

# Interpreting Visual Evidence: **PROPAGANDA, DECODING AN IMAGE**



Exhibition Areas:  
Poster Art in All Exhibition Areas



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

## LESSON

3

GRADES 8–11

This curriculum is aligned with  
the New York State  
P–12 Learning Standards.



New York State  
**Museum**

The New York State Museum is a program of  
The University of the State of New York  
The State Education Department  
Office of Cultural Education



This image from the August 11, 1918 *New York Times*,  
features James Montgomery Flagg repainting his  
“Tell that to the Marines” poster with the original model.

Courtesy of the New York Public Library

# LESSON

## 3

### OBJECTIVES

- ★ Students will be able to explain the role of propaganda to motivate a civilian population.
- ★ Students will learn to extrapolate motivating ideas and themes as visually depicted in wartime propaganda, including posters and other artistic materials.

# Interpreting Visual Evidence: PROPAGANDA, DECODING AN IMAGE



Exhibition Areas:

Poster Art in All Exhibition Areas

### RATIONALE

In this lesson, students will be asked to analyze and interpret messages from a variety of World War I propaganda posters. Propaganda has been a key tool used by governments and other organizations to influence a civilian population's beliefs and actions. This is especially true for nation-states' use of propaganda to influence a population's support for a war effort, which reached a whole new level during World War I. Thus, students must be able to interpret the various forms of propaganda and types of messages to truly understand the wartime experiences of the civilian population. Additionally, propaganda continues to be widely used today, and students must be able to utilize these skills to analyze these messages and determine how the government or other organizations are attempting to influence their thinking or behavior.

When examining all poster art within the exhibition, the Teacher will encourage the use of **Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)**. VTS is a method of engaging all students in a lesson by visually thinking about an image and answering three basic questions. Students do this by asking themselves and their classmates the following questions:

- What is going on in this image?
- What do you see that makes you think that?
- What more can we find?

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

World War I is frequently referred to as the golden age of poster illustration. Posters were an incredibly powerful weapon during the First World War. Their visually stunning illustrations conveyed important messages without relying on much text. As an advertising medium, posters had long been used for peacetime cultural events such as the theater or the circus. During the conflict, the government employed poster artists to inspire the citizenry and convey important messages on a wide scale. Millions of copies of posters, often made by some of the nation's leading illustrators, were printed to rally the nation to the war effort. New York City, as the commercial capital of the country, played a critical role in the advertising and **propaganda** campaign during World War I.

Shortly after the declaration of war, President Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI). The primary purpose of this committee was to develop a marketing plan to sell the war to a skeptical American public. Under the leadership of George Creel, the CPI undertook the task to unify the nation behind the war effort. Creel recognized the importance that posters would play in the shaping of public opinion. He established the Division of Pictorial Publicity (DPP) and named Charles Dana Gibson, President of the Society of Illustrators, as its head. By the time the DPP officially ceased operations in December 1918, more than 300 artists created over 1,400 designs for the American government and affiliated philanthropic organizations from which millions of posters were printed in support of the war effort.



This exhibition relies on the collections of the State’s Office of Cultural Education—the New York State Museum, Library, and Archives. Included among these world-class collections are the nearly 3,600 posters of the Benjamin W. Arnold World War I Poster Collection at the New York State Library; many by some of the most prominent graphics designers of the period from New York City including James Montgomery Flagg and Edward Penfield. **James Montgomery Flagg** of Pelham Manor, Westchester County, became arguably the most famous poster artist of the First World War. Flagg’s recruiting poster featuring **Uncle Sam** became iconic of the call to arms during the First World War. Over four million copies of the poster were printed. Between April 1917 and November 1918, two million men volunteered for military service. President Woodrow Wilson and others portrayed the conflict as a defense of civilization and a war to save democracy in an effort to rally public support to the war effort. By the thousands, New Yorkers responded to these calls both on the home front and overseas.



## LEARNING STANDARDS



**Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) supports the New York State Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.**

**New York State Learning Standards:** <http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-p-12-common-core-learning-standards-for-english-language-arts-and-literacy>

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7:** Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7:** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

**New York State Learning Standards:** <http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-p-12-common-core-learning-standards-for-english-language-arts-and-literacy>

**9-10:** Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

**NYS K-12 Social Studies Framework:** <https://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-k-12-social-studies-framework>

### 8.4 WORLD WAR I AND THE ROARING TWENTIES:

Various diplomatic, economic, and ideological factors contributed to the United States decision to enter World War I. Involvement in the war significantly altered the lives of Americans. Postwar America was characterized by economic prosperity, technological innovations, and changes in the workplace. (Standards: 1, 2, 4; Themes: SOC, GOV, ECO, TECH)

**8.4b** International, economic, and military developments swayed opinion in favor of the United States siding with the Allies and entering World War I. Domestic responses to World War I limited civil liberties within the United States.

### 11.6 THE RISE OF AMERICAN POWER (1890–1920):

Numerous factors contributed to the rise of the United States as a world power. Debates over the United States’ role in world affairs increased in response to overseas expansion and involvement in World War I. United States participation in the war had important effects on American society. (Standards: 1, 2, 3, 4; Themes: GEO, SOC, GOV, ECO)

**11.6b** While the United States attempted to follow its traditional policy of neutrality at the beginning of World War I, the nation eventually became involved in the war. President Woodrow Wilson led the nation into war with the hope of reforming the international order through his Fourteen Points.

**11.6c** World War I had important social, political, and economic effects on American society.

# LESSON 3



## **"I Want You" (1917)**

*Artist:* James Montgomery Flagg

*Printer:* Leslie-Judge Co., New York

*Publisher:* United States Army

New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections

## **WARM-UP:**

Introduce the concept of **propaganda** to the class, highlighting its function and positives and negatives in society during both wartime and peace time activities. After introducing the concept, display current examples and images from famous national campaigns (i.e.: forest fire prevention, crime prevention, drug use prevention, political campaigns, internet memes, etc.) for advancing the goals of persuading the public. Remind students that as they are looking at the images, they should ask themselves the three basic VTS questions. Additionally, they should be able to determine the message by exploring the use of symbolism, text, emotion, color, lighting, and form.

## **GUIDED INSTRUCTION:**

Visit this exhibition gallery via field trip or access our accompanying online exhibit ([www.nysm.nysed.gov/exhibitions/WWI](http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/exhibitions/WWI)) in a classroom setting. Examine the "I Want You" poster by James Montgomery Flagg. While examining the poster, the Teacher will initiate a **Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS)** discussion, ensuring that student conversation is guided by asking three consistent, open-ended questions that readily invite student participation in the discussion of the viewed object:

- What is going on in this image? (Encourages students to share their observations.)
- What do you see that makes you think that? (Stimulates analytic skills and self-awareness.)
- What more can we find? (Gives permission for students to probe more fully into the subject of the viewing.)

### INDEPENDENT PRACTICE:

Back in the classroom, have the students answer the following questions in their own words about the selected images below:



**"Beat Back the Hun with Liberty Bonds" (1918)**

Artist: Frederick Strothmann

Printer: Unknown

Publisher: Treasury Department

New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections



**"Joan of Arc Saved France" (1918)**

Artist: Haskell Coffin

Printer: United States Printing & Lithograph Company

Publisher: War Savings Stamps Campaign,

U.S. Treasury Department

New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections

- Compare and contrast these depictions of German and French people in the two posters above. Consider the faces, colors, lighting, cleanliness, size, and postures of both figures.
- What differences do you notice between the depictions of humanity in America's French allies versus our German adversaries?
- How might Americans view German Americans?
- How might German Americans react to this?
- Why would an artist emphasize Joan of Arc as a savior of France to motivate American women? Can these posters tell us anything about gender roles in society during that era?
- What is the symbolism of the weapons in each poster, and the water in the first poster?
- What motivational themes do these posters have in common?
- What emotions does each poster aim to generate within the viewer?
- What do these two images convey about the horror or gallantry of modern warfare?



Then contrast the following posters, answering the questions below:



**"Civilization Calls" (1917)**

Artist: James Montgomery Flagg  
Printer: Hegeman Print, New York, NY  
New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections



**"Men Wanted To Build Aeroplanes" (1917)**

Artist: E.W. Pirson  
Publisher: Curtiss Aeroplane Company, Buffalo, NY  
New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections



**"Raised 'em Myself" (1919)**

Artist: Anonymous  
Printer: American Lithographic Co., New York, NY  
Publisher: United States School Garden Army, Bureau of Education, Department of the Interior  
New York State Museum Collections, H-1975.85.4

- How do these images help motivate a society engaged in "total war"?
- How do these posters counter the ideas of pacifism and American neutrality?
- What ideas of self-sacrifice are contained within each poster?
- How do these images bring the life and death struggle to Americans at home?
- What symbols of American patriotism are contained in each image?
- How do the text and images support each other in each poster?
- What importance did food production play in society?

### ADVANCED PRACTICE:

Students will be asked to design and illustrate their own World War I-style propagandistic poster, encouraging Americans to do any one of the following:

- Ration food
- Enlist
- Enter the wartime workforce
- Foil espionage
- Buy bonds/stamps

### ASSESSMENT:

Students will be assessed on their ability to correctly identify the message, through the posters use of symbolism and text; as well as their ability to explain the reason and the ultimate goal of the message.