The most striking feature of household spending in modern America is its sheer volume. The typical middle-to-upper-middle-class household occupies more than two thousand square feet of floor space, owns at least two cars, a couple of couches, numerous chairs, beds, and tables, a washer and dryer, more than two televisions, a VCR, and has cable. The kitchen contains a conventional oven, a microwave, a frost-free refrigerator, a blender, a coffee maker, a tea kettle, a food processor, and so many pots, pans, dishes, cups and glasses, storage containers, kitchen utensils, and pieces of furniture that they aren’t even counted. Elsewhere in the house are a personal computer and printer, telephones, an answering machine, a calculator, a stereo or CD player, musical instruments, and many pieces of art—in addition to paintings and reproductions there are decorative items such as vases, plates, and statuettes, photographs in frames, and knickknacks. In the bathroom are a hair dryer, a scale, perhaps an electric toothbrush or shaver, and cabinets overflowing with toiletries, shampoos, conditioners, face creams, and other cosmetics. The closets are stuffed with clothes and shoes of all types: dresses, suits, pants, shirts, sweaters, coats, hats, boots, sneakers, flats, pumps, walking shoes, patent leathers, and loafers. And don’t forget the jewelry. In addition to watches, the diamond ring, and other high-value items, there’s usually a large collection of costume jewelry: bead necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, earrings, earrings. The family room is filled with books, videos, tapes, CDs, magazines, and more phones and knickknacks. The floors are covered with rugs or carpet, and throughout the house are scattered other pieces of furniture, adorned perhaps with dried or silk flowers. Stored in the garage or basement is all the sports equipment, such as bicycles and skis, as well as luggage and totes, lawn and garden tools, and broken appliances. (Some developers now routinely build three-car garages—two spaces for the cars, one for the junk.) In addition to all these durable products (of which this is a very incomplete inventory), households spend heavily on services such as child care, movies, restaurants and bars, hotel stays, airplane trips, haircuts, massages, visits to Disney
World, lawyer bills, insurance premiums, interest payments, and, sometimes, rental on the storage space where even more stuff resides.

If you are a typical American consumer, you did not always have so much. There was a right time in your adult life when you could fit everything you owned into your car and drive off into the sunset. Now you need professionals to transport your possessions. You spend hundreds, perhaps thousands of dollars a year to insure or protect them. As you survey your material landscape, you may wonder how this state of affairs came to be. You certainly didn’t intend to imitate those medieval armies that became sitting ducks—unable to move on account of the creature comforts they started lagging around. Each purchase made sense at the time. Many were truly necessary. Some were captivating, giving you that “I just have to have this” feeling. But added together, they raise the possibility that yours is a lifestyle of excess.

How does it happen? And so quickly? To understand how your possessions came to fill a full-size moving van, or why you never seem to have enough closet space, we need to begin with the acquisition process. The sequence of events starts with a social act—being exposed to consumer goods. It proceeds through the mental stages of fantasizing, wishing, and rationalizing. Borrowing may be the next step before the process culminates with a purchase. See, want, borrow, buy.

**Seeing: The Many Sites of Exposure**

“My little girl had a friend visit her who was really into Guess jeans. My nine-year-old didn’t even know what Guess jeans were. Well, after that kid left, that was all she talked about. She had to have a pair of Guess jeans.”

“Every time they see kids with something new, other kids on the block go home and say they want it. Or something they see on TV, they think they should get it.”

“Sure, who went with me to submit the application, just fell in love with the place because it’s on top, by Mulholland, with beautiful rolling lawns, a brand-new gorgeous facility, and she hasn’t stopped talking about how she wants to go to Stephen Weiss for school. So even a few-year-old can discern the differences. She was very impressed with the lawns and the playgrounds.”

Inner desires are prompted first and foremost by exposure. The seeds are “planted” by seeing what people at work wear or drive; by visiting others’ homes and observing their private spaces; by hearing about a coworker’s new purchase; by window and in-store shopping; by looking at mail-order catalogs; and by viewing (or to a lesser extent, hearing about) consumer items in advertisements and films or on television. As the North American president of Montblanc USA put it, referring to the Euro Classics, the company’s entry-level ($200) pen, “They will see their friend with one and go out and get the same.” While most critics of consumer society focus on ads and the media, it’s important to remember that the more powerful stimulator of desire is what friends and family have.

For Lauren Vandermeer, work was the place where her desires were stimulated. After graduating from a Seven Sisters college, Lau-

nren wanted only three things: a camera, a stereo, and a bick. In her sales job at a large corporation, she quickly acquired them. “Then I became aware of people going on vacation, and then I wanted to go on vacation. I went to Mexico for a week. I really liked it.” The townhouse came next. “Very quickly after the vacation, several of my colleagues started buying houses and townhouses. And all these people were moving to York and Yardley and Newtown, Pennsylvania. It’s a great little yuppy area, and it’s all very beautiful. It was like one started and then everybody else followed suit. Everybody was looking, everybody was putting down payments down. And so I jumped on board too. But I will admit, the only reason I did it is because everybody else was doing it. And I felt so much keeping up with the Joneses as their logic. I bought into the logic of not wanting to pay rent, and that it was worth it to have a mortgage and the deductions for your taxes and all of that.”

Being single, Lauren opted for an urban rather than suburban area. While the “Joneses’” financial logic got her started, once she started looking, the aesthetic and symbolic motivations “became the thrill, because then I saw what was available. It wasn’t just to get a brownstone in Chambersburg; it was to get the brownstone with the leaded windows and the hardwood floors, and the nice brick pointing on the outside. Then I realized how important light was to me, I wanted to own something really nice.”
Wasting: The Inner World of Desire

Between seeing and buying lies the inner world of desire. Recent literature has focused on fantasy, imagination, and vicarious experience as key aspects of modern consumer behavior. Spending fantasies are prevalent, indeed commonplace. People anticipate, they daydream, and they plan their participation in the "enchanted domain" of consumer culture. In their study of inner desire, Susan Fournier and Michael Guiry found that 61 percent of respondents "always have something in mind that [they] look forward to buying." Twenty-seven percent of the sample said that they "dream about things they do not own" very often.

In fact, these desires were rather structured; many respondents had well-articulated "wish lists." Defined as "things that you would like to own or do someday," these lists contained an average of 6-11 items and were heavily dominated by material possessions. (Consumption wishes outnumbered idealistic ones by three to one.) The most popular item (on 67 percent of all lists) was an exotic vacation. Then came everyday-life items. Forty-seven percent of people wanted a "better, bigger, or more beautifully situated home." Another 28 percent wanted a vacation house. Forty-two percent wanted new cars, mainly luxury models. (As the title to Fournier and Guiry's article suggests, what Americans dream about is "An Emerald Green Jagaut, a House on Nantucket, and an African Safari." Of course, respondents wanted other things besides the house, car, and travel trip. About one-quarter cited household electronics—big-screen TVs, home computers, VCRs. Fifteen percent wanted a boat, 10 percent yearned for nice clothes, and 16 percent just asked for the money—enough to buy anything they could possibly want. These wish lists did not vary by sex, income, education, or standard of living. Apparently consumerism is an equal opportunity ideology.

John Caughey's ethnographic study of four hundred subjects' imaginary social worlds supports the existence of these standard fantasies. "Americans regularly fantasize the same American dreams. . . Fantasy descriptions of ideal houses often sound like commercials, and many can be traced directly to particular media productions." Here is one dream, characterized by Caughey as "restrained":

A common daydream of mine involves my first "real" apartment. I enjoy walking through furniture stores, which is somewhat inconsistent, considering my allegedly liberal, antimaternalistic values, and picking out the furniture I would like to have. I particularly like Roche-Boobois and Saco, so the daydream usually begins with me walking into such a place with nary a care about such mundane details as cost or money. I wander through the store, in and out of all the model rooms, and just point. "I'll take that . . . and that . . . and two of those . . . . I have all the rooms planned, and the floor plan is perfect. There is a beautiful old fireplace and a huge window filled with plants in the living room. The kitchen is fantastically modern, with wooden cabinets, and all the newest gadgets. It is sunny, bright, and enormous. The apartment is, of course, a duplex, so up the spiral stairs, in the bedroom, you can look down over the living and dining rooms. The bathroom has a huge, sunny bathtub and a phone. There is a balcony with a small greenhouse and a glorious view.

The decorations throughout the apartment are magnificent. There is a mixture of modern and antique furniture. I would have an oak dresser and desk and a saten quilt. The living room furniture would be modern with brass lamps and glass tables. The chrome and glass dining room set would sit on deep, plush carpet. There would be beautiful paintings and pieces of art all around, and it would all be paid for.

Our fantasies also reveal the centrality of gaining others' esteem. The ideal house fantasy is not complete without "showing the house to admiring others." In the words of one dreamer, "The awe and respect and wonder of my guests are basic to every daydream about my house." This is also true of the luxury goods featured in the standard "material wealth" fantasy. Displaying goods and gaining respect for them are crucial to our preoccupation with things.

While fantasy and imagination are important, we should not lose sight of the fact that much of this wishing is really wanting—that turns into buying. In the wish list study, people had very high expectations of actually attaining the items on their list, but not with any effort. Sixty percent of respondents reported that advertisements for prestige items motivated them to "earn more money so that I can
afford the things they show." Students reported that the ads inspired them to study more. In the words of one: "I'd better get a good grade so that I can get out and make a lot of money."