

Director: Ann Pearson  
 Producers: Kathleen Shannon  
 Yuki Yoshida

**H**OW THEY SAW US is a video compilation of films made about women during the 1940s and 1950s. This twenty-year period saw significant changes in the role and status of women in Canadian society. The eight films presented here reflect those changes and serve as a graphic reminder of the values and attitudes of that time. Often enlightening, sometimes heartrending, they offer a window onto our recent past.

**WOMEN AT WAR (1942)** This British film accepts women's participation in the war effort as a natural outgrowth of their peacetime pursuits. (10 min. 23 sec.)

**WINGS ON HER SHOULDER (1943)** While commending the role played by Canadian airwomen, the central message of this recruitment film is that women only serve "so that men might fly." (11 min. 07 sec.)

**PROUDLY SHE MARCHES (1943)** Another recruitment film that celebrates women in the armed forces, while implying that their jobs are temporary and even unnatural. (18 min. 27 sec.)

**CAREERS AND CRADLES (1947)** A film to reassure us that since women's equality was now a reality, the most suitable and "modern" focus was "scientific" homemaking and informed consumerism. (11 min. 07 sec.)

**WOMEN AT WORK (1958)** A film that elevates repetitive, often menial work to the status of worthwhile and desirable career pursuits for women. (12 min. 5 sec.)

**SERVICE IN THE SKY (1957)** While glamorizing a service sector job, this film suggests that marriage is the natural end of a woman's working life. (9 min. 48 sec.)

**NEEDLES AND PINS (1957)** In this story of a factory seamstress, a brief moment of glamour is seen as an adequate substitute for job satisfaction. (10 min. 55 sec.)

**IS IT A WOMAN'S WORLD? (1957)** This film perpetuates the myth that women succeed best when they manipulate men through sex and marriage. (29 min. 20 sec.)

108 min. 36 sec.

Order number: B 0177 374 (b & w)

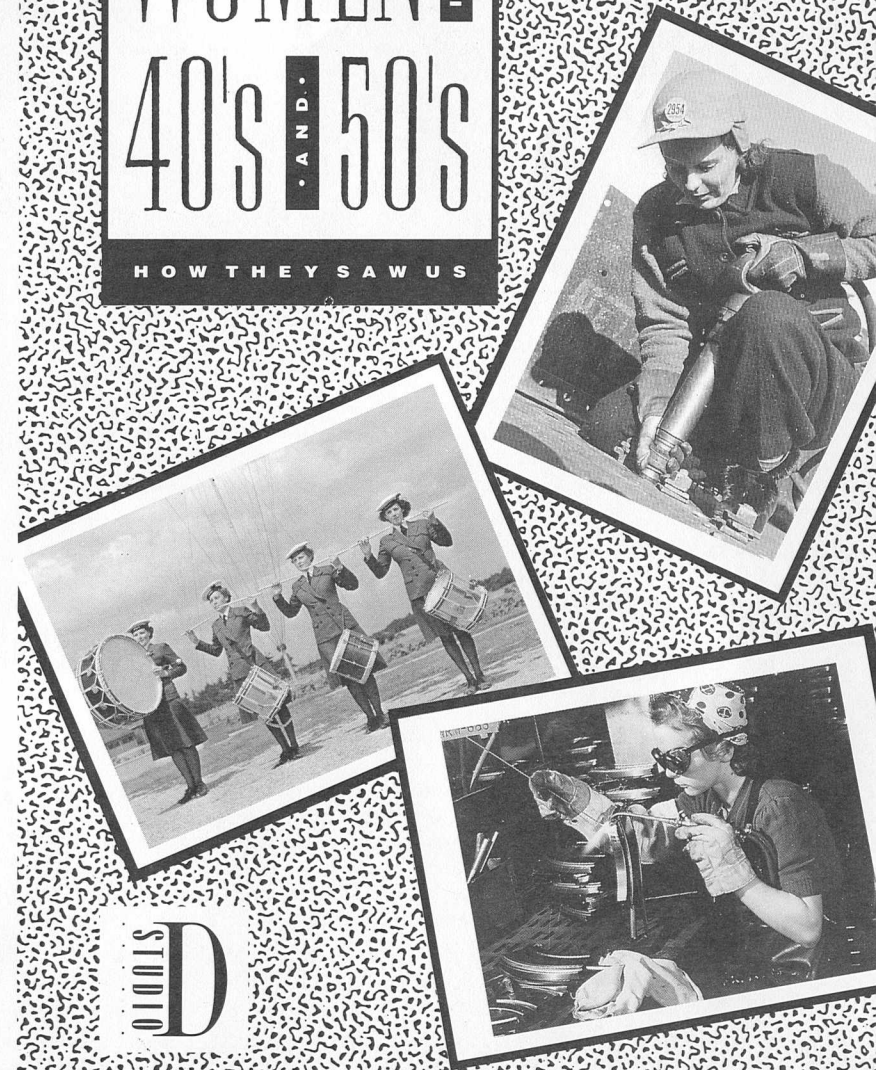
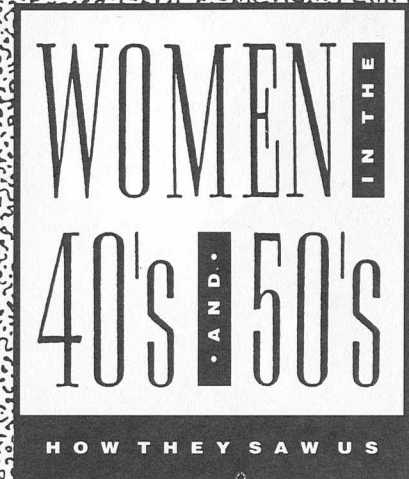
PRINTED IN CANADA

VHS  
 113B  
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WOMEN  
 IN THE  
 40's  
 AND  
 50's  
 HOW THEY SAW US



FROM THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA



# WOMEN IN THE 40's AND 50's HOW THEY SAW US

108 min. 36 sec.

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Video, Black and White

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world” of masculine work and the fantasy world of feminine glamour and ambitionless inconsequence, the post-war films attempt to re-establish it. Careers outside the home are often portrayed as subtly abnormal. Homemaking and consumerism are presented as attractive alternatives to paid work.

The series ends in the 1950s. Films made later reflect similar trends and can be subjected to a similar analysis. These films were chosen for historical purposes - to document one period in Canada's recent past.

**THE ERIN REPORT: The Portrayal of Sex Roles in Programming and Advertising on Canadian Television and Radio** (1985), documents the portrayal of sex roles in Canadian broadcast media in the autumn of 1984, following two years of industry self-regulation.

### Some findings:

- In English television programming, women account for 29% of all appearances by program staff in news and public affairs programming. Men account for 71%.
- Women account for 21% of persons interviewed in news and public affairs and the majority of women appear as witnesses to an event or non-experts. Men account for 79% and the majority appear as central figures or experts.
- 16% of the characters portrayed in children's cartoons are women and 74% are men. 10% of the characters do not have a clearly identifiable sex.
- 41% of the characters portrayed in adult drama are women; 59% are men. Women appear more frequently than men in the home, with family members, as parents of children, and in a number of other home and family-based roles. Men were more often associated with paid work, driving vehicles, and possession of weapons.
- In adult drama, characters in the age groups 36-50 and 51-65 contain more than twice as many men as women. The number of female and male characters is nearly identical in all other age groups.
- In English television advertising, 43% of characters are women and 57% are men.
- Voiceovers are present in 76% of ads. Among these, 86% have male voiceovers, 10% have female voiceovers and 4% have both.
- 16% of women compared with 37% of men are portrayed as having paid employment.
- Ads that show the preparation of food tend to feature women and girls while ads that show the consumption of food tend to feature men and boys.
- 5% of all women appearing in ads are visible minorities. The proportion of men is 8%.

The 1940s and 1950s witnessed an intense definition and re-definition of women's roles in society. The war years demanded women's participation in the workforce yet the post-war period saw the vast majority forced out of their jobs to make way for returning servicemen. Retrieved from the archives of the National Film Board of Canada, the eight films in this video compilation reflect these social trends. They reveal, often unwittingly, the socio-political preoccupations which produced them and which dominate their imagery.

All of the films focus on working women. All of them imply that there are limits to women's full participation in the labour force. Those limits were set by an underlying and fixed notion of what society deemed to be "appropriate" behaviour for women.

With the exception of *Women at War*, all of the films were made by men. What unites them is the enormous difficulty that "women-as-subject" presented to the male filmmakers of the time. To a large extent, they reflect the confusion of a patriarchal society trying to come to terms with women when seen independently from their traditional occupations as wives and mothers.

Yet despite the similarities, there are important differences that separate the films. However tentative their commitment to the principle of female equality, the filmmakers of the 1940s view women's contribution to the war effort as significant. The overall impression is that women are competent to do the same work as men under largely the same conditions. The women portrayed are not Amazons, but neither are they subservient, decorative adjuncts to the real business of work.

Such is not the case with the post-war films. While the war films did much to dissolve the separation between the "real

## AUDIENCES

Of particular interest to students of Women's Studies, these films can also be used at the Secondary and Post-Secondary levels in History, Sociology, Psychology, Film, Media and Social Studies courses, to stimulate discussion on the roles of women and the changing ways in which they have been depicted by the media. Women's groups, community groups and professional associations can also use the series as a tool for discussion and development.

## RELATED TITLES

There are a number of more recent films that can be used in conjunction with this series. Of particular note are: **KILLING US SOFTLY** (0179 389) and **STILL KILLING US SOFTLY** (0187 145), two films featuring American feminist Jean Kilbourne that focus on the impact of advertising on women; **MEDIA AND SOCIETY: IMAGES OF WOMEN** (0189 121), a video that explores the relationship between media images and the way women are defined by others and seen by themselves; **MIRROR, MIRROR: AN ADVERTISER'S SCRAPBOOK** (0183 004), a film that examines how advertising reflects social trends, values and expectations.

### Other related titles:

**BEYOND MEMORY** (0186 050)

**JUST-A-MINUTE PART 1** (0176 309) **PART 2** (0176 310)

**NOT A LOVE STORY: A FILM ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY** (0181 041)

**THE TENDER TALE OF CINDERELLA PENGUIN** (0181 011)

**THIN DREAMS** (0186 054)

**A TOKEN GESTURE** (0175 742)

Support material is available at NFB offices or through Distribution Services D-10, National Film Board, P.O. Box 6100, Station A, Montreal, Quebec H3C 3H5. Please request **WOMEN'S ARCHIVAL Film Study Package: HOW THEY SAW US**.

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## THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

- Discuss significant changes in social expectations of women's roles since the 1950s.
- Discuss areas where social expectations have not changed.
- Discuss the influence of the media in effecting positive change and/or maintaining negative stereotypes of women.
- Monitor prime time television advertising for one week and determine what percentage of images depict women in supportive versus active roles. What percentage of women are over 40? What percentage of women are Black women or women of colour? What percentage of women live in less than perfect surroundings?
- During the 1940s and 1950s, the image of women was manipulated to accommodate society's employment needs. Does this manipulation continue to happen? Is it reflected in unemployment rates and the '90s recession? Does the manipulation vary with different groups of women - for example young women, older women, Native women?
- Discuss ways to use film and other media with a sexist message.