ART, DESIGN AND SOCIETY

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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Art & Design:
Feminist Perspectives

Feminist Pioneers Lost in Political Narratives — Same Story of Three Women Groups from Different Societies

Hu Chao



Visual images in modern times are closely linked with political narratives, and this paper intends to use iconic images of three groups of women as a case study to illustrate this argument. These three groups represented an important page in human history with millions of women taking up labour work traditionally reserved for men. These women's groups have been integrated into their nations' histories, and into the construction of their countries' national identities. But they were hailed not for their own individual experiences but for being national heroines and symbols of patriotism. In short, their status as feminist pioneers was overshadowed by the political need to commemorate them.

The three groups discussed in this paper are: Rosie the Riveter in the United States during World War II in workplaces such as shipyards and munitions factories, Rubble Women in the mid and late 1940s in post-World War II Germany who were tasked with clearing the ruins created by wartime bombing, and the Iron Girls in China, who first emerged in the early 1950s and were present in all industries. Despite their different socio-political backgrounds, these three groups have one major feature in common: they were women taking up heavy manual labour work during or after World War II, and, in China's case, after the end of the Civil War which continued after the end of the war. The sheer numbers and nationwide presence of these women in their own societies were phenomenal. For instance, 8 million more women entered the workforce in the US primarily in military manufacturing and were all considered Rosie the Riveters[1], and more than 60,000 women in Berlin alone were involved in removing bricks in the ruins[2]. The number in China was even higher as the Iron Girls was a social movement that affected every corner of the country.

In each of these three countries, visual images such as posters, paintings, movies, sculptures, and photographs were used to record and promote these women. When labour shortages were alleviated, these women's groups were dismissed as a social movement. They are remembered more as heroines of their nations, manifestations of the virtues of resilience and patriotism. More recently, they were gradually integrated into the national identity and became part of the collective memory and spirit shared by their people. However, the visual images of these women continued to circulate and became sources of appropriation, parody and other forms of rendition. Thus these visual images provide another aspect to illustrate how women's status as feminist pioneers was overshadowed by the political narratives in their own countries. After all, it was a political narrative, rather than feminist significance, that

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played the key role in creating, promoting and canonising these visual images.

1. Propaganda Defined the Political Objectives of the Visual Images

The earliest images of these three groups were all the result of propaganda work that aimed to recruit women to take up jobs traditionally dominated by men. The visual images were aimed at generating a positive attitude in society towards women working in these new roles. In the US, this started in the defence industry and became known collectively as Rosie the Riveter after Norman Rockwell's legendary painting.[3] The United States Office of War Information masterminded the first group of posters for this purpose and the "propagandists instructed advertisers that recruitment messages were never to focus solely on financial or personal gain but had to include some reference to patriotism and 'desire to help our fighting men."[4]

In the case of the Rubble Women, visual communication initially relied on photographs that were expected to present women clearing the ruins as "heroic". These photographs were created to resonate with society as "images of women's heroic efforts to rebuild a devastated landscape and people"[5].

The visual propaganda surrounding the Iron Girls was directly associated with being revolutionary and progressive in the new socialist China. Women formed groups to compete against men in farming, construction and even military jobs. Other than a propaganda tool for the purposes of social influence, visual images of the Irons Girls can also be studied for their political significance. For example, Chen Yonggui, the head of Dazhai Village where the term Iron Girl was first used, later became the Vice Premier of China during the Cultural Revolution, and he appeared in many posters as providing guidance to Iron Girls.[6]

It is worth pointing out that certain visual features were commonly used in typical propaganda images to depict these women in order to "shape opinion and influence behaviour in pursuit of government goals."[7] Below is a summary of three main techniques used to create the iconographic effect:

1. Reference to heroism.
2. A focus on aesthetic moments to convey senti-mental messages.
3. Romanticising of the work setting.

Norman Rockwell's Rosie the Riveter is a good example of the first technique (Pic1). The poster depicts a muscular woman with a welding gun on her knees in an image with a strong allusion to Michelangelo's Prophet Isaiah.



Pic 1: Rosie the Riveter, cover for the *Saturday Evening Post* , by Norman Rockwell, May 29, 1943
Photo source: https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/01/04/myth-making-and-the-we-can-do-it-poster/

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The second approach was to create a sentimental atmosphere that would resonate with the audience. For instance, in Rubble Women photographs, women lined up to pass bricks from hand to hand, and some also recorded people dancing during their breaks. This created an atmosphere of normality and supported Elizabeth Heineman's claim that "such photos emphasized the innocence of Germans engaged in the reconstruction."[8]

The third technique was obvious in the images of all three women's groups – romanticisation of hardship and the depiction of a cheerful working environment. All the photos were staged or choreographed and women appeared to be able to handle difficult manual labour work easily and readily, often displaying an aura of confidence, comfort and positive contribution.

As with other similarly iconographic approaches of propaganda images, the three women's groups were depicted as patriots, responsible citizens, responsible family members and cooperative colleagues.

2. Highlighting Masculinity to Present Women as Substitutes for Men

Giving women's figures the physique of men was a common approach in the three groups' visual images. Photographs, cartoons, films and other imagery depicted women displaying their muscles and biceps with a confident air of pride and composure (Pic 1). The trick was to indicate that women were competent and capable for the task at hand because they were able, temporarily, to acquire masculine traits. When the labour shortage was over and this temporary demand on women died, all three groups were encouraged to give up some or most of these male jobs[9].

Discussions on masculinity and visual art abound and there are other theories that could apply to these women's groups. But one common feature these groups shared was that their existence required a change in the law to enable them to take up men's jobs. The relaxation of these laws is an explicit recognition of the awareness of the physical requirements traditionally attached to certain types of work.

In both 1945 and 1946, capitalist West Germany and socialist East Germany, including the Allied Forces stationed there, ordered all women between 15 and 50 years of age to participate in the post-war cleanup, which was the first official call for Rubble Women. "For this purpose, previous restrictive measures protecting women in the labour force were removed in July 1946."[10]

The fact that laws were changed to lower physical requirements for jobs held traditionally by men was indeed an overt emphasis that these roles demanded a certain level of masculinity. That explained why masculinity was featured in all the visual images to indicate that women had that potential to replace men temporarily.

Similar changes in the law were made in both the US and China. At the end of the Iron Girls' movement, legal regulations were revised again to stipulate more stringent job categories. This resulted in the exclusion of women from certain physically challenging jobs that they had recently been depicted as being thrilled to take up. This could be seen as an eventual admission that women were different from men in terms of physique and strength. Thus encouraging masculinity in women was illusory[11], and so was affirming women's masculinity in visual images.

Rosie the Riveter has yet another story to tell. The famous *We Can Do It!* (Pic 2) poster was one of a series by artist J Howard Miller for Westinghouse Electric. Yet hanging on the same wall as the *We Can Do It*! poster, was another poster depicting a man in a suit holding some documents, with the words "Any Questions About Your Work? Ask your Supervisor"(Pic 2).



Pic 2: Two posters by J. Howard Miller from the same series *We Can Do It!*. Photo: National Park Service Online

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This underscored the irony that although women could do many things, there were always male managers to supervise them. Subconsciously these two posters implied again that women were powerful just because they were a replacement for men. Thus it did not come as a surprise that when US soldiers returned home after the war, another propaganda campaign was launched to laud women's domestic roles. Those Rosie the Riveters who had been so carefully persuaded out of their homes, found themselves being pushed back in[12].

These examples confirm that the masculinity factor presented in the visual images of the women's groups was a facet of political calculation. The appreciation of masculinity in the images was meant to elevate women to the comparable level of men. This served the purpose of projecting the women as a functional replacement of men rather than giving women an individual and independent identity.

3. The Cold War Factor in the Visual Images

The Cold War as well as its related concept of socialist working women and ideological rivalry, was another strong political influence on the visual imagery and representation of these three women's groups.

Even though Rosie the Riveter and the Rubble Women appeared before the peak of the Cold War, the socialist vs. capitalist attitudes towards the employment of women, particularly in roles outside the domestic domain, can be seen in their respective visual images. Emerging several years later than these two groups, the Iron Girls (Pic 3), the a product of the social engineering movement to encourage women to work, were promoted with a clear objective to boast of women's status as a key advantage of the socialist system, a familiar theme throughout the Cold War era[13].

In 1944, when victory seemed assured for the United States, government-sponsored propaganda had shifted to



Pic 3: WANG WENBIN, Song of a Construction Site (of Iron Girls), 156×320cm 1962 oil on canvas
photo: CAFA Art Museum, Beijing

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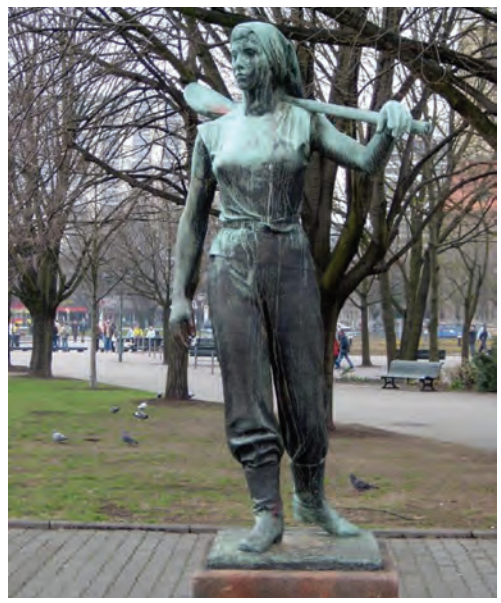
urge women to leave the workforce and stay at home. As a result, many Rosie the Riveters had to give up military factory jobs and go back to traditional positions, mostly clerical or administrative work, despite their reluctance to re-enter these lower-paying fields[14]. By directing advertising at women to return to these traditional jobs, the US government also wanted to show that the West stood for the traditional family and gender values to distinguish itself from the socialist views of the Soviet Union[15].

The Rubble Women in Berlin offers a stark example of the influence of the Cold War, including ideological competition on as aesthetics and gender.

This difference in positioning Rubble Women is reflected in the sculptures erected to commemorate them. In West Germany, representations of women were more true-to-life (Pic 4), whereas in the East, they were more masculine and powerful (Pic 5), a difference that shows a clear ideological aesthetic preference.



Pic 4: West Germany statue for Rubble Women.
Source: http://www.translating-berlin.com/remembering-the-rubble-women/#



Pic 5: East Germany statue to commemorate Rubble Women
Source: https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/trummerfrauen-contested-memories-germanys-rubble-women

According to Leonie Treber's research, in the very beginning, it was East Germany that was more active in using images of Rubble Women as a social message. Initially, this concept was not popular in West Germany which saw itself as a defender of traditional values[16].

The Iron Girls were also a feature of Cold War iconography in addition to being a socialist eulogy of working women. An interesting example is the cartoon book *Iron Girls Conquer Red Cliff Island* (Pic 6). English names were printed on the cover, which was rare in 1977, as a gesture aimed at attracting an international readership.



Pic 6: Cartoon book cover, Iron Girls Conquer Red Cliff Island, Renmin Jiaoyu Publishing House, 1977

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4. Cultural Icons as Political Symbols of Patriotism and National Identity



In the process of visual canonization of these women's groups, research has pointed out that these images, which initially praised women's courage and independence, were incorporated into nation building. As these iconological meanings have evolved, much of the complexity surrounding these women's groups has been simplified, neglected or re-interpreted owing to different political priorities.



Rosie the Riveter, for example, has been reborn as a symbol for women's empowerment since the 1980s. However, when it came to publicity campaigns, the more feminine Rosie depicted in the *We Can Do It!* poster (Pic 2) by J Howard Miller became the choice for source of imagery appropriation. Among these was the campaign by Sarah Palin when she ran for Vice President of the US in 2008 by personifying herself in the *We Can Do It!* poster. Why has this version of a more feminine-looking *We Can Do It!* poster become the most widely used Rosie, even though the name of the group was derived from Rockwell's original painting of Rosie holding a welding gun? This is somehow ironic because in the original visual images, Rosie the



Riveter (Pic 1) clearly carried a stronger sense of power and independence than the Rosie in *We Can Do It!* poster (Pic 2) who was supervised by a man.

That the sexier, more feminine Rosie in *We Can Do It!* has become the more commonly used image is further evidence that the connotation of Rosie the Riveter as a culture icon has changed over time.



Another example is the myth of diversity and equality later attached to Rosie the Riveter. Some research has highlighted that women of different colours worked together as Rosie the Riveters and this could be evidence supporting the concept of the US as a "melting pot."[17] By highlighting the racial composition of Rosie the Riveters, this type of research has integrated Rosie into the nation-building story of the United States after World War II, despite the fact that the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation were not abolished till 1966. Recruiting women of Asian and African descent to work side by side with white women on assembly lines was an act of convenience, but alluding it to stand for national unity probably painted a rosy picture of the hardship of racial segregation so as to symbolise a national identity.

In the case of the Rubble Women, today they are depicted as saviours of their country even though many women were in reality motivated to become Rubble Women by the prospect of additional allocations of food rations. As Elizabeth Heineman concluded, "women of the Rubble thus came to personify West Germany's reconstruction." They lay at the heart of a national identity that emphasized hard work and economic success, and "(the Rubble Women) would provide material for the establishment of a positive national identity at the expense of fully recognizing women's unique experience."

Helmut Kohl, a former German Chancellor, addressed a ceremony in 2005 to unveil a Rubble Women statue in Munich. In his speech, he praised the Rubble Women for representing a strong determination to rebuild the nation and to ensure the survival of the German people. Kohl also emphasised that the statue in Munich commemorated those women who voluntarily undertook the hardship of work[18].

Historian Leonie Treber has dismissed Kohl's interpretation of the Rubble Women's deeds as "voluntary" and contends that most of the real Rubble Women were not volunteers. Moreover, Treber concluded in her book *The Myth of the Rubble Women*, that the icons of Rubble Women were merely a German myth[19].

Whether it is a myth or not, Rubble Women as cultural icons have continued to play a significant role in Germany. They have been used to symbolise (West) Germany's resurrection from its wartime past as a "phoenix rising from the ashes"[20] and that "the history of German women from 1942-1948 shows they played a crucial role in the development of a West German national identity."[21]

There are many other examples of how the visual images of these women's groups turned into culture icons and part of national identity in their respective countries, including their use in contemporary contexts such as social media and civic education. They all accentuate a political intention to shape

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people's perceptions rather than an attempt to provide a true representation of women's experiences. This is illustrated by research on the Iron Girls. These women embodied a "social awareness" of women preceding their "individual awareness". Iron Girls who undertook manual work did not do so out of their own individual consciousness, but rather as a reaction to the social consciousness awakened by the political advocacy by a nation's government (Jin Yi Hong). This to some extent can also be said for the commemoration of Rubble Women and Rosie the Riveter.

Conclusion

The study of visual imagery pertaining to these three groups of women is another example of the importance of visual images in shaping people's perceptions and how political intentions influence visual images. These three groups of women remind us how images can be used and interpreted by political intentions. It is also worth noting that this kind of political influence evolves, develops and even changes course according to the needs of the time. These three groups of women were forced to take up labour work during times of adversity and hardship, and visual images created around these experiences could have different meanings attached to them, from patriotism to national identity. The shifting interpretations of these visual images as cultural icons can overshadow the fundamental reasons why women were placed in the situation of replacing men temporarily and why women's individual experiences gave way to political narratives. Awareness and consciousness of this influence or propaganda mechanism can provide people with a better understanding of the world and the different societies they live in.

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