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Visual Analysis Essay - Final

You Can Do It

In 1942, an artist by the name of J. Howard Miller was commissioned to paint a series of motivational printed posters for Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company. The company's War Production Coordinating Committee had asked him to create these posters which would be displayed on the production floor of their manufacturing plant. This committee, organized at the urging of the U.S. government, had been created to help insure cooperation during the war among industries¹. It is one of the artist's advertisements, titled "We Can Do It", on which I would like to focus this analysis. Through the use of a simple image, primary colors, and basic text, this poster helped motivate Westinghouse's female work force to meet the high production requirements that World War II demanded².

The poster contains just one simple painted image; it is a woman. This picture of a woman ready to tackle a challenging task paints a strong picture. She is dressed in a solid blue shirt, the sleeves rolled up, her strong biceps bulging in anticipation of a task she is prepared to tackle. She is not smiling but has a rather serious and determined look on her face. However, the tone of her face does not diminish her exquisite beauty. Her large almond shaped eyes, surrounded by lush eyelashes, look directly at the viewer. She has one eyebrow raised quizzically. It feels as if she is saying to herself "Oh no you don't, I'm going to take matters into my own hands. I'm going to get this done and get it done right!" She is a full-lipped woman. She is physically fit. She has high cheekbones,

a slender face, and a pert little nose. She looks, quite frankly, like most women wish they could appear. She is strong, feminine, and capable.

This depiction of a woman in the 1940's ran contrary to many of the cultural beliefs of that gender at that time. It was a commonly held belief that women belonged in the home. Manufacturing jobs were felt to belong to men who were stronger and better suited for those jobs³. With many of the men called out to fight in the war, this poster reflected the influence of the government launched propaganda campaign to sell the importance of women coming out of their homes and working to fill the jobs left empty by their men. The artist is showing the women of that time that they are strong enough to fill those jobs.

The artist's use of primary colors provides additional strength to his message. The blue of the woman's shirt paints a strong contrast to the bright yellow background of the advertisement. This space behind her is not cluttered with words or images. It is simply a solid yellow background. That solid yellow sends a stronger message than any words or images could. It draws the viewer's focus solely to the woman. What is she so entirely focused on doing? What has motivated her to roll up those sleeves, showing us the muscle that she has? The bright red and white polka dotted bandana on her head is, in my mind, a perfect addition to this picture. With her hair tied up in a red this bandana, she exudes confidence. Attention is drawn focally to the expression on her face. I can see why the artist uses these three primary colors. They are vital colors which add strength to the perceived character of the woman. They add power to the effective motivational purposes of the poster.

Finally, basic text is used at the top of the advertisement to convey the intent of the able woman portrayed therein. In the event that the viewer was unable to determine from the image and colors of the text what the woman's intent is, the basic text leaves no room for doubt. The bold statement above her head reads "We Can Do It!" in large white letters against a dark blue background. This blue compliments the color of the woman's shirt, and ties in with the blue footer of the advertisement. This simple statement helped the women in Westinghouse's production plants realize that they could, indeed, meet the demands that were placed on them.

Today, almost seventy years later, I stand and gaze at this advertisement. It is colorful and dramatic. It drives me to draw conclusions about the fictional woman portrayed in it, and urges me to follow her example. I see myself in the image of the woman it portrays. It drives me, in my modern world, to action in a similar way in which I know it was intended to draw woman in the 1940's to act. I have strength and am capable, as were the women of that long ago era. I am a woman, and I can do hard things.

Bibliography:

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3. "Rosie the Riveter: Women Working During World War II", <http://www.nps.gov/pwro/collection/website/rosie.htm>, author/date unknown (accessed 9/15/2012)

