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.

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