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Mors ab Alto: The Dangerous Power of Women's Images in Second World War Nose Art

As an art form, nose art is uniquely American, although images of women have certainly appeared on war machines from other countries. The depiction of women on planes became distinctively American during the Second World War when soldier-artists were informally commissioned to paint pictures on planes in order to personalise the machines. While most of these images were playful, obviously sexualised, and provided the airmen with reminders of home and "what they were fighting for," there is another aspect of nose art that has been until recently overlooked, in particular by the feminist community. Nose art is an art form that has its roots in ancient history and which appropriates a specific form of female power during a predominantly masculine event—war.

Women's Images in the First and Second World Wars

Women's images have been linked with modern warfare in any number of ways. During the First World War, women's images were used in the "most cynical way" as propaganda to drive men to war.[3] For example, the wholesome sexuality of Howard Chandler Christy's Christy Girl was uniquely linked with recruitment advertising in the First World War. One of his most famous images is a lovely, fresh-faced brunette wearing a Navy uniform stating: "Gee, I wish I were a man. I'd join the Navy." The snug uniform fits her curves, and her smiling gaze encourages enlistment, but she is not allowed to join up because of her gender. These images of women were separate from the arena of combat, and, for the most part, women were confined to the home front,

that were specifically linked with the event of war. During subsequent conflicts, both global wars and actions specifically linked with the United States, women have maintained a powerful presence both at home and abroad, in the civilian work force and the military, and now in this most recent conflict in Iraq, in the field and under fire. It is not surprising, therefore, that the highly sexualised portraiture of women most often exemplified by pin-up art during the Second World War has been castigated by the feminist community which has battled against the diminishment of female power and intellect through the objectification of the female form. However, pin-up art, particularly nose art, provides the physical manifestation of another form of female power—sexuality.

The Powerful Pin-up

Social critic Andrea Dworkin asserts that "hatred of women" was the trigger for the existence not only of the pin-up but nose art as well. Her article titled "Vargas' Blonde Sambos" included in the Vargas website at the Spencer Museum of Art represents a highly negative perception of this particular art form. Vargas's pin-ups, she notes, are

> some lazy, fetishistic view of white women, pale women, usually blonde; the drawing itself delineates the boundaries of non-existence, a white female nonentity. The empty space has a shape, which is why the line is necessary; the shape is female,

connected to the event of war. This truncated version of Marinatos' pioneering work provides a good base from which to view the modern evocation of this powerful naked goddess in the nose art of the Second World War and the subsequent pattern of its censorship and resurgence in current American conflicts.

The Modern War Goddess

Aircraft nose art, beginning with the Second World War, appropriated the ancient designation of female sexuality as powerful and dangerous. We can see this in the overwhelming use of the nude (or partially nude) female form in nose art and its enormous appeal with the troops. Aside from the quite obvious facts that the female form is at the opposite end of the spectrum from metal war machines, and that certainly the visual beauty of a scantily clad woman has its own sexual appeal to men who, in the midst of war, had little chance to see beauty, the women depicted on these planes were imbued with elemental, dangerous power: the female body as a weapon of war.

In 1944, late in the war, Army Air Force Regulation 35-22 officially sanctioned nose art as a means of "increasing morale"; however, the regulation was meant to curb the suggestiveness of the nose art particularly in the field.[22] Nudity on the planes was censored at times as were more suggestive names on the planes, but the soldiers got around regulations by painting bathing suits on their nose art pin-ups in water-based paints so that when they flew throughthorough a storm, the original statetus of the nose art would be restored. Or by way of protest, Captain Washburn reports, soldiers painted a large red streak across "the offending word or phrase [or body part]. The thus offended [the airman] invariably prints 'censored by' beneath the deletion and notes the name of

the officer guilty of the order to censor their ship."[23] It is well known that the level of nudity or suggestiveness in the nose art was in direct proportion to the proximity of an aircraft to general headquarters. The farther afield a plane was stationed, the less restraint was shown in artistic endeavour. The importance of the nude female image to the soldier is unquestionable, and its inclusion on a machine specifically manufactured for destruction pushes us to see this sexual display not only as a playful and indeed joyful celebration of the female body as American ideal, but also to recognise the power inherent in female sexuality.

The American Airpower Heritage Museum (AAHM) in Midland, Texas, houses the world's largest collection of Second World War aircraft nose art. We can use this collection as a springboard for analysis of women's images at war and to further the thesis that this art form is not purely a sexual objectification of women, but rather a deification that has historic precedents in artefacts from ancient warfare. Rescued from the scrap heap by Minott Pratt, Jr., the pieces are invaluable artefacts of a modern culture at war. Each of the thirty-three pieces was hacked from the fuselage of B-17 and B-24 bombers with a fire axe, the ragged edges of each panel highlighting the subtly curved aluminium canvas of the fuselage and augmenting the not-so-subtle curves of the women depicted on them. Most of the art is taken from Vargas's pin-ups, although other pin-up artists, in particular Art Frahm, Gil Elvgren, and George Petty are represented as well. Other sources of inspiration of the nose art in Midland include Milton Caniff's cartoon strip *Terry and the Pirates*, popular songs, and, of course those live pin-up girls Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth. As a spectator in the museum, one becomes immediately aware of the size of these images—all larger than life. Most of the women depicted are

looking out at the viewer with frankly humorous and playful gazes; however, there is no question about the sense of power which radiates from them. Hal Olsen, one of the artists whose work is featured at AAHM, describes the intimate relationship between the crew and its aircraft and the importance of the art to the men: "Nose art for the crew was a personalized reference to a piece of military hardware You are trusting your life to the plane to get you back to safety. […] Nose art brought the crew together."[24] Vernon Drake, an amateur cartoonist, notes in addition that because of his talent for painting on planes, he was assigned fewer "hump flights" (lengthy missions over the Himalayas), and says that "I often think that these girls I painted saved my life."[25] Olsen and Drake here reveal the talismanic relationship that the crews had with their own particular piece of art on the plane. Ritualistically, they named the planes after women, befitting the gendered quality of the planes, thus transforming the planes into womb-like entities which embodied the men and in whose care the men entrusted themselves. The physical act of painting the curves of a woman's body to conform to the curves of the aircraft became a ritual act which tied the men to their machine. To add to this quality, men often touched the image before they entered the plane in ritual fashion, to ward off ill luck during a mission.

Ritualised Placement and Incorporation of Nose Art

Women's images have been used as mastheads on Viking warships, as images of destruction on shields (Gorgo and Medusa), and as images of piety and righteousness (the Virgin Mary on the shields of crusaders). In each, the image is proximate to the warrior to ensure the transfer of power. Similarly, bomber nose art is most often placed near the

pilot's window on the fuselage and is larger than life signifying the power of the image for the airmen. In addition, the image was large enough for enemy pilots to see during "dog fights," and had the potential to distract the enemy, allowing the American crew to achieve a superior position.[26] In addition, ships, planes, and vehicles are traditionally gendered as female; thus the military plane becomes a ritualised, feminised agent of destructio

of missions flown. This image perhaps best reflects the relationship of the image to the men. It is talismanic and it renders strength and power to those whom she protects. The image of the Virgin Mary here closely resembles Jane Russell, another pin-up "bomb-shell"

hair streams behind them from the force of their descent towards the target, and their arms form aerodynamic wings to speed them on their journey of annihilation. In essence, these particular bombshells are the agents of destruction.

Again, to amplify the dangerous sexuality depicted on these planes, the phraseology on a number of the planes often links, in *double entendre*, sexuality and destructive power. For example, "Just Once More" inspired by Vargas's 1943 calendar girl, displays a brunette in a tight blue body suit arched out on her back with one arm draped across her face and the other flung back over her head. The sexual innuendo is obvious; however, if we look at the catchphrase through the lens of war, it suggests her desire to run another mission. The same idea is present on the B-24 entitled "Night Mission," inspired by Vargas's pin-

sexuality. Mama Foo Foo was inspired by Milton Caniff's highly popular cartoon strip *Terry and the Pirates* (refashioned by Caniff into the publication *Male Call* available specifically for the troops) and its sexy Oriental bad girl the "Dragon Lady." One of the largest panels at the museum, and a study in the use of black, red, and yellow paint (often all that was available), Mama Foo Foo showcases the image of a woman who wears a batwing cape and aTd [13Tj -0.0d [13Tj -0 Tw [(O)2(ne)4(36 j [(()3-c -0.03-9(ils)2(m)-2(,ow)2(un(y)2

Second World War, however, the enhanced representation of the motto includes a female figure who rides atop the shield. Once again, there is nothing soft or inviting about this figure though she is beautiful. Breasts bared, reddish-blonde hair flying like flames, and a look of rage on her face, she is reminiscent of one of the Furies of Greek mythology, and her winged arms as well as her winged feet imply the swiftness of her relentless vengeance upon the enemy. Behind her, a bomb floats, ready to drop at her command. She is an astonishing image, one which evokes the leading principle of nose art—that of powerful talisman.

buxom good looks enhance the patriotic force of her smiling image. She is the Twenty-first Century image of Columbia, the American representation of country and Goddess of Liberty.

The AAHM continues its mission to restore and to preserve these astonishing artefacts of a nation at war. The pieces rescued from the scrap-heap hint at the many which were destroyed after the Second World War and which are now only preserved in photographs. Second World War nose art predicted, in a fashion, the commanding presence of women in modern military combat forces as active participants in war. Instead of diminishing the power of the feminine, nose art represents the overwhelming importance of the numerous roles women held during wartime both at home and abroad, and as current nose art suggests, women's images continue to function as reminders of the dangerous power of female sexuality.

Notes

[1] Nanna Marinatos, *The Goddess and the Warrior: The Naked Goddess and Mistress of Animals in Early Greek Religion* (London: Routledge, 2000), 21.
[2] Dolly Parton by Wes Hope, *The Daily Times*, Maryville, TN. 2004.
[3] Peter Parker, The *Old Lie: The Great War and the Public School Ethos* (London: Constable, 1987), 179.

[13] Maria Elena Buszek, "Of Varga Girls and Riot Grrrls: The Varga Girl and WWII in the Pin-up's Feminist History," in *Alberto Vargas: The Esquire Pin-ups*, Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, http://www.ku.edu/~sma/vargas/vargas.htm, 2001 (accessed 12 Aug. 2002).
[14] Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake and Borderline Material," 14, 16.
[15] Despina Kakoudaki, "Pin-up: the American Secret Weapon in World War II" in Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 335-369.
[16] Maria Elena Buszek, "War Goddess: The Varga Girls, WWII, and Feminism" (*N. Paradoxa* 6, 1998), http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/buszek.htm (accessed 12 Aug. 2002).
[17] Buszek, "Of Varga Girls."
[18] Gary Valant, *Vintage Aircraft Nose Art* (St. Paul, Minn.: Motorbooks International, 2001).
[19] Buszek, "Of Varga Girls;" Buszek, "War Goddess."
[20] Marinatos, *The Goddess and the Warrior*, 18-19.
[21] Ibid, 21.
[22] Jeffrey Ethell and Clarence Simonsen, *Aircraft Nose Art from World War I to Today* (St. Paul, Minn.: Motorbooks International, 2003), 25.
[23] Ethell and Simonsen, *Aircraft Nose Art*, 30.
[24] Hal Olesen, Audio recording, American Aipower Heritage Museum.
[25] Vernon Drake, Audio recording, American Aipower Heritage Museum.
[26] Buszek, "Of Varga Girls."
[27] Both figures are photographs by the author, American Airpower Heritage Museum, Midland, Texas, October 2004.
[28] Ethell and Simonsen, *Aircraft Nose Art*, 174.