anxieties and satisfactions, which culminated by the 1930s, was what made American advertising "modern." It also made advertising more useful than ever before to the cultural historian.

Of particular assistance to the historian is the sense of innocent self-assurance about their cultural mission that many advertising people retained during this period. Despite a rapidly growing sophistication within advertising agencies, many ads still conveyed their messages far more ingenuously and explicitly than would be the case several years later. Advertising leaders took delight in the new maturity and power of their profession. They anxiously explored the possibilities and perils of acting as intimate advisors to the fickle, suggestible, and inexperienced new masses of economically enfranchised consumers. Their excitement led them impulsively to fill the pages of the trade press with revealing gossip about their techniques, their perceptions of the audience, and their own motives.

The advertising of the 1920s was the response of advertising agents, representing the economic and cultural elite, to their perception of a new consumer constituency in much the same way that Jacksonian politics and the Whig "Log Cabin" campaign of 1840 represented the response of a political establishment to perceptions of a new political constituency. In both instances, the established elites felt some sense of distaste for the ignorance and vulgarity of their new constituents. The advertisers, however, made greater efforts to examine the full dimensions of the needs and desires of their new constituency, and then not only to "pander" to it but also to counsel and uplift. Their motivation was no less self-interested than that of the early Democrats and Whigs, but the frequency and variety of their campaigns led them to search diligently for unfulfilled needs that they might promise to satisfy. Discovering vacuums of advice and psychological deprivations in modern society, they accepted a therapeutic role in helping Americans adapt to new social and technological complexities. The American dream, they promised, was a thoroughly modern dream, adaptable to a modern scale. It offered new and satisfying forms of individualism, equality, personal interaction, and cost-free progress within the emerging mass society. We may discount the solutions they offered to modern problems. But we would be unwise to neglect their diagnosis of the needs and desires of the expanding consumer society, or to ignore the refracted images of it that they projected in their advertising tableaux.

The American advertising man of the 1920s was the most modern of men.* He claimed that distinction for himself with much bluster and self-confidence—but also with considerable justification. Not only did he flourish in the fast-paced, modern urban milieu of skyscrapers, taxicabs, and pleasure-seeking crowds, but he proclaimed himself an expert on the latest crazes in fashion, contemporary lingo, and popular pastimes. As an exuberant apostle of modernity, he excitedly introduced consumers to the newest in products and confided to manufacturers the newest in popular whims. In fact, he based much of his claim to professional expertise on his particular sensitivity to changes in public tastes.

Other professional elites—scientists, engineers, and industrial designers—also claimed to epitomize the dynamic forces of modernization, but advertising agents insisted that they played a crucial role. Scientific inventions and technological advances fostered the expectation of change and the organization for continuous innovation that characterized modern society. But inventions and their technological applications made a dynamic impact only when the great mass of people learned of their benefits, integrated them into their lives, and came to lust for more new products. Modern technologies needed their heralds, advertising men contended. Modern styles and ways of life needed their missionaries. Advertising men were modernity's "town criers." They brought good news about progress.

In a structural sense, the advertisers' claim to modernity rested on their role in pushing economic modernization further along its logical course of develop-

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*Although a small minority of women played a role in shaping the content of national advertising, as described in Chapter 3, I have occasionally reverted to the phrase advertising man to epitomize the profession. Despite its generic inaccuracy, this gender-specific phrase does provide an occasional reminder of the overwhelmingly male dominance of the process of creating and approving advertisements. It also dramatizes an important aspect of the social context in which the ads of the 1920s and 1930s must be understood. As I explain in detail in Chapter 3, the advertisements of this era were generally perceived by their creators as communications from a rational and therefore patently masculine elite to the emotional, "feminine" masses.
ment. An economy organized for efficient production through economies of scale, rationalization of the working place, functional specialization, and a rapid and integrated flow of materials and communications also needed a high “velocity of flow” in the purchase of goods by consumers. Ad creators were becoming the highly specialized facilitators of that process. As some business leaders in the 1920s began to worry about the dangers of over-production, advertising agents gained increased respect for their role as guardians of uninterrupted progress.

New industries were surging to the forefront in the 1920s. Nearly all of the glamour industries of the era—automobiles, radio, chemicals, movies, drugs, and electrical refrigeration—had established what George Mowry calls a “face-to-face relationship” with the consuming public. Industrial giants like General Electric and Westinghouse, once primarily suppliers of equipment to other industries, increasingly sold products directly to individual consumers. The special modernity of advertising agents seemed exemplified by their strategic position on the interface of this dynamic new relationship between big business and its public.

In their efforts to speed the flow of goods through the national marketplace by eliminating any friction from consumer resistance, advertisers sought the ultimate realization of these qualities that had characterized the whole process of modernization. Presiding over the immense, impersonal marketplace that marked America’s emergence as the world’s most modern society, advertisers worked to further the processes of efficiency, specialization, and rationalization. More information about more products, they argued, would further rationalize the market. It would remove “the waste and lost motion in the characteristics of trade.” As more brands achieved national recognition, customers would enjoy a further expansion of choice. Consumer choices, in turn, would reward the best and most efficient producers, increasing their sales and enabling them to achieve new economies of scale in production. These producers would then lower prices, giving everyone the opportunity for a higher standard of living.

Advertisers thus celebrated the complexities and interdependencies of modern society, seeking to further rationalize the operations of the marketplace, to lubricate its mechanisms, and to achieve greater control over its functioning. With the maturing of industrialization, the consumer remained the most unpredictable and thus the most disruptive element in the economic system. If advertising agents could induce consumers to answer their needs by depending on more products offered them impersonally through the marketplace and could educate them to a predictable and enthusiastic demand for new products, then they would enhance the rationality and dynamism of the modern business system.

If modern society was distinctively urban, the people in advertising were quintessentially city people.

For most advertising leaders of the 1920s and 1930s, it was hardly necessary to step out of character to preach a gospel of modernity. If modern society was distinctively urban, the people in advertising were quintessentially city people. If modernity implied youthfulness, mobility, optimism, and a tolerance for diversity and speed of change, most advertising leaders immediately recognized such qualities in their self-portraits. When the copywriter A. B. Carson sketched for his colleagues a day in the life of John Smith, “typical citizen of this restless republic,” he instinctively took the ad man as his model of an American attuned to the modern tempo:

Whang! Bang! Clangety-clang! Talk about the tempo of today—John Smith knows it well. Day after day it whirs continuously in his brain, his blood, his very soul.

Yanked out of bed by an alarm clock, John speeds through his shave, bolts his breakfast in eight minutes, and scurries for a train or the street car. On the way to work his roving eye scans, one after the other, the sport page, the comic strips, several columns of political horoscope, and the tellable details of the latest moonshine murder.

From eight to twelve, humped over a desk in a skyscraper, he wrestles with his job to the accompaniment of thumping typewriters, jingling telephones, and all the incessant tattoo of twentieth century commerce. One hour off for a quick lunch, a couple of cigarettes, and a glamorous glance at the cuties mingling down the boulevard. Jangling drudgery again from one until five. Then out on the surging streets once more.

Clash, clatter, rattle and roar! Honk! Honk! Honk! Every crossing jammed with traffic! Pavements fairly humming with the jostling crowds! A singling sense of adventure and romance in the very air! Speed—desire—excitement—the illusion of freedom at the end of the day! The flashing of lights of early evening—Clara Bow in Hearts Afame! Wuxtry! Wuxtry!—Bootlegger Kills Flapper Sweetheart! Clickety-click, clickety-click—John Smith homeward-bound, clinging to a strap and swiftly skimming through the last edition.

Carson’s cameo strikingly captures the mood of dozens of self-portraits drawn by other advertising writers of the era. All recounted the hectic pace of their lives, the tense competition. But despite their allusions to “jangling drudgery” and “jostling crowds,” they responded enthusiastically to the modern tempo. The rapid pace of urban life matched the tempo of their jobs. The complexity and diversity of the city provided the stimulus for new “angles” and ideas. They peopled themselves on their cosmopolitanism, their independence from traditional mores and maxims, their tolerant acceptance of whatever mood of “smartness” was born aloft by the latest wave of fashion.

In their anxiety to stay alert for any sign of change and in their urgency to impress prospective business clients with the indispensability of their expertise in interpreting current tastes, advertising leaders in the 1920s heralded a new society transforming itself at breathless speed. “What an age,” gazed a columnist for Advertising and Selling. “Photographs by radio. Machines that think. Lights that pierce fog . . . Vending machines to replace salesmen. . . . The list of modern marvels is practically endless.” Everything now had to be “quick,” observed another advertising writer: “quick lunches at soda fountains . . . quick cooking recipes . . . quick tabloid newspapers . . . quick news summaries . . . quicker novels . . . quick-drying furniture paint . . . quick-smoking cigarettes . . . quick-
service filling stations.” Robert Updegraff, author of the most quoted article of the 1920s in Advertising and Selling, warned of a “new American tempo” that had given American life “the turbulence of shallow water.” No one could predict what might next evoke the public’s enthusiasm or sudden indifference, he observed. People were worried that the “stream of life” would surge past them, that their neighbors would leave them behind. This made them “quick to take up new ideas, to sample new products, to test new services, but quicker, also, to toss them aside.” Advertising, warned the agency president Earnest Elmo Calkins, was “the only means by which a manufacturer can quickly refocus his attack.”

While advertising agencies and the media undoubtedly hyped “the new tempo” in an attempt to stampede businessmen toward their services, the perception of a new pace of life was not mere advertising puffery. For more than a century Americans had been chronically self-conscious of the speed of change in their society, but the 1920s brought a new onslaught of that obsession. Everywhere they looked, Americans saw striking technological advances. In their everyday lives, they experienced the impact of disruptive social changes. A national network of new highways visibly symbolized a world now moving at a pace set by the automobile. Cities everywhere had suddenly acquired skyscraper skylines and rings of suburbs. As industrial production doubled during the 1920s, electrification and the assembly line proceeded apace. Everything seemed to operate on a new scale. In “Middletown” (Muncie, Indiana)—a city selected by the sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd in the mid-1920s as “having many features common to a wide group of communities”—the largest factories now employed between one and two thousand workers compared to approximately two hundred a generation before. Industrial hierarchies of technically trained managers were multiplying; employers no longer knew their workers. Larger, less “personal” chain stores steadily supplanted independent retailers: during a ten-month period in 1924–25, four new supermarket chains entered the small city of Muncie. New forms of consumer credit accelerated economic activity. By the end of the 1920s, Americans were buying over 60 percent of their cars, radios, and furniture on the installment plan.

The exhilaration created by the new pace of technological change and economic activity coexisted with deep anxieties about social disorder—anxieties symbolized by prohibition, immigration restrictions, and warnings of the dangers posed by the “new woman” and “flaming youth.” Jazz, bobbed hair, cosmetics, the hip flask, and sexual frankness all flouted traditional moral standards and seemed to threaten family stability and paternal authority. The new media of movies and radio were nationalizing American culture, creating the specter of a country whose masses could be easily swayed by the latest fad.

Ad creators seized on the public’s sense of an exciting-yet-disconcerting new tempo, reinforcing and amplifying this perception for their own purposes. They welcomed the economic forces that were propelling advertising toward an enhanced position of power and status in the society, and they explored strategies for transforming their clients’ products into plausible solutions to the anxieties and dilemmas that arose from the pace of life and the scale of institutions in the new era. In the process, American advertising matured in style and content, gradually assuming what we now recognize as distinctly modern forms.

Practical Heroics and Versatility

To gain full stature as the vanguard of American business in the 1920s, advertising first had to prove its worth on pragmatic economic grounds. It had long since accomplished this in product areas ranging from railroad lines to breakfast foods. But the second decade of the twentieth century witnessed an impressive expansion of the successful application of national advertising to the promotion of a much wider range of products and causes.

Even before World War I, several large companies had begun to use advertising to do more than simply sell a product. In 1908, for example, American Telephone and Telegraph launched a continuing campaign of institutional advertisements to persuade the public of the virtues of a regulated private monopoly. The campaign also instructed the public in proper telephone etiquette and reminded AT&T operators of their responsibilities to the public. Several public utilities and railroads launched similar institutional campaigns with more limited political objectives. The meatpackers turned to advertising to defend themselves against government investigations and threats of antitrust prosecution. The notion gained credence that advertising could influence public attitudes as well as sell products.

But the merchandising of products remained advertising’s central function. Here advertising began to demonstrate its amazing flexibility in the years just before World War I. Surging sales of an array of new electrical appliances seemed to prove the efficacy of the large advertising campaigns that had launched them. Procter and Gamble tutored the business community in the power of planned promotion for a new product when it spent $1 million in a step-by-step campaign to launch Crisco. Advertising also found ways to show its muscle in the promotion of old products. Textile mills began to trademark and label their products and to seek brand loyalty through national advertising. The California Fruit Growers Exchange (Sunkist) demonstrated that even fresh produce could successfully be branded and advertised. By the early 1920s, products ranging from walnuts to household coal were ingeniously being individually branded and nationally advertised. Few products seemed beyond the pale of advertising after 1909, when the National Gasket Company embarked on a national magazine campaign.

Even products rarely purchased as separate units began to seek a place in consumer consciousness. The Timken Roller Bearing Company and the Timken-Detroit Axle Company pioneered the way, beginning in 1912. Consumers were likely to purchase axles and ball bearings only as component parts of automobiles or other pieces of machinery. But Timken hoped, by creating a national reputation, to cement the loyalty of auto manufacturers to well-known components. By the early 1920s, a half-dozen manufacturers of component auto parts, from upholstery to door handles, were expressing their faith in advertising by purchasing expensive full-page ads in the Saturday Evening Post.

World War I provided American advertising with new opportunities to exhibit its power and flexibility. Organizing themselves into a National War Advisory Board, advertising leaders offered to help the government raise funds and recruit military personnel. Eventually incorporated into the government’s public re-
lations program (as the Division of Advertising of George Creel’s Committee on Public Information), agency leaders mounted impressive campaigns to sell war bonds, enlist army and navy recruits, enhance worker morale, and promote conservation of food and resources. Their propaganda packed evident emotional power; the war bond campaigns were a conspicuous success. As the J. Walter Thompson agency observed, the war gave advertising men “an opportunity not only to render a valuable patriotic service... but also to reveal to a wide circle of influential men... the real character of advertising and the important function which it performs.” Printers’ Ink later concluded that advertising had fully capitalized on its opportunity. Wartime advertising had shown that “it is possible to sway the minds of whole populations, change their habits of life, create belief, politically universal, in any policy or idea.” Moreover, reflected Theodore MacManus, the genius of Cadillac advertising, the patriotic propaganda campaigns had accustomed people to the notion that “any surface and every surface, and all approaches through the senses” were appropriate for advertising.

A wartime excess profits tax, which defined advertising expenditures as exempt business costs, encouraged experimentation with new or enlarged advertising budgets. As the agency president and advertising historian Frank Presbrey observed, this tax policy, which continued through 1921, “set new standards in the use of space.” Timid advertisers now burst forth with full-page displays. They liked the ego-satisfaction of such “dominance” as well as the resulting sales returns. In 1919 and 1920, advertising volume broke all previous records. After a brief downturn in 1921, the economy boomed, the real income of most Americans expanded, and installment-plan selling gained momentum. In an essay subtitle, Printers’ Ink dubbed 1923 “The Dawn of the Distribution Age,” an age in which advertising would play a central role.

Mounting statistics revealed how successful advertising had been in proving its practical power. Daniel Pope, in a recent attempt to correct incomplete and suspect statistics, estimates total advertising volume in the United States to have increased from $682 million in 1914 to $1,409 million in 1919 and to $2,987 million in 1929. The ratio of advertising costs to total distribution costs, according to Pope, rose from 2 percent in 1909 to 4 percent in 1929. Newly emerging national advertisers increased their advertising appropriations by geometric proportions. Maxwell House Coffee, for example, expanded its magazine budget from $19,555 to $509,000 during the years from 1921 to 1927 alone. The Crane Company (plumbing fixtures) appropriated $436,000 for advertising in 1925 compared to only $79,000 in 1921. Mushrooming activity brought unprecedented boosts in agency salaries and fees for artists and photographers. Agency costs in producing advertisements, as one critic put it, “hit the ceiling, broke through, and sailed off into the empyrean.”

Meanwhile, the advertising trade was gradually becoming more consolidated and complex. During the first year after the war, two dynamic new agencies, Barton, Durstine and Osborn and Newell-Emmett, appeared in New York City. Within two years, J. Walter Thompson, the largest New York agency, increased its staff from 177 to 283. During the previous decade, Philadelphia, and especially Chicago, had challenged New York in claims to leadership in national advertising. As late as 1926, two of the nation’s three largest advertising agencies were still headquartered outside New York City: the venerable N. W. Ayer and Son maintained its main offices in Philadelphia, and Lord and Thomas had its headquarters in Chicago. But both now expanded their branch offices in New York City. The term “Madison Avenue,” which first came into passing use in 1923 as shorthand for advertising agencies, steadily came to reflect accurately the concentration of advertising expertise in uptown Manhattan.

As the 1920s progressed, the rise of radio advertising and the corporate mergers that brought more companies under Wall Street influence tended to centralize national advertising in New York City. By the late 1920s, 247 Park Avenue, 283 Madison Avenue, and the Graybar Building on Lexington Avenue near 42nd Street had become the three points of a triangle of bustling advertising activity. The number of agencies and accounts mounted; the migration of accounts and personnel between the agencies intensified. In June of 1926 Advertising and Selling announced a new service to readers—a News Digest section that would catalogue for quick reference the proliferating agency and personnel changes.

It was also in 1926 that another significant sign of advertising influence and maturity appeared. In that year the Saturday Evening Post, the nation’s advertising showcase and the largest weekly in circulation, began to carry a regular Index of Advertisers as well as an index to its editorial content. In the same year the Post first offered four-color pages to advertisers at a rate of $15,000 per page. Already magazines and newspapers had become bloated with advertisements. In 1926 a single issue of the Saturday Evening Post often exceeded 300 pages. In the April 1926 Ladies’ Home Journal, the largest issue yet published, advertisements commanded 164 of its 270 pages. National magazine advertising had increased 600 percent in the decade since 1916, and newspaper advertising had doubled. Americans could hardly fail to notice this testimony to business confidence in the power of advertising. Trade leaders, and even the Secretary of Labor, proclaimed the end of business cycles. The bold application of advertising, they claimed, would counteract business downturns and prevent future depressions.

The climactic event in the demonstration of advertising’s economic power came early in 1927, with the capitulation of Henry Ford, advertising’s most prominent hold-out. Except for a large but temporary campaign in 1924–25, Ford had largely shunned national advertising. Advocates of advertising as the ultimate economic force found Ford’s success a thorn in their side. In mid-1926 he had impetuously eliminated nearly all of his advertising budget, exclaiming, “Cut it all out; it’s an economic waste and I never did believe in it.” The advertising trade press, stung by Ford’s actions and remarks, exploded in jubilation the next year when Ford announced a massive advertising campaign in support of his new Model A. The last great unbeliever had been converted.

Erasing the Barnum Image

Many advertising leaders in the 1920s did not remain content with the widespread recognition of advertising's economic power. If advertising had proved itself economically as "the Archimedean lever that is moving the world," then
perhaps such leverage could also be employed to elevate its status as an occupation. Patent medicines had loomed large in nineteenth-century American advertising. The lingering effects of that association continued to fuse images of the modern advertising man with recollections of carnival barkers, snake-oil salesmen, and such celebrated promoters of ballyhoo and humbug as P. T. Barnum. Advertising leaders chastened under public suspicion of their craft. Movements for professionalization and respectability, such as the pre-World War I quest for professional standing as a "science" and the "truth in advertising" movement of 1912, had testified to the depth of their concern about this image problem.

Service with the Committee on Public Information during World War I helped bring advertising men new stature. George Credle, chairman of the CPI, concluded that their war service had won advertising men new prestige as professionals. In their successful promotion of Liberty bonds, military enlistments, and civilian morale, they had convinced the nation that advertising could instill new ideas and inspire people to patriotic action. Comparable war work also significantly elevated the status of advertising men in Britain. The wartime crusades proved that advertising was no mere commercial tool, but a great moral and educative force, capable of serving "unselfish social purposes."

Capitalizing on their wartime elevation in status, advertising leaders in the early 1920s began to seize every opportunity to associate themselves with high culture and "business statesmanship." In 1921 the Art Directors Club of New York initiated exhibitions to demonstrate advertising's contributions to artistic excellence. In 1924 the trade established a "Harvard connection" with the announcement by the Harvard Business School of awards for various phases of advertising excellence. By the mid-1920s, agencies had been able to lure such prestigious illustrators and photographers as Maxfield Parrish, Norman Rockwell, Walter Briggs, Edward Steichen, Anton Bruehl, Bernice Abbott, and Frank Lydenacker from their magazine-cover and studio work to contribute to the prestige and allure of the advertising pages. No less an institution than the Metropolitan Museum of Art appointed a liaison officer to help advertisers use its resources. Agencies boasted of their dignified and high-minded new institutional campaigns on behalf of E. R. Squibb and Sons, General Motors, General Electric, and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Advertising's rising star was hardly dimmed when Bruce Barton, a partner in the flashy young agency handling the General Electric and General Motors institutional accounts, hit the top of the nation's nonfiction bestseller list in 1926 with The Man Nobody Knows, in which he portrayed Jesus as the archetypal, advertising-minded businessman.

The climax of advertising's rise to new heights of influence and stature came with President Calvin Coolidge's address to the convention of the American Association of Advertising Agencies in the fall of 1926. For more than a decade, advertising leaders had been claiming recognition as a preeminent civilizing and modernizing force. By educating consumers in everything from the use of toothpaste and higher standards of dress to a love of beauty and a "cultivation of the mind and the social graces," they were harnessing America's modern industrial system to the uplift of its citizenry. President Coolidge defined their con-

==The Advertisement Becomes "Modern"

What made American advertising "modern" as an economic force and "modern" as a promoter of new urban habits of hygiene, dress, and style consciousness was not what made it "modern" in content and technique. As an economic force, advertisements functioned as efficient mass communications that rationalized and lubricated an impersonal marketplace of vast scale. They facilitated the exchange of goods and services between multitudes of strangers on a national (and even international) level. The resulting economies of scale and efficiencies of specialization generated pressures which increased in the American standard of living that President Coolidge undoubtedly had in mind when he spoke of "regeneration and redemption." Advertising also stimulated the popular conviction that what was new was desirable, the attitude that J. H. Plumb describes as crucial to an acceptance of modernity and that twentieth-century advertising leaders saw as indispensable to mass production and economic growth. Thus advertising fits comfortably into the concept of the "modern" as expressed in the term modernization.

But "modern" also means "characteristic of the present time, or time not long past." In the 1920s and 1930s, as in several previous eras, the attitudes, fashions, modes of artistic expression, and fads in popular psychology that were "characteristic of the present" were as likely to contradict the process of economic and industrial modernization as to reinforce it. The "modernity" of advertisements that were "characteristic of the present" often found expression in styles and appeals that catered to yearnings unfulfilled by efficient, rationalized mass production and distribution. Thus in content and technique, American advertisements can be said to have become "modern," precisely to the extent to which they transcended or denied their essential economic nature as mass communications and achieved subjective qualities and a "personal" tone. As it came to accept the paradox of its role as both apostle of modernity and buffer against the effects of modern impersonalities of scale, and as it developed strategies for accommodating the public to modern complexities, American advertising in the 1920s and 1930s took on what we now recognize as a distinctly modern cast.

Advertising content and style had changed gradually but decisively during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Older styles and techniques were seldom discarded entirely and sometimes experienced revivals, but the main
thrust of change was unmistakable. At the beginning of the century advertisers had sought simple brand-name publicity through advertising jingles and poster-style displays. Then advertising copywriters had turned to "salesmanship in print" with hard-selling copy full of reasons and arguments in place of rhymes and slogans. These arguments and reasons, as Daniel Pope and Jackson Lear have observed, were not necessarily "rational"; influential copywriters and advertising psychologists had already concluded that consumers acted less from logic than from "nonrational yearnings." The new "reason-why" approach took as its model the salesman, foot in the door, overcoming buying resistance with an arsenal of factual and emotional arguments. Already, copy experts were admonishing each other not to think of their audience as an anonymous crowd, but rather to imagine themselves selling the product to an individual customer. To induce consumers to read advertising copy that was often long and argumentative, the advertiser-salesman was encouraged to use imagination and a "human-interest" approach to appeal to their emotions.30

By about 1914, a few advertisers had begun to appreciate the advantages of selling the benefit instead of the product—illumination instead of lighting fixtures, prestige instead of automobiles, sex appeal instead of mere soap. (Woodbury's pathbreaking slogan, "The Skin You Love to Touch," first appeared in 1911.) Still, the great majority of advertisements remained product-centered. Only occasionally did human-interest advertising move beyond appealing illustrations of children, animals, and trade characters.31 A comparison of advertisements of 1915-16 with those of a decade later presents striking contrasts (Figs. 1.1, 1.2). For all of the new emphasis on advertising psychology in the years just prior to World War I, the ads of that period largely featured the product itself, most gave little attention to the psychic byproducts of owning it.
from "the objective to the subjective," from "descriptive product data" to "talk in terms of ultimate buying motives." Recently, Richard Pellay has characterized these changes toward an emphasis on the benefits of consumption, portrayals of consumers using the product, and "emotive" copy styles as a transition from "a production or selling orientation" to a "marketing orientation." Ads increasingly included what might be called "participatory" anecdotes and illustrations. These changes manifested themselves by the mid-1920s in ads with such headlines as "Are You Sure You Know Your Type?" "Little Dry Sobs Through The Bedroom Door," and "And he wondered why she said No!" and "Sh-h-h, he's coming." People rather than products dominated illustrations as advertisers sought to induce the potential customer to play a vicarious, scripted role as protagonist in the ad. A 1928 headline, "He, The Leading Lady in this Little Modern Drama," only made explicit the invitation to consumer participation that many advertisers now sought to imbue in their illustrations and copy.

Advertisers had come to appreciate the advantage of inducing the reader empathetically to "have lived through an experience," an experience planned by the advertiser to prove sales points. Reciprocally, consumers, through responses measured in sales results, personal letters, and coupon returns, were persuading advertisers that they wanted to comprehend the product on a "human scale" and thus, perhaps, gain confidence in their capacities as individuals to retain a sense of control in an expanding mass society.

Americans had traditionally welcomed modernization. They had celebrated the contributions of new technologies to prosperity, convenience, comfort, and a faster pace of life. But many had accommodated uneasily to the new scale of social and economic life occasioned by technological advances. People had responded with both excitement and suspicion as new forms of transportation and communication invaded local communities. As powerful external forces seemed to gain increasing power over their lives, Robert Wiebe observes, people "groped for some personal connection with that broader environment, some way of mediating between their everyday life and its impersonal setting." The giant industrial organizations that emerged with technological advance could easily diminish the individual's sense of autonomy and control. As Daniel Bell has pointed out, the new world of large-scale organizations—the world of coordination and bureaucracy—was one in which men were often "treated as things because one can more easily coordinate things than men." And the rationalization and depersonalization of increasing portions of people's lives made it more difficult to find emotional satisfactions. During the late nineteenth century and the early years of the Progressive Era, many Americans had vented their anxieties about the increasing complexity and scale of their society by protesting against the engulfing tides of unrestricted immigration, by launching anti-monopoly attacks against the great corporations, and by seeking, in quests extending from political reform to mind cure, some reassurance that opportunities still existed to achieve autonomy and to gain recognition for qualities of individual character.

World War I brought an end to widespread distrust of big business, and post-war legislation curtailed the influx of immigrants. But perceptions of a quickened tempo of change in the 1920s intensified people's fears of failing to keep pace with new complexities and of becoming "lost in the crowd." Societal trends toward large bureaucratic organizations, high mobility, and more anonymous and segmental relationships persisted, even accelerated. Even in the late twentieth century, a 'tangled and distended' network of economic and social relationships and a crumbling faith in "communal, ethical, or religious frameworks of meaning" had cut many Americans adrift from a 'secure' sense of selfhood. Now, increasingly, many Americans pursued their search for a secure identity, for "self-realization," by seeking clues and advice in those sources most conveniently and ubiquitously available—the mass media.

Advertisers gradually recognized, consciously or subconsciously, that the complexities of an increasingly urbanized, specialized, interdependent mode of life were creating a residue of intransit needs. Perceiving new vacuums of guidance and personal relationships, they moved forward to offer their products as answers to modern discontents. Thus what made advertising "modern" was, ironically, the discovery by these "apostles of modernity" of techniques for empathizing with the public's imperfect acceptance of modernity, with its resistance to the perfect rationalization and bureaucratization of life.

Some ad creators, undoubtedly, simply assumed that their new strategies reflected a gradual awakening of copywriters to psychological truths about human nature. But others recognized that the success of the new subjective, personalized, and "participatory" techniques stemmed from ambiguous popular reactions to the modern scale of things and the modern tempo. The inferiority complex had come to be a "valuable thing in advertising" noted William Esty, a J. Walter Thompson account representative, in an agency meeting in 1930. Was that not true, he asked, to "the fact that this standardized age has made people feel inferior?"

Advertisements in the new copy styles set forward a model of life's struggles that was well-tailored to strike a responsive chord among people conscious of the increasing dependence of their life ambitions on large organizations and impersonal judgments. This model portrayed the typical life situation as that of an individual facing an external task or goal. An objective test or impersonal decision determined whether the protagonist of the story—the consumer's stand-in—successfully met the challenge. Disinterested, judgmental people would determine whether one succeeded in contests for business success, popularity, social standing, beauty, even love. "They" would determine by rigid standards—without the possibility of personal favoritism or the sympathetic excusing of faults—whether one's teeth, breath, "intestinal vigor," bathroom fixtures, silverware, or automobile polish "met the test." Having scripted a confrontation between the consumer and an impersonal test, the advertiser quickly befriended the consumer. Assuming the role of coach and confidante, he offered the consumer advice and encouragement as together they faced the external challenge.

Side by Side with the Consumer

As copywriters evolved from salesmen to confidantes, they began to perceive other advantages in this new "side-by-side" approach. Argument, no matter how amiable and persuasive, had a polarizing tendency that pitted advertising persuas-
siveness against buyer resistance. Too much argumentative reliance on reasons indicated the reader to generate counter-reasons. Advice or "coaching," on the other hand, aligned advertiser and potential consumer on the same side in opposition to a task or problem confronting the consumer. As society's increasing pressures and complexities made the consumer uneasy, the advertiser intervened with sympathetic advice on how to triumph over the impersonal judgments of the modern world.

"Scare copy," which became increasingly prominent as the 1920s progressed, was simply one variant of this side-by-side positioning. Known in trade jargon as the "negative appeal," scare copy sought to jolt the potential consumer into a new consciousness by enacting dramatic episodes of social failures and accusing judgments. Jobs were lost, romances cut short, and marriages threatened. Germs attacked, cars skidded out of control, and neighbors cast disapproving glances. In each instance, the product stepped forward—not to argue with the reader, but to offer friendly help. Scare copy posited a universe in which the fate of each consumer lay in the hands of external disinterested forces and unsympathetic, judgmental observers, a world of normative expectations applied with unmerciful severity. By contrast, the advertiser was solicitous and caring, a friend in need (Fig. 1.5).

Increasingly during the 1920s, this friend was recognizable by name. It might be Betty Crocker or Mary Hale Martin or Nurse Ellen Backland or any of a score of (usually fictitious) advisers and confidantes who "personally signed" their company's ads. Or it might be someone you "knew well"—a prominent society figure or movie star whose familiar presence could give you a sense of receiving advice from a real person.

Personal endorsers in the advertisements acquired a new sort of realism. The conventionalized character types of only a few years before—the stencilled and standardized doctor, businessman, druggist, and housewife—were vanishing from the ads, the Printers' Ink art reporter noted in 1926. As photographers turned away from professional models and as artists perfected refinements in expression, he claimed, people in advertisements seemed less commercial. Now, "familiar faces smile out at you; old friends bow recognition.... The little lady in the shoe advertisement is almost a likeness of a friend's daughter who lives down the suburban street." Not only were the faces of people in the ads coming to look friendly and familiar. They were also acquiring the power to induce readers to "smile with them, frown with them, suffer with them." By the beginning of the 1930s, one critic was praising Unquintine ads for "studies in expression...so 'catching'...that the reader is swept along by them despite himself." Advertising copy could also create ordinary folks as "real people" to personalize the helpful advice. Procter and Gamble advertisements for laundry soap reported in chaty informality on a series of "Actual Visits to P & G Homes." In "Mrs. Lewis" in P & G home no. 3 recalled her experiences with "little Dorothy's" rompers, and "Mrs. Moore" in home no. 5, offered friends an ironing hint (See Fig. 1.2). Names were crucial, concluded William Esty several years later. In comparative tests with coupon returns, an ad with a person's name always outperformed an ad without one, regardless of the selling message. Readers hungered for a personal touch. Mobility, greater generational separation, and modern complex-
ities of living had created a vacuum of personal advice. In responding to that need, advertisers explored new ways to personalize their relationship with the consumer.

How did the ad creators know that consumers thirsted for the subjective, personalized, "realistic" vignettes of the emerging modern style of advertising? Certainly they paid close attention to the returns from coupon offers of booklets and samples. And they noted the apparent reflection of popular tastes in the movies, tabloid newspapers, and other burgeoning forms of popular culture. But above all, they paid attention to the most dramatic successes among other advertising campaigns. Advertising leaders had experimented with the human-interest approach in the decade before 1920, but it was the spectacular sales success of several specific campaigns in the early 1920s that now spurred a host of advertisers to adopt the modern mode in advertising.

Three Legends in the Making

Within a single year in the early 1920s, major advertising campaigns emerged for three products that were unknown, obscure, or facing declining sales. In each case, the product achieved spectacular sales increases by the middle of the decade. Since advertising seemed primarily responsible for each of these success stories, other advertisers pondered the lessons they offered in modern advertising content and technique.

Fleischmann’s Yeast, the first of these emerging advertising legends of the 1920s, had been “something merely to bake with—until Fleischmann advertisements said otherwise.” In the face of a steady decline in home baking, even Fleischmann’s lofty characterization of its product as the “Soul of Bread” had not proved inspiring enough to stem declining sales. Social trends offered little hope for a resurgence in home-baked bread. Prohibition had largely destroyed another sales outlet for yeast. Could the sales of a product so tied by tradition to very specific functions be salvaged by its promotion for some new use? In 1919 the Fleischmann Company began to explore that possibility with a medicinal appeal.

Within a year, with the impetus supplied by its new agency, the J. Walter Thompson Company, Fleischmann’s advertising had transformed its product into a food to be eaten directly from the package as a potent source of vitamins. Two years later, with the market saturated by new vitamin products, Fleischmann’s Yeast evolved once again, this time into a natural laxative. A price contest brought in hundreds of usable testimonials for the product’s newly advertised proprieties. From 153 of the winners, the agency gained permission to use their letters and “illustrate them in any way we saw fit.”

Fleischmann advertising moved into the costly but highly visible rotogravure sections. Photographs replaced drawings to give the ads a greater aura of realism. Soon photographers’ models gave way to “candid” photographs of the actual endorsers. Capturing the tempo of popular journalism, the J. Walter Thompson copywriters established a tabloid format for the Fleischmann campaign. They injected as much human interest and eye appeal as possible by using multiple photographs and succinct, first-person testimony (Fig. 1.6). Sometimes the ads recapitulated the layout of the magazine or newspaper so perfectly that the reader might become thoroughly immersed in the ad before discovering that it was not an editorial feature.

By 1926 the Fleischmann Company had become one of the nation’s ten largest magazine advertisers and a major purveyor of newspaper space. With no other new factor in its merchandising effort, sales turned upward. By the spring of 1926 sales had increased 150 percent over 1923, when the candid, man-in-the-street testimonials had begun.

When sales threatened to recede, the Thompson agency called doctors to the rescue. Authoritative physicians in white coats explained how the pressures and complexities of modern civilization had led to constipation and advised readers to “eat a half a cake of yeast three times a day to counteract intestinal fatigue.” One agency executive affirmed the effects of the modern tempo in tracing the logic of the newly labeled disease. “Fatigue is universal; we simply have to credit it to the intestines, that’s all.” Ignoring complaints about a violation of Victorian delicacy, the agency dramatized the role of the intestines by superimposing bold diagrams of “where the trouble starts” over photographs of lovely young women (Fig. 1.7). Such diagrams might help readers picture more clearly the source of their own modern troubles. Undaunted by the American Medical Association’s outrage and its prohibition of testimony by its members, the agency turned for
paid testimonials to European doctors. Their impressively unpronounceable names, prestigious hospital affiliations, and stern visages reinforced their authoritative presence. 47

The success of Fleischmann’s Yeast in the 1920s seemed to confirm the power of advertising. It had become a popular remedy despite formidable obstacles. Its price was high and its taste so repulsive that backsliders had to be reconverted to its medicinal benefits again and again. Other challenges, a copywriter reflected, were the “necessity for frequent purchase and the almost complete absence of quickly apparent results.” 48 Advertising alone had enabled the company to increase sales in spite of these difficulties and the decline of its prime home-baking market.

The success of the Fleischmann campaign was overshadowed, however, by the even more spectacular story of Listerine. The profits of the Lambert Pharmaceutical Company, manufacturers of Listerine antiseptic, mushroomed from approximately $100,000 per year in 1920 and 1921 to over $4 million in 1927. 49 Not surprisingly, the company’s style and strategy gave rise to a whole school of advertising practice.

Listerine was not a new product in 1920. For years it had been merchandised perfunctorily as a general antiseptic. Initially, the three men who transformed Listerine into the marvel of the advertising world—the copywriters Milton Fesley and Gordon Seagrove and the company president Gerard B. Lambert—did not so much convert the product to a new use as induce the public to discover a new need. After a year of comparatively awkward and old-fashioned human-interest ads for Listerine as a mouthwash, the copywriters hit upon a winning formula. The picture of a lovely girl introduced a story cryptically entitled “He Never Knew Why.” The hero of the story, a rising young businessman, was spurned by the “luminous” but “charmingly demure” girl of his dreams after a single romantic encounter. He seemed to have every advantage in life, but he labored under one insurmountable handicap. He had “halitosis.” 50

The term “halitosis” (exhumed from an old medical dictionary) had a scientific sound, and thus took some of the coarseness out of a discussion of bad breath. Mimicking the tabloids’ personal-interest stories and advice to the lovelorn columns, the ads took the form of quick-tempo sociodramas in which readers were invited to identify with temporary victims in tragedies of social shame. Now the protagonist was not the product but the potential consumer, suffering vicariously, a loss of love, happiness, and success (Fig. 1.8). As Printers’ Ink reflected in a tribute to the copywriter Milton Fesley: “He dealt more with humanity than with merchandise. He wrote advertising dramas rather than business announcements—dramas so common to everyday experience that every reader could easily fit himself into the plot as the hero or culprit of its action.” 51

Fesley and Seagrove constructed the Listerine ads in a way that resembled scientific efforts to control for independent variables. The heroine or hero of the story invariably possessed all the qualities needed for success—weight, good looks, attractive personality, high social standing. Thus the only possible cause for a personal failure had to be the inexcusable fault of halitosis.

By 1926 Printers’ Ink was eulogizing Fesley for having transformed people’s behavior. He had “amplified the morning habits of our nicer citizenry—by making the morning mouthwash as important as the morning shower or the morning
shave.58 But Gerard Lambert had not been content to wed the fortunes of his product to one new habit. To maintain momentum, he had quickly introduced new uses for Listerine. Halitosis had hardly become an advertising byword before Lambert began to proclaim Listerine’s virtues as a cure for dandruff. Between 1921 and 1929 the American public also learned the virtues of Listerine as an after-shave tonic, a cure for colds and sore throats, an astringent, and a deodorant (Figs. 1.9, 1.10). (If Listerine’s claims to versatility seemed audacious, they paled in comparison to those of Linit, long advertised as a starch, which courted “Fastidious Women” in the mid-1920s with pretensions to newly discovered qualities as a beauty bath.) Lambert capitalized on the new fame of his product to market a Listerine toothpaste, which brought even greater financial returns. The Listerine advertising budget mounted from $100,000 in 1922 to $5 million in 1928.59

The financial feats of the Listerine campaign held the advertising trade enthralled. Although Lambert claimed to have contributed to company profits through innovations in cost accounting and production efficiency, observers justifiably attributed his success to the power of advertising. Phrases like “the halitosis style,” “the halitosis appeal,” and “the halitosis influence” became standard advertising jargon. In unmistakable tribute, copywriters soon discovered and labeled over a hundred new diseases, including such transparent imitations as “pseudodosis” (sweaty foot odors), “homotosis” (lack of attractive home furnishings), and “acidosis” (sour stomach) and such inventive afflictions as “office hips,” “ashtray breath,” and “accelerator toe.”59 Needless to say, most of these new diseases had escaped the notice of the medical profession. Even more influential than the halitosis ploy was Listerine’s effective use of copy that presented the consumer-surrogate as protagonist. Scores of converts to “Listerine copy” offered their sympathy and advice to readers who faced those intrusive, impersonal judgments of their skin, teeth, figure, clothes, furniture—even their choice of car polish and house paint—that modern life occasioned.

The promoters of Listerine were not the first to discover the sociodrama as an advertising technique—just as they had not pioneered the appeal to social shame or personal fear. In advertisements headlined “Within the Curve of a Woman’s Arm,” the deodorant Odo-to-no had earlier confronted the threat to romance posed by underarm perspiration.60 But Listerine purchased larger space in a wider variety of publications. Its expanding appropriations and spectacular profits impressed the business community. The J. Walter Thompson Company summarized the new perception of proper advertising techniques in 1926: “To sell goods we must also sell words. In fact we have to go further: we must sell life.”

Listerine had vividly demonstrated how to “befriend” consumers by inducing them to experience vicariously the barriers and the avenues to “a romantic way of living” through the ads.61 A third widely heralded triumph of advertising in the early 1920s was the almost instantaneous success of a new product of the Cellucotton Company: Kotex. Advertising had long proclaimed its role in ensuring rapid, deserved success for superior new products as one of its major social contributions. The inventor Elias Howe had died a pauper, advertising writers reminded the public, because the virtues of his unadvertised sewing machine had too long remained unknown to the nineteenth-century public.62 Not so the disposable sanitary napkin in the 1920s. Even though the delicacy of the subject of menstruation placed formidable barriers in the way of an advertising campaign, the Lord and Thomas agency accepted the challenge.

The first Kotex ads, which appeared in 1921, cautiously employed a string of circumlocutions. The first ad in Good Housekeeping, under the headline “Meets the Most Exciting Needs,” pictured young women skating. It said only that Kotex “completes toilet essentials” for active schoolgirls, “guards against emergencies,” and “has been accepted as the most satisfactory article of its kind.”63 As a publicity article sent to the dealers explained, the ads simply set forward the general value and convenience of the product in an inoffensive, scientific way. Facts were presented “thoroughly yet without unnecessary detail. It possible the reader is left to draw her own conclusions from her intimate understanding of the subject.” Some letters of protest did greet the appearance of advertising for so intimate a product, but the negative reaction was far milder than either the manufacturer or the advertising agency had expected.65

Encouraged by this response, the Cellucotton Company pushed ahead. It enlisted the hand of “Ellen J. Buckland, Registered Nurse” to sign the advertising
Thespectacular sales results of the Fleischmann, Listerine, and Kotex campaigns had won the practical flattery of a host of imitators by the late 1920s. Personal confidantes and advisers proliferated, warnings of probing scrutiny by others mounted, and the personal testimonial enjoyed a dramatic revival. Printers' Ink noted that the Fleischmann "news-picture" style had attained "high favor" by 1928. 43 Inspired by these campaigns, advertisers of a wide variety of goods found ways to empathize with the anxieties of consumers who sought to keep pace with the tempo of modern life and to overcome its impersonal judgments.

Still, these three campaigns were hardly typical of the advertising of the era. Product-oriented "announcement" copy still appeared regularly. Although the Jordan Motor Car Company had been titillating the trade for several years with copy emphasizing "the enjoyment of something besides mere transportation" and the feel of a "personal, individual intimate car," Buick, Chrysler, and Chevrolet still greeted 1926 readers with pictures of their factories. 44 In the mid-1920s the more subjective, intimate style of the Fleischmann, Listerine, and Kotex campaigns still represented only the leading edge of change in a diverse body of advertising. Some advertisers, concerned about the prestige of their products and the status of their profession, found such copy too reminiscent of the patent medicine era. The sales figures were impressive, but could "participatory" copy work for most products?

By the end of the 1920s, the answer to that question by the advertising business was unquestionably Yes. Negative or scare appeals might often be inappropriate, but a sympathetic depiction of consumer experiences, instead of the product itself, gained steadily in favor. "Show consumer satisfactions" increasingly became the rallying cry for advertisers. The organizer of a J. Walter Thompson door-to-door survey returned early in the decade from the land "behind the doorbell" to report...
breathlessly that "members of the Consumer Family do not want for its own sake the product which they buy." Soap ads should sell "afternoons of leisure," advised one copywriter. Copy should wrap the product "in the tissue of a dream." The Chicago Tribune provided a lesson in the new orthodoxy for anyone who had missed the message. It demonstrated the potential of its rotogravure section for radio advertising with a sample illustration captioned, "Here is a picture, not of a radio, but of keen enjoyment." Obviously the illustrations for such ads should emphasize people more than products. They should picture situations of fulfillment or cautionary scenes of humiliation easily avoided by use of the product. Advertising agencies prided themselves on having begun to modernize industry by introducing the consumer's point of view to correct the producer's self-centered myopia. "The happiness of the reader should be the real topic of every advertisement," concluded Ernest Calkins in 1926. "The happiness of the advertiser should be carefully camouflaged." Writers in the advertising journals recounted a standard scenario of modernization in advertising: it began with ads depicting the bewhiskered founder and his factory, then moved to illustrations of the housewife pushing a vacuum cleaner or otherwise using the product, and finally arrived at scenes of fulfillment—the housewife's friends blinded by her gleaming floor or her children enjoying her company on an outing to pick wildflowers.

The result of this trend toward emphasis on consumer satisfactions was called "dramatic realism"—a phrase derived from the romantic novel and soon institutionalized in the radio soap opera. It intensified everyday problems and triumphs by tearing them out of humdrum routine, spotlighting them as crucial to immediate life decisions, or fantasizing them within enhanced, luxurious social settings. In selling leisure, enjoyment, beauty, good taste, prestige, and popularity along with the mundane product, advertisers assumed that the customer was "pre-sold" on these "satisfactions" as proper rewards for the successful pursuit of the American dream. But in dramatizing the American dream and giving it pictorial form, advertisers also further defined the specific meanings of such qualities as good taste and enjoyment. By attempting to "fit the product into the life of the consumer," advertising, in Otis Peese's phrase, had come "to traffic in beliefs concerning the Good Life.

But what beliefs about the good life were these? Did copywriters and advertising artists, spokesmen of modernity, measure the good life by its conformance with rational efficiency, technological sophistication, and the tempo of urban life? If so, was that good life really "pre-sold" to consumers whose emotional, irrational, and even abstruse yearnings were seen by advertisers as shaping the appeal of the modern advertisement? Were images of the good life imposed on an unsuspecting public, or were they drawn from the lives of the people themselves by experts in the synthesis and articulation of inchoate popular lore? What relationship did these images bear to actual social conditions or cultural dilemmas? We can begin to suggest answers to these questions only when we know more about the creators of advertising—who they were and how they defined their relationship to their audience. That will be our task in the next two chapters.
Advertisements as Social Tableaux

The scene opens upon the covered veranda of a spacious country club. In the foreground, two women and a man are seated in large, smartly designed wicker chairs around a low table. They are carrying on a casual but obviously engaging conversation. A waiter in a white coat, black bow tie, and slicked-down hair stands near the table, opening a bottle. A golf bag rests beside one chair. The two women are seated with their backs to us, but their stylish cloche hats, their trim figures, and the slightly angular but nevertheless graceful way in which one leans forward toward the gentleman who is speaking unmistakably suggest fastidious demeanor and social confidence. The man faces us. He is impeccably dressed in a summer suit with his handkerchief precisely squared in his coat pocket. He has a tiny, trimmed mustache. As he speaks, he projects an image neither aggressive nor retiring, but simply confident and relaxed. His hands rest comfortably on his crossed knees.

The larger setting is opulent and refined. In the foreground and to the extreme right, a distinguished-looking man in knickers, seated in a wicker chair, serenely puffs a pipe and rests his book in his lap. He gazes out through the veranda's pillars toward the lawn, the boxed and sculpted trees by a low wall, and the golf course beyond. In the far background more waiters hover about several tables of genteel club members, as yet another couple emerges onto the veranda from the clubhouse doors. Everything suggests spaciousness as well as leisure. The central figures are well separated from each other with ample "talking room" and sufficient privacy from other tables. They are small, yet not dwarfed by the clubhouse. The pillars at the right, with several Italian cypress trees interspersed, open out for the entire length of the veranda, as far back as we can see, on the expansive open areas of the golf course. Several indistinct figures of golfers can be vaguely glimpsed. Although no color is apparent, the tiled floor of the veranda, the vines covering its roof and the grassy expanses convey a sense of vivid opulence. Tiny goblets on the table of the three characters in the foreground complete the image of fastidious restraint.

Having taken in the scene, we then learn something about the sprightly conversation that is unfolding at the table in the foreground and about some other characters soon to make an appearance: "A woman's laugh falls gaily upon their ears, and the company learns of a well-played match. The talk turns to yachting and a youth tells of winning the King of Spades' cup. Fleet horses engage their interest and a Master of Hounds recounts a thrilling hunt in Maryland." The scene just described might have served as the opening tableau for a play, reproduced in precise detail from the instructions of a playwright who wished to convey an immediate impression of the characters and their society at the raising of the curtain. In fact, it appeared in a 1929 Canada Dry Ginger Ale ad from the Chicago Tribune. Advertising tableaux such as this confront us directly with the dilemma posed by the rather offhand but frequently repeated truism that "advertising reflects society."

We should recognize, first, that advertisements may be said to reflect society in several ways that have little relevance to the problems raised by the Canada Dry tableau. Advertisements depict and describe the material artifacts available for purchase at a given time. They reveal the state of technology, the current styles in clothing, furniture, and other products, and sometimes the relative prices commanded by various goods. Whereas archaeologists must deduce the probable social uses of the artifacts they unearth, and then interpret from them the economic and social structures of the society, advertisements provide us with ample guidelines to the social functions (or at least the suggested uses) of various products. They can supply this information about a society without depicting either a person or a social setting, merely by displaying and describing the products themselves.

Another way that advertisements can "reflect society" without actually depicting any social setting is through the testimonial ad. The endorser may be quoted without illustration; or he or she may be shown in close-up, with no suggestion of social context. But the choice of endorser will tell us what sort of person the advertising professionals, from their highly motivated study of popular attitudes and perhaps through sales or coupon tests, have determined that the public will best accept as an "authority." If the trend in testimonials moves away from business figures toward movie celebrities, we have glimpsed one reflection of attitudinal changes in the society.

The Concept of a Social Tableau

But the advertisements we are most likely to think of when we speak of ads as "reflections of society" are those, like the Canada Dry ad, that may be defined as "social tableaux." Within this category fall all advertisements in which persons are depicted in such a way as to suggest their relationships to each other or to a larger social structure. The depiction of a single person may qualify if that person is placed in a setting suggestive of social relationships with others.

I have adapted the phrase "social tableau" from the term "tableaux vivants" or "living pictures," a genre of theater entertainment that enjoyed a moment of
popularity toward the end of the nineteenth century. The tableaux vivants were elaborately costumed and staged representations of familiar scenes, accomplished through the grouping of models who held sustained, motionless poses while the curtain remained open on the scene. Their entertainment value stemmed from the shock of recognition of a familiar scene suddenly "brought to life" in three dimensions with real persons. The scenes, therefore, had to be familiar to the audience. They usually consisted of famous paintings, historical or biblical scenes, or ostensibly pleasing fantasies of "moonlight" or "springtime."

Playwrights still occasionally employ the tableau technique to evoke a scene vividly in the audience's memory. The actors are frozen in place as the curtain opens or the stage lights come on. They hold their poses for several seconds before the action and dialogue begin, so that the audience may take in the atmosphere of the stage set and the implications of the depicted social situation. These theater tableaux seem to me the genre most nearly analogous to printed advertisements that depict social scenes. Though both are static, both are as suggestive as possible of impending or arrested action.

The social tableau advertisement usually depicts a contemporary "slice-of-life" setting rather than a work of art or a legendary scene. But it still relies on scenes sufficiently stereotypical to bring immediate audience recognition. Just as the tableaux vivants were defined as "vivid" representations, so the advertising tableaux often enhance social scenes through their brilliance of imagery and intensity of focus. With a little imagination, we might even interpret the texts of those ads as analogues to the program notes or spoken narratives that sometimes accompanied the nineteenth-century tableaux vivants.

But did the social tableau advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s serve, as they might seem to promise, as "mirrors" of American society in those decades? They usually purported to depict real, contemporary social scenes. But the Canada Dry tableau, which was not entirely unrepresentative of most advertisements, seemed to "reflect" only one very narrow stratum of American society. Other social strata, as manifested in urban slums, or working class households, or even apartment-house dwellers and families with boarders, found no reflection in advertising's "mirror." So prevalent was a "class atmosphere" in these social tableaux that a historian relying exclusively on their manifest evidence could only conclude that most Americans of that era enjoyed an exceedingly affluent and leisureed mode of life.

Thus, before we attempt to evaluate the "evidence" of these social tableaux, we must recall that "reflecting society" was not the purpose of these ads. The content of a social tableau advertisement was determined primarily by merchandising strategy. Its purpose was to sell a product. Within the boundaries set by that strategy, its content was further shaped by pictorial conventions and by the desire to provide consumers with a scene into which they could comfortably and pleasurably place themselves. Given the assumption of advertisers, constantly reinforced by their observations of popular culture, that people preferred to identify with portrayals of themselves as they aspired to be, rather than as they "really were," we must assume that most social tableaux aimed at depicting settings at least "a step up" from the social circumstances of the readers.

If social tableau advertisements are too unrepresentative of social reality to provide us a "slice-of-life" semblance of America, perhaps they can be salvaged as evidence by interpreting them as reflective of the "reality" of the social aspirations of American consumers. After all, the tableaux were reflections of something, even though that something is more accurately described as "social fantasy" than "social reality." Fantasy images of "a step up" may also conceivably be employed to estimate the reality of the step below. Even highly selective and idealized images of one elevated rung of the social ladder may provide information on assumptions about class relationships and social structure that ad writers believed their audiences would accept without dissent.

But these "reflections" in the ads must still be evaluated in the light of another possible source of distortion—the impact of the advertisers' mission as apostles of modernity. The social tableaux depicted an ideal modern life—one to which consumers presumably aspired, but also one specifically discerned by the eyes of ad creators. As we explore the social roles portrayed by the players in these tableaux, we will find instances in which the distortions created by merchandising strategies and by the occupational biases of advertising agents resulted in images that accurately reflect neither the actual lives nor the authentic aspirations of consumers. But we may also discover situations in which the tableaux, because they sought to relate products to social needs, did graphically reflect central social and cultural dilemmas of the age.

Modern Woman as Businesswoman:
"The Little Woman, G.P.A."

The leading lady claimed the largest role in the advertising tableaux. Her qualifications for stardom were scarcely debatable; everyone acknowledged that she made at least 50 percent of all consumer purchases. To foster identification and illustrate consumer satisfactions, advertisers kept her in the limelight. Although stereotyped characters abounded in the tableaux, the portrait of the American woman that emerged from the ads of the 1920s and 1930s is striking in its complexity. No other figure in the tableaux shifted roles and appearances so frequently. Yet the ultimate boundaries on the leading lady's scope of action were so clearly drawn that this apparent diversity of roles eventually came to seem less impressive.

The decisive separation of workplace and home during the previous century had inspired extremely polarized conceptions of the proclivities and capacities of men and women. Man's proper sphere had been increasingly defined by a life away from home in a world of ambition, severe competition, and the efficient, unsentimental manipulation of people and objects. In compensation, the home, now defined as the woman's sphere, had assumed the character of a sanctuary. Here the woman preserved the "softer" and more "cultured" qualities of sentiment, beauty, and repose, while progress proceeded space in the "real world" outside.
The home and its perpetual occupant, the wife, had thus acquired an archaic aura. According to this convention the home was not an agency of modernization, but rather a buffer against the harsher thrusts and shocks of progress. The women who guarded these havens did not contribute to the progress of the modern world. Rather, they preserved those qualities that helped to soften the necessary dislocations caused by progress and to salve the psychological wounds they inflicted.

Most social tableau advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s perpetuated the notion of polarized sexual spheres. But advertisers strenuously resisted the implication that women represented archaic qualities. Jealous as they were of their self-proclaimed status as the most modern of men, advertising men still labeled women as the more modern of the sexes. Advertisers not only complimented women on their superior responsiveness to new ideas, they also made them look modern. Although Santa Claus retained his traditional girth and white hair in advertising tableaux and usually displayed an archaic, pockmarked charm, advertisers who employed "Mrs. Santa Claus" as a merchandising assistant insisted that she be a slim, chic, "modern little lady... who is up-to-the-minute on all present day matters."41

Once again, however, the ambiguities of the concept of modernity intervened to prevent women from gaining complete respect for their apparent superiority. Ideas of modernity carried connotations drawn both from the realm of modern business progress (efficiency, control, rationality, technological sophistication) and from the realm of fashion (expressiveness, changeability, extravagance). Advertising tableaux cast women in "modern" roles in both of these senses of the word. But women's modest attainments in the higher, business sense of the term "modern" never achieved sufficient scope or stature to compensate for the unserious implications of their modernity in fashion. In fact, the more that women achieved recognition for their modernity in consumption, the less they qualified for any true equality in the broader quest for modern progress.

This is not to say that women gained no recognition from advertisers for their progress in business skills in the 1920s. Quite the contrary, copywriters constantly congratulated women for their presumed new capacities for management. But the proper field for these managerial talents remained the home. Nowhere did advertising men display so sincere a desire to flatter women for having achieved modernity than in the frequency with which they recast the old role of housewife as "family G.P.A." or general purchasing agent.42 To view the home, by analogy, as a business concern and the housewife as a business executive seemed, in a business-minded age, to banish the archaic aura of the home. As purchasing agents, women could command respect for exhibiting qualities previously honored primarily in men—capacities for planning, efficiency, and expert decision-making. In its ad "The Little Woman, G.P.A.," N. W. Ayer and Son stationed the housewife at the controls of a domestic communications center, and appended prestigious initials after her name in the same way that a professional man might add L.L.D. or M.D. (Fig. 6.1). "Businesses may have their treasurers, their controllers," noted Ayer. "But homes have their wives who do the same work in 25 million independent businesses, the households of America." An appliance company congratulated "the modern homemaker" for running her home "quite as efficiently as her husband does his business—perhaps more so."43 Scores of tableaux disclosed the housewife planning expenditures or paying bills at her home desk and labeled her role "manager" or "executive."44

Social tableaux also frequently portrayed women demonstrating their new competence as purchasing agents in forays outside the home. In an ad headlined "Women know these things now," Veedol Motor Oils complimented women on their refusal to "rely on the men folk for every little thing as women did a generation ago."45 Similarly, Piggly Wiggly stores, the pioneers in self-service food markets, congratulated women for their "self-reliant" new skill in shopping. "The women of yesterday probably could not have done it at all," Piggly Wiggly began patronizingly. "For the woman of today it is both easy and pleasant. Her new, wide knowledge of values, her new ability to decide for herself, is one of the wonders of the world we live in." By selecting products off the shelf with "no clerk to persuade her," proclaimed Piggly Wiggly, "she has astonished her husband... and the world."46

If her husband was astonished, still he suffered no loss of traditional dominance. If his wife was the home's purchasing agent—and thus analogous to a business
executive of modest power—the husband was more elegantly defined, either implicitly or explicitly, as the home’s “treasurer” or its “president.” The wife’s expertise and efficiency within the realm of day-to-day consumer decision-making warranted praise, but her ultimate subordination to a higher executive remained unchallenged. As for her heralded new competence in decision-making, Piggly Wiggly characterized it as fully expressed in her “endorsement” of the Piggly Wiggly plan, and Veedol suggested that she exercise her new independence by relying on Veedol ads rather than on the advice of “men folk.” For the upper-middle-class housewife, the new ascribed status of “purchasing agent” was particularly ironic. Just as she was receiving recognition with a managerial-sounding title, as Ruth Schwartz Cowan points out, she was often losing help from servants, relatives, and commercial service agencies and was slipping into a less managerial role as an unspecialized, “proletarianized” household worker.13

Even though the “President of Home, Inc.” occasionally called her to account on expenses, the efficient home manager’s goal was as much to save time as to save money. A “clever manager” not only claimed respect for her businesslike modernity, she also emancipated herself from withering isolation and cultural deprivation by creating time for outside activities. This she accomplished by giving housework even more attention but turning it into a science. So systematic was one home manager, in the fond vision of an advertising agent for a washing machine, that “when she shopped, she bought in twos. Two shirts exactly alike, two sheets exactly alike, two towels, two pairs of pajamas, two pairs of hose.” She saw that each article had similar wear. “But one she sent out by the pound and

the other she had washed at home with her electric washer. . . . Then she balanced her cost—operating cost of machine, maid’s time at 50 cents an hour, . . . machinery depreciation.” For a somewhat less self-reliant but still eagerly scientific young housewife, Old Dutch Cleanser provided a white-coated scientist with a stop watch to measure her cleaning speed (Fig. 6.2).14

Leisure—For What?

The merchandising strategies of manufacturers of foods, soaps, waxes, disinfectants, and similar products usually dictated tableaux that elevated the standards for respectable housekeeping. Like the home economists, whom they often employed, these advertisers exalted “homemaking” as a career. As Ruth Cowan remarks, the image of housework changed: “it was no longer a trial and a chore, but something quite different—an emotional ‘trip.’”15 And if the positive rewards of scientific perfection were not sufficient, there was always the goal of possible failure. “By Their Floors Ye Shall Judge Them,” admonished one floor polish ad. “It is written that floors are like unto a mirror, reflecting the character of the housewife.”16 But emphasis on higher standards of housework was not the main thrust of ads to women in the 1920s and 1930s. Scores of advertisers, including the producers of new home appliances, promised that their labor-saving products and services would bring women the most fulfilling reward—leisure time. It is in the delineation by social tableaux advertisements of these new self-fulfilling activities for women that we discover one of the purest instances of advertising as a social mirror. The particular merchandising bias of the advertisement for a time-saving home service or a drudgery-removing appliance was largely exhausted in the argument that it could, in fact, produce the desired increase in a woman’s “free” time. How the leading ladies in these tableaux used the new discretionary time represented the best estimate by advertising copywriters and artists of the uses of discretionary time that women would find most attractive.

Many of these ads now showed the housewife enjoying her leisure—with the picture of the product absent or subordinated. The desirability of the depicted substitute activity was the very essence of the ad’s appeal: to show women using their free time for gardening when most actually longed to go shopping for clothes would be an advertising blunder. If advertising men ever faced a situation in which their overriding task was to depict exactly what the audience wanted, uncontaminated by their own or the manufacturer’s ulterior motives, these portrayals of the uses of leisure would seem to have offered that occasion.

Using these assumptions, we can attempt to reconstruct the aspirations of women readers of mass-circulation magazines in the 1920s from the advertising campaign of the American Laundry Machinery Company. This campaign stressed the time saved by sending family washing to a commercial laundry and described the activities women might choose in their free time. Each ad usually included three or more illustrated testimonials in which women described the particular joys of their expanded leisure. Since the ads included a large number of
examples, we may be able to infer from them not only which activities women most desired, but also the boundaries of such desires. What these ads did not include may be as significant as what they specifically portrayed.

What uses of leisure time did the women in these ads find most appealing? A compilation of all activities described or depicted in eight of these ads in 1926 reveals that leisure for reading and for spending more time with their children far outranked all other choices, with twelve mentions each. Participation in club activities gained six mentions; golf, sewing, and part-time work outside the home numbered five each. Visits with friends, concerts and plays, home decoration, music, motoring, and sports other than golf all appeared in at least three testimonials or lists of possible leisure activities. No testimonial mentioned a career. Civic affairs gained only a single reference, and shopping and charity work each appeared only twice (Fig. 6.3). A survey of ads for other labor-saving devices and services between 1926 and 1928 reveals an even heavier emphasis on "more time to devote to your children" or "companionship with your children" as the most desired benefit. Visits with friends, clubs, reading, golf, the theater, and bridge received lesser attention; part-time work, shopping, and civic affairs received none. Several years later, a Woman's Home Companion study of women's use of free time resulted in "a list so long and a range so wide that even we staunch believers in feminine progress were surprised." But the magazine still implicitly preserved certain outer boundaries of women's proper sphere by noting that the gamut of leisure activities extended from "kitchen to golf course—nursery to club room." This evidence could support the argument of Ruth Schwartz Cowan and others that new theories of child care—which called for expanded, expert attention to the child and the cultivation of a feeling of companionship between child and mother—had persuaded many women simply to shift their time from house maintenance to child nurture. Certainly advertisements seemed calculated to encourage that process. Social tableaux regularly offered warm scenes of mothers sharing their children's enjoyment of a book, a picnic, or a romp through a field of wildflowers (see Figs. 5.29, 8.18). Ads warned that during children's early "plastic years...when they need 'mothering' most," a woman had precious little time to exert that crucial influence that would guide her children "safely through the shoals and narrows of childhood" and fortify them against the multitude of competing influences and attractions that might later induce them to "drift away." The social tableaux will not tell us, however, whether these visions of a new companionship with children actually came to pass. Nor will they reveal whether these choices for leisure time were authentic reflections of women's real attitudes. We must still take into account possible refractions in advertising's "mirror image." The testimonials may have revealed women's notions about praiseworthy uses of leisure time more clearly than it showed their real preferences. Certainly it is striking, despite mounting box-office figures and frequent comments in the trade press about the movie-madness of the age, that no women in these tableaux confessed to using their new leisure time to go to the matinee.

The American Laundry Machinery testimonials were undoubtedly edited by copywriters to avoid undue repetition and to establish the range of alternatives they wished. The resulting priorities may well have represented a judgment by
Just what is it to be
A Good Wife in this
MODERN AGE?

[Text continues on page]
6.5. The omnipresent mirror reminded each woman of her central “duty” — to be beautiful. See also Fig. 6.9.

(Figs. 6.5, 6.6). Some advertisements clearly conveyed the idea that in presenting the formulaic scene of the woman seated before her dressing-table mirror they had captured the essence of “Woman” (Figs. 6.7, 6.8). For the male copywriter or illustrator, the mirror served to epitomize women’s supposedly unrivaled addiction to vanity; for a woman, it served as a reminder of an inescapable “duty” beyond that of efficient homemaking — the duty “to catch and hold the springtime of her beauty.”

Advertisers insistently reminded women that they might lose the very opportunity to embark on their “great adventure” of homemaking or fail to hold their treasured positions as companions unless they repeatedly won these privileges in the ongoing “beauty contest of life.” The warnings could be positively intimidating. “What Do Men Think When They Look at You?” asked one Camay soap ad. “You against the Rest of Womankind; your Beauty . . . your Charm . . . your Skin,” warned another. “Someone’s eyes are forever searching your face,
Comparing you with other women.  

A corset manufacturer added that the "beauty contest of life" was an equal-opportunity competition, in which women must acquire beauty "as a personal achievement... not a birthright. Ivory soap rushed to the aid of mothers seeking to protect their daughters from failure in the most important "battle" of their lives. To gain a headstart on the competition, the mother in an Ivory tableau told her infant daughter, "I'm Starting Your Beauty Plans Now." (Fig. 6.10.)

Grotesque Moderne

Exactly what "look" women should adopt to play their modern roles was defined less by the close-ups of soap and cosmetic ads than by the staid silhouettes, and accessories of women in the whole range of social tableau advertisements. The "Fisher Body girl" established the normative image for women of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The creation of illustrator McClelland Barclay, it
Of all those who express motor car body preference—95% Prefer “Body by Fisher”

An investigation made by a different agency and verifying the evidence of every car owner in America, has revealed that the great majority of motor car owners select a car with a body attribute foremost in mind. It has established that just as each of all motor car buyers who are influenced by the body in purchasing a motor car, prefer Body by Fisher.

When the American people—those who know motors—select

GEORGE MOTORS

most solid and permanent feature in a motor car is its automotive product, there is no need to mention. This product must be indescribably superior. As a matter of fact, the superlativity and superiority of Body by Fisher have been recognized from the start. So evident was Body by Fisher 's body and equipment demanded by the manufacturers of the finest motor cars that, inevitably, Fisher became a leader in the creation of bodies for all makes of cars—bodies that are better motor cars as well.

Now the results. When General Motors presented the finest motor car in each price class that has ever been equipped, these better cars were already equipped—with Body by Fisher. This is the reason why today the famous “Body by Fisher” is the standard guide in the selection of the better motor car in every price field—a fact which is very plainly apparent when one glances at the pictures below. All of these are equipped with Body by Fisher.

His first love

Mother—charming and modest, with the charm of the simple girl companion. The simple daily life is known to thousands.

6.12. Mothers looked “softer” than the norm for modern women and rarely indulged in dramatic poses or gestures. They were shorter, rounder, more likely to appear in soft focus. Compare Figs. 6.10 and 6.12 with Figs. 5.4, 5.14, 6.13, and 6.14.

6.11. Whether attended by maid or male escort, the Fisher Body girl accentuated her angular lines by indulging in self-dramatizing stances and gestures. See also Figures 4.10, 4.11, and 5.3.

heroine of the Fisher Body ads was slender, youthful, and sophisticated. Her finely etched facial features formed a slightly aloof smile, suggesting demure self-confidence in her obvious social prestige and her understated sexual allure. Attired elegantly, but not exotically, she stood tall and angular, her fingers and toes tapering to sharp points. In her role as a model of the proper feminine look, she gained credit for attracting the attention of women as much as men (Fig. 6.11).

In one direction, this modal image of modern woman shaded off into that of the housewife and mother. Her outlines were usually softer and slightly more rounded than the Fisher Body girl. Her posture was less self-consciously canted or accentuated, her neck and limbs slightly shorter (Fig. 6.12). In the other direction, the divergence from the Fisher Body model moved more abruptly toward striking “high-fashion” extremes, until the “modern woman” approached the status of a geometric abstraction.

It was in the increasingly abstract portrayals of this “high-fashion” version of the American woman that advertising men effectively propagated their contention that the “beloved buying sex” must also be the most modern. Men were sometimes depicted in modernistic illustrations. But never did advertising artists distort and reshape men’s bodies as they did when they transformed women into Art Deco figurines. Women in the tableaux, as symbols of modernity, sometimes added more than a foot to their everyday heights and stretched their elongated
eyes, fingers, legs, arms, and necks to grotesque proportions (Figs. 6.13, 6.14). The proportions of some women in the tableaux suggested a height of over nine feet. A deference to the geometric motifs of popularized modern art in the 1920s, women's legs sometimes extended in cantilevers or absolutely straight lines from thigh to toe. Their pointed feet and toes appeared to have emerged fresh from a pencil sharpened. Foot-long fingers similarly tapered into icy stilettos. As for their legs, one advertising writer observed that they were "just as long as the artist cares to make them, and evidently he is paid by the running foot."

Thus the woman of high fashion—and, by implication, all women of high social status—appeared in advertising tableaux as physically distinct from the woman of lower social position. By a Lamarckian process of natural selection, the lady of high class had acquired an elongated neck to accentuate her pearl necklace and her hat, and a body tall enough for the artistic drape of an evening dress. Her sculpted head evoked images of Grecian culture and aristocratic poise; her brittle, tapered appendages conformed to Thorstein Veblen's specifications for the look of conspicuous leisure. So extreme were some of these distortions that a comparison of advertising drawings with contemporary advertising photographs is often startling, even though the photographs themselves were often taken at

6.14. The "smartness" of actress Gertrude Lawrence, like that of the Ondine hostess (Fig. 6.13), was revealed in bodily proportions that suggested a height of at least eight feet.
Famous Feet

The Eureka Man leaves you healthy, fit, and satisfied.

Blue-jay

6.15, 6.16. Despite the photographers’ use of flattering angles, women in full-length photos were often posed to look up to the ad artists’ models of the modern woman. Compare Figs. 5.4, 6.13, 6.14, and 8.48.

extreme angles, in an effort to approximate the fashionable ideal. Even next to the moderately high-fashion drawings of the retail advertisements, women in the advertising photographs look squat, neckless, and beefy (Figs. 6.15, 6.16). 32

What relationship did the modern woman of these illustrations bear to social realities? Certainly, the physical resemblance was meager. Fashion economist Paul Nystrom estimated in 1928 that only 17 percent of all American women were both “slender” and over 5 feet 3 inches in height. 33 The emphasis on youth and slenderness, however, did reinforce the notion of women’s new freedom of physical activity; and like the cut of women’s clothes, the stance of fashion models, and the postures of modern dance, it fostered the image of the woman in actual or impending motion—the woman on the move. 34 The tubular shapes and angular lines also suggested a rejection of the traditional motherly image. In fact, advertising tableaux that cast women in maternal roles with children usually modified the modern image appreciably, rounding out the figure, bringing the proportions back toward normal, and softening the lines (see Fig. 6.12). Perhaps significantly, mothers looked like women of more modest social status.

If extreme height and exaggerated “artistic” postures gave the modern woman of the ads a certain claim to elegance and prestige, still she gained stature mainly in comparison to other, non-fashionable women. In relation to men, as Erving Goffman has intriguingly suggested in Gender Advertisements, distortions of women’s shapes and gestures often convey messages about social subordination. Women, Goffman argues, appear in poses that are more “canted,” more exaggerated and grotesque, more off-balance and tentative than those assumed by men. These stances and gestures imply a sense of dependence on the man for stability and balance, a willingness to make oneself into an interesting “object,” and a greater vulnerability to the caprices of a dominating emotionality (Figs. 6.17, 6.18). 35

Particularly common in the illustrations of the 1920s and 1930s is the contrast, which Goffman noted in the 1960s, between the predominance of a solid, firmly planted stance for men and an unbalanced stance for women. Men in the tableaux usually balanced their weight on both feet. Women placed their weight on one foot while the other leg inclined in a “bashful knee bend” or complimented the supporting leg and foot by posing at an artistic angle (see Figs. 9.10, 10.3). If such off-balance and tentative stances implied, as Goffman argues, a status of dependence and a “foregoing of full effort” to prepare for assertive, self-reliant action, then illustrators of the 1920s and 1930s certainly exaggerated these qualities in depicting the modern woman. 36

Advertising illustrations thus reinforced the tendency to interpret woman’s modernity in a “fashion” sense and to define the status of “decorative object” as one of her natural and appropriate roles. Women took on the contours and angles of their modern art backdrops more decisively than men, suggesting their pliability in the service of art. In some tableaux, women with less distorted shapes and postures still functioned as decorations for the depicted room, as much as did the sculptured art objects or the curtains (see Fig. 5.23). 37 Even the distortions of body proportions, which elevated women of fashion and status to awesome heights of eight or nine feet, served more to accentuate their decorative potential than to suggest their commanding presence as new women of broader capacities and responsibilities.
Anticipations of Superwoman: Finessing the Contradictions of Modernity

The compulsion of advertising men to relegate women's modernity to the realm of consumption and dependence found expression not only in pictorial styles but also in tableaux that sought to link products with the social and political freedoms of the new woman. Expansive rhetoric that heralded women's march toward freedom and equality often concluded by proclaiming their victory only in the narrower realm of consumer freedoms. In "When Lovely Women Vote," an immaculately groomed modern woman, well-educated and active in civic affairs, gazed ideologically outward and upward in the pose more recently adopted for political candidates with "vision." However, the question on which she was asked to vote was "What toothpaste do you use?" (Fig. 6.19). Cannon Mills recalled that since women had first exercised the vote for political candidates in 1920, "that year we decided to let them vote on toothpastes." The frequent conflation of consumer and sociopolitical freedoms found provocative expression in a 1930 Chicago Tribune ad entitled "Feminine Values": "Today's woman gets what she wants. The vote. Slim sheaths of silk to replace voluminous petticoats. Glassware in sapphire blue or glowing amber. The right to a career. Soap to match her bathroom's color scheme."42

Although a devotion to matching soaps might seem trivial to some, women's responsibility for home decoration was linked with a much more significant issue. Whatever range of outside activities they might enjoy, women still bore full responsibility for maintaining the "scenting atmosphere" of the home. In an age of rapid tempo and distracting amusements, women needed to respond to such centrifugal forces by making their homes adequate counter-attractors. By making her home a haven of beauty and cleanliness, and herself an energetic and alluring companion, could a wife shoulder that "burden of making a marriage successful [which] must always be chiefly on the woman."43 Ads for products ranging from laxatives to varnishes agreed that "one person" alone was responsible for the family's happiness. No tableau ever portrayed a housewife enjoying golf, a club meeting, or even a fricic with the children at the expense of her homemaking responsibilities. Nor did any tableau exempt her from the responsibility of beautifying herself and her surroundings. Men, the tableaux reiterated, fell in love, and stayed in love, with the beauty-minded, and ultimately home-oriented, "womanly woman." "Watch that you don't disappoint him," they warned.44

Thus the chain of women's roles in the tableaux came full circle: from the "business modernism" of the efficient home manager to the personal modernity afforded by leisure time and outside activities, then to the fashion modernism of the decorative object, and finally back to the hearth as home-beautifier and anchor against the winds of modern distractions. A woman's enthusiasm for stylistic modernity revealed a proper instinct for beautification, but it also inspired suspicions about her helpless susceptibility to the whims of change. It was not a modernity that contributed to significant social and economic progress.

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When lovely women vote

To thousands of women of this type—
charming, educated, well-dressed, prominent
in the social and civic life of her city, we
put this question: What tooth paste do
you use?

To our delight, the majority answered
Listerine Tooth Paste. Certainly to women
of means, the price of 25¢ could not pos-
sibly have been a factor in deciding upon
a tooth paste. Obviously, the quality of
the dentifrice itself and the brilliant results
it accomplished were responsible for their
choice.

Won't you try Listerine Tooth Paste?
See how thoroughly it cleans. How even
ly it covers blemishes and disfigurements. How
glimmering white it leaves the teeth. How it
refreshes the mouth and sweetness the
breath. Bear in mind, incidentally, that it
costs you less half of what you would ordi-
narily pay for tooth paste of equal quality.
Lambert Pharmaceutical Co., St. Louis, Mo.

LISTERINE TOOTH PASTE
the quality dentifrice at 25¢

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6.19 Listerine blithely introduced the theme of women suffrage only to flatter the majority of women on their choice of toothpastes. Consumption was the true realm for a modern woman's decision-making.
A Man’s Castle is Woman’s Factory!

6.20 An efficient housewife might create more leisure, but she could entertain wider aspirations only in defiance of authoritative warnings: “Men are judged by what they accomplish—women by the homes they keep.”

In tableaux with titles such as “Her home is still her castle . . . but it has a drawbridge now,” advertisers celebrated a woman’s new freedom of activities. But the drawbridge also led back into a castle (sometimes called a woman’s “factory” in other tableaux) in which she was to continue to play the roles of queen and castellan (Fig. 6.20). A truly modern woman would be so efficient as a “home manager and hostess” that she could blithely tee off at the fourteenth hole at four o’clock and still arrange a “dinner at seven for eight.”

Sacrificing none of her former responsibilities as housewife, doting mother, and vision of loneliness, this modern superwoman would simultaneously display her talents as sportswoman, clubwoman, hostess, sophisticate, and home decorator. In advertising’s fond reflection of “progressive” American ideology, she could attain every promise of the new while sacrificing nothing worthwhile of the old. Advertising men, it appeared, were not only apostles of modernity; more significantly, they were mediators who counseled women on how to adapt without cost to a consumption-oriented modernity that was appropriate for feminine instincts and capabilities.

The Businessman as Generic Man

In contrast to the women of the advertising tableaux, most of the other characters played less striking and less ambiguous roles. Men appeared almost as frequently as women, but in nondescript, standardized parts as husbands or as businessmen at work. When the advertising message called for it, men appeared in a much larger variety of occupational roles than women—an accurate reflection of social realities. As doctors, dentists, or business executives, they might endorse the product; as truckers, delivery men, house painters, or mechanics they joined the tableaux to demonstrate the product’s manufacture or use. But working-class men never appeared as consumers; an unspoken law decreed that the protagonist (and consumer surrogate) in every ad must be depicted as middle class (Fig. 6.21).

Not one motorist in a thousand, for instance, ever appeared in anything but a suit, and hat or club sporting togs.

When merchandising strategy did not call for a particular occupational function, the leading man, as Everyman, tended to conform to the single stereotype. Whenever his occupation was revealed, the man who played the role of husband was almost invariably identified as a businessman. Advertisers sought to flatter their male readers by opening the sales argument with “You are a business man.” Remedies for nerves, fatigue, and constipation regularly attributed such ills to the “stress of business.”

Among hundreds of thousands of advertisements in its 1920s and 1930s, I have yet to discover a single one in which the husband or an ambitious young man is defined as a factory worker, policeman, engineer, professor, architect, or government official, and I found only one in which he is a lawyer. Even doctors and dentists appeared only in their functional roles—not typical husbands. As a McCall’s advertisement put it, in an offhand manner that reflected the conventionality of this advertising stereotype: “The average man just a business man.”

Within the role of businessman, some slight differentiations emerged. Old men were likely to be cast as business executives. Young men were often salesmen, aspiring to the popular intermediate step of sales manager on a stereotype business ladder. When husbands telephoned their wives to expect a dinner guest, they always brought home either a “sales manager” or a “client.” Whatever his level of achievement in business, advertising’s Mr. Everyman always left home for the office, never for the shop, the factory, the garage, the courthouse.
One collar manufacturer, seeking "to avoid the obvious danger of effeminacy" when women were introduced into collar ads, found a way to emphasize sexual differentiation by displaying the girl in color with many decorative accessories. She was looking at a man in a black-and-white photograph whose portrait, with its severe lines and matter-of-fact atmosphere, stood out in "virile contrast to the feminine charm of the girl and her colorful surroundings." Edgeworth Smoking Tobacco even suggested that the growing number of women smokers had effeminized cigarettes; men should respond by turning to pipes. In a rare but strategically understandable display of pique at the recent advances of women, Edgeworth proclaimed: "A man looks like a man when he smokes a pipe." 151

Men could dress conservatively, avoid distorted, modernistic poses, and return to traditional habits like pipe smoking because they did not have to prove themselves modern. All middle-class and upper-class men were businessmen, the tableaux implied. A businessman exemplified efficiency and control. If a woman's modernity was primarily decorative, a man's was primarily functional. In modeling the typical man on themselves, advertising men distorted the realities of occupational and class structures. By refusing to give men a distinct "look" as consumers, they preserved the assumption that dominant male instincts for production and functional modernity would counter any decadent tendencies of the consumption ethic.

Supporting Players

Of the supporting actors and actresses in the social tableaux, few were more stereotyped than the children. Two children invariably meant a boy and a girl, never two girls or two boys. Virtually never were children described or depicted in such a way as to suggest distinctly individual personalities. Except when the selling message specifically dictated otherwise, children were healthy, fastidiously groomed and attired, and impeccable in behavior. Magazines of the 1920s often conveyed "an image of youth out of control." 152 Not so the advertising tableaux. Except on the few occasions when children or young people were called upon to influence the family's buying decisions through pleading or protest, they happily deferred to parental authority.

The elderly found their leading roles largely limited to ads for life insurance and grave-vaults; occasionally they gained "sit-in" parts as grandparents. Older men enjoyed a little greater latitude, since a silver-haired man could still find occasional work as a business executive, doctor, or experienced craftsman. Women whose hair had whitened found parts only as widows or grannies. Nothing so uniformly characterized the tableau roles of the elderly as a seemingly compulsory seated position. An observer from another century might well conclude, from studying advertisements alone, that men and women of the 1920s and 1930s lost the power of locomotion and upright stance after the age of fifty-five. Grandmothers sometimes still did handwork and both grandmothers and grandfathers held young children or read to them. Grandmothers bestirred themselves once or twice a year to put holiday turkey in the oven, but aside from that, most of them apparently
did little more than daydream about the past (Fig. 6.23). As if to confirm their distance from modernity, the elderly never appeared in explicitly urban settings. If American films of the era, as Martha Wolfenstein has argued, placed their spotlight entirely on the younger generation and emphasized the discontinuity between present and past, advertising did so even more emphatically. The elderly were not model consumers. Their needs and desires were less pressing than those of the younger generation and their ideas and habits were out-of-date. Usually, and perhaps mercifully, advertisers either removed them from sight or allowed them to sit quietly by the fire, rather than parading them on center stage as horrible examples. It would be easy to interpret a neglect of the older generation, and the prevalence of families with only one or two children, as an accurate reflection of certain social realities of the age: certainly nuclear families increasingly lived apart from grandparents, and the middle and upper classes adopted the ideal of the small family and practiced contraception. But we must remember that the tactical considerations of advertising played as large a role as social realities in shaping such illustrations.

Children or the elderly usually gained parts in the tableaux for the limited purpose of conveying a single visual message—such as “family” or “child” or “extended family.” Children appeared frequently, but in numbers no greater than needed to convey the required message. Only rarely did a family with more than two children appear, even in ads by newspapers and magazines that stressed the buying power of their subscriber families. Nor was the three-generation family called upon to convey an image of family buying power. Part of the reason stemmed from a law of artistic economy: don’t clutter the picture with several figures when one child will adequately say “family” to the audience, and when a boy and a girl with parents will symbolize the whole universe of possible nuclear-family roles. A desire to focus the viewer’s attention could lead to the decision to employ only a single child. Then, with the eyes of both mother and father turned solicitously toward the child, readers would be induced to look where the parents looked. (See Figs. 7.11, 8.15.) Such a focus of attention also carried the side effect of emphasizing the child’s right to the parents’ attentive concern.

The other reason for limiting the number of children and the appearances of grandparents was more attuned to social realities—or at least to the real attitudes of advertisers. To the upper-middle class, with its ideal of the smaller and more “democratic” family, a picture of a family with three or more children might suggest an absence of middle-class status. And the presence of three generations—except in the formulaic holiday dinner scene—might indicate an overcrowded and less affluent household. Social tableau families were the idealized families of artistic economy and social aspiration. Grandparents were removed from sight and mind and a favored child or two might receive doting attention.

Ethnic and racial minorities found virtually no employment in the advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s. The names and facial features of the central and supporting figures in the tableaux were never suggested Southern or Eastern European origins. The names given to “typical” families or other leading figures tended heavily toward such standards as Brown, Anderson, Smith, Morton, and Jones. (Among these fictional names, the most suggestive of ethnic diversity I have encountered were Dougherty and Joyner.) Two rare tableaux allowed Italian men to speak broken English. Asians found no role whatsoever in the ads; one “Mexican” washerwoman and an Eskimo washlady made single appearances as archaic foils for modern washing methods in a Procter and Gamble series. American Indians played their stereotyped roles in historical scenes, but they never appeared as contemporary figures. Categorically, ethnic and racial minorities failed to qualify as modern. Nor did crowd scenes depict racial and ethnic diversity, as they frequently do today. To immigrants, the message of advertising was implicit: only by complete fusion into the melting pot did one gain a place in the idealized American society of the advertising pages.

For blacks, the available roles in advertising, outside of those in the black press itself, were severely limited in scope as well as number. Finding little reason to use caricatures of blacks for humor, as other forms of popular culture did, advertisers largely confined them to roles as colored patrons, janitors, washerwomen, and houseboys (Fig. 6.24). A few black trademark figures, such as Aunt Jemima and Rastus, the Cream of Wheat cook, at least managed to preserve a measure of humble dignity. Blacks never appeared as consumers, or as fellow workers with whites, or as skilled workers. Primarily, they functioned as symbols of the capacity of the leading lady and leading man to command a variety of personal services. Certainly the tableaux distorted the diversity of functional roles
that blacks played in the society and the extent of their satisfaction in servile positions, but the occasional presence of blacks did offer one perspective on the spectrum of social classes in that era. Perhaps if we turn from the predominantly stereotyped individual roles of the advertising tableaux to their broader delineations of classes and class relationships, we will find images more reflective of reality in advertising’s “mirror.”

Social Class in Advertising Tableaux

In *People of Plenty*, when David Potter defined advertising as the characteristic institution of an affluent society, he also suggested indirectly the affinities between advertising and a society of high social mobility and insecure social status.60 Expectations of mobility create the necessary openness to change; insecurities suggest an avenue of advertising appeal. It was particularly in a society of shifting relationships, without a fixed social hierarchy or authoritative standards, that products most readily served as an index of status.

Judging by the social tableaux of the 1920s and 1930s, advertisers had evidently concluded that American consumers hungered for an authentic, certified social aristocracy against which they could measure their own gains in status. For women, who constituted the bulk of consumers, the pursuit of modernity offered fulfillment only if it brought secure social status in reasonable proximity to an authentic social aristocracy. The tableaux steadily promised such fulfillment in scenes of ornate hotel ballrooms, exclusive restaurants and cabarets, and country club verandas like the one presented in the Canada Dry Ginger Ale tableau described at the beginning of this chapter.

These tableaux, and many others of less pretentious social scenes, disclose a society that saw differences of social class more distinctly than we do now—and a society that often spoke frankly about them. Frankness, of course, is not a salient quality of advertisements in situations where the advertising writer or art director has any reason to suspect that it will provoke even the slightest negative reaction. But advertisers in the 1920s and 1930s apparently had no qualms about flaunting the image of an opulent, exclusive, and clearly defined elite class before their audience. According to the tableaux, "society," in the narrow, elitist sense of the word, deserved popular veneration. Illustrations pictured an American social aristocracy; advertising texts unflinchingly labeled it as “high society.” Although illustrations of mansions, liveried chauffeurs, and polo matches would seem to have been sufficient to create the desired impression, copywriters sometimes bluntly underlined the point by referring explicitly to “the rich” and “the wealthy.” In the depths of the depression, staff members of one advertising agency voted a preference for advertising copy for a baking powder that claimed the patronage of 36 out of 39 “millionaires in one square mile” over copy that simply implied the same thing by referring to homes in “the finest residential section of Brookline.”61

The “society” of the wealthy, moreover, was an organized society. As revealed in advertisements, it had distinct boundaries and standards of admission. People who were “in society” could be confidently labeled as such; others could be described as seeking to “break in.” For their own tactical purposes, advertisers simultaneously stressed both the clarity of such boundaries and the ease of crossing them—the first to enhance the exclusiveness and desirability of the life of the rich, and the second to suggest how easily the advertised product would eliminate barriers to upward mobility.

The ads that depicted America’s wealthy elite never carried the least implication of satire. Nor did they suggest that the rich held any power—except, of course, the power to shape the esthetics of the society. “The rich” and “the fashionable explicitly so labeled, strutted through the advertising tableaux as though expecting bedazzled deference from the audience.62 Since no formal aristocracy existed in America, advertisers felt impelled to certify the rich as having gain that status. The Packard Motor Company and Freed-Eisemann Radio specifically designated their patrons as “America’s Aristocracy” (Fig. 6.25). The Will Knight Motor Car Company counted among the admirers of its new “Great Si the “world’s elect,” which included “those who by birthright move in America’s most select social orbits.”63

In their campaigns to establish a socially authoritative American aristocracy, advertising men freely drew upon the aid of European kings, queens, dukes, a duchesses. If traditional American patriotism had prescribed a self-respecting republican contempt for decadent European aristocrats, advertisers nevertheless sensed a powerful and insufficiently repressed American undertone of venality for a titled nobility. Oneida silverware claimed a baroness, a princess, a duchess as patrons. Pond’s Cold Cream combed Europe for testimonials from titled ladies. Queen Marie of Romania replenished the royal coffers from many appearances on American advertising pages.
Palmolive Soap sought expert testimony in Europe they chose an ample number of doctors and beauty advisors who were "graced by royal patronage."

Although endorsements by prominent American socialites drew gratifying responses in advertising coupon tests, the public seemed to prefer authenticated nobility. A study of the "pulling power" exerted by the various endorsers in Pond's Cold Cream ads in 1925 showed that European royalty and nobility held three of the top four positions, with Princess Marie de Bourbon well on top. Another study four years later revealed a commanding lead for the Duchesse de Richelieu, with Mrs. Reginald Vanderbilt narrowly edging out the overworked Marie, Queen of Romania, for second place. Given this bias for titled Europeans, advertisements regularly cast the mantle of aristocracy over rich American socialites by gossiping about their social intimacy with European nobility.

Yet few European duchesses or aristocratic American socialites dared appear before the consumer audience merely as grande dames in static, courtly tableaux. Despite their fastidious demeanor, they were also horsewomen, golfers, and tireless travelers, living activity-filled lives, fully in pace with the tempo of the age. The "gay round" of one "charming cosmopolitan," the audience learned, included "Newport for the brilliant summer season ... a whirl of early autumn festivities in New York, then on to Melton Mowbray, England, for the fox hunting, winter in Italy or Egypt ... spring in Paris." Thus the dignity of inherited social eminence was fused with expertise on the up-to-date and fashionable. Moreover, any taint of decadence that might have been attached to unproductive, pleasure-seeking women of wealth and title was deflected by the strenuous activity they undertook. In seeming anticipation of the "fan morality" that Martha Wolfenstein discerned in American popular culture in the late 1940s, copywriters made their duchesses and debutantes work very hard at keeping up with the hectic pace of high society. Perhaps advertisers felt more comfortable glorifying these prototypes of a triumphant consumption ethic when so much "hard work" was involved.

Having conferred upon America's wealthy the qualities of aristocratic stature and a sensitivity to the pace of modern life, advertisers then added a few finishing touches before setting them before the public as models and advisers. The wealth these people enjoyed, the advertisements pointed out, enabled them to choose products without regard to price; their social lineage gave them an "instinctive" sense of taste. Their fastidiousness and discrimination made them the "best people" in every conceivable sense. Thus the aristocratic rich were always the first to recognize products of quality; news of their choices gradually trickled down to influence the consumer masses. Advertisers found no reason to imagine that this picture of a superior social elite as supremely "in the know" might provoke skepticism or resentment in the broad consumer audience.

The word "fastidious" in an advertisement was always the highest compliment; it never suggested an irrevocable snickier, as it might today. The fastidious ones were "people who know their way about in the world," people "with whom excellence in all their material possessions is a fetish." Canada Dry never doubted that "our best people" had the discrimination to select the best ginger ale. Camel cigarettes assured readers that "those who live well" easily recognized those "subtle differences in flavor ... lost on some people." Kotex bluntly and repeti-
president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies. The average family needed alluring dreams to compensate for its low income. Cecil B. DeMille had already demonstrated the popularity of opulent movie scenes that provided modest housewives and working-class girls a glimpse of the life of the rich. Although agency people were indifferent to many such movies, an art director argued, they should take a lesson from Hollywood and give this matinee audience the same opportunity to participate vicariously in a life of fashionable luxury through advertisements. 70

Were these social tableaux, though unrepresentative of American society as a whole, at least accurate depictions of the nation's wealthiest families or faithful mirrors of the social fantasies of the public? Idealized though these scenes were, they did reflect a wider tendency of the media of the age to portray the wealthy, in Frank Fox's phrase, as a separate genus of man. 71 The "smart set" was still a highly visible and relatively cohesive group. Whether or not the pre-1929 rich truly "glittered as they walked," as Caroline Bird later recalled, advertising writers and artists strongly encouraged American consumers to think of them that way. Advertising not only reflected but exaggerated and embellished the deeper social pyramid of the late 1920s. 72

Still, while the social tableaux of the aristocratic rich undoubtedly provided satisfying social fantasies for the wider consumer audience, the particular needs and biases of the ad creators shaped that fantasy in ways that may not have reflected accurately even the "realities" of the public's fantasy life. Distinctly absent from these tableaux were displays of the more vulgar tastes of some of the nouveau riche or any suggestion of those naughty escapades of the rich that so attracted tabloid readers. The need to protect the reputation of the product and confirm the reasonableness of its price ensured that advertisers would place it in the company of only the most discriminating among the rich. One suspects that this made the aristocrats of the advertisements more fastidious than their "real life" counterparts. It also may have made them less extravagant and sensual in their tastes than they would have appeared in social fantasies of the public's own making.

Social tableau advertisements thus emphasized the importance of class distinctions and provided a flattering and conservative portrait of the lives of a "natural aristocracy" composed of the very rich. But what did they reveal of the larger class structure? Some tableaux suggested the extent of the class spectrum, although from a rather foreshortened viewpoint. Advertisers tended to make only gross distinctions below a level roughly constituting the upper-middle class. One scheme of stratification identified the upper or upper-middle class with butlers and maidservants, the affluent or upper-middle class with maids, dinner parties, and tuxedos and evening dresses; the middle class with a white collar, home-loving existence—with, perhaps, a single maid—and the remainder of society as working class. Only those of the middle class and above ever appeared in the tableaux as consumers: Illustrators and copywriters frequently defined this spectrum of social classes through a mansion-bungalow comparison. The initial term of this comparison—the mansion—suggested that the contrast would span the universe of possible social stations. By implication, then, the cozy bungalow or "cottage" constituted the society's opposite pole of possible living standards.

The inhabitants of these far-from-tiny bungalows were inevitably a young middle-class couple. The husband, like all tableau figures with ambitions of mobility, was invariably depicted as already middle class in clothing, occupation, and social setting. 74 The working class appeared in advertising tableaux only in supporting, functional roles such as garage mechanic, house painter, truck driver, store clerk, or household servant. Some of these supporting players—delivery boys, tailors, maids, and scrupulously attentive sales clerks—reminded us of the reality of the far greater amenities of deferential personal service that were then available to those of the middle class and above. 75 Working-class people, including the emerging white-collar class of clerks and office employees, were never shown off the job in home situations or enjoying recreational pleasures. The task of depicting a home scene of a working-class family would have severely challenged the illustrators' capacities for social imagination. There is no evidence that they found occasion to attempt it.

Although the advertising tableaux of the 1920s and 1930s spoke far more explicitly than their present-day counterparts about class position and frequently depicted characters who were unmistakable badges of their exact class status, they never suggested that wide discrepancies in position should breed class resentment. On the contrary, the very tableaux that most vividly depicted the extent of the class spectrum often used the contrasts not to separate but to unite. Chauffeurs, maids, grocers, and department store clerks happily and deferentially served their exquisitely dressed patrons (Figs. 6.28, 6.29). The ad creators sufficiently shared
the class prerogatives of the upper and upper-middle classes to wish to believe that those who provided menial services to their betters did so fondly and thankfully.

If advertisements, as Jib Fowles argues, serve as the clearest indicators of a society's unfulfilled needs, then prominent among those needs in the 1920s and 1930s was the need for a sense of confidence in having secured a hold on a clearly demarcated place in the social hierarchy.16 Ads did not necessarily promise consumers a position in the highest echelons. The tableaux often assumed that members of the consumer audience would continue to admire the upper crust of high society from afar. But advertisers offered viewers who used the product the prospect of a secure foothold on some elevated rung of the social ladder.

The attainment of such a status, moreover, was clearly a palpable pleasure. Recent advertisements often celebrate pleasures of comradeship, sexuality, or gastronomy by showing people enjoying them either entirely independent of any particular class setting or in a variety of class settings. In contrast, the tableaux of the 1920s and early 1930s associated all other pleasures with an explicit "class" setting. Although ads portrayed people having fun at restaurants, ballrooms, nightclubs, and dinner parties, the major satisfaction they conveyed was that of simply being there, securely installed in the proper class setting, among the proper people, and appropriately defined as "belonging" by their attire. Advertisers assumed that their audience craved vicarious participation in displays of class standing and that it gladly imbibed the frank portrayals and discussions of the class hierarchy that were necessary to define the setting of the tableaux. Modernity in the realm of consumption, the wanton pursuit of style, did not afford complete gratification; some ultimate reward was required. The ads confidently addressed an audience willing to believe that class position itself constituted the supreme pleasure. All other pleasures contributed to it or flowed from it. The "good life" in these tableaux was a life lived in evening clothes (Fig. 6.30).

Modern Maids and Atavistic Ambitions

Visual confirmation of a secure, elevated social status often called for the inclusion of a final supporting player in the social tableau—the modern maid. Ballrooms and polo fields provided a setting and required an attire that immediately conveyed the class atmosphere of a tableau. A maid provided the same visual index of class in a domestic scene. Although they served mainly as props and rarely gained speaking parts, these maids deserve our attention. Their prevalence in the advertising tableaux of the 1920s and early 1930s, and their particular physical characteristics, dramatically illustrate both the extreme distortions of reality sometimes reflected by advertising's "mirror" and certain larger truths about the society's cultural dilemmas.

If advertisers, as apostles of modernity, wanted to acquaint American society with the logical outcome of the process of industrial modernization, they should have emphasized the leveling of the hierarchy of classes and the fading of visible class distinctions. They should have reflected the tendency for people to find their identity more in occupational groups than in explicit distinctions of social class.
They should have explained that "exclusiveness" through external display was necessarily declining with the advance of mass production and mass consumption. And they should have accurately recorded a decline in personal servants. But they sensed that their audience was not eager to listen to such blunt messages. If Americans were not yet prepared to relinquish the vision of a highly visible and elegantly enthroned social aristocracy, even as the price for a presumed democratization of society, advertising men were willing to indulge them in nostalgic social fantasies. Again, advertising leaders acted more as mediators than as apostles of modernity, providing the audience with fantasies that would buffer their adaptation to modern realities.

The "modern maid" of the advertising tableaux epitomized the adaptive social fantasy in its nostalgic or stative form. One might have expected that the high demand for maids as means of establishing a "class" atmosphere would have provided employment in the tableaux for many black and immigrant women. But such was not the case. In defiance of the realities of the American domestic working force, advertisers insisted upon the image of the "French maid" as the standard for social respectability. In Selling Mrs. Consumer, Christine Frederick conjured up images of domestic maids with such names as "Bridget, Maggie, Hilda, or Annushka," but the poise, demeanor, and facial characteristics of most advertising maids hardly suggested recent immigrant stock. A few black women did make an appearance as maids or cleaning ladies, but they were outnumbered more than ten to one by young white women in immaculate caps and aprons. White maids older than thirty-five or with physiognomies distinctly different from that of the lady of the house were even scarcer than blacks.

Again and again, in advertisement after advertisement, the maid was young, poised, and slender. She possessed finely chiseled facial features and a smartly modern hairdo. Except for her dress, she was indistinguishable from the leading lady. Even in photographed tableaux, the models who posed as lady of the house and as the personal maid could have been interchanged (Figs. 6.31, 6.32). Of 186 advertising illustrations of maids I have recorded, 158 show maids who are young, white, slender, and have facial features very similar to those of the leading ladies, occasionally differing from them only in having slightly younger or having a different hair color. In 13 instances the maids are somewhat dissimilar to the smart young leading lady, but are still young, white, and slender. In only 15 cases is the maid black, plump, or noticeably older than the mistress.79

Such a phenomenon cannot be explained by any theory of advertisements as direct reflections of social realities. Most female domestic workers in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s were not young "French maids." In fact, most were blacks or recent immigrants. According to the 1930 census, 18 percent of the women listed under "other domestic and personal service" were foreign-born and 39 percent were black. By 1940 the percentage of blacks among female domestic servants would surpass 46 percent. Nor were the majority of actual maids young women in their early twenties, as the ads seemed to suggest. In 1930, 39 percent of female domestic servants were over thirty-five years of age. By 1940, those over thirty-five had increased to 47.8 percent.80 The likelihood of an urban upper-middle-class family securing a maid who met all of the typical tableau specifications—slim, white, between twenty and thirty years old, and possessed finely etched facial features—was slender indeed.

The persistent presence of maids in the advertising tableaux, moreover, contradicted broad social trends. The ratio of domestic servants to households had fallen sharply in the United States in the decade before 1920. In that year, according to figures cited by David Katzman for five Northern cities, female servar ranged from 35 to 79 per 1,000 households. Markedly lower ratios characterized rural areas. Although the number of female servants took an upturn in the 1920s, it had slowed again by 1940. Never after 1920 did female domestic servants exceed national ratio of 57 per 1,000 households. Meanwhile, wages for domestic help increased in the 1920s. As a writer summarized the "servant problem" for the Saturday Evening Post in 1926, "only the very wealthy can afford the luxury being insisted by high-priced domestics."81 Advertisers perceived that the public found fantasy fulfillment in visions of stylish maids, especially when they connoted both modernity and willing subordination. Upper-middle-class families were facing a complex servant problem to which the producers of household appliances were offering only a partial solution. Some of these families now did without full-time, live-in servants because of the shortage of cheap household labor and the acquisition of laborsaving products. They sought to get by with the once- or twice-a-week blaxwasherwoman or immigrant cleaning lady.82 But the absence of a maid provoked...
As for hosiery... the Fresher the silk — the Better the fit... because...

FRESH silk hosiery is real. It should sit itself to every curve, clings snugly, and when stretched, spring-returns back into shape.

This means that the fabric is strong, comfortable, and not likely to be found wanting by the wearer. It is also designed to be a perfect fit, ensuring that it stays in place all day long.

The image of a well-dressed woman, often seen in advertisements, reinforces the message of the advertisement. It is a symbol of elegance and sophistication, suggesting that wearing REALSILK hosiery is a sign of status and refinement.

The depiction of a woman in the advertisement is also significant. It showcases the product in a way that is visually appealing and relatable to the target audience. The use of color and design helps to draw attention to the product and make it stand out.

Overall, the advertisement effectively communicates the message of the product and its benefits, presenting it as a desirable and desirable choice for women who value comfort, style, and elegance.

6.33. What could feed fantasies of class harmony and personal success more powerfully than an attractive, wholesome maid whose "in-your-service" stance complemented her mistress's dramatic pose? See also Figs. 5.1 and 6.11.

fears of social inferiority. Through coupon tests, the J. Walter Thompson agency discovered that the most effective headlines for Lux dishwashing soap were "Do Women with Maids Have Lovelier Hands?" and "Need Your Hands Say 'I Have No Maid'?" Consumers liked to think of themselves as entering that social class whose status was still symbolized, as a result of a kind of cultural-pictorial lag, by the visible presence of idealized, prestige-enhancing maids.

Even those who still retained domestic servants did not appreciate being reminded by the advertising pages of their problems with ungenerous, hard-to-manage, and less-than-exquisitely presentable household help. The tension-filled relationship of mistress and maid continued to be, in David Katzman's phrase, "an arena of intense cultural, racial, religious, and class conflict." In short, this was an era in which the satisfactions of being attended by a maid were likely to be far greater in vicarious experience than in reality. If the advertising tableau was going to depict a maid, there was ample reason not to stir the ill-humor of the reader by reminding her of such unpleasant realities as her dependence on ethnic minorities and blacks or on unattractive and hard-to-manage older women for domestic help. Instead, a parade of smart, efficient, and subservient young French maids might provide welcome psychological relief from the irritations and indignities of the "servant problem."

But the smart young maid, despite her passive role as a dehumanized stage prop, did more. Her modern, often glamorous, beauty added a Venetian grace to the image of conspicuous leisure in "class" advertisements. Her streamlined figure complemented the modern artistes surronding the leading lady of the tableau, in an ensemble effect that would have been disrupted by the authentic depiction of a typical real maid of the era. The French maid's usual roles as dutiful, conscientious servant and ego-enhancing personal attendant offered readers a chance to retain in fantasy something that appliances-as-servants could not provide—the psychological pleasures of solicitous personal attention from an obvious subordinate (Fig. 6.33).

Thus, the advertising tableaux, despite their distortions of reality, did sometimes explore basic social dilemmas of the era. Modernization, in the form of mass production, improved standards of living; new leisure-creating technologies seemed to promise an opportunity to rise in society. But middle-class and upper-middle-class families were likely to find that promises a bit hollow unless that rise could be certified by visible signs of social arrival (such as a French maid). The ultimate reward they sought for modernity in style was ascension into a secure, exclusive level of society, enriched and made visible by dominion over attractive and attentive personal servants. Then they would be presumed tasteful and modern by instinct and birthright.

Logically, apostles of modernity should have characterized maids and other visible signs of aristocratic exclusivity as passé. Nothing in the theory of modernization suggested that women should look to Princess Marie de Bourbon, or even Mrs. Reginald Vanderbilt, for authoritative guidance. But if consumers wanted to believe that exclusiveness was still fully compatible with an age of mass-produced goods, advertising leaders were not prepared to undermine such expectations. On the contrary, they began to find a larger social function in accommodating their advertising strategies to any wishful fantasies and illogical faiths that would ease the continuing transition to modern society.


14. I rely here on the counsel of Peter Burke in Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe (London, 1978), pp. 72-78, where he observes that "historians can never trust their documents completely. . . . The point about the different classes of documents is that they are worthless, but that they are dissected and distorted can to some degree be allowed for—indeed, it is the historian's traditional business to do so."

One Apostles of Modernity

1. In describing the superficially self-evident role of advertising as the logical extension of the process of modernization, I have drawn my definition of modernization from the following sources: Richard D. Brown, Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1850-1950 (New York, 1976); Alex Inkeles and David H. Smith, Becoming Modern: Individual Change in Six Developing Countries (Cambridge, Mass., 1974); Daniel Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Society (Glencoe, Ill., 1958); and Thomas L. Haskell, The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth Century Crisis of Authority (Urbana, Ill., 1977). I explore the complicated relationship between modernization and modern advertising further in Chapter 10.

2. In the Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), pp. 233-36, 266, 281-83, Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., employs the terms "velocity of flow" and "velocity of throughput" to describe how administrative coordination and integration in large businesses created gains of productivity and decreases in unit costs by ensuring a steady and rapid flow of materials through the industrial plant to the ultimate consumer. Velocity of flow was more important than economies of scale, he argues, in rationalizing the entire mass production–mass distribution system and ensuring higher productivity.


5. Advertising and Selling, Sept. 15, 1928, p. 28.


9. For the best survey of the rise of national advertising to its modern institutional shape between the 1880s and 1920, see Daniel Pope, The Making of Modern Advertising (New York, 1938), pp. 84-8 and passim.


11. Printers' Ink, Fifty Years, pp. 205, 241-42, 244; Advertising and Selling, Sept. 8, 1926, p. 29; July 13, 1927, p. 27. The branding of coal was ingeniously pioneered by a dealer who printed his name on thousands of orange cardboard disks which he scattered amid the coal so that a householder would be reminded of the brand with every shovelful.

12. Printers' Ink, Fifty Years, p. 249; Saturday Evening Post, Sept. 1, 1923, pp. 140, 141; Sept. 8, 1923, pp. 135-36; Sept. 15, 1923, pp. 172, 174; and Schudson, Advertising, the Unseen Persuasion.


59. Scrapbooks 195 (Kotex), Lord and Thomas Archives, housed at Foote, Cone and Belding Communications, Inc., Chicago; "Minutes of Representatives Meeting," May 21, 1930, p. 12. JWT Archives.
60. Scrapbooks 195 and 203 (Kotex), Lord and Thomas Archives; the emphasis on blood and periods is mine.
64. J. Walter Thompson News Bulletin, Aug. 1923, p. 6. This bulletin for external distribution is cited by its full title to distinguish it from the confidential, internally distributed JWT News Bulletin and JWT News Letter.
to Frank L. Scott, Jan. 9, 1940, Ford Folder, N. W. Ayer and Son Archives, 1 York City.


112. George Batten Co., News Letter, June 23, 1925, p. 4; Aug. 25, 1925, p. 5; Fitzgerald Macy's, Gimbels and Mr. p. 16.


114. Advertising and Selling, May 2, 1928, pp. 23, 66, 68.


122. Saturday Evening Post, Aug. 6, 1928, p. 51.


126. On the concept of women as driven by instincts toward "uncontrolled consumption" while men remained "uncorrupted," see Ewen and Ewen, Chains of Desire, pp. 149-50.

127. Printers' Ink, June 30, 1932, p. 86.

Six Advertisements as Social Tableaux


40. Ibid., Mar. 1930, fourth cover.


49. Printers' Ink, May 19, 1927, p. 10.

50. Ibid.


54. Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, Movie: A Psychological Study (Glencoe, Ill., 1950), p. 103.


56. Ibid., pp. 55, 61, 102; Scrapbook 179 (Electric Refrigeration Bureau, NEIA), Lord and Thomas Archives, housed at Foote, Cone and Belding Communications, Inc., Chicago; Saturday Evening Post, Jan. 23, 1926, p. 113; Feb. 6, 1926, p. 116; July 27, 1925, p. 15; May 1, 1926, p. 176; American Magazine, July 1933, pp. 199, 119.


entitled “Actual Visits to P & G Homes” or “Actual Letters from P & G Homes,” promoted a laundry soap, a mass-market product that would logically seek its constituency among those of nearly every level of society. Yet not one tableau of the 32 that I located revealed a home of less than middle-class status. Not one “P & G home” was an urban apartment, a rented home, or a multi-family structure.


78. Frederick, Selling Mrs. Consumer, p. 169.

79. Printers’ Ink Monthly, May 1928, p. 23. The distinctions involved in such categorizations as “similar” or “somewhat dissimilar” are necessarily subjective. If the maid is shown alone, with no “lady of the house” present, I have counted her as “similar” as long as she is slender, young, white, and has the standard, finely etched features. If the lady of the house is also present in the picture, I have counted the maid as similar even if her hair color and hairdo are different, as long as she is of the same build, posture, and facial features as her mistress and her mistress’ friends and is as young or younger.


Seven The Great Parables


2. TeSelle, Speaking in Parables, pp. 70, 73, 79.

3. For comparisons of melodrama and tragedy, see John Cawelti, Adventure, Myth, and Parable (Chicago, 1970), pp. 26, 38, 46.


8. This “tragedy of manners” represents a conditioned of the following ads: Evening Post, June 14, 1929, p. 148; Nov. 9, 1929, p. 160; Better Homes and Gardens, Oct. 1929, p. 99; Aug. 1930, p. 49.


17. Collier’s, Apr. 16, 1927, p. 44; Saturday Evening Post, Nov. 9, 1929, p. 169; Better Homes and Gardens, Mar. 1929, p. 149.


24. Saturday Evening Post, Mar. 1, 1930, p. 2. See also Saturday Evening Post, Mar. 8; Delineator, Aug. 1928, p. 68.

