

Riveting Imagery

THE ART OF WARTIME PROPAGANDA DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

By David H. Mihaly

In the oversized arms of a shipbuilder, a rivet gun takes on symbolic meaning in this poster printed at the height of America's involvement in the First World War. You may not be able to fight for your country overseas, the poster seems to say, but you can do your part at home to help win the war.

Warships are massive hulks, but here artist William Dodge Stevens makes the vessel all but invisible and transforms the men into giants of American industrial power. The orange glow of the ship's hull highlights the brute force of the workers, while their heroic size exaggerates their strength and intensity.

Stevens established himself as an illustrator in New York City before the war and became known for detailed renderings of the upper-class—for example, a fashionable couple strolling hand in hand or drinking tea in a dining room. By 1906, he had signed an exclusive contract with Harper & Brothers to illustrate articles for the popular news and literary magazine *Harper's Monthly*. By 1913, his well-liked depictions of high society appeared in other leading magazines, including *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Woman's Home Companion*.

But here, Stevens applied his talent to a different purpose. When his country called, he answered with this allegorical image of working-class America. Stevens was one of more than 300 artists who created art to convince American citizens to buy war bonds, enlist, support relief efforts, preserve food and fuel, or perform jobs that would help win the war.

Teamwork Builds Ships will be on view in "Your Country Calls! Posters of the First World War," which features 55 works from The Huntington's collection of more than 700 from this era. The Library West Hall exhibition opens Aug. 2, 2014, coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the war. It closes Nov. 3, 2014.

David H. Mihaly is the Jay T. Last Curator of Graphic Arts and Social History at The Huntington.



William Dodge Stevens (1870–1942), *Teamwork Builds Ships*, ca. 1917, lithograph, 36 x 50 in., The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens.

Wartime production posters summoned civilian populations to support the war effort through hard work and sacrifice. Appeals to increase productivity on farms and in factories were intended to rally wartime economies while trying to build an emotional bond between civilians and soldiers by emphasizing "teamwork for victory."

The Division of Pictorial Publicity was formed in 1917 as a volunteer U.S. government organization within the Committee on Public Information. Assembled by Committee chairman George Creel and Charles Dana Gibson, president of the Society of Illustrators, the DPP enlisted many of America's best-known illustrators to serve their country by producing wartime art.

The Forbes Lithograph Manufacturing Co. (Boston, 1876–1960) built a reputation in the late 19th century by printing high-quality stone-lithographed product labels, sheet music covers, trade cards, and theatrical posters. This poster is an example of offset lithography, an advanced method of mechanical printing from plates made of thin metal or rubber. Although its quantity is unknown, print runs of American wartime posters averaged 10,000.

By the 1890s, poster artists consistently signed their work, a new trend that gave them proper recognition from publishers and viewers.

Days after America declared war against Germany, the United States Shipping Board established the Emergency Fleet Corporation to increase production of merchant ships needed to transport cargo across the Atlantic and to keep lines of communication open between North America and Europe.