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Madison Avenue: Method and Madness

To speak of advertising is to speak of consumer society, that plentiful world of goods and services we call our own. The history of its development, like that of the advertising industry, has recently attracted the attention of historians and cultural analysts. The reader interested in a fuller version than can be presented here is directed to their texts.¹ My purpose in this chapter is, first, to present an overview, emphasizing the arguments that have been made pro and con, and, second, to outline how advertising images are created, and how they will be analyzed in the following chapters.

Though it may be that people have always desired to have "just a little bit more" of everything, historians find that it was only in the eighteenth century that this dream became a possibility for more than the aristocratic few. Then, new wealth culled in part from overseas possessions and vigorous trade combined with internal reforms to raise the standard of living and make England the first real consumer society. New products emerged: fancy dolls displaying the latest fashions that

dressmakers would then copy for their well-off patrons, new plants to cultivate and pets, especially dogs and horses, to breed and, in the latter case, raise. Josiah Wedgwood's pottery works set a new standard for dinnerware and porcelain figurines, and textile mills exploited Indian cotton and new dyes to fashion exciting new fabrics that became all the rage in London and the countryside.² Advertising took two forms: men wearing placards and announcements in the newspapers. But not everyone accepted its legitimacy. Some found it peculiar that anyone could advertise his goods or services, daring to put his name on the very page that might include that of the Prince of Wales! An honest merchant, some felt, would not stoop to such advertisements; let word-of-mouth spread by satisfied customers announce his reputation and provide for his livelihood.³

In the nineteenth century the mounting forces of industrialization and urbanization made an ever-wider variety of goods available to people throughout Europe and even in the relatively backward former colonies, the United States. Improved transportation, the growth of the railroads in particular, served to take people out of their small villages and towns to show them a wider world, to instil new desires. Whereas in the small town every one had his or her place, largely determined by kin, church, and occupation, in the large cities each was free to make his or her own way in life: in short, to dream. Old ideas about one's proper place or station in life eventually gave way in face of new desires for an improved living standard. America in particular glorified the desire of the common man to make it big. By the end of the century he was encapsulated in the writings of Horatio Alger, in whose books young lads with names such as Ragged Dick made it big through a combination of their relentless honesty and hard work and that one lucky break. Their success was well earned: it supported the cultural myth of the American Dream.

For women, becoming beautiful was part of that dream.

Historian Lois Banner calls it the woman's version of the American get-ahead spirit.⁴ Fashion and standards of female beauty changed; it was every woman's civic duty—and duty to herself—to keep up with them. The major new department stores that developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth—New York's Macy's, Detroit's Hudson's, Chicago's Marshall Field's—legitimated shopping as an activity for women of the expanding middle class. These stores became a respectable destination for women who wanted to get out of the house, to see and be seen. The new stores quickly learned how to cater to their female clientele, adding restaurants where women could relax without fear of being bothered, and incorporated new departments for a range of goods previously never shown under one mighty roof.⁵

The old rural ethic that many people had brought with them from peasant and craft backgrounds in European villages died a hard death. The old emphasis was on saving and thrift. The new emphasis was on spending and consumption. Perhaps the most difficult sales job for advertising lay in its convincing people that it was not a sign of a dissolute character or an impoverished pocketbook to buy on credit. In fact, advertisements argued in the 1910s and 1920s, it was the *modern* thing to do. It showed one's faith in oneself and in the future. Credit was patriotic and it was economical. It supported nation and capitalism. It provided the exciting new durables: the new refrigerators, gas ovens, and vacuum cleaners ("Hoovers"). It made living clean. It made life fun.

It was in the 1920s that advertising came of age. Before long, it gained considerable sophistication in marketing a wide range of goods and services: cigarettes, mouthwash, cosmetics, alcohol, automobiles, insurance, encyclopedias. Advertising men became the archetypal modern men: always on the forefront of change, always coming up with something new to sell whatever else was new.⁶ As James R. Adams, one of the

founders of the advertising agency MacManus, John & Adams Inc., advised young men, "Advertising calls for a constantly curious mind, eager and alert. If you are a conservative and prefer to have things as they are, you can easily get trampled in advertising. Change is the only constant with which we have to deal."⁷

Today, advertising is established fact and major industry. It has its own folklore—witness the rash of advertising histories and confessions—and its own folk heroes—Albert Lasker, David Ogilvy, William Bernbach, now Hal Riney. It is played as art, as science, as craft, and even, according to one advertiser, as witchcraft. "Advertising is the witchcraft of the twentieth century. It has its incantations, its how-to recipes, . . . its priests and priestesses, its temple whores and secret languages."⁸

It is also like fortune telling. It is the art of looking in crystal balls and telling people who they are, who they might be. Advertising had become one of the means through which we develop a modern sense of self, one perpetually open to change. Social historian T. J. Jackson Lears believes that the destruction of the old bases of identity mentioned above (kin, church, village, occupation) left a void that the new consumer society filled with advice on topics such as self-improvement, "selling oneself," "making friends and influencing people," developing an attractive personality (in contrast to the nineteenth-century emphasis on "character").⁹ Would-be advertising men are advised that the one word consumers never tire of is *me*. Advertisers simply tell them who that "me" is, and how to make it ever more attractive, comfortable, exciting, appealing.

To do this, advertisers must do more than communicate information on a product. They must communicate *image*. Their task is somehow to position a product within a market of competing goods and to aim it toward an identifiable population. They must give it a personality. As Roy Bostock, president of