

Constructing the Ideal Soldier



A **SPACE** for **DIALOGUE** 110

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

Who defines the ideal soldier?¹ It could be said that many entities have played a role in constructing the image of the perfect service member, including filmmakers, government officials, and actual soldiers themselves. But visual artists have also shaped our societal ideal of the archetypal service member; that is, who the perfect soldier is and should be.

Constructing the Ideal Soldier focuses on Mexico and the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, a period when visual artists constructed the image of the perfect service member as a very specific type of individual. Artists, generally male, often depicted the soldier figure as a heroic, patriotic, heterosexual man. This vision of the soldier has reinforced patriarchal and heteronormative values, as well as unquestioned nationalism.

During the first and second world wars, artists and governments used posters to fabricate the image of the ideal soldier, and to recruit people who identified with this image. Two such examples are Josep Renau's World War II-era poster *La Patria Mexicana Defendida Por Sus Hijos* and Howard Chandler Christy's World War I-era poster *Gee!! I Wish I Were A Man, I'd Join The Navy*. Renau's work depicts the muscular, hypermasculine arms of a soldier holding a rifle (cover). He defends two iconic Mexican national symbols, the Pyramid of the Sun, a temple located in the ancient Mesoamerican city of Teotihuacan, and the eagle grasping a snake, an image featured on the national flag of Mexico. This poster asks the viewer—ideally a strong, young man of fighting age—to identify as the extension of these stereotypically macho arms, and therefore to imagine himself as the patriotic soldier selflessly serving his country. Howard Chandler Christy's work imagines its intended audience similarly to Renau's, but also suggests that the ideal soldier is heterosexual (left). This poster depicts a woman dressed in a sailor's uniform. Her image conforms to normative beauty standards for World War I-era propaganda, thereby attracting the attention of the assumed viewer. In addition, the poster's text, "Be a man and do it," reinforces the identity of its intended audience, the male military recruit.

Constructing the Ideal Soldier also includes works that challenge the vision of the perfect service member from the first half of the



twentieth century. One such work is May Stevens' *Big Daddy Paper Doll* (right). This work presents its central figure as an undressed male paper doll with a bullet-shaped head, drawing a connection between patriarchal authority and violence. He is surrounded by several uniforms stereotypically associated with masculinity, including that of the executioner, the soldier, the policeman, and the butcher. Through these prefabricated uniforms, Stevens exposes stereotypical masculinity for what it is: a collection of deeply embedded, interchangeable tropes from which society constructs the very concept of "being a man."

Here Stevens interrogates not only the ways in which the ideal soldier has historically been imagined as male, but also the ways in which the concept of the “soldier figure” has shaped the very construction of masculinity.

José Clemente Orozco’s *Study for Modern Human Sacrifice*, a preliminary drawing for the artist’s mural at Dartmouth College, also problematizes the ideal soldier archetype. This drawing depicts the skeletonized remains of a soldier buried beneath symbols of patriotic sacrifice, such as floral wreaths, flags, a war monument, and an eternal flame. Orozco renders the soldier figure not as the heroic patriot defending his country, such as in Renau’s recruiting poster, but as the helpless victim of modern militarized nationalism, a sacrificial offering to the forces of industrialized warfare.

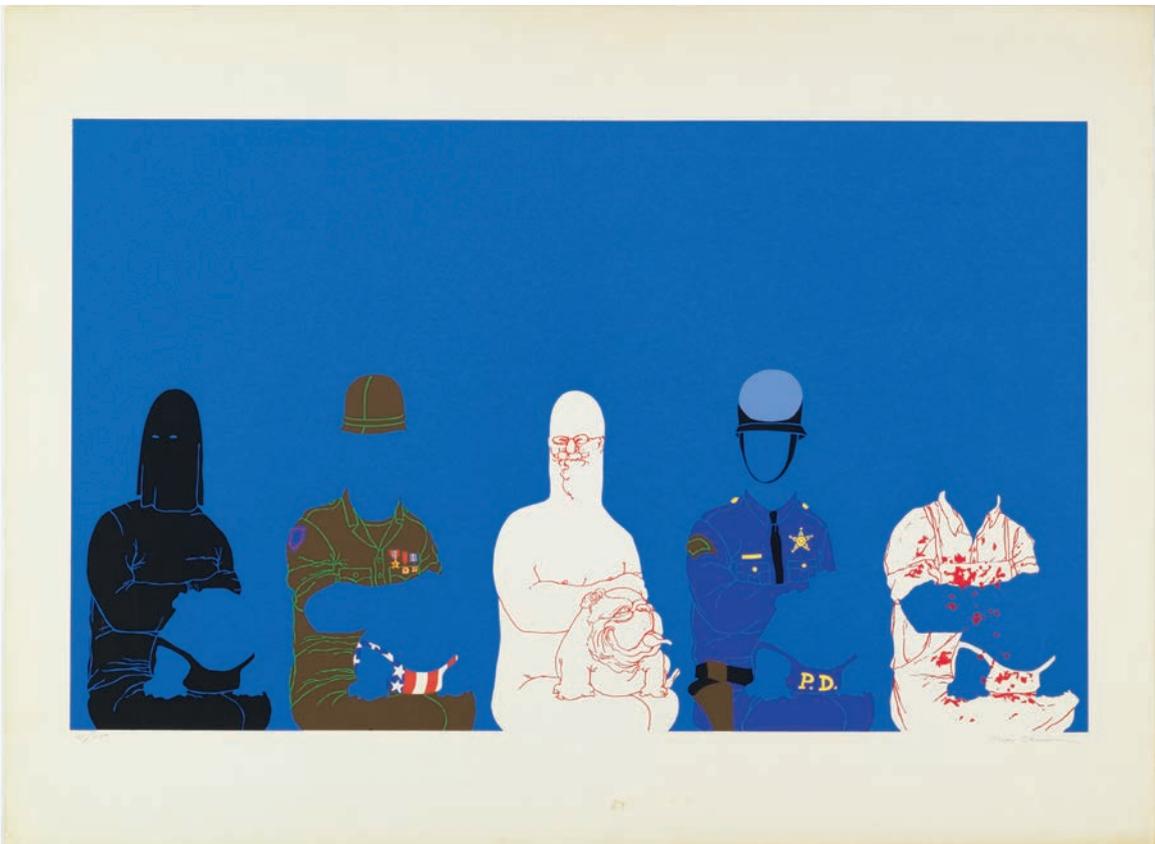
Artistic representations of the soldier figure are not, of course, limited to the twentieth century. Artists today continue to produce images

of the soldier figure which influence the way we conceptualize the ideal military serviceperson. This exhibition asks you to look beyond the art museum and think about the target audience of contemporary military advertisements, as well as how these advertisements construct today’s idealization of the perfect service member. More generally, this exhibition invites you to consider how our societal conception of the ideal soldier has, or has not, changed over the past one hundred years.

Nathan Savo '24
Class of 1954 Intern

NOTES

1. While this exhibition uses “soldier,” which, strictly speaking, only refers to those serving in the army, I am taking the semantic liberty of using this word to refer to all members of the armed services.



CHECKLIST

Howard Chandler Christy, American, 1873–1952. *Gee!! I Wish I Were A Man, I'd Join the Navy, Be a Man and Do It - United States Navy Recruiting Station*, 1917, lithograph on paper. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College; PS.X.559.539.1

José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949. *La Retaguardia (Rear Guard)*, 1929, lithograph on cream wove Rives BFK paper. Purchased through the Robert J. Strassenburgh II 1942 Fund; 2015.1.1

José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949. *Study for Modern Human Sacrifice (Panel 17) for The Epic of American Civilization*, about 1930–1934, graphite on tracing paper. Purchased through gifts from Kirsten and Peter Bedford, Class of 1989; Jane and Raphael Bernstein; Walter Burke, Class of 1944; Mr. and Mrs. Richard D. Lombard, Class of 1953; Nathan Pearson, Class of 1932; David V. Picker, Class of 1953; Rodman C. Rockefeller, Class of 1954; Kenneth Roman Jr., Class of 1952; and Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935; D.988.52.177

José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949. *Study for Hispano-America (Panel 14) for The Epic of American Civilization*, about 1932–1934, graphite on tracing paper. Purchased through gifts from Kirsten and Peter Bedford, Class of 1989; Jane and Raphael Bernstein; Walter Burke, Class of 1944; Mr. and Mrs. Richard D. Lombard, Class of 1953; Nathan Pearson, Class of 1932; David V. Picker, Class of 1953; Rodman C. Rockefeller, Class of 1954; Kenneth Roman Jr., Class of 1952; and Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935; D.988.52.136

Paul Cadmus, American, 1904–1999. *The Fleet's In!*, 1934, etching on wove paper. Gift of Ilse Martha Bischoff; PR.950.32.3

McClelland Barclay, American, 1891–1943. *Save Your Cans Help pass the Ammunition*, 1940, lithograph on paper. Gift of Willis S. Fitch, Class of 1917 or Gift of Edward Tuck, Class of 1862; PS.987.6.84

Josep Renau, Mexican, 1907–1982. *La Patria Mexicana Defendida Por Sus Hijos*, about 1944, lithograph on paper. Gift of Willis S. Fitch, Class of 1917 or Gift of Edward Tuck, Class of 1862; PS.987.6.171

May Stevens, American, 1924–2019. *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, about 1970, silkscreen on paper. Gift of Ryan Lee Gallery in honor of Patricia Hills and Lucy Lippard; 2017.29

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The exhibition *Constructing the Ideal Soldier*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, January 7–February 26, 2023.

A Space for Dialogue: Fresh Perspectives on the Permanent Collection from Dartmouth's Students, founded with the support from the Class of 1948, is made possible with generous endowments from the Class of 1967, Bonnie and Richard Reiss Jr. '66, and Pamela J. Joyner '79.

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Designed by Cara Borelli
Printed by Puritan Capital

Cover image: Josep Renau, *La Patria Mexicana Defendida Por Sus Hijos*, about 1944. © Josep Renau. Photo by Sara Jamback.

Inside left: Howard Chandler Christy, *Gee!! I Wish I Were A Man, I'd Join the Navy, Be a Man and Do It - United States Navy Recruiting Station*, 1917. © Howard Chandler Christy. Photo by Sara Jamback.

Inside right: May Stevens, *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, 1970. © May Stevens; Courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

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