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The commonly mistaken origins of the “We can do it poster” and its alternate versions over the years.



Nowadays, most people recognize the poster with the “We can do it” lettering on it or at least the woman on it, by many called Rosie the Riveter. Many identify this artwork as a symbol of feminism and fight for woman rights even though its initial message was different.

Many people assume that the mentioned poster was a part of the USA propaganda during WWII which is far from the truth. The artwork was created by J. Howard Miller as a poster for Westinghouse Electric in 1943. Only the workers inside the company buildings saw it as it was supposed to only motivate them to be more efficient. It was a part of a bigger series made by the same author.

The poster originally was not called “Rosie the Riveter”. “The name (..) originated from a popular 1942 song written by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb. The name was chosen simply for its alliterative appeal, and the song told the story of an inspiring assembly-line worker supporting the troops during World War II” ¹. After that the character gained even more popularity when Norman Rockwell portrayed it on a cover of The Saturday Evening Post. Rosie became famous while Miller’s poster was just hanging in a warehouse.²



Companies during WWII did not show posters like “We Can Do It” to promote feminist practices or inspire women to fight for their rights but to have them work as efficiently as men who left for war. “Though they worked hard, sometimes too hard, they recall their wartime work experiences as satisfying and demanding and, for a change appropriately lucrative.” ³. The support for women was temporary and when the war ended, they were supposed to abandon their positions.” Many women interrupted their studies to take positions in blue-collar sectors, thus forgoing education and work experience in more desirable occupations while building experience in occupations not normally available to them.“ ⁴. They spent years gaining experience in something they could not do anymore leaving them even more dependent on men.

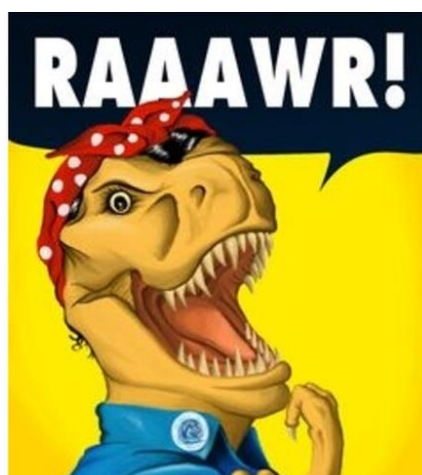
Miller’s poster resurfaced in 1982 when it was featured in an article titled “Poster Art for Patriotism’s Sake” for Washington Post Magazine. 40 years from its creation it gained

popularity and stopped being used to control employees but to promote late second-wave feminism.

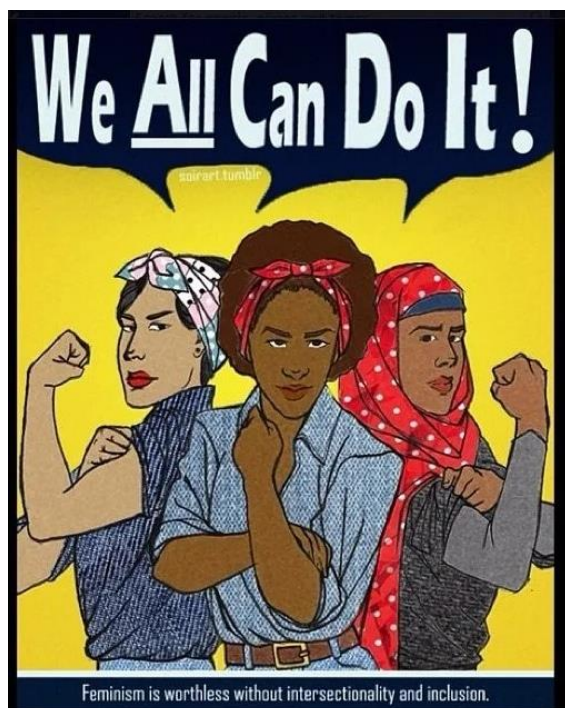
It has been featured on the cover of Smithsonian in March 1994 which only showed the woman from the poster, who gained the name of “Rosie the Riveter”. It got rid of the text bubble as it was no longer needed to convey the information. It was one of the steps that started the wave of many alternate versions of the “We Can Do It” poster. “Miller’s version of Rosie is now available throughout U.S. popular culture on everything from coffee cups and facial tissue wrappers to mouse pads and aprons.”⁵.



Since its appearance on the cover of Smithsonian the picture became a pop-culture icon. Sometimes used as a joke, other times as propaganda. On Womens Day in 2015 Israel Defense Forces tweeted “#HappyWomensDay from the IDF! #MakeitHappen” with an image where Rosie got replaced with an Israeli soldier. At the time the tension in between Palestine and Isreal was rising which resulted in many waves of aggression later in the year.



In 2013 the image has been used once again for good. The picture named “We All Can Do It!” by Valentin Brown was not only supporting women rights but also taking into consideration also other races and religions. The design kept the speech bubble and the outfit of Rosie but this time it was on three women. The picture has kept some of the characteristics but has been adjusted to more recent times. Another example of this is the multiple versions created during COVID-19 pandemic that were supposed to represent the nurses fighting for the lives of people. These two examples fit the most common narrative nowadays of Rosie as the feminist icon.



Moreover, the outfit and the pose of this character have been referenced in music quite a few times. One of the examples being the P!NK's music video for “Raise Your Glass” where she presents herself as Rosie while cheering up “underdogs” and those who are “wrong in all the right ways”. Katy Perry did a similar thing in her video for “WOMAN’S WORLD”, but it met with different, negative reactions as people felt it made mockery of women. It not only

stemmed from making the image of Rosie overly sexual but also the context of Katy's collaboration with dr. Luke who was accused of sexual abuse.



To conclude, the “We Can Do It” poster even though created for the purpose of controlling women in a workspace, after years and under a wrong name, represents the image of “Rosie the Riveter”. The core of the image consists of a blue shirt, bandana and a shown arm muscle and gets put in many contrasting contexts. Nowadays, it more often supports women than gets used for propaganda and manipulation.

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