PAPER BULLETS: THE OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION

AND AMERICAN WORLD WAR II PRINT PROPAGANDA

(Order No.)

AUSTIN PORTER

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2013

Patricia Hills, Professor of History of Art & Architecture

ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes American World War II propaganda generated by the Office of War Information (OWI), the nation's primary propaganda agency from 1942 to 1945. The visual rhetoric of printed OWI propaganda, including posters, brochures, newspaper graphics, and magazine illustrations, demonstrated affinities with advertising and modern art and exhibited an increasingly conservative tone as the war progressed. While politically progressive bureaucrats initially molded the OWI's graphic agenda, research reveals how politicians suppressed graphics that displayed the war's violence, racial integration, and progressive gender roles in favor of images resembling commercial advertisements. To articulate the manner in which issues of American self-representation evolved during the war, this study examines the graphic work of artists and designers such as Charles Alston, Thomas Hart Benton, Charles Coiner, Ben Shahn, and Norman Rockwell.

The investigation unfolds across four chapters. The first chapter examines the institutional origins of American World War II propaganda by exploring the shifting

content of New Deal promotional efforts during the 1930s and early 1940s. This analysis is critical, as government agencies used propaganda not only to support economic recovery during the Great Depression, but also to prepare Americans for war before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The second chapter analyzes the ways OWI increasingly suppressed depictions of violence as the war progressed. While the agency distributed traumatic images of Axis hostility early in the war, such work was later deemed "too aggressive" by former advertising executives turned federal bureaucrats who preferred more friendly, appealing graphics. The third chapter focuses on propaganda intended for African Americans, whose support for the war was divided due to racist Jim Crow legislation. This section analyzes OWI efforts to address the nation's largest racial minority through posters, brochures, and newspaper graphics. The fourth chapter examines the OWI's efforts to influence middle-class white women, a demographic of consumers whose influence grew as the war progressed. This includes an examination of the OWI's role in modifying the "Rosie the Riveter" mythology in contemporary advertising to encourage women to pursue jobs outside of factory work.