Woodrow Wilson: “I Summon You to the Comradeship,”

A brief study on Wilson’s Red Cross and the direct approach

 Following the Great War, one may have come across a simple Red Cross poster, a beige print bearing the portrait of President Woodrow Wilson. He stares at the viewer from the canvas, beseeching them underneath with a simple request to join the Red Cross for their Christmas drive, but more importantly making a summons. “I summon you to the comradeship,” he says.

The poster is unique in its beige blandness, its morose subject, its utter lack of uniqueness in a time when many posters took the opportunity to fill a page with patriotic symbolism and empty promises of heroic deeds to be achieved at the front, each artist seemingly trying to outdo the others in scale and breadth of patriotic symbolism. What possible viewing pleasure could a simple presidential portrait elicit in favor of these more colorful and promising posters? The beige poster might almost blend in with the wall, might go completely unnoticed—in this way it is un-unique, though in another sense also perfectly unique in comparison to the patriotic palette that might be pasted on the wall around it. What else of its sort exists with these campaigns? Who out there, wanting their posters to be seen and read, would go with such a simple and non-eye-catching design? Leo Mielziner’s rendering of Wilson does little to elicit the grandeur of other posters; indeed, the poster is almost depressing to look at. The efficacy of this poster, though, is in its casting aside of propaganda rhetoric in favor of the shameless direct approach.

First, some historical context: in 1918, portrait artist Leo Mielziner’s rendition of President Wilson ended up in a poster advertising Red Cross support. It’s difficult to pin the exact date when the poster went into circulation, as it advertises support for the Red Cross with their Christmas drive, and the armistice ending the war was signed about a month-and-a-half before Christmas that year. In her article “American Nurses in World War I,” Marian Moser Jones states that, “In May 1917, U.S. medical teams became the first American troops to arrive in the war zone, and many remained through mid-1919.” So, for these American nurses, the Red Cross may have needed such monetary support for some time after the war. The Wilson poster probably went into circulation between May and November of 1918, given that the quote used seems to come from a speech Wilson made on May 18, 1918.

“I summon you to the comradeship,” he said in conclusion to said speech at the Metropolitan Opera House. “I summon you in this next week to say how much and how sincerely and how unanimously you sustain the heart of the world.” The words themselves were spoken in support of the Red Cross’s Second Fund Drive, a drive that lasted May 20–27, and the poster’s creator pulled the quote to continue with that purpose. The conditions surrounding the quote are interesting: it seems almost as if Wilson surprised the public by walking in a Red Cross parade that day, unannounced, and delivered his speech at the end of the night. Wilson’s interest in the Red Cross and his call for support is interesting, given his lack of direct affiliation. Though, it seems a year earlier he’d effected substantial changes in the organization’s administration. In *Wake Up, America! World War I and the American Poster*, historian Walton Rawls recounts how, “In early May, 1917, Wilson replaced the mostly female directorate of the American National Red Cross with a group of businessmen he named the War Council. Henry Pomeroy Davison, a banker and partner in J. P. Morgan & Company, was appointed its chairman…” (126). This administrative rearranging seemed to have still been in place at the time of Wilson’s speech, as he referenced Davison when opening his speech, mentioning how he hoped Davison hadn’t “curtailed” his own speech in anticipation of Wilson’s. Wilson’s inclusion behind the scenes indicates a president concerned with the humanitarian efforts of his country and quite eager to introduce an influx of both donations and enrollment. So, the inclusion of his quote on the poster seems appropriate and well in-line with Wilson’s own feelings. An easy-to-read stance from President Wilson merits an easy-to-read core message for the poster, a simple declaration without want of flare, unique in comparison to the louder, more colorful war posters of the time.

In regards to such contrast, the poster’s design is interesting—and effective—in its simplicity. Mielziner seemed to have taken little effort in sprucing the poster up to one that might catch a passer-by’s eyes. Neither did he care to inject any overt patriotism. Compared with a Harrison Fisher poster bearing the same slogan and a buxom woman, described by Pearl James in *Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture* as a piece erotic for men, patriotic for women (283), Mielziner’s poster does little in the way of such visual rhetoric. It doesn’t rely on the Christy-girl, nor a buff soldier, nor a depiction of Belgium burning, nor any of the dozen other tropes touted by its neighboring posters. Mielziner’s is calm, cool. In place of any visual rhetoric, the poster holds simply the cold gaze of Wilson at the viewer, his stoic image from the shoulders up, his near-scowl. The poster does not promise a better future, a better America, a world finally safe for democracy. It’s a slow burn, something that one might not notice at the first glance but that, in its curious uniqueness, its blandness in the face of the overt displays around it, actually draws the eye more over time. In a world of circles, the bold, straight line stands out the most—if not at first, then after a gaze. The poster is patient. It’s simple in its absolute, direct approach: the President of the United States of America is asking *you* directly to support the Red Cross. Will you heed his call?

Works Cited

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