Our Lady of Perpetual Desire: Religious Discourses of the American Pin-Up Girl in World War II

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Our Lady of Perpetual Desire:
Religious Discourses of the American Pin-Up Girl in
World War II

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Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of how the iconography, consumption, and meaning of World War II pin-ups resemble religious discourses; demonstrating that U.S. soldiers’ interactions with pin-ups mirror the ways that Catholics worship icons of saints and the Virgin Mary. To reach this conclusion, first popular World War II pin-up images such as the Varga Girl, Hurrell photographs, Rita Hayworth’s *Life* pin-up, and Betty Grable’s pin are analyzed in terms of their composition. How soldiers’ consumed these pin-ups are evident in photographs of GIs lives during World War II where pin-ups are seen in battlefields, military bases, and painted on planes. Looking at soldiers’ writing about women and pin-ups during the war shows how they idolized these women and saw them as protectors, paralleling the ways that Catholics in the war looked to the Virgin Mary for protection and forgiveness.
This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Kathy and Dean Kohr.
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Introduction

In 1917, during World War I, the children’s magazine *St. Nicholas* told boys across the nation “…your part is not a small one! It is vitally important. The service you can render now in preparing for the service you will surely be called upon to render in a few years is precious to the nation.”¹ The young men fighting in World War II grew up hearing such rhetoric throughout their childhoods. During World War I, the U.S. government put forth a massive and very effective propaganda campaign to revolutionize the public’s perceptions of soldiers.² This view of the mythic soldier, which still exists to an extent today, persisted during World War II as evidenced by the declarations of a Czechoslovakian Jewish woman after she was liberated by U.S. soldiers: “You are for us not human beings, you are mythical heroes, persons from a fairytale….³ War was presented as a grand, heroic adventure and the American soldier was a martyr and godlike savior.

Yet many of the young soldiers who went into World War II expecting fun, adventure and heroism, were left disappointed. The truth was that war was dirty, lonely, and often boring, with moments of intense horror and danger.⁴ To cope with the unexpected reality of war, American soldiers needed something to look to for hope, strength, and forgiveness. Pin-ups fulfilled such longings for many GIs. To deal with the fact that they were not the mythic

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² Collins, “This is Your Propaganda, Kids,” 15.
soldiers that they expected had to be, men uplifted the pin-up girl to a mythical, religious-like state.

This thesis is an exploration of how the iconography, consumption, and meaning of World War II pin-ups resemble religious discourses. In particular, I demonstrate that U.S. soldiers’ interactions with pin-ups mirror the ways that Catholics worship icons of saints and the Virgin Mary. Through examining the relationship between the soldierly gaze, women’s bodies, and the meanings that soldiers placed onto pin-ups, I offer an unexplored view of the significance of World War II pin-ups. I locate this innovative approach within the larger trend in Western history in which women’s bodies are deployed as vessels for men’s symbols, metaphors, and ideas.

World War II pin-ups have been studied extensively, and there are numerous intersecting theories about why these images were so popular during the war. The common argument to emerge in these studies is that pin-ups were popular because the government endorsed them as a way to enforce white, American, heterosexual desire for men stationed abroad with hundreds of other men. Scholar Despina Kakoudaki is the most focused on this theory. She finds that America’s homophobic anxieties were the likely reason why pin-ups, which were considered soft-core pornography before the war, were suddenly mainstream images that appeared everywhere and had widespread approval. America, or at least the military, believed that soldiers’ staring at and masturbating to images of women was better than men turning to one another to fulfill their sexual desires.⁵

Robert Westbrook expresses a similar belief, yet he regards the pin-up as a nationalistic icon. He finds that pin-ups’ popularity resulted from the military forcing them

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onto soldiers and civilians to remind them of home and their obligation to fight. He theorizes that this is why the most popular pin-ups were not pornographic in nature, but showcased innocent-looking, young, white women who seemed to need protection from the foreign enemy.\(^6\) Historian Elaine Tyler May also notes the wholesomeness of America’s most popular pin-up, Betty Grable. She believes that Grable’s popularity arose out of a conscious effort by the U.S. public to keep soldiers’ sexual desires focused on married conjugal bliss and the “good” girl.\(^7\) Kakoudaki’s, Westbrook’s, and May’s notions do not fully explain U.S. soldiers’ rampant consumption of pin-ups by their own choosing. They explain why the military and public were so invested in pin-ups, but not why soldiers themselves were so invested in the images.

Maria Elena Buszek’s *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* offers a sex-positive view of pin-ups. She argues that the World War II pin-up is both a reinforcement and a reflection of the empowered American women working on the home front, who were more ambitious, sexual, and liberated than their predecessors. To her, *Esquire* magazine’s Varga Girls were femmes fatales, an ideal of womanhood that was traditionally seen negatively. They were popular with both men and women because the femmes fatale’s putative strength and aggression dovetailed with the mentality that America needed for morale during the war.\(^8\) Buszek’s argument is inspiring to read; yet it ignores the myriad of female voices that did not approve of pin-ups and their use. Her study also does

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not take into consideration that these images were produced for men, by men. Contradicting Buszek’s theory is Joanne Meyerowitz, who finds that many women were deeply concerned by these representations of their gender in magazines and media. Meyerowitz’s research on women’s letters to pin-up magazines shows that women found the images degrading or misrepresentative of their gender.⁹

Page Dougherty Delano finds a similar dichotomy in her study of women’s use of make-up during wartime. Through examining advertisements, literature, and women’s experiences she discovers that cosmetics were an essential part of American women’s lives and identities during World War II. They considered it important to their own morale; but while it empowered them, wearing make-up also caused suspicion about the purity of their character and respectability.¹⁰ Delano combines Buszek’s and Meyerowitz’s ideas, arguing that both are valid and played out simultaneously throughout the war, creating an atmosphere in which femininity was both empowering and repressive. Film historian Michael Renov and literary historian Susan Gubar see soldiers’ adoration of U.S. women as a double-edged sword. Alongside the reverence came hatred and fetishization by both male soldiers and civilians. Many women whose bodies were worshipped were also feared for their supposedly aggressive sexuality, and soldiers were warned to stay away from them because they carried venereal disease and caused men’s psychological ruin.¹¹

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While many of these scholars have remarked on World War II soldiers’ idolization of the pin-up; but they have failed to investigate this phenomenon. In contrast, my thesis focuses specifically on the soldiers’ adoration of pin-ups and shows how soldierly discourses about these images of women have parallels with Catholic worship of saints and the Virgin Mary. The pin-ups are pseudo-religious objects of devotion.

Chapter one begins by tracing the creation and history of the pin-up girl and the female body within art history in order to understand why pin-ups became such a readily accepted and loved part of American life during World War II. Using the work of art historians, I explore how Western art and the patriarchy in general have used women’s bodies as vessels for expression for symbols, allegories, and ideas. This insight combined with the history of pin-ups—which occupy the thin line between advertising and pornography—shows how World War II pin-ups were more than just images of women, and why they were so widely consumed by the U.S. public.

This chapter also examines the popular pin-ups of World War II, including *Esquire*’s Vargas drawings and Hurrell photographs, *Yank* pin-ups, and the most popular actress pin-ups. How were the women depicted in the pin-ups drawn and photographed? The placement of their bodies, the size of their breasts and waistlines, their clothing, and even the photographs’ backgrounds all convey meaning and offer clues as to why they were wartime favorites.

The second chapter analyzes how soldiers consumed pin-ups. This part relies heavily on photographs of soldiers interacting with pin-ups during the war. I use the photographs to understand which images soldiers chose to display or keep and where they put them.

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Whether the pin-ups were painted on the sides of planes, tacked onto their walls, or carried into battle, which pin-ups GIs chose to display in specific areas reveals a great deal about what meanings the men attached to them.

My final chapter answers the question of why soldiers put so much effort into displaying and consuming pin-ups. Here I look at soldier’s memoirs and correspondence, and the letters and poems they submitted to the magazine *Yank*, which were written entirely by and for GIs. I examine their writings to show how they viewed women as more than human beings, and looked to them as beacons of hope during the war. Using texts from Catholic organizations’ reports on religious practices during the war, I also compare the soldiers’ veneration for pin-ups to Catholicism’s worship of the Virgin Mary.

The pin-ups of World War II were sex objects, yet at the same time more than just pretty bodies; they held real power to many of the soldiers in World War II. My project is concerned with how the pin-up’s adoration during the war, while its intensity was very much a result of the war and its circumstances, also reflects larger patterns in our society’s views of women. These women were idealized by soldiers and put on a pedestal, but after the war the pin-up was seen for what she truly was, a figment of the imagination that no living woman could ever truly embody.
Chapter One: The Pin-Ups

The World War II pin-up is the result of centuries of cultural development in Western art and history. While the female body is a timeless figure, the meanings and symbols attached to it depend on the social and historical moment. ¹ This chapter traces the history of the pin-up image to show how the World War II pin-up achieved nationwide acceptability and popularity.

The modern history of the pin-up emerged out of the invention of photography in the late 1830s in France and England, and the creation of popular consumer culture. Vaudeville and circus performers quickly utilized the new medium to promote their acts. In particular, female entertainers used photographs to cultivate and circulate their public personas to a wider audience. In 1854, the carte-de-visite or “calling card” was patented. New technology allowed for inexpensive mass produced photographs that could be sold for very little in the form of a 6cm. by 9-cm. card.

Sold in most shops, Cartes-de-visite were extremely popular with the growing middle classes of Europe and the United States. People collected the cards and then displayed them in photo albums, a pastime which became so common that by 1870, most children’s doll accessories included tiny carte-de-visite albums.² During the Civil War, many soldiers carried photo cards of their wives or sweethearts in their interior jacket pockets, where the image would be close to the soldier’s heart.³

Women embraced the cartes-de-visite, as they proved to be an indispensible tool in legitimizing and even constructing their identity. For female performers such as actresses, vaudeville, and burlesque dancers, their professions were heavily associated with loose sexuality and prostitution. For some women, the calling card was a way to step away from their over-sexualized image and for others, it was a way to advertise and embrace the stereotype. Even the famous former slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth used photography to present herself as a respectable, middle-class lady during the Civil War to combat Confederate disparagement of black men and women.

Burlesque dance groups such as the British Blondes embraced their occupation’s overtly sexual connotations. Their promotional calling cards mirrored the future pin-ups of World War II, with the dancers in revealing costumes, often gazing straight at the viewer, smirking and maintaining a careful balance between soft femininity and aggressive sexuality (Fig. 1.1).

In 1886, the middle-class family magazine *Life* began to publish illustrations by Charles Dana Gibson. Gibson’s art featured the “New Woman” ideal of the late 1800s. The New Woman was more independent and public than her predecessors; Gibson often portrayed her behaving in ways that were radical at the time, such as wearing a bathing suit in public or playing football. However, his illustrations romanticized his subjects and often contained moralizing messages about women’s frivolity. The “Gibson Girls,” as his women were called, were beautiful, tall, and highly feminine with tiny, corseted waists and mountains of thick, curled hair piled perfectly on their heads (Fig. 1.2). At the turn of the

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Figure 1.1. Carte-de-visite of British Blonde member Pauline Markham, 1860-1920. Photo: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection: “Pageant of America” Collection - The American Stage, The New York Public Library.

Figure 1.2. Gibson Girl cartoon “The Reason Dinner Was Late,” from Life, October 24, 1912. Illustration: Charles Dana Gibson, Cabinet of American Illustration, Library of Congress.
century, the Gibson Girl was the epitome of the ideal woman, young and beautiful. By 1904, Gibson’s images were icons, produced on a mass scale and printed on plates and handkerchiefs; new hairstyles and fashions were even named after the Gibson Girl.⁷

From the 1880s to the 1920s, actresses continued to grow in popularity, and like the burlesque performers of the 1850s and ’60s, actresses and film actresses’ studios used photography to create celebrity personas and connect with their fans. In the early twentieth century, film fan magazines such as Photoplay began to emerge and gain popularity. Actresses’ photographs were in high demand among the middle class; much like the earlier carte-de-visite collectors, film fans would compile and display images of their favorite actresses.⁸

In the 1920s and ’30s the popularity of burlesque dancers rose yet again, but this time burlesque’s customers were mostly heterosexual, upper class, white men instead of the more diverse audience the dancers had entertained at their peak of popularity during the mid-1800s. Male visual artists, such as Reginald Marsh, flocked to the shows and drew the dancers. The majority of these artists were educated, upper-class men, who saw the working-class entertainers as mysterious erotic “others.” The dancers’ “imagined availability,” lower-class status, and taboo lifestyles fetishized them for these artists.⁹

Burlesque art reflected a common trend in European and American discourse wherein women’s bodies and even women themselves were seen as mysterious, unknown, and complex due to their status as the secondary sex in society. The repeated use of women’s bodies in art represents a power dynamic in which men attempt to control women’s bodies.

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⁷ Buszek, Pin-Up Grrls, 85-96.
⁸ Ibid., 117-147.
⁹ Kathleen Spies, ““Girls and Gags” Sexual Display and Humor in Reginald Marsh’s Burlesque Images,” American Art 18, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 34.
and, to a greater extent, to gain control over situations in which humans feel vulnerable.¹⁰

Like the Gibson girl, burlesque drawings and, later, the World War II pin-ups, almost all Western art that displays the female body has been made by men and for men; the images do not represent the messages or ideas of women. Instead, men speak for or about women. The female body does not represent a person. It is a blank page on which men and society as a whole inscribe messages, desires, ideas, and fears, creating a cycle in which women never truly represent themselves.¹¹

The popularity of the Gibson Girl and other mass-produced drawings of women set the stage for the later popularity of illustrated pin-up girls during World War II. The 1930s, saw the debut of Esquire, a men’s magazine, each issue of which featured a drawing of a woman by George Petty (Fig. 1.3). By 1939, his drawings had become the centerfold of each issue and the defining characteristic of the magazine. The popularity of Esquire’s female features peaked during the war with drawings by Petty’s replacement, Alberto Vargas.¹²

Vargas was born Joaquin Alberto Vargas y Chavez in 1896 in Peru. His father was a photographer with multiple studios and Vargas spent his childhood watching his father work and helping him touch up photographs using airbrushed paint.¹³ When Vargas grew up, he moved to the United States, married a Ziegfeld Follies dancer, and painted promotional

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¹² Despina Kakoudaki, “Pin-up: The American Secret Weapon in World War II,” in Porn Studies, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 350. An interesting fact about the Petty Girl is that the model for the images was Petty’s own young daughter, which was publicly known. Instead of horror at this fact as we may expect today, the public approved and thought that using his daughter for the pin-ups gave the images a wholesome, familial quality.
Figure 1.3. One of George Petty’s last pin-ups for *Esquire* for their March 1941 issue. Illustration: George Petty, *Esquire* Inc., Hearst Corporation.
images for Ziegfeld and film studios. In 1940, *Esquire* hired Vargas as its new pin-up artist after George Petty was fired. Originally, Vargas wanted to use his wife as the model for his magazine art, but *Esquire* wanted the pin-ups to look younger, so they gave him a fifteen-year-old girl to be the model for his artwork. The magazine also dropped the “s” from his last name to erase his Latin heritage, so Vargas’s pin-ups were known as “Varga Girls.” The Varga Girl ran in *Esquire* from October 1940 to March 1946.

The women in Vargas’s *Esquire* pin-ups are always white, tall, and simultaneously curvy and skinny, much like the showgirls he spent his early career painting. The Varga Girls do not have realistic body proportions, with their legs appearing to be exceptionally long. Their breasts and hips are their most prominent features, accentuated by an unrealistically tiny waist, creating a pronounced hourglass figure that was popular in the mid-twentieth century. They are always posed in a position that highlights the legs and breasts; many of the women are stretched, twisted, and contorted across the page to give the viewer the best look at their attributes. The background of the pin-up drawings is always a blank white, making the pin-up the sole focus. Almost all of the Varga Girls are blonde. Redheads are the second most common, and very few of his females have brown or black hair. Most of the pin-up girls are wearing bathing suits or negligées with slits to the upper thigh to display their legs (Fig. 1.4). Usually the drawings are full body images, but several are just headshot portrayals of women’s faces and shoulders.

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16 *Esquire*, January 1940 – December 1946, New York Public Library, Microform. Some examples of Varga Girls in bathing suits can be found in the May 1943, August 1943, August 1944, and July 1945 issues. Varga Girls in negligées can be found in the February 1941, April 1942, March 1943, November 1944, and May 1945. Varga Girls that are only featured as headshots include: January
Figure 1.4. Varga Girl for September in *Esquire*’s 1942 Calendar. Illustration: Alberto Vargas, The Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Gift of Esquire, Inc.
During World War II, Vargas produced several pin-ups wearing patriotic outfits, such as a Red Cross Veil and WAAC (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) and WAVE (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) uniforms (Fig. 1.5). Often Vargas used airbrush to make their clothing sheer so that the curves of the women’s breasts and buttocks would be visible, and in the case of his first *Esquire* pin-up, even her nipples are visible through her clothing (Fig. 1.6). Some of the pin-ups are naked or half-clothed, but they are never presented as completely nude. The naked pin-ups are always in a peek-a-boo pose in which the side of the breast is visible.

In addition to illustrated pin-ups, pin-up photographs of actresses were also extremely popular. Like the women who came before them, film stars like Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth, and Jane Russell used their photographs to build up their fan bases and to create particular identities for themselves. Jane Russell was famous for her pin-ups before she even acted in her first film. Two of the best-selling pin-ups of the war were Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth. Their images embody the contrasting elements of the war’s most popular pin-ups, the innocent, nice girl versus the femme fatale. Grable the top pin-up, was most famous for a photo in which she poses in a modest, white, one-piece bathing suit and heels with her

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Figure 1.5. A Varga Girl in a WAVE uniform from the April 1945 of *Esquire*. Illustration: Alberto Vargas, The Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Gift of Esquire, Inc.
Figure 1.6. The first Varga Girl pin-up for Esquire (October 1940), called “First Love.” Illustration: Alberto Vargas, The Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Gift of Esquire, Inc.
back facing the camera as she looks at the viewer over her shoulder while smiling sweetly (Fig. 1.7). She looks fun and charming, like a regular girl next door, but more glamorous. Grable’s reputation and image were heavily bound together. As May and Westbrook both point out, her American girl persona and status as a young wife and mother elevated her popularity with both men and women.22

Rita Hayworth’s most famous pin-up exudes a totally different feeling. She is sitting on her knees on a bed wearing a lace and satin nightgown that is not at all modest, with alluring shadows cast over her body (Fig. 1.8).23 Her hands rest on her thighs, and her nails are long and painted, and she is smirking at something off to the side that viewer cannot see. Hayworth offered a dramatic contrast to Grable’s good-girl image. Born Margarita Cansino and often playing femme fatale characters in her film, Hayworth offered an image of more exotic and dangerous sexuality than Grable.24 Her popularity and acceptability with the public stemmed from the fact that she known as the “shy siren,” aggressive in her films, yet kind and quiet in public.25

*Esquire* also featured George Hurrell’s photographs of films actresses in addition to the Varga Girl. Hurrell began working with the magazine in 1936 and by the time the United

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Figure 1.7. Betty Grable’s famous pin-up, circa 1940. Photo: Michael Ochs Archives/Stringer, Getty Images.

Figure 1.8. Rita Hayworth’s pin-up from *Life*, August 11, 1941. Photo: Bob Landry/ The LIFE Images Collection, Getty Images.
States entered World War II, he was a regular contributor. His pin-up photographs for the periodical mirror Hayworth’s image in that they always had a sultry, bedroom feel about them. Usually the women are lying down, with their hair fanned out around them, wearing a silky, low-cut gown or lingerie that looks like it is seconds from sliding off the woman’s shoulders to reveal her breasts.

Hurrell’s most iconic image is the photo he captured of Jane Russell to promote her film The Outlaw in Esquire’s June 1942 issue (Fig. 1.9). Her pin-up captures what seems to be Hurrell’s favorite pose, a woman lying on a bed or sofa (or, in this photo, a haystack) with her legs slightly spread, arms raised above her head to highlight her chest, and eyes gazing straight into the camera. The entire image is the visual equivalent of a breathily moaned, “Take me!,” inviting the viewer to lie down and have his way with her.

Many photograph pin-ups in magazines like Yank and Esquire came with a sentence or two about the actress posing; they listed facts like hobbies, interests, favorites foods, and in what movies she appeared. Sometimes they also specified her “vital statistics,” including height, weight, bust, hip, and waist measurements. Many men memorized the measurements of their favorite pin-ups. As one soldier stated about Jane Russell, “I can quote from memory, I think, the dimensions of her calf, thigh, waist, etc. because they are drilled

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27 George Hurrell, Eleanor Parker, in Esquire, May 1942, foldout insert; George Hurrell, Frances Gifford, in Esquire, September 1942, foldout insert; George Hurrell, Dorothy Kelly, in Esquire, January 1943, foldout insert.
28 George Hurrell, Jane Russell, in Esquire, June 1942, foldout insert. The film was not released until 1946.
Figure 1.9. George Hurrell’s pin-up photograph of Jane Russell for the June 1942 issue of *Esquire*. Photo: George Hurrell, Esquire Inc., Hearst Corporation.
into me like the manual of arms….”\textsuperscript{30} Renov’s analysis of Hollywood women during wartime argues that the inclusion of these measurements fetishizes the pin-ups and transforms the women into body parts judged by their ratios.\textsuperscript{31} This view of pin-ups as commodities is compelling when we consider that \textit{Esquire} sometimes featured dog pin-ups next to the female pin-ups.\textsuperscript{32} Juxtaposing animal pictures and pin-ups and measuring pin-ups’ worth by their beauty and size ratios renders women comparable to the prize cattle at a county fair.

Every issue of \textit{Yank} magazine featured a pin-up photo. The photos were of models and actresses and came from an assortment of photographers and entertainment studios. \textit{Yank} pin-up girls were white with the exception of Lena Horne, the magazine’s only black pin-up, featured in its December 10, 1945 issue.\textsuperscript{33} The women usually wear bathing suits in the photos, and evening gowns are the second most common attire. Most of the pin-ups that \textit{Yank} showcased did not have the heavy sexual undertones that \textit{Esquire}’s Varga and Hurrell images carried. Instead, their pin-ups are much more cute and approachable-looking rather than sexual. Most of the women are smiling brightly in outdoor settings and look more friendly than seductive (Fig. 1.10).\textsuperscript{34}

In addition to professional pin-ups, many American women produced their own homemade pin-ups, mimicking the poses and clothing of the actresses they viewed in magazines. Betty Grable publicly asked women to put on a bathing suit and emulate her

\textsuperscript{32} “German Shepherd,” \textit{Esquire}, February 1942, 66.
Figure 1.10.1. Jane Russell Yank pin-up, June 25, 1943. Photo: Yank: The Army Weekly, United States Army.

Figure 1.10.2. Rita Hayworth Yank pin-up, November 19, 1943. Photo: Yank: The Army Weekly, United States Army.

Figure 1.10.3. Bonus pin-up special from Yank, June 25, 1943. Photo: Yank: The Army Weekly, United States Army.
photographs and give them to servicemen. It was seen as part of women’s duty to the war effort to take these photos and send them to men overseas, whether they were their husbands, lovers, acquaintances, or complete strangers.\(^\text{35}\)

Like the French revolutionaries of the late eighteenth century, who portrayed liberty as a bare-breasted woman, the U.S. Armed Forces used pin-ups to symbolize patriotism.\(^\text{36}\) Margie Stewart was the government’s pin-up girl for posters; she was featured on over twenty information notices. Her most famous poster shows her sitting at a table looking longingly into the camera with the phrase “Please Get There – And Back.” (Fig. 1.11).\(^\text{37}\) Pin-up propaganda had a deep emotional impact on many soldiers, as displayed by a \textit{Yank} staff writer’s musings on Stewart:

She looks like somebody a GI might come home to happily. She looks like as if the GI who would come home to her could take her to a picnic or prom, a double-feature or the Trocadero with equal pleasure. She looks like a good girl friend or a good young wife. She looks like the dream you not only want to go on dreaming but which you might continue after you wake up.\(^\text{38}\)

The military frequently used pin-ups like Margie to remind soldiers not only of what they were fighting to protect.\(^\text{39}\)

The military also utilized pin-ups to train soldiers for battle. To teach soldiers how to read a map, the U.S. Military placed a map grid over a Betty Grable pin-up (Fig. 1.12).\(^\text{40}\) By mapping her body, soldiers were meant to learn how to read land maps. Her image was


\(^{38}\text{Ibid.}\)


Figure 1.11. Margie Stewart Poster No. 1, 1941-1945. Photo: Records of the Office of Government Reports. 1932-1947: World War II Posters, compiled 1942-1945 Series, National Archives.
clearly intended to give soldiers an incentive to pay attention during the lesson. The sole function of her body was to capture the attention of the men, the majority of whom were young and probably sexually inexperienced. To them, she was a mysterious territory to explore and conquer; a pure object, instead of a real living woman. This technique was effective; one veteran fondly recalled the Grable map in 2009, saying, “You learned to read a map real quick that way.”

The military also used pin-ups as bait in booby-trap training lessons. In a photograph from June of 1944, a sergeant teaches a group of soldiers how to look out for traps and mines using an accordion board made up to look like the wall of a home with a fake window and door. On the makeshift wall hang pin-ups that represent the tempting traps that the men may find on their missions. In California’s Camp Kohler, a pin-up painting was used as a booby-trap for combat training exercises. A drape covered a woman from the shoulders down and soldiers had to resist the temptation to remove the cloth to see what was underneath (Fig. 1.13). In 1942, when the U.S. Army experienced a malaria outbreak in the Southwest Pacific, it launched a campaign to teach soldiers how to prevent the disease by creating roadside signs with malaria information and pin-ups to get GIs attention. In these settings women were not people; they were traps and tools for men’s use.

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Figure 1.12. First Sergeant Richard P. Bates of Lowry Field teaching soldiers to read a map with a Betty Grable pin-up covered by a map grid, circa early 1940s. Photo: Bettmann Collection, Corbis Images.

Figure 1.13. Pin-up booby trap at Camp Kohler from Yank magazine, January 21, 1944. Photo: Sgt. Ben Schnall, Yank: The Army Weekly, United States Army.
Images have multiple meanings based on the viewers’ own history and ideas. Viewers can consciously or subconsciously choose what messages of an image to see or ignore.\textsuperscript{45} While the military and government saw pin-ups as patriotic symbols and educational tools, soldiers themselves attached a much wider variety of meanings to pin-ups, as chapter two demonstrates.

\textsuperscript{45} Margaret R. Miles, “The Virgin’s One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning In Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture,” 196.
Chapter Two: The Soldiers

My passion for the Varga girl goes almost to the extreme; they occupy my walls, ceiling and even space on my luggage given up to these shapely damsels…

In 1944 a Naval Lieutenant stationed in the Pacific found one of his sailors lying dead in a foxhole after a Japanese bombing. Clutched in his fingers was a Varga pin-up, which he had carried with him into battle because he worried that the Japanese would steal it from him. A picture may say a thousand words, but what you choose to do with that image also says a great deal. Just as the Lieutenant’s story reveals how important the Varga pin-up was to his comrade, which pin-ups American soldiers displayed and where they were displayed reveals much about the significance attached to them.

It is important to note that pin-ups’ consumption was strictly intended for white men. In her autobiography, black actress Lena Horne, one of the very few acceptable pin-ups for black soldiers, sums up the problematic politics of who could display pin-ups and who could not:

If the officers were white it was hardly safe for a Negro soldier to put up any of the fifty white lovelies, ranging from Grable to Lamar. They did not have fifty or so Negro lovelies to choose from. They had little ol’ me. I therefore chose not to accept my status as a pinup as a compliment. It was, rather, an afterthought, as if someone had suddenly turned to the Negro GIs and said: “Oh, yes, here fellows, here’s a pinup girl for you, too.”

Pin-ups distributed by the government, such as the Betty Grable map and images of Margie Stewart, were widely seen by the American public and not overtly sexual in their...
appearance. The further these images were from the eyes of the American public, however, the more sexual they became. This was evident in Officer’s Clubs, in GIs’ quarters, and on airbases, where Varga-style women and actresses were painted carefully onto the walls (Fig. 2.1). GIs also placed pin-ups in the areas where they conducted their daily duties and assignments. One photograph shows a barbershop on a Marine base in the Pacific. Behind the barber and his client is a wall covered in pin-ups. According to the photo’s caption, the pin-up wall was meant to give soldiers a “dream on the house” as they received their haircuts (Fig. 2.2). A barbershop of the 535rd Bomber Squadron stationed in England had a similar set-up, except its pin-ups covered not just one wall, but all the walls and even the ceiling.

Pin-ups served as beloved decorations in workplaces too. In a photograph from 1944 of a makeshift workshop called “Rocky’s Place Sheet Metal Shop,” U.S. soldiers work on repairing aircraft parts. Hanging from the rafters are row after row of pin-ups (Fig. 2.3). In a 1942 photo by a Life magazine photographer, two soldiers stationed in an Aleutian Islands radio outpost have covered their entire workspace in pin-up images (Fig. 2.4). In 1945, Yank magazine reported that an Armed Forces Radio Station in the Marshall Islands had its sole

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Figure 2.1. Officer’s club for servicemen in Tarawa, Gilbert Island with Varga Girl-inspired pin-ups painted on the walls, 1944. Photo: J. R. Eyerman, The LIFE Picture Collection, Getty Images.

Figure 2.2. A barber shop at a US Marine Base in the Pacific with a display of pin-ups’ adorning a wall on May 18, 1944. Photo: Bettmann Collection, Corbis Images.
Figure 2.3. Soldiers repairing aircraft parts at “Rocky’s Place Sheet Metal Shop,” which is decorated with pin-ups, 1944. Photo: US Signal Corps, World War II Signal Corps Photograph Collection, Box 76, US Army Heritage and Education Center.

Figure 2.4. Two US Servicemen working in a pin-up covered radio outpost on Adak Island of the Aleutian Islands, 1942. Photo: Dmitri Kessel, The LIFE Picture Collection, Getty Images.
decoration, a pin-up of stripper and burlesque performer Sherry Briton, stolen one night. When the theft was discovered, chaos erupted among the men; some sobbed, some began to tear apart their base, some took off in planes. When the pin-up was finally found, an official bulletin was posted stating, “Never in the history of the military has a pin-up meant so much to so many. The picture of Sherry Briton was part of life on this island. Its value as a morale builder cannot be measured by any standards….,”

As outrageous as this anecdote about a simple photograph may sound today, it captures the fact that in non-European territories where white women were virtually non-existent, pin-ups were treasured possessions. Soldiers stationed in the European theater, which had white women in abundance, wrote much more about real women that they interacted with, while soldiers in the Pacific often lamented in their writings that they did not see a white woman in the flesh for months at a time.

It is also worth mentioning that the barbershop, metal shop, and radio outpost showcase soldiers’ preferences for displaying much more sexual images in public areas. The barber and metal shops are covered in Varga Girls and Hurrells, which as noted in chapter one, were far more risqué than Yank pin-ups. Esquire and other men’s magazines were much harder to receive abroad during the war due to mailing restrictions. Multiple GIs wrote to the periodical’s editor on how rare it was to see an issue, and when someone received one, it was passed along to all of the men. Army-issued magazines like Yank were often regularly handed out to soldiers, and therefore their pin-ups were much more readily available and

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10 T-5 Chet Straight, Mail Call, Yank (USA Edition), July 28, 1944, 14; Pfc. Jake Owens, Mail Call, Yank (USA Edition), September 8, 1944, 14
accessible. The *Esquire* and other more sexual pin-ups may be on display in public areas so that everyone can view and enjoy them. It is also likely that these types of pin-ups were chosen for public display not only due to their rarity, but also for their aggressive sexuality. Displaying these pin-ups made soldiers appear more sexually experienced and masculine to others.

One of the most common spots pin-ups were placed was in soldiers’ personal quarters. Some had simply one or several pin-ups hanging above their beds, while others had entire walls covered in mosaics of women. The most impressive example of this is a 1944 *Life* photograph from the Aleutian Islands. It depicts a group of American bombers playing cards inside their hut, which is covered floor to ceiling with pin-ups (Fig. 2.5). It is impossible to count every single one, but there are at least several hundred pin-ups tacked to their walls, and it must have taken many hours, if not days, to cut them out and mount them.\(^\text{12}\)

A photograph from 1943 shows a captain stationed in Australia napping on his bed with a single pin-up on his wall. It is *Esquire*’s June 1943 Varga Girl, a blonde ballerina in a black leotard and pointe shoes, on her knees and leaning backward, her head tilted toward the sky. Underneath her, someone has written in block letters the name the magazine bestowed on the image: “Threat for Tonite” (Fig. 2.6).\(^\text{13}\) The photographs of GI life captured by magazines such as *Yank* and *Life* and by war photographers in general show that pin-ups

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Figure 2.5. A US Bomber Crew relaxing in their hut in the Aleutian Islands, which they have covered with hundreds of pin-ups, March 1944. Photo: Dmitri Kessel, The LIFE Picture Collection, Getty Images.
Figure 2.6. Captain R.N. Skipper napping in Darwin, Australia with a Varga Girl pin-up taped above his bed, November 12, 1943. Photo: Bettmann Collection, Corbis Images.
were staple decorations in enlisted men’s huts, barracks, submarines, or wherever they were sleeping, and seemingly in every country where U.S. soldiers were stationed.\textsuperscript{14}

One veteran fondly remembers of pin-ups, “Any place we could stick those girls up we did. On a wall or locker. When you moved out they went into your trunk…. But the second you were in a room or a house, anything like that, and the war settled down for five minutes, back up they went….\textsuperscript{15} It is clear from the photographs that pin-ups were not tacked onto walls arbitrarily or with indifference. Each soldier felt something for the images that he chose to collect and display. In a poem submitted to \textit{Yank}, a soldier wrote:

\begin{quote}
There is Sandra with the smold’ring eyes,  
And Jeanne who is so wondrous wise.  
Elaine, the lovely, tall and fair  
Whose figure is beyond compare.  
Then Ruth who walks with silken grace,  
And Helen with her angel’s face.  
Yes, all these darlings I adore  
Though in my heart there’s room for more.  
And why shouldn’t I love them all?  
They’re only pictures on my wall?\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The poem displays how each pin-up had some special identifying quality in the eyes of the collector. Each woman was important and carefully cut out and displayed. Many magazines tried to make pin-ups as accessible as possible for soldiers abroad. \textit{Esquire} was especially

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dedicated to getting its pin-ups to U.S. soldiers. The magazine sold Varga calendars, Varga playing cards, Hurrell datebooks, oversized postcards with their pin-ups on them, and even jigsaw puzzles of Hurrell photographs. Many of these items were included in Esquire Service Kits that could be ordered and sent to GIs overseas. From 1942 to 1943 Varga calendar sales jumped from 504,000 to over one million.17

For some soldiers such as the dead man the Navy Lieutenant found in the foxhole, pin-ups were much more than decorations and distractions; they were precious images that men carried with them into battle. In an iconic photograph of a group of Marines approaching the burning Tarawa of the Gilbert Islands, several of the men are not looking forward to the wrecked island and the battle that awaits, but instead are gazing at the August 1943 Varga girl (Fig. 2.7). Closely examining the image, we can see that the pin-up was carefully taken from the magazine binding and has deep creases from being folded many times.18 It is evident in the photograph that the Marine who holds it made a deliberate choice to have this image with him as he went into battle.

In an image from February 1945, a different Marine is on a ship heading toward the battle of Iwo Jima; he is wearing a flamethrower pack that has a Varga Girl taped to it (Fig. 2.8). The pin-up is dressed up in a strapless fur-trimmed black and pink dress and someone has written on the blank background surrounding her “Hot Moma!” and “Miss Spitfire,” doubtless alluding to the flamethrower’s purpose.19 In a photo taken that same month in

19 Eugene Jones, US Marine Private Kenneth R. Hoger with his pin-up decorated flamethrower pack, off Iwo Jima, February 1945, United States Navy Naval History and Heritage Command, in World
Figure 2.7. As a landing barge full of Marines approaches the burning, Japanese-held island Tarawa in the Pacific, several men are staring at a Varga pin-up instead of the flaming island awaiting them, 1943US. Photo: US Marine Corps, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
Figure 2.8 - Marine Private Kenneth R. Hoger at the Battle of Iwo Jima wearing a flamethrower pack decorated with a Varga Girl, February 21, 1945. Photo: Eugene Jones, United States Navy Naval History and Heritage Command, World War II Database.
France, two infantrymen sit in a foxhole with their guns propped up, staring at a Yank pin-up (Fig. 2.9). According to the Division’s records, enemy fighters were only yards away from them when the photo was taken, yet their eyes are stuck to the woman’s image. These battlefield images reflect the words a veteran once spoke to Betty Grable:

> There we were out in those damn dirty trenches. Machine guns firing. Bombs dropping all around us. We would be exhausted, frightened, confused and sometimes hopeless about our situation, when suddenly someone would pull your picture out of his wallet. Or we’d see a decal of you on a plane and then we’d know what we were fighting for.

This quotation reflects how important pin-ups were to the soldiers who brought them onto the battlefield. They were a reminder of what they were fighting for and a diversion from the death and wreckage around them.

Some men regarded pin-ups as good luck charms, and nowhere was that more evident than on the flight gear and planes of bomber squads. Most plane crews personalized their bomber jackets, which were a part of their flight suits. The images they used to do this varied from crew to crew and person to person. Usually the jacket’s art included symbols that tracked the number of missions, bombs dropped, and hits on the enemy. Some jackets displayed the names and emblems of aircrafts; others had women on the back. One debriefing soldier’s jacket displays a smiling woman in a bathing suit and sun hat on a beach (Fig. 2.10). The man wearing the jacket was a member of the bomb crew for the aircraft “Bad Penny,” he had named the pin-up on his jacket “Flossie” after his wife, and he believed the

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Figure 2.9. Two members of the 274th Infantry take a break in their foxhole in France to look at a *Yank* pin-up even though the enemy is yards away, 1941-1945. Photo: US Signal Corps Photo, 70th Division Infantry Records, National Archives, posted on Fold3 by Ancestry.com.
Figure 2.10. Staff Sergeant Allen Blake, the waist gunner of the bomber, “Bad Penny,” is being debriefed on his recent German raid in France, January 12, 1944. His flight jacket bears a painting of a pin-up, which he called “Flossie,” after his wife and he believes the image brings him good luck. Photo: Bettmann Collection, Getty Images.
image brought him luck in battle. Most airmen chose and painted the images themselves, or hired artists to paint them. Antique collectors have found that, while religious imagery was not seen on bomber jackets, pin-ups, cartoons, and symbols of fortune such as rabbit’s feet were often depicted.

As for the bomb crew’s planes: most were not known by their squadron names or even by the type of aircraft they were, but by the names the bomb crews gave them. Often the names were female. Many bombers were named after pilots’ wives, such as “Margie” and “Mary Lou” of the 323rd Squadron, “Lorraine” of the 324th Squadron, and “Sweet Dish” of the 322nd Squadron. Crewmembers also often named their bombers after their daughters, as seen on the planes labeled “Little Jean” and “Shirley Jean” of the 324th Squadron. Many of the pin-ups painted on the sides of the planes had extremely suggestive monikers, such as the 323rd Squadron’s “Mount ‘n Ride,” the name given to a Varga-inspired painting of a woman

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with her buttocks high in the air and her legs stretched over her head (Fig. 2.11). Often the women painted onto planes’ nosecones were entirely naked, while others were topless with their breasts exposed for all to see. Some nose art pin-ups bore names that alluded to the deadly nature of the bombers, such as “Yankee Belle” and “Demo Darling,” which featured women riding missiles. On the nose art of the bomber “Lady Satan,” a pin-up was engulfed in flames.

Clifford M. Schultz, who served as the radio operator for the bomber “Rhapsody in Red,” complete with a red-haired Varga Girl on its side, wrote in a memoir about his sadness when the plane became scrap metal after the war: “I like to think that maybe she was made into beer cans, and now when I have a beer, maybe, just maybe, I’ll be touching her again!”

The emblems on the sides of the bombers clearly were very special to the crewmembers. Records show that, when a plane was damaged or wrecked, the crew would lovingly restore its nosecone art or duplicate it on the side of the next plane they received.

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Figure 2.11. The bomber “Mount ’n Ride” of the 323rd Squadron of the 91st Bombardment Group. Photo: 91st Bomb Group (H) Crew Photos, 91stBombGroup.com.
Despina Kakoudaki and Robert Westbrook’s claims that pin-ups were forced onto soldiers by the government is defied by the men who carefully tacked pin-ups on their walls, the GIs that went into battle with photographs tucked into their pockets, and the bombardment crews that lovingly painted women on the nosecones of their aircrafts. When Army bases and camps prohibited pin-up displays and ordered them to be taken down due to the sensibilities of their inspecting officers, soldiers continually found ways to discreetly display the images. To many men in World War II, the pin-up functioned as far more than just an image.

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33 E.L. Straisser, The Sound and The Fury, Esquire, December 1944, 10; Cpl. Al Halpern, Mail Call, Yank (USA Edition), September 24, 1943, 15; Cadets Dan Weinberg, Charley Keane, George Reimer, and Dale Briggs, Mail Call, Yank (USA Edition), September 24, 1943, 15.
Chapter Three: The Adoration

American soldiers are marching into war again…

Do we know what they are fighting for?...
You’re damn right we do. The answer is simple. It’s women.

Girls! Girls! Girls!
That’s what American manhood is fighting for. Its what we’ve been fighting
for since the days of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas….¹

“What Our Boys Are Fighting For,” 1943

Images of women were not only scattered along soldiers’ walls, in their pockets, and
on their planes; they were also praised through men’s words and thoughts. They were the
reason men fought, as the 395th Bombardment Group declared in the poem quoted above. Yet
the pin-ups’ treasured status with soldiers did not garner real women the same reverential
treatment.

When U.S. forces stationed in the Burmese and Indian theaters were surveyed on
their opinions of Red Cross women, many men showed outright hatred toward them. They
characterized these American women as “easy” or labeled them as prostitutes, yet at the same
time found them to be sexually inaccessible.² In these theaters, where white women were in
low supply, those who were there were encouraged to date as many men as possible and
attend social events for soldiers.

U.S. women at home and abroad were encouraged by media propaganda to support
the troops, usually in a romantic or sexual way. Taking care of the emotional needs of the
troops was seen as all American women’s duty. Yet, if they acted too sexually, the same

¹ “What Our Boys Are Fighting For,” The Gremlin, September 22, 1943 in Editorial, Esquire,
December 1943, 6. The Gremlin was a paper for and by the 395th Bombardment Group.
² Yasmin Khan, “Sex in an Imperial War Zone: Transnational Encounters in Second World War
media that encouraged them to support the troops would shame them for it. Not only the media, but also U.S. soldiers themselves expected women to be sexually available to them.\(^3\)

Across multiple theaters of the war, liberated women threw themselves at their American saviors or sold themselves to them to support their families in their countries’ ruined economies.\(^4\) Rejecting the attention of American GIs went against social expectations. One man spewed in a poem in *Yank*, “Down through the years it’s been the same: each daughter plays her mother’s game – the magic art of counterfeit, ’cause there are those who fall for it. Who?.... We men!”\(^5\) Negotiating this fine line between patriotism and prostitution made women across the world targets of verbal and sexual harassment when they rejected American men’s advances.\(^6\)

The stark contrast between the ill feeling toward real women and reverence for images of women highlights how absence enhanced the pin-ups’ appeal to soldiers. Pin-ups existed only as pictures, memories, letters, and dreams; the women they depicted were never truly there.\(^7\) With its physical absence, yet imaginary presence, the female body as a pin-up became something more than human and more than a body. One commentator in *Esquire* wrote of soldiers, “The point is the hunger for home, hunger so great that it takes the mind up

\(^3\) Marilyn E. Hegarty, “Patriot or Prostitute?: Sexual Discourses, Print Media, and American Women during World War II,” *Journal of Women’s History* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 112-124.


\(^6\) Khan, “Sex in an Imperial War Zone,” 250-251.

with teeth and shakes it and bangs it and rakes it into aching….”8 Soldiers wanted something more in their lives during the war, and each soldier’s wants varied.

The Bible’s Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon, best exemplifies this phenomenon in which inaccessibility elevates a desired object to religious heights of devotion. Hebrew scholar Carey Ellen Walsh believes that this book revolves around the connection between religious and sexual desire. In the Song, which is about two lovers’ memories of and longing for one another, the couple never acts out their sexual desires. Instead, the book focuses on their anticipation of sex. Walsh concludes that the Song of Songs was included in the Bible because it is not about sex, but instead offers a metaphorical exploration of the appeal of religion. Whether there is a yearning for love, sex, salvation, or hope, sexual desire and religious desire are about wanting something more from life.⁹ Just as the lovers never reach one another in the Song, God and other divine figures are not physically present in the lives of the faithful, yet they are wanted, especially in the face of worry or fear. A private sums up this emotion in his ode “Pin-Up Girl” in which he exclaims, “Come! Let me clutch thee! I have thee not, yet I see thee still….”¹⁰ The pin-ups soldiers surrounded themselves with depicted women that were craved, yet never accessible.

One lieutenant in the South Pacific wrote to Esquire that he did not understand the appeal of the pin-up, confiding that he “want[ed] to die for something more noble than the Varga Girl.”¹¹ But that is just the thing; the soldiers who died with pin-ups in their hands saw these images as much more than pin-ups. This is evident in the way that they spoke of

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9 Carey Ellen Walsh, Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 4-29.
10 William Carty, “Pin-Up Girl,” Post Exchange, Yank (USA Edition), May 14, 1943, 19. This line is also a reference to Macbeth’s soliloquy in Act 2, Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s eponymous play.
faraway lovers and pin-up girls. Staff Sergeant William R. Carty’s poem about his ex-girlfriend describes his “long, sincere devotion at [her] shrine.”\textsuperscript{12} Another poem submitted by a soldier, entitled “In Your Absence,” reveals his thoughts on his lover. In one line he thinks, “She is the incarnation of some Grecian Goddess….”\textsuperscript{13} Veteran Robert Peters’s memoir recalls of pin-ups such as Rita Hayworth and Marlene Dietrich,

They were…packaged like primary orchids growing among the lesser ones to admire rather than possess…. During the forties the phrase “sex goddess” meant something now lost – the female idealized yet so tantalizingly real, finally inaccessible to be adored as goddesses always have been….\textsuperscript{14}

To the men who worshipped pin-ups, they were not simply images; they were larger-than-life deities. The fact that most pin-ups were depictions of famous actresses or imagined drawings contributed to their mythic quality. Their subjects were women only glimpsed on pages and film screens, or man-made women with unrealistic proportions, like the Varga Girls.

The pin-up’s veneration by soldiers can also be linked to Christianity’s worship of the Virgin Mary. The Madonna is, of course, known most for her role as a mother. The pin-up, in particular the Varga Girl, may not seem maternal, with her seductive poses and revealing clothing, but her large breasts, wide hips, and small waist indicate to viewers biological markers of a fertile woman. When Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth had children during the war, their popularity as pin-ups skyrocketed, suggesting that GIs desired women with whom they could have a family and that women with maternal qualities reminded them of their own mothers.\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{15} Robert D. Westbrook, ““I Want a Girl. Just Like the Girl that Married Harry James”’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II,” \textit{American Quarterly} 42, no. 4 (December 1990): 600.
\end{flushleft}
Soldiers’ preferences for maternal images, likely came from assumptions about women based on their relationships with their own mothers. Their desire for motherly women also probably evolved from the pervasiveness of the Virgin Mary and church culture in pre-World War II America. Soldiers would have seen the Madonna in nativity scenes at Christmas time, heard about her in church and school, and even would have seen New Deal art in public buildings that intentionally mirrored Madonna and Child paintings.  

The presence of the Madonna in American culture and internalized ideas about women based on their own mothers likely contributed to some soldiers’ preferences for less sexualized pin-ups. As one sergeant wrote to Yank, “A bouquet of roses to you for your excellent choice of Betty Jane Graham as a pin-up girl. She struck me as being a typical American girl …. I’m just a bit tired of looking at a lot of sexy leg pictures of pin-up girls and prefer more wholesome pictures….“ Another group of GIs from Brooklyn wrote to their hometown newspaper, “We have become weary of viewing the professional pin-up girls that cover our walls…. What we would enjoy very much are some pictures or photos of some real, honest-to-goodness natives of God’s Country – Brooklyn.” As seen in the previous chapter, a great many pin-ups were headshots, hung inside soldiers’ private quarters. The headshots gave the pin-ups the look of the chaste “typical American girl” the sergeant requested. These pin-ups do not have the overt sexuality of the Varga Girl or Hurrell photographs. The women look like they could be friends, sisters, girlfriends, or wives the GIs

18 “Boro GIs, Scoffing at Movie Star Pinups; Demand Photos of Brooklyn Glamour Girls,” The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, December 17, 1944, 2.  
19 Urwiller, Mail Call, 14.
left behind, which may have been why they were chosen. Images like these made the foxholes, huts, and barracks feel like home.

That pin-ups reminded GIs of female family and friends is also supported by the fact that multiple men wrote to *Yank* requesting “mom pin-ups” to remind them of home.\(^{20}\) The magazine once featured “Pin-ups for Papa,” which showed multiple wives of men overseas holding their babies, evoking Madonna and Child imagery (Fig. 3.1).\(^{21}\) When overseas fighter pilot George Rarey received a letter from his wife announcing that their son had been born, he declared in reply, “You are the official Madonna of the 379\(^{th}\…” \(^{22}\) Another issue of *Yank* showed a photograph of a soldier whose sister was a pin-up model adding her picture to his wall collection.\(^{23}\) Many companies made young girls their official pin-ups. Often, the girls were members’ daughters, but some were not at all related to any of the men and served as surrogate daughters for dozens of young soldiers.\(^{24}\) Pin-ups were more than female bodies, then; they could also represent real people in soldiers’ lives in the United States.

As the images in Chapter Two show, moreover, a wall of pin-ups gave GIs multitudes of female eyes watching over them, guarding them, protecting them, and giving these men the feeling that someone cared about whether they lived or died. *Esquire* even used religious metaphors to market their Varga Girls as guardians. A 1942 flyer for the Varga Girl calendar


Figure 3.1. “Pin-Ups for Papa” from *Yank*, July 2, 1943. Photo: *Yank: The Army Weekly*, United States Army.
declares it “the Koran of the faithful… presiding over the days and nights… like a knowing muse.” An advertisement for the 1943 Varga girl calendar claims “she’ll watch over you like a guiding star.”

The pin-up in battle functioned much like a Saint Christopher medal or the rosary that some Catholics carry to protect them. Just as Saint Christopher watches over travelers, the pin-up tucked into their pockets or painted on the sides of planes served as talismans of good fortune and protection during the war. Paralleling pin-up art, an image titled “Ave Maria” on a bomber of the 447th Bombardment Squadron depicts the Virgin Mary in a blue veil with a face that bears a remarkable resemblance to pin-up model Jane Russell’s (Fig. 3.2). The bomber’s name “Ave Maria,” also refers to the Catholic prayer “Hail Mary,” which invokes Mary to intercede with God on the behalf of sinners; this is an appropriate invocation considering the death and wreckage that bombers were capable of inflicting.

There is also the “Pin-Up Madonna,” originally called “Mary, Immaculate, Queen of Peace” (Fig. 3.3). This image was created by a seminarian after an overseas Army chaplain requested a religious pin-up for soldiers. By 1944, the “Pin-Up Madonna” was in the possession of over 24,500 servicemen. It portrays the Virgin Mary as a young, white woman, with heavily lashed eyes, dark hair visible underneath her veil, and a thin halo.

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25 *Esquire*, January 1942, 137.
26 *Esquire*, January 1943, 193.
Figure 3.2. The nose art of the bomber “Ave Maria” of the 321st Bombardment Group, March 17, 1945. Photo: Bureau of Public Relations, National Archives, posted on Fold3 by Ancestry.com.
Figure 3.3. The “Pin-Up Madonna”. Print: Robert L. Heim, Holy Ghost Fathers, US Provincial of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.
framing her head. She looks innocent and pretty; if it were not for the veil and halo, she could easily pass for one of the less-sexual pin-ups that circulated during the war. The “Ave Maria” bomber and “Pin-Up Madonna” show just how blurred the lines between religious objects and pin-ups could become during the war.

While medals and the worship of the Virgin are Catholic practices, the pluralistic atmosphere of World War II America broke down dividing lines between different religious faiths and between religious and non-religious people. While Protestantism was predominant in America, many Catholic groups used the war to spread their message. In particular, the National Catholic Community Service (NCSS) used its participation in the United Service Organization (USO) to hand out to servicemen at home and abroad over 4.3 million rosaries, 12.6 million prayer books, 4.3 million medals, and tens of millions of other items from 1941 to 1946. Catholicism thus became such a ubiquitous presence in the war zones that many non-Catholic soldiers wore Mary medals or carried rosaries for protection. A chaplain in the South Pacific said that once when he was in a badly injured plane and he and other Catholics aboard were saying the rosary for a safe landing, the ship’s Jewish gunner joined them and took out a medal of the Madonna. After the plane landed, the chaplain asked the gunner why he carried the medal and he responded, “I always carry the Blessed Mother with me. I know she’s the person who gets us out of these scrapes.”

Like pin-ups, Catholic practices were present on the battlefield. A Navy veteran once told a NCSS club,

You don’t know what it is out there. Confession sometimes takes a while, because you have to stop to pick off the snipers, but the padre understands.

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The guns keep firing as you stand at Mass. You have a revolver in one hand and a rosary in the other.33

The imagery of a soldier praying while in combat echoes the images of soldiers in battle taking moments to look at pin-ups despite the death and imminent danger surrounding them. The momentary reprieve offered by the rosary, or a glossy pin-up ripped out of a magazine, gave GIs a haven in a horrific environment.

The Virgin Mary serves as a reminder of Christ’s compassion and humanity for many Catholics and, pin-ups served a similar purpose for some men.34 On the battlefield, the pin-up not only protected soldiers; she also haunted them. In the heat of war, it was easy to get lost in all of the brutality. As one technician describes in a prayer published in Yank: “The bitter curse of war is everywhere, with blood and flame, sorrow mixed with fear, and Death, instead of Angels, rides the air.”35 In battle, soldiers recalled or evoked women to remind themselves of who they were beyond their identities as warriors. A private writes in one poem1

… I try to hold  
Myself in the changing balance, uselessly  
Struggling for retention in the mold  
Of what I am, and what I want to be:  
Then let the swirl of happenings subside.  
And I will cast far into memory  
For a lake, and a walk, and evening’s tide.  
And you in the sunlight, and you with me:  
But when the pause of memory is done,  
My hands will clench around my heated gun.36

Another soldier evokes a nameless woman in his poem, promising that on a sunny day.

She will come to you
In the warm sun and the hot earth
And the hungry days.
She will be touching you
And you will feel naked and humble
Beside her.\(^{37}\)

In both of these poems women serve as haunting focal points for men. They remind them that they are loved and most of all that they are human. In the second poem, the woman is everywhere; she is the sunlight, the ground, and even the hunger in the writer’s stomach.

In the two poems, women serve not only as protectors, but also as forgiving figures that soften the reality of war. These supplications to women for redemption mirror the Hail Mary that the “Ave Maria” bomber references. The traditional words of the prayer are: “Hail Mary, full of grace. Our lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”\(^{38}\) The bomber and poem are soldiers’ different ways of asking women for forgiveness and mercy, similar to the final sentence in particular, in which the prayer pleads for absolution.

The pin-up girls that protected men on the battlefield and watched over them in combat zones were in return adored by their subjects. Like European crusaders returning from a mission to the Holy land, the soldiers showered women back home with gifts and tributes in an effort to show them how much their image meant to GIs. A Marine in the Far East theater sent his wife monthly gifts such as a grass skirt outfit, coats, sarongs, blouses,


and jewelry from the places he was stationed. In turn, she would create pin-ups in which she modeled the gifts for him (Fig. 3.4).\textsuperscript{39} One Navy Lieutenant left the was promising his girlfriend a “jap,” and he delivered in 1944 when he mailed her a skull of a Japanese soldier, signed by the lieutenant and thirteen of his buddies. \textit{Life} magazine photographed this woman writing a thank-you note for the skull, which she named Tojo after Japan’s prime minister.\textsuperscript{40}

While the lieutenant in the South Pacific may have thought there were better things to die for than a pin-up, many GIs found these images of women to be worth sacrificing their lives for.\textsuperscript{41} Like saints and deities of religions past and present, the pin-up gave men something to fight for and watched over them in battle and at rest. The pin-ups’ smiling faces were a light in the darkness of combat; they symbolized hope and compassion, reminding soldiers that there was much more to life than war.

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{39} \textbf{“Life’s Cover,”} \textit{Life}, June 28, 1943, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Stuart Bernstein, \textit{The Sound and The Fury}, \textit{Esquire}, June 1944, 10.
\end{itemize}
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Figure 3.4 - Sybil Myersburg, models one of her many gifts from her husband, Marine Captain Robert Myersburg, on the June 28, 1943 cover of *Life*. Photo: The LIFE Picture Collection, Getty Images.
Conclusion: The Aftermath

Overseas, we goggled at our wives’ pictures day and night. We stuck them up in our foot-lockers and argued about whose was most beautiful. Now we get home and our two-by-four pin-ups suddenly become strange life-sized women. It’s when we prefer the pin-ups that we walk out. That’s what happened to me.

Spoken to a *New York Times* reporter by a man identified only as a “saddened lieutenant,” these words reflect dramatic changes that occurred when World War II was over. With the war’s end, American life was assumed to go back to normal. Women were expected quit their jobs and return to the home, and men were supposed to go back to their previous occupations and settle down with a wife and children. But the reality is that the war had changed everyone, and Americans were no longer the people they were at its outbreak. For women, the soldiers they wrote letters and sent pictures to and envisioned as gallant heroes were now tangible and many were not the gentlemen they had expected. The women soldiers prayed to and looked to for salvation were suddenly real, and some men were not able to cope with the reality of the women they once adored. For many couples, whose love was based on idealistic views of one another, their relationships fell apart when they were greeted with the actuality of each other.

The sad truth of what happened between many men and their pin-ups after the war highlights the fact that the pin-ups that soldiers venerated during the war were more than images and more than women. Women’s physical absence allowed them to become legends. Idealized to the extreme, pin-ups helped soldiers survive. Pin-up girls, even the famous ones like Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth, were not goddesses or saviors; they were women, both flawed and mortal. The end of the war shattered men’s disillusions.

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The story of Jean Bartlett is particularly poignant to this point. During the war, she believed it was her duty to send pin-ups to soldiers, to write to them, date them, and make them feel important. She was only sixteen when the war ended and had lied about her age during the war. When the soldiers to whom she had written to returned home, some wanted to marry her. When she had to reject one of the soldiers, he told her, “You’re the one that kept me surviving.” She had meant everything to him during the war. For her, as a young fourteen years old at the war’s peak, the war held a different meaning:

The war was just a game to me. I didn’t know what it was. I had a number of letters come back, marked “Deceased.” I didn’t know what that meant. One said “Expired.” I had to look it up. I thought it meant my stamp wasn’t any good. I wasn’t even sure which boy it was, because they all became one uniform…. The war absolutely ruined me.²

Jean’s story showcases how the glorification that women and soldiers projected onto one another set them up for disappointment when the war ended. This aftermath shows how the intensity of soldiers’ love for the images was specific to wartime. The social, cultural, political, and technological circumstances of World War II created an atmosphere in which the pin-up could be seen as a figure of worship comparable to the Virgin Mary.

Exploration of the pin-up’s significance to GIs during World War II is important because it offers a great deal of insight into our society’s views of women and the social history of the war. World War II pin-ups today are often only spoken of in nostalgia pieces and coffee-table picture books; yet as artifacts they are embedded with immensely rich histories about the American men and women of the war years.

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A large number of the primary sources referenced in this thesis are photographs. The majority of the images consulted are from The LIFE Picture Collection at Getty Images, Corbis Images Bettmann Collection, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and member contributions uploaded to Ancestry.com’s affiliate military records site Fold3.

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