

Symposium on Art from the Second World War

University of St Andrews, November 2015

'Real war ammunition'¹: The National War Poster Competition, 1942

Abstract:

In November 1942 the Museum of Modern Art, NY [MoMA] responded to the upcoming anniversary of US involvement in the war by organizing the National War Poster Competition. This competition, jointly sponsored by MoMA, Artists for Victory Inc. and the Council for Democracy, addressed issues of a war-torn world, with categories for submissions that included "The Nature of the Enemy", which be the focus of this paper.² President of Artists for Victory, Hobart Nichols, explained: 'The great body of American artists, ..., wanted to be of service in this crisis and hoped to use their special ability both to further the prosecution of the war and to maintain the cultural standards that would surely be lost if we were defeated.'³ Earlier he had explained: 'We confidently expect that the competition will be the means of placing the services of more artists and photographers at the disposal of the government.'⁴

This competition is significant in a number of ways. First, it was a *national* competition. Initially the posters were displayed at MoMA, but the resulting exhibition would also embark on a national tour in 1943. Second, it was given wide coverage via *Life Magazine*. Third, the Office of War Information was involved, conducting a survey of visitors and publishing a number of the winning poster entries. Fourthly, the outputs represent a version "from below" about the "Nature of the Enemy". Finally, President Roosevelt considered that the response to the competition exemplified 'a voluntary, spontaneous contribution [by artists] to the war.'⁵ This paper will explore the relationship between wartime art and propaganda in relation to enemy image creation. As the results of the competition show this was a version of the enemy that the government approved of.

Dr Wendy Toon, University of Worcester

w.toon@worc.ac.uk

¹ U.S. Office of War Information, *Poster Handbook: A Plan for Displaying Official War Posters*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943, p. 6.

² Artists for Victory, Inc. was based in New York, N.Y. and created in January 1942. It was formed by artists from 23 art societies (approx. 5000 artists) who desired to assist in the war effort by using their artistic abilities. The Council for Democracy was organized in August 1940 and 'its purpose [was] the creation in citizens of an awareness of the meaning of democracy, and the waging of an all-out morale offensive on the home front.' Cedric Larson, 'The Council for Democracy.' *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 1942, p. 284.

³ Hobart Nichols, 'The Artists for Victory Exhibition Opening December 7, 1942.' *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 3, November 1942, front cover.

⁴ Memo, Hobart Nichols, August 24, 1942. <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2008/wareffort/>

⁵ Letter, FDR to Hobart Nichols, November 16, 1942 in Museum of Modern Art, New York, Press Release, November 21 1942. http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/841/releases/MOMA_1942_0083_1942-11-21_421121-76.pdf?2010