

Poster Art: Uncle Sam "I Want You"
James Montgomery Flagg

Grade: Fifth
Month: October
Theme: Persuasion in Art

Guns, tanks, and bombs were the principal weapons of World War I, but there were other, more subtle, forms of warfare as well. Words, posters, and films waged a constant battle for the hearts and minds of the American citizenry just as surely as military weapons engaged the enemy. Persuading the American public became a wartime industry, almost as important as the manufacturing of bullets and planes. The Government launched an aggressive propaganda campaign to gain public support, and some of the nation's foremost intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers became warriors on that front.

Posters' powerful images and captivating slogans stirred patriotism, united Americans against the enemy, recruited soldiers, and solicited participation in fundraising and humanitarian campaigns. Posters played a vital role during the conflict. From the time the United States declared war against Germany in 1917 until shortly after the Armistice in 1918, the federal government printed and distributed more than 20,000,000 posters.

More posters than were produced during the entire war (1914 to 1918) by all of the other countries involved combined. In a time before television and widespread radio, they were a highly effective means of spreading information, shaping public opinion, recruiting soldiers, encouraging thrift, and raising money.

What is the message? Who is the audience? What is the purpose?

How does the poster communicate its message? Think about the use of language, space, color and symbols.

What colors do you see?
What symbols are used?

Is the message visual or verbal?

Who is this man?

How old do you think he is?

Uncle Sam is one of the most popular personifications of the United States. However, the term "Uncle Sam" is of somewhat obscure derivation. Historical sources attribute the name to a meat packer who supplied meat to the army during the War of 1812--Samuel (Uncle Sam) Wilson (1766-1854). "Uncle Sam" Wilson was a man of great fairness, reliability, and honesty, who was devoted to his country--qualities now associated with "our" Uncle Sam.

What does the government hope the audience will do?

What are specific facts or details are used?

Rarely in art is the subject glaring, if even looking, in the direction of the viewer. Why in this print is it important for the subject to be looking right at the viewer?

Typically portraits include significant, colorful, meaningful backgrounds that hint at the significance of the subject...there is no background in this print; why?

Look just at the text. Notice the font, the color and size.

The most effective posters use symbols that are unusual, simple and direct –
Is this an effective poster?

This is an election year. What forms of persuasion do you encounter in politics? (Bring in Examples)

- TV Ad Campaigns
- TV News
- Yard Signs
- Bumper Stickers
- Phone Calls
- Emails

Are they positive or negative?

If you were to update this poster, how would you do it?

Would you use Uncle Sam?

If not whom would you use?

A fictional character, an actor, an actress, cartoon character, etc

Would you wear the same clothes?

What would you say – what would your slogan be?

James Montgomery Flagg's depiction of Uncle Sam insisting "I Want You for the U.S. Army" has become one of the best-known images of the 20th century. The image is so famous that there is a website devoted to the image and you can change the text. (See Next Page)

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I WANT YOU

To Go To Sixth Grade!