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The Mark I and the Canvas of War: Gender Roles and Military Vehicles

An Object Project for HIST 100-04, Fall 2022, William and Mary

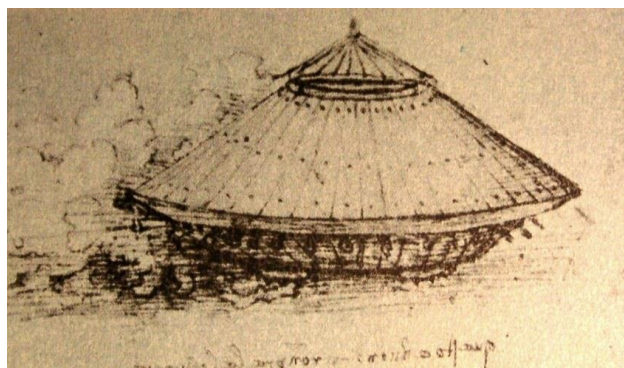
By Coran Goss

When my professor introduced us to our COLL-100 final project about telling stories with certain objects, I knew that I wanted to research something related to the military. Weapons, vehicles, uniforms, and other military equipment can give insight into how industrially advanced a country is, not only militarily, but also economically and culturally. In the following project, I describe the process that I went through when conducting my research on a tank I found in a British museum, as well as exploring the narrative pushed by the museum exhibit the tank is located in. I will demonstrate how I utilized course texts and outside sources from peer-reviewed journals, images, books, and museum websites to construct a narrative that covers very different subject matter when compared to the narrative the Tank Museum pushes.

Guns n' Trenches: The Museum Story of the Mark I



If you were to ever travel to the county of Dorset in south-west England, you would find yourself in the heartland of tank history. Dorset is home to the Bovington Garrison and the subsequent Bovington Tank Museum which, as its name implies, is home to one of, if not the largest collection of military tanks and vehicles in the entire world and is home to the oldest surviving combat vehicle still around today: the Mark I tank, [1] shown above. [2]



1 - Leonardo Da Vinci designed this fighting vehicle during the fourteenth and fifteenth century. It is regarded as one of the first designs for an armored vehicle in history. [3]

The idea of an armored fighting vehicle has been around for a long time with the conceptualization of Leonardo DaVinci's armored fighting vehicle back in 1487. [4] However, the concept of the tank as we know it today began during the first World War with a very specific purpose: breaking stalemates. "The Trench Experience" exhibit tells of the necessity of the tank to break through enemy lines during WWI [5] as it became extremely hard to break through enemy fortification with the development of the machine gun and effective artillery. The First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, created the British Landship Committee, which was tasked with designing an armored fighting vehicle to "tackle the problem of trench warfare" that was occurring on the western front. The answer was the "Landship", codenamed the tank to prevent the Germans from figuring out what they were trying to develop. [6]



2 - The first functional prototype the Landship Committee produced, nicknamed "Little Willie". It was shortly replaced by the Mark I after being constructed. [7]

The first functional prototype of the tank was created in 1915, nicknamed "Little Willie". However, this design was soon replaced by the prototype "Mother" and the subsequent Mark I tank as the committee immediately began exploring new designs that were able to cross trenches more efficiently. [8] *The Trench Experience* puts heavy emphasis on the idea of "stalemates" into the reasoning for the creation of the tank. [9] You can see this via the elaborate recreation of the WWI battlefield, utilizing several props and artifacts, as well as depicting soldiers receiving injuries and suffering from PTSD. [10] Overlooking all this terror atop one of the makeshift trenches is the Mark I, almost shining down on the visitor as if it was a gift from God. I believe that this is intentional to make the tank appear as a sort of "savior" to the men who fought in the trenches because of the vehicles capability to break the stalemate of the western front and bring the war, and therefore the terror, to a close, although it is impossible to know what the curator's true intentions are. Interestingly, the World War II section of the Tank Museum does not focus on the war itself compared to WWI and *The Trench Experience*, but that is just something interesting I noted when brainstorming.



3 - The tank appears to overlook the exhibit, always above the visitors below. I speculate that this may be to elevate the tank's status, literally and metaphorically, as a necessity for the soldiers during WWI. [11]

The Tank Museum also wants to emphasize how important the tank was in world affairs via its other exhibits, such as *The Tank Story*, which emphasizes how “this important British invention helped shape world history with its domination on the battlefield.” [12] Another exhibit, *Warhorses to Horsepower* describes how “the mud of the Western Front saw the beginning of the end for horse mounted cavalry and the rise of the tank.” [13] Clearly, in my view, the museum places high regard on the tank's technical advancement and further supports the idea that the Tank Museum aims to celebrate the tank as a sort of revolutionary machine that brought about a new age of warfare.

Beyond the Trenches: Brainstorming With/Beyond Course Texts



I had seen numerous propaganda posters for World War I before starting this project at the American History Museum, and I knew I could find more online to spark inspiration for what I wished to discuss about my object. I knew that many pieces of propaganda contained imagery that was commonly associated with being “masculine” to appeal to young males to join whatever conflict they were promoting. Immediately upon searching these recruitment posters, plumes of fire, fierce animals, and numerous tanks, as seen in the image above [14], pushed my mind into the territory of one of my course

texts: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's essay "Why We Need Things", which discusses the relationships humans have with objects. More specifically, the "Objects of Power" section focuses on ideas of objects as reflections of a person's personal power. He remarks that male notions of power "tend to be synonymous with traditional virile virtues such as strength and endurance." [15] I wanted to see how I could fit the tank into this idea of conveying power not just through practical application, but how the tank could be seen as a symbol of male power, with the conception of power being a "stronger impetus in the development of technology than the search for survival and comfort" [16] being a factor into pushing me more towards gender roles in vehicles. What if the tank was developed not just for breaking trenches, but also to demonstrate a sense of power and might against enemies during WWI?



4 - Carol Cohn, the author of "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals". [17]

This idea of gender roles and military vehicles stuck with me, especially after delving into the topic during my international relations class, where we discussed Carol Cohn's essay "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals", which highlights Cohn's experience attending a nuclear strategy workshop. The essay describes the "ubiquitous weight of gender, both in social relations and in the language itself; it is an almost entirely male world." [18] In addition, the quote "there is a rich and increasingly vast body of theoretical work exploring the gendered aspects of war and militarism" [19] influenced me to dive into the language that was used to refer these tanks, such as naming conventions. How did the language used to describe these vehicles play and tinker with stereotypes of typical gender roles and ideas?



Donald J. Trump 
@realDonaldTrump



North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the “Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.” Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!

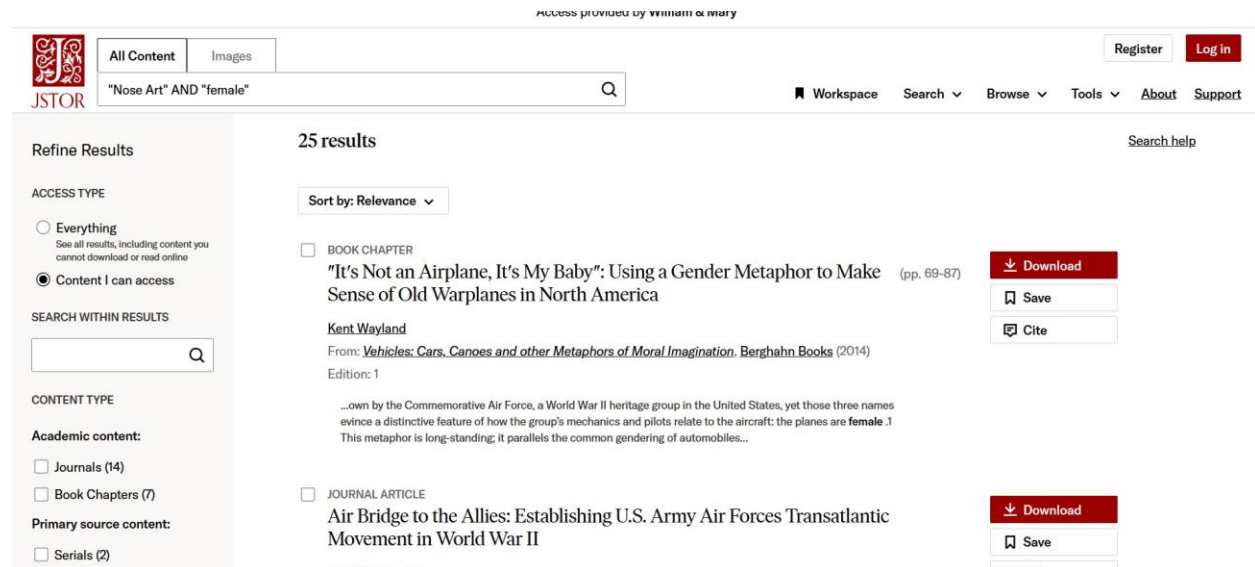
12:49 am · 3 Jan 2018

122,071 Retweets 288,470 Likes

5 - Images such as the one above illustrates Cohn’s point about the use of sex-based language is used by males in the defense world. [20]

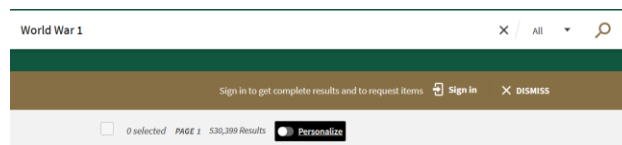
When reading Giorgio Riello’s essay “Things that Shape History,” which discusses how objects can be used to shape and determine contexts of history, I was especially influenced by Riello’s idea of the “History of Things”. “History of Things” discusses areas of history that objects play a part in, in this case, military vehicles. [21] This was important as I needed to broaden my subject matter as few resources existed on the direct connection between gender roles and tanks. I began not only looking at tanks, but other military vehicles such as planes and boats. Riello influenced me not only to think about tanks, but about the wider concept of gender and vehicles. What could be an explicit form of gender stereotyping on these kinds of vehicles? After discussions with my professor, a specific idea popped into my head when I decided to go back and look through objects I had brainstormed before I had arrived at the Mark I. Nose art! What was a more explicit representation of gender stereotyping than nose art? In addition, I also thought about how boats were very commonly referred to with feminine pronouns. Even my own grandfather did this with his tiny motorboat. This took my idea of language and meshed it together with the presence of artwork. I wanted to use tanks to discuss the overarching narrative of gendered language and artwork in military vehicles. Referring to Riello’s way of thinking, I wanted to tell the history of military vehicles relating to gender.

Through No-Man's Land: Researching the Connections Between Tanks and Gender

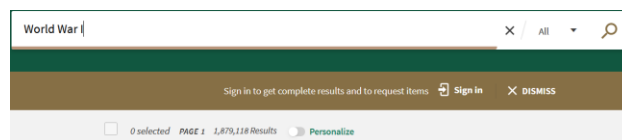


Searching for articles/media about the relationship between female and nose art in JSTOR. [22]

Typically, with brainstorming, I like to look at what sources I can find about a given topic first before deciding if there is enough information on my given topic. When I first began brainstorming about what I wished to discuss about tanks, my first instinct was to draw a direct connection between tanks and gender in some form or another, such as naming conventions or the language used by people who created the tank in the first place. I began my search utilizing the Swem library PRIMO database and the Rockefeller Library's search tool with the term <military tank> to start broad, and eventually narrow the searches down to items specifically about my topic. An interesting tidbit about the "title" of World War I came to my attention during my first dives into the Swem database, where the term <Tank WW1> returned no results until I replaced the "1" with a roman numeral "I". Collecting and noting these important barriers to the search process was important so that I did not waste my time searching combinations of terms that would yield little to no results.

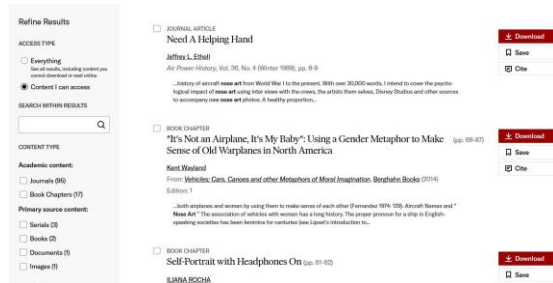


6 - Image of two screenshots with 'World War I' as a search term and 'World War 1' as the other. Caption: Just a small change can incite a massive decrease in the number of results that turn up. [23]



7 - Image of two screenshots with 'World War I' as a search term and 'World War 1' as the other. Caption: Just a small change can incite a massive decrease in the number of results that turn up. [24]

The biggest change to my research process came after I was having trouble finding these direct connections between gender roles and tanks. After discussing the lack of information with research staff at Swem library, as well as my professor, we determined that while documentation of gendered qualities may be few for tanks, they may exist for other military vehicles. I recalled from my travels to the Air and Space Museum how pilots used to paint often sexualized women onto their planes, as well as name their planes or call them with female pronouns. We determined that I was looking to narrowly into this direct connection, and that I needed to broaden my scope, just like what Riello stated about “History of Things”, where military tanks were part of an area of history, military vehicles, which I could discuss in more detail.



8 - JSTOR provided a wealth of information about nose art and its relation to gender that allowed me to really dive into the topic of gender and vehicles. It was actually more beneficial than Swem library. [24]

However, even with this change, I quickly realized that this broader topic was not necessarily documented under entire books dedicated to the subject, but an inclusion into other broader subjects. So, I began browsing the EBESCO and JSTOR site for articles and book chapters to use for studies into nose art with terms such as <"nose art">, <"nose art" AND "gender">, etc. These searches would surprisingly return only a few results, but these few results provided a wealth of information into my topic, which will be seen during my beyond-museum story. From my experience consuming popular culture about navies having a grandfather in the navy, I knew that many sailors called their ships “her”, as well as crafted figureheads of male and female figures to place on their ships. I utilized new search engines, including CRETO and Google Scholar at the recommendation of my professor to do further research into the terms <Ships AND Gender AND Pronouns> or <Ships AND Feminine> and found a few basic sources, as well as specific book chapters, essays, and articles that would guide me on my way towards including ships in my beyond-museum story.

One thing eluded me however, and that was instances of artwork on tanks. A basic google search of <Tank Nose Art> revealed a few examples of tank nose art, but other search engines left me frustrated on the lack of information. However, when I searched on the Tank Museum’s website for <Paint>, an article titled “Camouflage and Paint in WWI” which provided evidence as to why tanks did not commonly have nose art when compared to planes or ships. [25] While tanks were lackluster as an expression of gender, they could be used as a jumping off point to dive into other military vehicles.

A Beautiful, but Frustrating Machine: Gender Roles and Military Vehicles.



Starting With Ships, the Goddesses of the Sea

The English language has had a long history of personifying ships as feminine, with a few exceptions. Many members of the Royal Navy “talk about a ship as having a life, soul, a spirit, a personality, and a character of her own.” [26] This “spirit” manifests in the form of, as author Silva Rodgers writes, “the all-powerful mother who nurtures and offers womb-like protection; and the enchantress of whom a man can never be certain.” [27] But why is this the case? Why would sailors crave this idea of a mother figure or an enchantress when out at sea?



9 - Sailors often face perilous conditions at sea, and thus, ships were personified as mothers because of the motherly instinct to protect their children. [28]

Put simply, the sea is terrifying, and leaves sailors desiring motherly protection against it. In being at sea, sailors are often faced with a “disorienting, frightening, as well as awe-inspiring” [29] environment. Rodgers writes how the environment to a sailor is not “natural” to a human, with a lack of female presence and being on the open, and often violent sea for months on end. So, it is not difficult to imagine why sailors would crave a mother figure: because a mother figure provides protection. As James Mellefont in his essay “Heirlooms and Tea Towels” remarks how it “takes a determined rationalist to resist a powerful sense of identification” [30] when discussing how sailors experiencing life or death situations personify the craft that had protected them. A mother provides a “symbol of rebirth” [31] which relieves a sailor’s stress from the unknown horrors of the sea. The ocean provides a “need for mystical protection that emanates from women” that both the feminine ideas of mothers and enchantresses encompass in a superstitious context. [32]



10 - Image of a lion figurehead from an unknown small British warship. Caption: Lions were commonly used up until the end of the 18th century. In my opinion, they may have symbolized power and aggression due to how lions are often portrayed to the public as fierce killers. [33]



11 - Women figureheads were common after the 18th century, possibly providing sailors with superstitious reassurance of feminine-based protection during rough periods at sea. [34]

Figureheads also played an important role into not only the personification of ships, but also exemplifying power. Lions were a common figurehead on vessels up until the end of the 18th century [35], which may have been used to “instill fear in enemies” [36], along with possibly other more masculine figures based on my observations. Only until the beginning of the 19th century did female figureheads become popular. Figureheads were commonly nude back then, which may have represented either a motherly situation for sailors, or that through superstition nudity was promoted to calm a storm at sea. [37] In my opinion, it looks like this may have something to do females commonly being associated with caring, motherly qualities that would be perfect for calming down aggressiveness in the sea.

Personifying Planes: From Protection to Desire

Of course, gender roles and the idea of personifying women as vehicles not only found their way into sailors and their ships, but to pilots and their planes during World War I and II. The practice amongst sailors may be partially why planes received a similar level of personification as psychologist George R. Klare notes in his contribution to “Aircraft Nose Art: From WWI to Today”. [38] Nose art may have been a big way these sentiments were expressed. The practice of nose art on military aircraft began just a couple of years before the start of World War I with an Italian plane in 1913 being “painted like a sea monster with a face, teeth, eyes, and large ears”. [39] While most of the time “nose art” during WWI would be relegated to simply a squadron’s insignia, depictions of women on planes did exist. World War II saw a large increase in the number of depictions of women on aircraft, often in a sexual or sexually charged manner. [40]



12 - WWI nose art commonly took the form of insignias, such as this black horse. [41]



13 - Nose art often displayed women in sexual poses or with little to no clothing. They could possibly be referencing both real or fictional women. [42]

But why do this? What does this kind of artwork and naming say about the men who fought during the war? One could think of planes as a “vessel” for a reflection of the desires of the heterosexual male. Because the prevalence of women in manufacturing increased during World War II, it became much more likely that planes would be manufactured by women. By tying an object, in this case an airplane, to sexual desire, it becomes a way for men to “control” their objects of desire. The practice, as author Wayland Kent puts it, “establishes male control over technologies like these vehicles.” [43] In addition, Kent expresses the sentiments of soldiers viewing women as “complicated” or being “high maintenance”, which draws into focus with the personification of airplanes. The plane reflects a relationship between men and women in the areas of how many men saw relationships back in the day. “Indeed, the positive dimensions of the relationship, the intimacy and affection, become explanations for why the pilot or mechanic tolerates the negative dimensions, the caprice and difficulty.” [44] In essence, aircraft and women are connected in a way because they are both complicated, but incredibly beautiful. This can go both in positive or negative directions, but it is good to note that “ultimately, [the metaphor for planes and women] reinforces hierarchy of gendered spheres, with the masculine sphere predominating.” [45]



14 - Women on nose art may have been seen as a blessing or as a protectorate to get the men home safe. [46]

However, this notion of control is not the only way men derived benefit from personifying their planes as female, but also the myth of war goddesses and motherly figures. Some historians, such as Tracy Bilsing, offer a contrast from the typical notion of sexism because men personify their planes as female, and instead harken back to the idea of the reversal of gender roles during warfare, called the “modern war goddess.” [47] Bilsing discusses how female nudity and sexuality has been used throughout history to convey notions of female power and control in sharp contrast to the typically male-dominated view of power. Moreover, some ideas of the “motherly” figure carry over from ships. The idea of the “nurturing” female/mother figure protecting sailors from the sea or from enemy vessels may have been brought over to planes as these planes acted as protection from the deadly flak crews often faced. In essence, these ships and planes brought protection to men caught in an unfamiliar environment to the natural human, and thus categorized these vehicles as motherly figures who protected them in these environments. [48]

Where are the tanks?

Unlike planes and ships, it is very hard to find tanks that had any sort of personalization that could represent gender dynamics, but there is some information available to derive educated guesses. Tanks were created via the “Landship Committee” by first Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill [49], so it plausible that many of the names or personification of ships would carry over to tanks just like planes. In fact, a prototype of the Mark I was nicknamed “Mother”, which may derive from a “motherly figure” type role that protected the crew from enemy fire. This is simply speculation on my part, however, and would require further evidence to support this hypothesis.

Gender did explicitly play into the designation of tank roles during World War I. Tanks were, however, designated into male and female roles, with male tanks having two 6-pounder cannons, and female tanks being equipped with machine guns. [50] This may be because the cannons may be interpreted in a sexual context as male genitalia, or because of the increase in firepower these cannons possess in contrast to machine gun fire. Supporting this “sexual context” theory is that tanks were called “hermaphrodites” if they contained both cannons and machine guns, with hermaphrodite being a term for someone with both male and female sex organs. I garnered this idea from Carol Cohn's "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals" who remarks about the use of sexual language to designate items of destruction, such as nuclear weapons. [51]



15 - While tank nose art was rare, Captain Clifford Rice did allow his men to paint their tanks with a 'devil scheme' during the Korean War to scare/intimidate the enemy. [52]

Nose-art is very difficult to find on tanks in contrast to planes, and even boats. According to the Tank Museum website, tanks were camouflaged during the introduction of the tank. Nose art and other custom paint jobs may have interfered with this camouflage and could possibly result in aerial reconnaissance picking up on the tank. [53] Despite mud largely replacing the need for camouflage, it is hard to find any instances of tank nose-art at all. The one exception may be "Rice's Red Devils" during the Korean War who painted animals and demons onto the front of their tanks to scare enemy Chinese soldiers via their superstition. [54]

Planes, ships, and to a lesser extent, tanks all contain a rich history of how sailors, pilots, and tankers dealt with a woman-less military. The next time you go to the Air and Space Museum and catch a glimpse of a "raunchy looking" woman on the front of an airplane, you'll have a better sense of how male soldiers viewed their vehicles as complicated, cumbersome, but also beautiful.

Endnotes: The 'Materials' of the Presentation

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- [23] Coran Goss. Comparison of library search using 'World War I' and 'World War 1'. 14 December, 2022.
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