters, newspapers, and magazines collectively answered that question, at times blurring the line between ‘propaganda,’ ‘information,’ and ‘education.’ This exhibit explores the various ways in which the US government, together with the military and advertising agencies, sold the war to the American people.

Looking for ways to maintain profit during wartime, the advertising industry formed the War Advertising Council (WAC) in February 1942. The WAC concerned itself with mobilizing the war industry and selling war bonds. The US Governmental Office of War Information (OWI), established in June 1942, was charged with the tasks of increasing public understanding of the war at home and abroad, and serving as a liaison between the government and the press, radio, and motion pictures. The OWI, headed by Elmer Davis, a CBS newsmen, produced 267 wartime newsreels, established the Voice of America in 1942, and documented the home front war through photography, concentrating on images of factories and women at work.

Film, radio, and photography were effective, but posters were a democratic, efficient, and inexpensive medium that could literally blanket the nation. Posters could be found in schools, at the corner filling station and plastered above the Fredrick & Nelson department store. Most of the posters you are viewing were designed or approved by WAC or the OWI.

OWI officials felt that the most urgent problem on the home front was the careless leaking of sensitive information that could be picked up by spies and saboteurs, explaining the large number of “careless talk” posters.

Loose lips sink ships…

Gravely concerned about national security, especially spies and saboteurs, the staff at OWI produced a number of dramatic posters warning Americans against dangers lurking within American borders. Most of the national security posters were concerned with information leakage of military
efforts. The “Award for Careless Talk” is visually striking, requiring a double-take. The maudlin “Because Somebody Talked” made a dog cry. The national security posters create the feeling that America was being besieged not only from the outside, but from the “enemy within.” They seemed to help create a mild paranoia.

In “ Wanted for Murder,” a woman portrayed as the viewer’s neighbor, sister, wife or daughter is an unwitting murderess. The poster reflects a new and quite effective use of photography on war posters increasingly used in advertising following the war.

**United We Will Win!**

World War II saw strange bedfellows, as the democratic and capitalist United States allied with the authoritarian and communist Soviet Union. Virtually overnight, FDR managed to transform the diabolical Joseph Stalin into “good ole’ Uncle Joe,” worthy of US military boots, food rations, and cable lines. The “United We Will Win!” poster came out of the OWI in 1943, stressing a substantial, cohesive, and strong alliance. In the example, “Strong in the Strength of the Lord” various sectors of the American war machine are collectively inspired: a factory worker, a soldier, and a woman.

Words are ammunition. Each word an American utters either helps or hurts the war effort. He must stop rumors. He must challenge the cynic and the appeaser. He must not speak recklessly. He must remember that the enemy is listening.

--Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry Office of War Information (Cited in National Archives)
The Home Front Sacrifice

WWII saw a blurring of lines between the military battlefield and the civilian home front. Civilians donned soldiers’ uniforms at a week’s notice, and many towns and factories retooled themselves into an economic war machine. Wartime posters called Americans to industrial and labor mobilization.

The US Treasury, assisted by OWI and the WAC, asked the American public to finance the war by purchasing war bonds. By July 1945, the government had conducted seven successful war-bond drives, which had raised a total of almost sixty-one billion dollars.

Americans also had to adjust to rationing of material goods from food to fuel. Many Americans were willing to give up all luxuries and devote all spare time to the war effort to achieve victory.

Brightly colored posters produced by artists from the Work Progress Administration (WPA) encouraged Americans to “Fight with Food.” Vegetables grown in home gardens would not only lighten the burden of food rationing, but would free up supplies needed for troops fighting in Europe. The appealing combination of self-sufficiency and patriotism made the Victory Garden effort arguably the most successful civilian wartime program. By 1944, an estimated 20 million Americans planted Victory Gardens, producing almost half of food consumed nationally.

OWI drew some of its specialists from the world of advertising and commercial art who tended to think in terms of “ad campaigns.” The results were sometimes surreal - posters that translated messages of sacrifice and struggle into the familiar advertising world of smiling faces and carefree households, such as on the “Grow Your Own” campaign.

This is the Enemy!

Posters depicting the enemy are among the most shocking and dramatic in the collection. Caricatures of the Axis enemies appeal to fears, but also hatreds. Playing on those fears, artists fabricated the “other” in extreme terms: the Japanese were “supermen” to be feared; the Nazis were destroyers of western Judeo-Christian culture. Portrayals of the enemy reduced Axis powers to either something more or less than human - but definitely not human. These posters,
in their dark, earthen colors, confront the viewer with the frightening stakes of the war and its human cost. “This is the Enemy!” portrays the anti-religious nature of the Nazi movement. It conveys the sense that the enemy is one that hates religion, will destroy home life, and persecutes Jews and other minorities.

“This is Nazi Brutality,” by Ben Shahn, painted in 1942 depicts a Nazi massacre in the Czech village of Lidice in 1942. In reprisal for Czech resistance to Nazi occupation, Hitler ordered the German security police to “wade through blood” to find Czech resistance fighters. In that context, German security police surrounded the small village of Lidice, directed all males to a barn and where they were subsequently shot, and deported all women and children to concentration camps. The destruction of Lidice became a symbol for the brutality of Nazi occupation during World War II.

In conclusion, the US Government, along with the military and advertising agencies, informed America of why the nation was at war, against whom, and called Americans to military and economic arms. The American public responded overwhelmingly to the call: Americans filled the ranks of the armed services, financed the war through war bonds, rationed food, and energy, and went to the factories fully in support of America at War.

Bibliography Available at the WRVM
Museums collect artifacts because they carry with them unique stories of our common history, stories imbedded in the object that can provide keen insight to the past. A single object may contain many stories from its lifetime of use, and the curator’s task is to uncover as much of this provenance as possible.

A recent donation illustrates the importance of keeping track of object histories when ownership is passed. In July, Don and Ethel Garrison of Puyallup donated a telegrapher’s key that had belonged to their dear friend Frances A. Moore. Friends knew her as “Frannie” and she was a lifelong employee of the Northern Pacific Railway. She was born Frances Schuler in North Dakota in 1903, but her childhood was spent on a family farm in Algona. Frannie joined the Northern Pacific on August 14, 1922, learning Morse code from a friend who was a railroad operator. She served as telegrapher at many stations on the 140-mile stretch between Auburn and Yakima, using the key to transmit train clearances, weather reports and other vital news to stations along the line. In addition to sending Morse, telegraphers were also responsible for selling tickets, loading baggage, and keeping records. She was eventually promoted to a chief clerk’s position, retiring from the NP in 1968. Frannie was a longtime resident of Seattle before moving to Auburn in 1988. She passed away of natural causes in 1990, but her memory lives on in objects like this telegraph key.

Frannie likely bought her key the same year she started with the railroad. Complete with carrying case, hers is an Original Model Vibroplex. The key was manufactured in 1922, a date deduced from the serial number stamped on its brass nameplate. Keys like this are called a “bug” by those familiar with Morse, trade lingo which referred to a poorly-skilled telegrapher who started using a key without much training. Telegraphers in the commercial sector were typically paid by the word, so the faster you could send and receive Morse, the more money you earned. However, accuracy was also important and telegraphers built a reputation on both speed and precision. Telegraphers who worked for the Railway were usually paid by the hour or the day.

Although many different brands of keys were made since the debut of Alfred Vail’s switch in 1844, Vibroplex bugs were some of the most popular throughout the telegrapher community. Not only were they affordable and reliable, they allowed for faster transmissions. The Vibroplex was patented in 1904 as one of the first fully automatic models. It was designed to help eliminate the painful Repetitive Motion Disorder (or “glass arm” syndrome) that so many telegraphers suffered. The inventor was Horace Greely Martin, a renowned telegrapher from Georgia who also struggled with this debilitating condition. Martin’s innovative key design vibrated automatically, creating an endless stream of dots. The telegrapher had only to push a lever to release the contact and insert the dashes.

Vibroplex keys are still being manufactured today, although older models remain highly collectable. The museum is pleased to add Frannie’s bug to our collections, which can now be viewed on display in the Auburn Depot exhibit - we hope you stop by and take a moment to appreciate the story behind this fascinating artifact of telegraph history.