More is Better: 
Mass Consumption, Gender, and 
Class Identity in Postwar America

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“around here, the working class is the middle class”

—suburban worker, 1960

At a series of conferences in the mid-1950s, the nation’s leading designers of appliances, automobiles, and other mass-produced goods debated the social and cultural consequences of working-class prosperity in the decade following World War II. One invited panelist reportedly “shocked and intrigued” the mostly male group of Madison Avenue sophisticates. The participant who caused such a stir was Miss Esther Foley, home service editor of True Story, a confessional-style magazine aimed at wage-earners’ wives and published by Macfadden Publications since 1919. Foley abandoned the usual abstract or statistical profiles of the “average” mass-market consumer. Instead, she used slides to bring these designers directly into an unfamiliar world—the kitchens and living rooms of her “ten million” working-class women readers. What “shocked and intrigued” designers was the material evidence of working-class women’s purchasing power. The debate centered on “rosebuds,” the flowery flourishes that appeared everywhere. Why, the mystified designers demanded to know, did Foley’s women readers insist on buying silverware decorated with rosebuds? Rosebuds represented a sentimental, ornamental aesthetic associated with working-class taste. In designers’ scheme of economic mobility

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leading to cultural uplift, postwar prosperity should have brought an end to rosebuds. As more and more of these women moved into the middle-income groups, they would trade rosebuds for silverware of a simpler aesthetic preferred by designers and other upper-middle class tastemakers. Instead, these wives of wage earners demanded their rosebuds.

Foley told designers that she “did not want ‘her’ people to be ignored or slighted ... [nor] their motives ... misunderstood.” She argued that “motivation research” could help designers understand that these women rejected “severe sterile purity” in silverware because it did not embody the “hopes, dreams ... and despairs” of their increasingly comfortable but still distinctively working-class lives. In other words, working-class women’s preference for shiny ornamental rosebuds was not about bad taste, fashion, or status-seeking but about social identity. In fact, designers’ dream of economic mobility leading to cultural uplift had been turned on its head. Not only was silverware with rosebuds evidence of a persisting working class in a supposedly classless middle-class society, but through the mechanism of mass production this ethos actually drove the standards for shiny appliances, automobiles, and other goods that permeated mainstream culture.

This study offers a reconsideration of postwar class relations by exploring the significant influence of working-class women’s distinctive values, as expressed in taste, on American social life and culture. By World War II, class had come to be synonymous with the “collar line,” yet historians have shown that, along with income and occupation, patterns of education, sociability, and style of life also have played a role in class formation and identity. The new postwar working class that was the subject of debate in this public discourse referred to white “blue-collar” wage earners and their families, a predominantly northern industrial workforce that included the children and grandchildren of European immigrants for whom ethnicity had become a class marker. An increasing number of these blue-collar workers now had middle-class pocketbooks that allowed them to live in suburban “mass-produced domestic comfort” and participate in the white identity defined by that racially homogenous environment. But, these blue-collar men and women nevertheless often retained their distinctive class values, lifestyles, and tastes. Above all, an ethos I call “more is better” defined working-class taste. This ethos represented the preservation of working-class values now given new expression in big cars.
and shiny refrigerators. That style, with its boldness and bulk, stood in contrast to a “less is more” aesthetic of simplicity favored by upper-middle class tastemakers. By identifying the persistence of working-class taste, this study contributes to the work of labor historians who have argued that achieving a higher standard of living and common participation in the mass market could strengthen working-class identity and even foster political activism, as opposed to assimilation.

This study further argues, however, that a “more is better” aesthetic as an expression of working-class values not only persisted, but through the mechanism of mass production of goods such as kitchen appliances, actually pervaded material culture. Because mass production aimed at the largest possible market, working-class taste influenced design standards for goods purchased by working-class and middle-class women alike. Rather than assimilating, this study suggests, members of the working class—notably working-class women—reformulated the mainstream material world of suburbia commonly understood as a middle-class creation.

The pervasiveness of this gendered blue-collar aesthetic did not come without a battle from some designers and other upper-middle class critics who fought to maintain their influence on standards for mass-produced goods. Designers of these domestic consumer goods perceived that working-class consumers moved up economically but not culturally. Promoters of a “less is more” ethos, many designers resisted this disjunction between economic and cultural mobility. Although these battles took place outside the political arenas of voting booths and union halls, the triumph of tail fins and shiny refrigerators signaled the democratization of taste.

This article will trace the impact of working-class values, as expressed in taste preferences for mass-produced goods, on mainstream culture by looking at the complex interactions among four key social groups: working-class women, who preserved their distinctive values and taste; designers of mass-produced goods, who had to satisfy the demands of this gendered working-class market; motivation researchers linked to social scientists, who articulated and promoted this persisting taste; and the publishers and editors of True Story magazine. Best known as a confessional magazine featuring stories with such sensational titles as “I Married Two Men but I Wasn’t a Bigamist,” the magazine’s publishers sponsored numerous motivation research studies of real blue-collar women who read their largely fictional magazine.
True Story’s publishers and editors then sold this image of a new gendered working-class culture back to their readers through the fictional stories and real home features in the magazine itself.14

War of the Rosebuds

In the five years following World War II, household furnishings and appliance purchases climbed 240 percent. During the next decade, the median family income rose 30 percent in purchasing power and the suburban population increased at a faster rate than the general population.15 Bolstered by increased real wages and purchasing power, a significant number of wage-earning families swelled the middle-income ranks and moved to the suburbs, and a majority purchased refrigerators, automatic washing machines, and other household appliances for the first time.16 Did a higher standard of living and the ability to buy the same basic package of mass-produced goods as their white-collar neighbors make these blue-collar workers middle class? A consensus chorus of government policymakers, sociologists, public intellectuals, and businessmen answered affirmatively that prosperity was eroding the class identity of the American worker.17 As one report argued, the suburban development was becoming the “new American melting pot... in which ‘blue-collar’ families are taking up the middle class life.”18 Designers, too, celebrated such reports of a “middle class classless society” by creating their own visual mythology in which workers traded blue-collars for tuxedos and their wives exchanged household drudgery for domestic “elegance.”19 In this view of cultural uplift, designers portrayed entertaining in the kitchen as a “new interest in simple routines,” rather than acknowledging the social kitchen as a working-class tradition influencing middle-class servantless homes. Even the tools of work, the appliances themselves, were minimized in this image of upper-middle class uplift (fig. 1). Underlying this notion of social assimilation achieved through mass consumption and household modernization was a gender ideology defined by middle-class domesticity.20

Foley’s war of the rosebuds was an attempt to counter this view by offering indisputable visual evidence of real working-class women’s homes. Designers’ disdainful descriptions of the “shiny ‘miracle’ appliances in badly arranged kitchens, the inevitable chrome dinette set, the sentimental and unrelated living room furnishings... common
to this taste group” suggested that these designers were reluctant to admit that they now had to satisfy the demands of working-class women whose incomes allowed them to participate in postwar consumer culture but whose values and tastes differed from their own. The kitchens of Foley’s working-class readers spoke of a middle-income standard of living achieved by up-to-date household appliances but not one defined by middle-class values of simplicity, managerial efficiency, and refinement that took their cue from professional tastemakers such as designers (fig. 2).21
Figure 2. A large, shiny, modern stove occupied a prominent place and function in the working-class kitchen of True Story reader Mary Brewer, who served meals seven times a day to children, extended family, and her husband, a night-shift worker. True Story (Oct. 1953): 69. Permission granted from the Sterling/Macfadden Partnership.

Foley drew on True Story’s own productive collaboration with a new group of market researchers linked to prominent social scientists who engaged in “motivation research” [hereafter MR] to expose the class and gender politics of an ongoing cultural debate. Drawing on numerous MR studies of actual blue-collar women in new suburbs and older neighborhoods, Foley’s presentation clearly challenged the popular assumption that mass consumption and household modernization went hand-in-hand with social assimilation. She implied that these commentators confused middle income with middle class and suburb with middle-class community. The True Story editor’s slides made the point that blue-collar consumers had risen on the “economic ladder,” as evidenced by the proliferation of household appliances, but not on the “taste ladder” that designers had constructed. Foley suggested that MR could help designers understand and predict the distinctive preference of these blue-collar female consumers. Although motivation
research was criticized as a device to manipulate consumers by some and dismissed as a pseudo-science fad by others, True Story saw motivation research as a method to uncover the persistence of working-class values, lifestyles, and taste within this middle-income mass market. By linking the symbolism in design to social science, motivation researchers made blue-collar aesthetics evidence not only of a distinct market segment but of a new social class of suburban workers within a changing American social structure.

The retention of working-class taste presented manufacturers with a challenge. Manufacturers of silverware, tableware, textiles, and furnishings could offer diverse choices from rosebuds to plain design. But, the huge tooling and advertising costs involved in the mass production and mass marketing of goods such as household appliances was a disincentive to variety. This meant that manufacturers had to aim at a national mass-market majority comprised of both newly prosperous working-class and middle-class consumers. Designers would have to make a choice between shiny chrome and plain design as the basis for determining increasing value on a ladder of consumption. Foley warned that designers who ignored this working-class taste in favor of their own upper-middle class preference for simplicity would fail. Designers realized that the triumph of a “more is better” aesthetic in mass-produced goods meant they were losing a battle not only to shape a new working-class market but also the middle-class market. The application of ornament through chrome and color even to standardized refrigerators suggested the pervasiveness of working-class taste.

Working-Class Sparkle or Upper-Middle Class Simplicity: Who Defines Value?

During the postwar era, the mechanism of mass production became the means by which a gendered working-class culture permeated the mainstream “middle,” although this process was hotly contested by upper-middle-class tastemakers. The logic of mass production as it developed by the 1920s in the Ford Model T demanded standardization and thus the creation of design standards for the mass market. How these design standards, the visual expression of a product’s value, should be defined became a matter of increasing debate during World War II, when it became apparent that the composition of the market for expensive consumer durables like household appliances would rapidly
move away from an upper-middle class market to a mass market after
the war ended. In the postwar period, for example, the ownership of
mechanical refrigerators increased from 44 percent to about 90 percent
of American households. Corporate executives and designers in
essence admitted that they had been catering to “an essentially conser-
vative group—‘middle class’ and ‘better’”—a group not so different
from themselves—in designing and marketing their goods. Standard
practice had been to design household appliances based on the majority
opinion of these largely upper-middle class women as expressed in
surveys, resulting in designs that favored professional middle-class
values of hygiene, efficiency, and simplicity.

Manufacturers understood this new postwar “mass market” as “the
low and low middle income classes of our national market.” Manu-
facturers wondered whether they could “connect” with this new mass
market without losing their former clientele. Designers perceived that
consumers had diverse tastes, and social class became the most useful
way to categorize these tastes for national markets. As opposed to
designers’ own upper-middle class preference for elegant simplicity,
consumer research revealed that the working-class masses generally
believed worth was expressed through three design features. One was
“bulk and size”: if “it looks bigger, it must be worth more.” Bulk
signified solidity. Another was “embellishment and visual flash.” The
third was color. Although surveys indicated that men generally held
the purse strings, manufacturers conceptualized the consumer as fe-
male and more specifically attributed the desire for styling to the
influence of women. As one study argued, “whether she has a job
outside the home or not, the wage earner wife decides most family
purchases or investments.” This reflected a dichotomy that gendered
function and production as masculine and ornamentation and consump-
tion as feminine.

In the postwar period, the question was whether design standards
would have to be “lowered” to accommodate blue-collar women’s
“more is better” idea about value or whether the working class would
be uplifted by their new prosperity to accept the upper-middle class
“good design” available to them. These options were represented by
two competing models available to determine design standards in a
diverse and changing market. Industrial designers generally champi-
oned functionalist principles, which argued that design standards
should reflect universal and everlasting aesthetic ideals defined by
simplicity and efficiency. In this view, changes in the composition of
the market would have no impact on design standards. Working-class
consumers would be uplifted by their new prosperity and would
simultaneously be compelled by qualities of simplicity to accept
designers’ upper-middle class standards. In contrast to this static
model, “Sloanism,” the marketing strategies developed at General
Motors under Alfred Sloan, opened the door for a dynamic conception
of design that responded to changes in the social structure of the
market. Sloanism used design and flexible mass-production technol-
ogy to create mass-market cars in which increasing value was repre-
sented visually as one “stepped up” to more expensive cars. This
created a “ladder of consumption” in which cars at different price
points corresponding to income groups—from Chevrolet to Cadillac—
were defined through a visual vocabulary of increasing value defined
by the “average” consumer.

Not surprisingly, the automobile industry took the lead in recogniz-
ing working-class purchasing power to create new postwar design
 standards. Contemporary social commentator Eric Larrabee derisively
noted how this dynamic worked. According to Larrabee, the automo-
bile industry was,

\begin{quote}

democratic in its refusal to assert style leadership by setting genuinely
aristocratic tastes that then filter slowly down; quite to the contrary, through
market research it makes style filter up from below.
\end{quote}

In other words, the automobile industry created a ladder of consump-
tion based on the idea that “when the American workingman gets a
little money . . . he wants a bigger car.” For these consumers, increasing
value was expressed through bigger, and more ornamented, cars. The
impact of this mass market aesthetic in automobiles, and how it spread
to household appliances, was most vividly illustrated in the Cadillac.
After World War II, General Motors relied upon mass production to
lower prices of this high-end car. The Cadillac was no longer aimed at
the elite, but to “the man on his way up.” This linked it clearly to the
top of the ladder in a mass market. In addition to large size and
chrome, the Cadillac created distinctive design elements that reflected
the “more is better” taste of a new average consumer. Because the
Cadillac was the premier status symbol of the 1950s, these design
elements then became linked to notions of status. Harley Earl, the
influential GM designer who created the tail fin, argued that the tail fin
gave the consumer a “visible premium” for the money spent. The tail fin and the “V” emblem were two of the potent design elements that signaled “class” to a majority of Americans.  

Immediately after the war, there were signs that this new mass-market aesthetic might spread to household appliances and other goods. Household appliance designers recognized that automobile designers were successful at articulating this “more is better” visual language of value. The design motifs on refrigerators began to follow suit. Observers increasingly noted the resemblance between the embellishments on refrigerators, such as flashy chrome nameplates, and the gadgets on automobiles. Critics singled out Frigidaire as the worst offender, noting that Frigidaire’s rounded form appeared bulky and was “least attractive [with] a very flashy trademark in gold and chrome, and gold colored plexiglass trim about the handle.” The fact that Raymond Loewy, a leader of the profession, had a hand in this design suggested the challenge designers faced. Loewy shared the view of his critics that the designer should be the “Knight of Good Taste,” educating the masses to appreciate the modernist ideals based on simplicity. But, he defended “more is better” styling by arguing that “it is a proven fact” that “only a limited segment of sophisticated buyers” accepted “products whose design has been reduced to their simplest expression” while the masses “love chrome . . . indiscriminately.” Whether designers liked it or not, if they wanted to sell the goods they would have to recognize that social changes inevitably were altering mass-production design standards.

Commentators understood that this trend in household appliance design signaled the infiltration of working-class values into mainstream culture. The shrill debate over taste and suburbia reflected a concern over the growing impact of this new class and gender dynamic in the marketplace. William Whyte captured these class and gender politics in his influential 1956 book The Organization Man. Whyte wrote disparagingly that the unhappy result of the “social revolution” that gave rise to the “emancipation of the worker” was the “pink lampshade in the picture window.” Like shiny chrome refrigerators, the pink lamp shade represented a new majority of American women who drove design standards in the marketplace and created new suburban domestic lifestyles without regard for the values of cultural arbiters.

Tastemakers who hoped that working-class prosperity would result in uplifted tastes feared this spread of ornamentation influenced by
working-class purchasing power. The fact that even refrigerators could be styled showed the pervasiveness of this new “more is better” culture. Designers realized that it meant that they were losing the battle to shape a new “middle-majority” market consisting of both working-class and lower-middle class consumers. A step removed from market pressures, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) acted as the guardian of these values. Beginning in 1950, MoMA launched the “Good Design” program in conjunction with the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. Through this program, MoMA effectively sanctioned certain goods available in the marketplace that met its aesthetic criteria of simplicity and restraint. When the “Good Design” programs ended in 1955, however, the impact on the mass market appeared minimal. The Museum of Modern Art resorted to evaluating these trends by holding sessions with such titles as “What’s Happening to America’s Taste?”

While some designers desperately tried to stem the tide against this “lowering” of standards in reaction to working-class women’s influence, others promoted the “more is better” aesthetic as a successful sales strategy. Although there had been a tension within the design profession between modernist ideals and market realities, now more was at stake as the social structure of the market changed. The battle lines were clearly drawn in a design competition that the Servel refrigerator company held in 1950. Servel was a high-end refrigerator company with only 6.5 percent of the market. Company executives faced great confusion over the degree to which working-class purchasing power would affect their product, the most expensive mass-produced refrigerator. As a result of this uncertainty, the company’s president invited Walter Dorwin Teague, a prominent designer, to compete with the proposals of Lurelle Guild, Servel’s consultant designer since the early 1930s, to design the 1950 refrigerator line. The two designers—Teague and Guild—offered clearly divergent design strategies based on different conceptions of what the design standard should be: Teague offered upper-middle class “good design” uplift, while Guild argued for a new mass aesthetic.

Although he subscribed to modernist principles, Guild prided himself on his savvy understanding of consumer taste. Displaying the biases if not the concerns of his fellow designers, Guild once stated that he often designed “deliberately for people without taste.” Now the purchasing power of these people made them a force in the market for refrigerators and other expensive consumer goods. Guild correctly
argued that “plain,” “good design” was “utterly obsolete in style for this market” of the postwar years. The designer observed that this new market of working-class women wanted large and bulky refrigerators with more features and more “luster.” As Guild argued to Servel executives: “The Cadillac car looks expensive and is, the Servel refrigerator is expensive and looks plain.” In other words, consumers would not “pay such a high price for a plain refrigerator.” Rejecting “simple and austere” design, Guild recommended a healthy dose of “sparkling chrome” to keep pace with competition such as Frigidaire.

In direct contrast to Guild, designer Walter Dorwin Teague prescribed an approach of upper-middle class uplift. Teague expressed confidence that women instinctively wanted “good design,” if it were available to them. Teague came to the conclusion that Servel should define itself against “flashy” Frigidaires through a visual vocabulary of austerity and refinement. He achieved this plain aesthetic with a door design that minimized curves to reduce bulk and restricted ornament to the slim chrome door handle and small lettering and “flame insignia” for the requisite nameplate. Teague expressed confidence that “the great majority of purchasers respond to the care, restraint, and intelligent consideration this design expresses” (fig. 3). Accustomed to a “tasteful” high-end niche, Servel, a company dominated by engineers, ignored Guild’s advice that it adopt more ornamentation in order to expand sales into lower-middle class and working-class markets. Although they agreed with Guild that these consumers defined worth in terms of ornamentation rather than restraint, they selected Teague with the hope they could manipulate consumer demand.

By the early 1950s, however, Servel’s refrigerators became an illustration of the way that the taste of newly prosperous working-class women increasingly influenced design standards for entire product lines through increased ornamentation of household appliances. Even as Teague’s plain model debuted in 1950, the sales department began arguing that Servel refrigerators must have “either less cost or greater glitter” as the key to mass-market success over competitors. As Servel floundered, company officials turned for a few years to their own in-house designers with assistance from other consultants to design refrigerators that reflected a “more is better” aesthetic. These refrigerators featured two large multi-color door handles with a gold, modified “Cadillac V” surrounded by blue and white rectangles framed by chrome that enhanced the three-dimensional effect. By 1954, the
Figure 3. Advertisement for 1950 Servel refrigerator with simple styling. The D’Arcy Collection of the Communications Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

nameplate was rendered in large gold lettering, and the line featured two-tone models (fig. 4). Servel executives ultimately brought back Teague but pressured him to abandon the “classic restraint” approach and lower his notion of average taste to reflect the mass market’s idea of value. By 1955, even Teague had to concede, begrudgingly, to the “request for sparkle” for a new line of Servel refrigerators.53

Throughout the industry, household appliance forms became bulkier and more ornamented to increasingly reflect this “more is better” aesthetic. When working-class women expressed their preference for “white metal kitchens with Cadillac handles” on appliances and
Figure 4. Advertisement for 1954 Servel refrigerator with more sparkle aimed at mass market taste. Reprinted with permission of the American Gas Association.

cabinets, designers realized they were losing the battle not only to shape a working-class taste, but also the middle-class market, since these standards shaped mass-produced goods aimed at the widest possible market. The extent to which the new mass aesthetic had become the basis for an entire ladder of consumption was best illustrated in the design strategy of “good, better, best” developed by Sears, Roebuck and Company, in which best was always signaled by more ornamentation and gold color. Design critic Thomas Hine has coined the term “populuxe” to suggest that an ideology of popularized luxury pervaded these goods. But, this “populuxe” styling associated with new suburban developments was not popularized in the sense of
taste trickling down to the newly prosperous masses. As mass-produced shiny appliances blurred the collar line in the kitchen, working-class values pervaded mainstream middle-class culture.

Working-class women’s desire for styling did not mean that they were unconcerned about function or that styling reflected either glamour or status seeking, though designers such as Guild and critics tried to make such links. These machines were primary tools for work, and this concern primarily shaped women’s purchasing decisions. Women rewarded major advances in performance, which were few, with their pocketbooks, and spurned manufacturers’ attempts to get them to trade in appliances that worked for newly styled models that represented no advance. Their interest in color for major purchases was bounded by practical considerations. But, given two refrigerators of comparable price and performance, women demanded one that represented their “more is better” taste as an expression of value. Upper-middle class modernist designers tried to argue that there was a relationship between simple styling and function. In fact, aesthetics often had little relationship to performance. As a study in Consumer Reports showed, some chrome-laden machines rated low in aesthetic terms by designers were rated higher in terms of function than plain ones. Working-class women’s point remained valid: why should they pay more for a plain refrigerator?

Even as household appliance designers created this visual language, they continued to deride the trend toward bulk and adornment. Ultimately, designers who could not bear these design standards had to get out of the household appliance business and limit themselves to designing for the home furnishings industries, which supplied market niches. Those who stayed in the business were reduced to private symbolic acts of protest. Designer John Vassos, whose own designs for RCA appliances catered to mass-market taste, had the tail fins removed from his own Cadillac, an act that garnered accolades from fellow uplifter Philip Johnson of MoMA.

Critic Vance Packard blamed designers and marketers for fostering status anxiety by designing status symbols, but designers clearly saw this as a development that was driven from the bottom up specifically by women. In response to charges that designers’ professional stance was “undemocratic,” designers suggested that the masses’ preference for ornamentation was a sign of feminine weakness. By the mid-1950s, these design critics were blaming this “more is better” aesthetic on a
new group of motivation researchers who promoted it. *Industrial Design* magazine editorialized that the mass-market consumer should trade “motivational styling” for “psychiatry”: “he may as well take his Freud straight.” But, motivation researchers simply analyzed, advocated, and gave a name—motivational styling—to changing design standards. It was designers who, despite protestations, gave material expression to persisting working-class values that were then studied by motivation researchers, in the service of groups such as *True Story* magazine.

“Blue-Collar Aesthetic”

Both critics of mass-market taste and the marketers who promoted it understood that, despite the prosperity of blue-collar consumers, there remained a distinction between economic and cultural mobility. Different taste and opinion makers, including *True Story* magazine, tried to harness these distinctions for their own ends. In this battle, MR was an important tool for promoting a working-class ethos. Traditional market research had been primarily quantitative and asked direct questions about likes and dislikes. In contrast, the new proponents of MR in the postwar era used in-depth interviews, “role playing” and other techniques, and featured extended quotes from interviewees in their reports. MR emphasized that consumers’ answers to direct questions were unreliable because consumer motivations were complex. MR was based on the assumption that the “symbolic meanings” of an object, in part expressed through the external design, were important to the average housewife. Motivation researchers argued that the “huge economic gains of the American worker classes” and their resulting purchasing power presented an enormous potential for businessmen who studied the symbolic meanings of design, such as unraveling “the underlying significance and linkages between such surface phenomena as the flair for color in cars and . . . shirts and refrigerators.” Through motivation researchers’ relationship with prominent social scientists such as Lloyd Warner, corporate efforts to understand the “taste” of the blue-collar consumer became a way to reinforce distinctions within American society through material culture.

A pioneering and influential MR firm that used the tools of MR to discover a distinctive working class after World War II was Social Research, Inc. (SRI), founded in Chicago by academic Burleigh
Gardner in 1946. SRI’s work often focused on social class differences expressed through behaviors, values, and consumption choices.\textsuperscript{65} Gardner’s firm sought, in part, to uncover the ways that design in mass-produced goods conveyed social assumptions that were widely understood. For example, the firm conducted an influential MR study of automobiles that probed the “nonrational symbols” that made Cadillac such a symbol of success. The study found that cars had functioned as an “indicator of social status,” because cars were designed at different price points that correlated to social classes that were understood by the designers in terms of income groups.\textsuperscript{66} These studies also concluded, however, that during the 1950s, mass-produced goods like automobiles and appliances were becoming less useful as markers of social distinctions because a wide variety of people now occupied the middle-income group and could purchase the same goods.\textsuperscript{67}

Gardner and others argued that “social-class membership,” as determined by an individual’s consumption patterns, offered a richer understanding of buying behavior than relying on income alone, which blurred white-collar and blue-collar. They stressed the importance of cultural criteria such as domestic lifestyle and “taste.”\textsuperscript{68} This conception owed its greatest debt to the work of influential University of Chicago social scientist Lloyd Warner, a co-founder of SRI.\textsuperscript{69} Warner rejected the rigid dual-class schemes of working versus business class based on the relation of power at the production site as represented in the work of Robert Lynd.\textsuperscript{70} Instead, Warner rank-ordered people into six primary groups: upper-upper, old families; lower-upper, newly arrived wealthy; upper-middle, professionals and successful businessmen; lower-middle, white-collar salaried; upper-lower, skilled, blue-collar wage earners; lower-lower, unskilled labor. The lower-middle and upper-lower classes were the “middle majority,” the target of mass-market appeals. What was useful to marketing men was the fact that Warner’s divisions were not by amount of income but by type of income, occupation, and consumption patterns, thus revealing the class distinctions within the middle-majority group. According to these studies, the upper-lower wage-earner group represented about 53 percent of all families in postwar America.\textsuperscript{71}

Rather than “deny the existence of social class” in America, motivation researchers found that “knowledge of the social structure” allowed them to sell the U.S. “by class.”\textsuperscript{72} By using Warner’s stratification schemes to probe the underlying significance of the whole constellation
of domestic artifacts, these motivation researchers challenged the prevailing perception that the collar line had disappeared. To demonstrate the persistence of the collar line, they shifted the attention from the mass-produced environment of the kitchen to a variety of choices in the living room and therein found a distinctive working-class culture created not by men but by women and united not in politics but in taste. They had an important ally, and client, in the publishers of True Story magazine.

True Story had been commissioning traditional market research surveys since the 1920s under the umbrella of its publisher Macfadden Publications, which had its own internal market research department. The primary thrust of the magazine’s interwar surveys was to convince advertisers that its working-class readers were becoming part of the mainstream consuming public. In these “sociological sermons to the trade,” the magazine painted a picture of a working class that was an important market for mass-produced goods. At the same time, True Story promoted the emergence of what historian Lizabeth Cohen has called a “class-differentiated mass market” by arguing for the distinctive tastes of the working class as opposed to the “white collars.” Despite the fact that True Story vied with Ladies’ Home Journal as the leader among women’s magazines, these publicity campaigns met with limited success. Although True Story was able to increase advertising by nationally-branded products such as food and soap through such appeals, it still received little advertising from makers of expensive consumer durables such as automobiles and appliances during the interwar period.

In the postwar period, True Story had the opposite problem: not to draw attention to the working class as consumers but to maintain the working-class consumer as a distinct class. After World War II, few could dispute the economic influence of True Story’s wage-earning readers. No one could achieve a mass market without this group. As one study argued, the “shift from 35 percent to 65 percent penetration of a new appliance” depended primarily on “the working class housewives.” The magazine’s challenge, therefore, was proving that the working class was still a class and had remained true to True Story despite its prosperity. Macfadden Publications feared that advertisers would think they now could reach these blue-collar consumers by advertising in middle-class women’s magazines such as Ladies’ Home Journal. Macfadden had to find a way to tout workers as prosperous,
and therefore the same economically as the middle-class, but distinct culturally and therefore worthy of being targeted separately. To explain the distinct interests of True Story readers further, however, required a departure from the traditional division in market research by income groups.78

Beginning in the late 1940s, True Story commissioned SRI to conduct several motivation research studies to understand “the working class woman.”79 Although these studies, written by professional men, occasionally revealed the same gender and class biases as industrial designers’ rhetoric, they were nevertheless significant for trying to reclaim a voice that was lost in much public discourse. Interviews with actual True Story readers in their homes provided the bulk of evidence for these studies. The studies interviewed working-class women in a variety of cities and suburbs and used middle-class women as points of comparison. The most famous report, a 1959 study called Workingman’s Wife: Her Personality, World and Life Style, was authored by SRI employees Lee Rainwater, Richard Coleman, and Gerald Handel based on twelve years’ research commissioned, not coincidentally, by Macfadden Publications. This was followed by another influential report, Status of the Working Class in Changing American Society. A few years later, they completed a study entitled The Working Class World: Identity, World View, Social Relations and Family Behavior Magazines.80

Taken together, these various studies concluded that business magazines such as Fortune and government-issued reports had exaggerated the extent of middle-class values and homogeneity in society by confusing “middle-income” with “middle class” and “suburb” with “middle-class community.”81 They argued that marketing strategies were based on the erroneous assumption that, “given the same income, the poor man would behave exactly like the rich man.” In other words, they did not account for the difference between economic and cultural mobility. The major point of these Macfadden-sponsored studies was that “although a factory worker might now be in the same income group as a white-collar worker,” that worker was unlikely to embrace middle-class values.82 Instead, these blue-collar families had different attitudes towards their work, different ways of raising their children, different ways of socializing, and different taste. These class distinctions reflected not only status hierarchies identified by sociologists, but also the persisting working-class self-identification of a majority of
blue-collar suburbanites surveyed. Women played a key role in articulating these distinctions within the domestic culture of suburbia.

SRI’s studies for True Story probed various aspects of working-class women’s domestic lifestyles including “patterns of taste and aesthetics in connection with furnishings, appliances, and clothing” to uncover these differences. These studies suggested that looking solely at the appliances these women purchased obscured differences in patterns of sociability and taste because “a prosperous lower class and an upper middle class kitchen” might seem similar “when both are well furnished with modern appliances, often of the same brands.” As the previous section has shown, mass-produced appliances themselves did not express differences, only a greater influence of working-class purchasing power through an overall adoption of the “more is better” aesthetic. But, as SRI’s Sidney Levy pointed out, “even these ‘same kitchens’ may have important differences in them, and have been arrived at through rather different marketing processes based on different values, thought processes, and purchasing actions.” Lengthy conversational interviews conducted in these women’s own homes revealed that the meaning of these appliances differed dramatically.

It was the distinctive importance of new household appliances and the kitchen to the working-class woman in this postwar period that suggested why her taste prevailed in these mass-produced goods. Working-class women’s preference for up-to-date, substantial, shiny appliances was an expression of their distinctive domestic lifestyles. Their daily routines were dominated by work, including housework and childcare. As one woman responded when asked to describe her day, “I just run from one day to the next.” Middle-class women did much the same work, but they were more likely to have some help, and to have a varied routine that offered social opportunities outside of the home. The studies concluded that working-class women saw their primary role as houseworkers, whereas middle-class women defined themselves more as wives. The centrality of work to the daily lives of blue-collar women led to their emphasis on appliance purchasing. Although studies of household appliance purchasing by income made in the 1950s and early 1960s showed that the majority of purchases were in the middle-income range, analysis by social-class group revealed that blue-collar consumers bought the largest percentage of appliances. Blue-collar consumers also bought a large percentage of top-of-the-line appliances. Large-capacity, bulky appliances repre-
sented solidity and potential laborsaving qualities. These women realized that modern conveniences had not freed them from drudgery, but they made their work easier and contributed to a more cheerful kitchen environment.87

Furthermore, the importance of the kitchen to the working-class woman led to a desire for “more is better” appliances that reflected that importance. Even by 1960, the kitchen continued to be the room where blue-collar women spent the most time working and socializing. The blue-collar family was more likely to eat in the kitchen, even when entertaining.88 When asked what the most important room was, one working-class resident of Gary, Indiana noted that her kitchen was most important because “that’s where all your expensive household equipment is . . . and that’s where I do the biggest part of my work.”89 Another woman living in a new suburban house in Louisville indicated that the kitchen was the most important room to her because “that’s where we stay most of the time. We eat in the kitchen. If neighbors come in, we sit in the kitchen.” Many women expressed the importance of a “bright” and “cheerful” kitchen as the “heart of the home.”90 Therefore, these studies concluded, it was “not surprising that they should want the kitchen fixed to order, since the kitchen is the focal point of the working class wife’s existence.”91

Finally, a “modernized up-to-the-minute kitchen” with modern styled appliances signified these blue-collar families’ “arrival into a 1950’s middle-American level of . . . respectability.” These studies concluded that “solid heavy appliances” were “symbols of security” for working-class folks.92 Motivation researchers emphasized that this quest for “respectability” meant pride in achieving a hard-earned standard of living, not necessarily middle-class identity. The studies implicitly suggested that designers, even those who promoted a mass aesthetic, misunderstood women’s reasons for embracing styling. Designers thought women wanted “glamour” and advertised them in this way, but MR studies suggested that women viewed shiny appliances as a reflection of “modernity,” an acknowledgment that they had achieved a higher standard of living defined by new household technology.93

Researchers identified middle-class women by their distinctive use of their domestic spaces.94 Middle-class women also wanted similar kitchens, but their motivations were different; they wanted the latest appliances to facilitate their escape from the kitchen, since traditionally the kitchen was associated exclusively with work, and socializing took
place elsewhere. The living room was most important to the middle class housewife.95 Whereas working-class women expressed pride in their large refrigerator and ranges, middle-class women were interested in minimizing the appearance of these machines in their kitchens.96 Furthermore, these women often achieved these up-to-date kitchens differently. Working-class families were more likely to update their kitchen using their own extensive manual skills and labor.97 Whereas working-class women most often named an appliance as their most valued possession, middle-class women named possessions that appealed to “aesthetic sensitivities,” such as living room furnishings.98

These studies comparing blue-collar True Story readers to wives of white-collar workers argued that it was in these living room furnishings that social class differences were most evident. SRI identified three major taste cultures by social class as manifested in furniture (fig. 5). The working class rejected the “severely plain, functional styling of furniture.” They preferred “an overelaboration of detail” in large, substantial-looking furniture and sought dependability and comfort. By looking in the living rooms of these women in suburbia, one could see that there was a distinct “blue collar aesthetic.” In contrast, the “anxious” middle class was concerned about “good taste” and most apt to be influenced by professional tastemakers such as designers. The upper class had a “hodgepodge” of styles because they were secure in their status.99 These studies tended to define “middle-class” by a concern for taste and by the “status-anxiety” that resulted from this concern.100 With mass-produced goods such as appliances, working-class taste influenced design standards for the largest possible market. In contrast, “taste in furniture” was “much more elusive and subtle.” Brand names were unknown; the variety was seemingly endless.101 Therefore, women’s selection of furniture was an expression of class identity, as well as an impediment to social mobility.102

The intentions of True Story’s editors and publishers were limited to defining a market segment of working-class consumers in order to influence manufacturers and advertisers and sell magazines, not to promote collective class-consciousness.103 In probing blue-collar taste, however, these studies also reinforced the work of those sociologists who discovered the persistence of a distinct working-class identity.104 For example, Bennett Berger’s influential sociological study of blue-collar suburbanites also made “taste” central to defining social identity. He argued:
Figure 5. Interviewers from the motivation research firm Social Research, Inc. documented working-class women’s homes as an expression of class identity. (Social Research, Inc. for Hearst Co., 1954). Reprinted with permission of Good Housekeeping/Hearst Communications, Inc.

Impressions garnered from a survey of furnishing style of the [wage earner] living rooms leads one to doubt the success of the [middle-class] “women’s and home” magazines in providing a viable model. The living room tends to be crowded with . . . overstuffed furniture. . . . The mantle tends to become a glass or plaster menagerie.105

While a national ideology promised middle-class status to those who participated in mass consumption, through their discoveries about taste these motivation researchers and sociologists secured a place for a persisting working-class identity in the new postwar social order. As an expression of social values and identity, taste was an impediment to social mobility from the working to middle class and within the middle
As Bennett Berger noted, the upper-middle class was “tightening their entrance requirements” by emphasizing those things that money couldn’t buy, such as “good taste.” As one woman who married a lawyer and moved to the suburbs later remembered:

You were trying to live out this ideal of life in the suburbs, in a way, that you saw in Life magazines. But you always considered yourself just a little above it. You know, you had the Eames chair.

These researchers differed amongst themselves about the relative significance of the boundaries between the lower-middle class and the working class, acknowledging the commonalities women were forging in new suburban communities while distinctions in taste, outlook, and values remained. What was being created, Berger argued, was a new working-class culture, one that differed both from the middle class and from the urban working class of the past. The sociologist ultimately concluded that the suburban working-class and portions of the lower-middle class formed a “middle-class working class” with “finer gradations of status” existing between them. Perhaps Berger’s phrase best expressed the complex ways in which this newly prosperous working class influenced a segment of mainstream culture defined as middle class through mass consumption while it maintained its distinctive identity through taste, expressed most notably in the living room. For example, the increasing emphasis on the kitchen as a space for sociability within the suburban middle class reflected the increasing prevalence of working-class lifestyles.

Motivation researchers and sociologists had uncovered an important division between the economic and cultural mobility of the working class and articulated the influence of this powerful, working-class market on the material world of suburbia as a whole. After discovering this persisting identity, True Story magazine sold back the image of the suburban working-class woman to its readers. Just as True Story’s patronage influenced the work of motivation researchers, so too the perspective of the actual women readers interviewed for this research was reflected in the magazine itself. As a study by Eung-Sook Kim has noted, the editorial formula of True Story was tailored to a “feminine psychology in a working-class setting, with fears, anxieties (and pocketbooks) raised to the middle-class level.” Whereas the MR reports of actual working-class women and Esther Foley’s conference appearances were aimed at business, the magazine promoted working-
class distinctiveness to its own women readers. The magazine offered its readers advice to navigate this new suburban lifestyle on their own terms.\textsuperscript{112} The result was a dialectic between the actual readers surveyed and quoted in the reports, the composite portrait of the “workingman’s wife” constructed by motivation researchers from the individual responses, and the readers—imagined and actual—portrayed in the magazine.

Throughout the postwar period, True Story magazine’s monthly features offered strategies for working-class wives to achieve their new standard of living, often within a suburban milieu, without conforming to middle-class values. In articles such as “Washing Work Clothes is a Tough Job,” home service editor Esther Foley and her associates unabashedly promoted automatic washing machines and other up-to-date modern styled household appliances, but in a way that spoke to working-class domestic routines and family circumstances.\textsuperscript{113} Homemaker stories focusing on actual True Story readers—a regular feature—depicted this “more is better” aesthetic as one aspect of a distinctive blue-collar lifestyle. For example, Alexandra Angelov, Yugoslavian-born wife of a machinist in Indiana, and Genevieve Sherpa, wife of an Italian-American worker in Syracuse, used their new appliances to make the traditional ethnic recipes they brought with them into these kitchens.\textsuperscript{114} “Shining” and “sparkling” were the phrases used most often by readers interviewed in the magazine to describe modern equipment and the new kitchens where they most often ate family meals and socialized. In 1948, Rae Berling of Detroit told True Story’s editors that she “would love to have a brand-new shiny” refrigerator. True Story reader Patsy Brennan achieved that goal in 1963. She told the magazine that “a kitchen is the heart of the home, worth spending money on to make as perfect as possible,” a phrasing which perfectly mimicked those of readers surveyed in an earlier MR report.\textsuperscript{115}

Letters in the “Village Pump” column, purportedly sent from actual readers, confirmed the persistence of working-class identity in suburbia by reporting tensions with new white-collar neighbors. One woman complained that despite her “reasonably attractive home” she had to “take a back seat socially” because her father was a manual worker. She suggested that “the white collar attitude towards us of the working class” made her “wonder how we can honestly claim our country is a real democracy.”\textsuperscript{116} Even the “true stories,” first-person dramas written
by professionals drawing on reader submissions, occasionally focused on the class tensions embedded in new suburban domestic lifestyles.\textsuperscript{117} Traditionally, the typical “true story” featured a heroine and a sensationalistic, but highly moralistic, story with themes that often combined seemingly conflicting ideas.\textsuperscript{118} The new suburban domestic dramas occasionally featured in the postwar era were tamer, but they were still moralistic dramas that sent ambivalent messages about consumption. In “The Yellow Refrigerator,” when a man proposed marriage to his fiancée, he promised her a yellow refrigerator, the color signifying up-to-date styling and a better life. After marriage, some expense always prevented them from getting a new refrigerator. After learning she was pregnant with yet another child, the author lamented: “There goes my yellow refrigerator.” The story concluded with the author deciding that her family was more important to her than the elusive yellow refrigerator. The magazine acknowledged women’s desires for colorful appliances and cheerful up-to-date kitchens as legitimate expressions of their social identity, but it also suggested limitations.\textsuperscript{119}

Stories featured the kitchen as a place where neighbors of different “collars” united and where working-class women wielded influence in their neighborhoods. In “Duchess in My Kitchen,” the wife of a mechanic felt inferior to a more sophisticated woman who moved into the town and invited herself into her home. Ultimately, however, the middle-class woman found respite from her own troubles in the working-class “author’s” kitchen. Significantly, it was the kitchen that served to unite the two women (fig. 6). In “Frozen Friendship,” a woman received new-found popularity in her neighborhood when she purchased a large freezer, but the freezer also became a source of tension when neighbors took advantage of her. The tension ultimately was resolved after the freezer-owning woman asserted herself.\textsuperscript{120} Finally, “Split Level Blues” epitomized the complex portrait of the working-class suburban woman. This fictional author represented a virtual composite of the real True Story women readers quoted in the MR surveys. The working-class woman featured in this “true story” was proud of her up-to-date suburban kitchen with “shiny machines” that were equal to those of her neighbors. Yet the tension in the story arose from her feeling that she did not fit in with her white-collar neighbors. Not only was her husband a manual worker who didn’t play golf like the others, but she cleaned her house everyday, whereas the white-collar housewives—like the middle-class women interviewed in
the MR reports—had a daily schedule for cleaning particular rooms. As the author told her husband, “they don’t . . . think like we do.” Differences manifested themselves in areas as diverse as parenting and living-room decorating styles. The author felt like an outcast at a neighbor’s party because of the “ultra modern furniture, I guess you’d call it. Everything looked flat and bare and cold, with almost no decorations except some crazy abstract paintings.” The turning point came when neighbors joined her in singing songs from her working-class youth. She concluded her story with the realization that her neighbors would accept her despite her differences in taste and values if she accepted herself.121 Like the MR reports suggested, and as the actual readers featured in the magazine confirmed, this fictional story suggested that shiny appliances and living room furnishings added up to a new suburban culture where women were reformulating class relations as they shopped, worked, and raised families, forging new commonalities and distinctions.
Conclusion

The prosperity of the “workingman’s wife” after World War II spurred a debate on taste precisely because mass-production design began catering to her. Rather than try to reform taste, ultimately business found it useful to reify, embrace, and even amplify this stratification and diversification to sell more and to sell to a new mass market. Together, mass-produced industrial design and motivation researchers’ study of its social meanings provided material expression to changes in the economy and social structure. Because working-class prosperity fostered changes in material culture, the goods themselves helped to shape a new understanding of class relations that was framed in terms of taste and domestic lifestyle. The dynamic interactions between designers, motivation researchers, and sociologists ensured that debates about taste moved beyond the realm of the market to society and culture. T.J. Jackson Lears has argued that this focus on taste deradicalized debates over class and indicated that a new professional class, including tastemakers such as industrial designers, had “come into its own.” But, as this article has suggested, the emphasis on a “more is better” aesthetic was in some ways destabilizing to traditional class and gender hierarchies. What lay behind this “more is better” ethos was the new power of working-class women in mainstream culture. The older upper-middle-class group failed to maintain their own cultural authority. The battle over design reflected a “status anxiety” of a social class that no longer controlled a mass consumption economy that they had helped shape.

If critics understood suburbia through its purchased symbols—the place where the “chrome shines brighter”—so did its residents. Oral histories of women who moved to the suburbs, combined with these sociological studies of suburban blue-collar wives, and the stories that True Story subscribers read, suggested that these women were pioneers. No one knew how to be suburban in these new communities formed in postwar America. In part, this new mainstream culture of “mass-produced domestic comfort”—along with its inner divisions—was worked out in the process of designing these goods.

The combination of mass-produced household appliances and production of domestic furnishings aimed at distinctive markets gave women in suburbia the tools to reformulate social relations. Women’s outlook and work in the home were influenced by their husbands’ jobs
and their prospects limited by them, but on a day-to-day basis these women were largely on their own to develop a new domestic culture. Vance Packard described this domestic consumption as “status-seeking” and blamed manufacturers, designers, and marketers for intensifying this urge by designing status symbols. Viewed from the perspective of women in suburbia, this was not so much about seeking status as it was creating society. Because they reflected changes in the economy and social structure, goods helped women create new social bonds and distinctions. As Bennett Berger argued, contemporaries mistakenly took these goods to be “‘middle-class’ symbols” that suggested the disappearance of the working class rather than understanding these higher standards of living as “conditions capable of generating a consciousness of collective achievement which is worth fighting to preserve.” By questioning the popular assumption of suburbia as a reflection of narrowly-defined middle-class values, this study takes seriously struggles over taste and suggests why shiny appliances were worth fighting over in postwar America. Viewed through this lens, style can be understood as a tool that women used to preserve class identity and reformulate social relations. More broadly, we need to reconsider the purported classless nature of postwar society and the popular assumption that assimilation necessarily went hand-in-hand with household modernization and mass consumption. In particular, we need to appreciate the ways that working-class women wielded influence in the battle to define standards for a new mainstream material world commonly understood as middle class.

NOTES

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3. On Foley, see her obituary in *The New York Times*, Dec. 13, 1974, p. 48. These slides have not been located in Macfadden company files, according to inquiries made to Janet Tanke, Lisa Rabidoux-Finn, and Tina Paptalardo, of *True Story* magazine. Foley may have used slides taken by the motivation research firm SRI, but these materials have not been saved. Personal communication from Sidney J. Levy to author, Oct. 18, 2001. The readership figure is from Larrabee, “Rosebuds,” 63. The circulation of all Macfadden publications’ “True Story Women’s Group” magazines, which included not only *True Story* but also *True Romance*, *Photoplay*, and others, was 6.5 million in 1957, but market research placed the total number of homes reached by the magazine including second-hand readership at about 12 million. “Come on In . . . The Market’s Fine,” advertisement, *Electrical Merchandising* 89 (July 1957): 58–59. According to *True Story* magazine figures, 81 percent of the magazine’s readers were “working class housewives,” whom they defined as wives of blue-collar workers, including craftsmen, factory operatives, and service workers such as truck drivers. Lee Rainwater, Richard Coleman, and Gerald Handel, *Workingman’s Wife: Her Personality, World and Life Style* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1959), 219.


6. Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), particularly his discussion of Giddens’s theory of structuration, has been useful in articulating this approach to defining class (5–12); see also Olivier Zunz, “Class” in *The Encyclopedia of the United States in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stanley I. Kutler (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1996).

7. For two perspectives on the process by which ethnicity became a more distinctively working-class attribute by the mid-twentieth century, see Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880–1920* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 7. As debated in this public discourse, the “working
class” excluded non-white workers as well as the poorest members of society. Although True Story magazine occasionally included African American stories and letters, the two major MR studies completed for the magazine made explicit the belief that “Negroes and Puerto Ricans” were a different category and therefore excluded from their studies of working-class women. Rainwater, Coleman, and Handel, Workingman’s Wife, 17; Lee Rainwater and Gerald Handel, Status of the Working Class in Changing American Society (Chicago: Social Research Inc. for Macfadden Publications, 1961), 176. This racial distinction is clearly articulated in S.M. Miller, “The ‘New’ Working Class” in Arthur B. Shostak and William Gomberg, eds. Blue-Collar World: Studies of the American Worker (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964), 2–9. In the pre-World War II period, when the working class was not seen as a significant market for expensive mass-produced durables, industrial designers often lumped the ethnic working class together with non-whites as consumers outside the middle-class norm. See Shelley K. Nickles, “Object Lessons: Household Appliance Design and the American Middle Class” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Virginia, 1999), ch. 3. On the African American consumer market, see Robert F. Weems, Jr. Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1998).


10. On a distinctive working-class aesthetic in earlier periods, see Lizabeth A. Cohen, “Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of Working-Class Homes, 1885–1915” in Material Culture Studies in America, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local


22. These are phrases used by Larrabee, reporting on Foley’s presentation in “Rosebuds on the Silverware.” This official viewpoint of Macfadden publications was argued most forcefully in Rainwater and Handel, “Status of the Working Class,” 3.


25. On Fordism, see Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production*. For its impact on industrial design, see also Heskett, *Industrial Design*.

26. For the earlier figure, see Tobey, *Technology as Freedom*, 115; for the later figure, see Leibergott, *Pursuing Happiness*, 113.

27. B.L. Aldridge to George Throckmorton (July 23, 1942), Box 292, folder: Memo from Mr. Throckmorton, Radio Corporation of America collection (Acc. 2069), Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware [hereafter RCA/Hagley].


29. Aldridge to Throckmorton (July 23, 1942), *RCA/Hagley*.

30. Ben Nash, *Developing Marketable Products*, 19–25, 139. See also Stan Wellisz, “The Designer’s Stake in the Changing American Market,” 97; Harold Van Doren, *Industrial Design*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1940), 46. On a class-differentiated market in the ceramics and glass industries, see Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers*, 139–41. In the prewar period, the “masses” were largely associated with poverty, and manufacturers catered to a “class” market of upper-middle class consumers. Mass-market ornamentation had been used to sell cheap novelty goods but could be largely ignored by industrial designers of expensive consumer durables, since the average consumer was solidly middle class. Nickles, “Object Lessons,” ch. 2, 3.


41. Raymond Loewy, Never Leave Well Enough Alone (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1951), 221–23, 371. Frigidaire advertised this refrigerator in True Story during this period. For Loewy’s role as consultant to Frigidaire at this time, see also Raymond Loewy, Industrial Design (Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 1979); and contracts between Loewy’s firm and Frigidaire, box 40, folder: contracts, Ga-Ge, Raymond Loewy Papers, Library of Congress.


44. Pulos, American Design Adventure, 110–121. The sociologist Herbert J. Gans exposed the cultural politics of “good design” in “Design and the Consumer: A View


49. William Hainsworth to Louis Ruthenberg, “Refrigerator Appearance, Dr. Frank Steining’s visit” (Sept. 13, 1948), box 17, folder: Servel 1948, *Guild/Syracuse*.

50. This is based on written descriptions. No images of this suggested design, rejected by Servel, have been located. Lurelle Guild to Louis Ruthenberg (Mar. 30, 1949); and Guild to Ruthenberg, letter draft [1950], box 17, folder: Servel 1950–51, *Guild/Syracuse*.

51. Catherine Moran, “Report on Market Survey made on Home Refrigerators” (Feb. 15, 1949); W.D. Teague, “Presentation of Model in Evansville” (Mar. 17, 1949); W.D Teague, “Servel 860 for 1950” (Sept. 15, 1949), all reel 16.28, *Teague/Syracuse*. Although ornamentation was clearly part of a general marketing strategy to increase price paid by consumers for “deluxe” models based on a “more is better” idea of value, correspondence in the Teague papers makes it clear that plain design was not necessarily cost saving. In fact, Teague’s initial design proposed reducing the exterior corner radius much more dramatically to eliminate the bulky, rounded appearance, but he was rebuffed by Servel because of the new tooling costs that would have been incurred. Walter Dorwin Teague to R.S. Taylor (Feb. 18, 1949); Taylor to Teague (Feb. 21, 1949), both reel 16.28, *Teague/Syracuse*.

52. R.J. Caniff, “Comment on Servel’s 1950 Refrigerator Designs” [1949], reel 16.28, *Teague/Syracuse*. Servel clearly viewed working-class consumers as an important market, as evidenced by its frequent advertising in *True Story* magazine in this period.

53. For the “less cost or greater glitter” quote, see Dailey to Teague (Sept. 18, 1950). During 1950, Servel was already at work on the 1952 model. Servel hired staff designer Donald Dailey in 1950. Dailey to Teague (Sept. 18, 1950); Dailey to Teague (Apr. 5, 1951), all reel 16.28, *Teague/Syracuse*. Teague to Mr. Menzies (June 22, 1955); Dan Cardozo memo “re: Telephone conference with Fred Eilers (July 25, 1955), both reel 16.28, *Teague/Syracuse*. R.H. Ensign, conference report (May 26, 1956), reel 16.28, *WDT/Syracuse*. This discussion is based on numerous correspondence and other materials in *Guild/Syracuse* and *Teague/Syracuse*. For a fuller discussion of these developments, see Nickles, “Object Lessons,” ch. 5.


56. Hine, Populuxe.

57. For the complex values influencing women’s consumption choices, see Parr, Domestic Goods; and Clarke, Tupperware.


72. "Selling the U.S. By Class," 79.

73. For an example of the earlier market research reports, see *Magazine Homes and Branded Merchandise* (New York: Macfadden Pub., 1937).


80. About half of the sample of both working-class and middle-class women interviewed for the 1959 study lived in newly-built houses in postwar suburbs. Rainwater, Coleman, and Handel, Workingman's Wife, 221. Status of the Working Class was published in 1961. The last Social Research, Inc. study for Macfadden that I have located is A Study of Working-Class Women in a Changing World (May 1973).

81. Rainwater and Handel, Status of the Working Class, 3–5. They were responding to the popular notion that “people in the same income groups today tend to resemble each other” in lifestyle, outlook, and consumption. This view was promoted in articles such as “Selling to an Age of Plenty” Business Week, May 5, 1956, p. 132.


83. For example, Berger, Blue-Collar Suburb, table A.21.


87. Rainwater, Coleman, and Handel, Workingman’s Wife, ch. 2.


91. Ibid., 176.

92. Ibid., 171; Martineau, “Social Classes and Spending Behavior,” 126.

93. Ibid., 175. Martineau, “The Consumer Speaks About Appliances.”


95. Rainwater and Handel, Status of the Working Class, 21–2, 111.

96. Rainwater, Coleman, and Handel, Workingman’s Wife, 179. Chicago Tribune’s Advertising Dept. derived this conclusion about upper-middle class women in The Consumer Speaks About Appliances.

97. Rainwater and Handel, Status of the Working Class. Many home service articles in True Story documented the changes readers made to their homes. See, for example, “How Happy Can a Woman Be,” True Story (Nov. 1957): 88–89.


99. “Blue-collar aesthetics,” a chapter title in Rainwater, Coleman, and Handel, Workingman’s Wife, pointed out the differences between working-class women’s own stated preferences for the “simple” and “modern” and the meanings the middle class gave to these terms, as well as the differences observed in their furnishings. Gardner spelled out these categories for designers in the Industrial Designers’ Institute Press release, [1959]. See also “Burleigh Gardner: Selling the U.S. by Class,” 77; Burleigh B. Gardner, S.J. Levy, R.F. Camp, N.B. Zisook, and S. Greene, The Homemaker and Home Furnishings (Chicago: Social Research Inc., 1967); Martineau, Motivation in Advertising, 168.


103. See Kim, “Confession,” 118–19; and, more generally, Zunz, Why the American Century, 109.

104. Although some sociologists criticized Workingman’s Wife as a commercial product, they also cited it as an important resource for information. See Shostak and Gomberg, eds., Blue-Collar World.

105. Berger, Working-Class Suburb, 76–78. See also Shostak and Gomberg, Blue Collar World. The importance of the living room as an indicator of class had been noted in the 1930s by the sociologist Stuart Chapin, who concocted a “Living Room Scale” as a measurement of social class. On Chapin, see Alan Roy Berolzheimer, “A Nation of Consumers: Mass Consumption, Middle-Class Standards of Living, and American National Identity, 1910–1950” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Virginia, 1996), 323–36. See also Paul Fussell, Class: A Guide Through the American Status System (New York: Summit Books, 1983), on Chapin and other efforts to use furnishing choices as an index of class.


108. Berger, Working Class Suburb, 93–97. On the distinctions between SRI’s view, which accepted the usefulness of a “middle majority” market despite class differences, and Martineau’s contrary view, see Martineau “The Pattern of Social Classes,” 244, and Motivation in Advertising, 163–172. For an analysis of the “middle majority” market, see also Hurley, Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks, 12–19.

109. On the working-class association of the social kitchen, see Kelly, Expanding the American Dream, 135.


112. This section is based on my analysis of every issue of True Story magazine from 1945 through 1965. I am grateful to Rachel Fincken and Kirsten Brinker for their assistance in collecting and analyzing these materials.


117. For the derivation of the “true stories,” see Fabian, “Making a Commodity of Truth,” 64–65.


122. One of the first commentators to suggest that a new social structure had emerged in which class divisions were replaced by distinctions of tastes and lifestyle after World War II was Russell Lynes in his essay on highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture published in the pages of *Harper’s* and *Life* magazines in 1949 as well as in a book called *The Tastemakers*. Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1949), 310–33. For an analysis of the impact of brow categories on industrial designers, see Ibid., 300–5. On Lynes see, Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 97.

123. Lears, “A Matter of Taste.” For a nuanced discussion of these debates over class, see Zunz, *Why The American Century*, ch. 5.

124. See Berger, *Working-Class Suburb*, although he does not put this point in gendered terms. On the influence of women in the postwar market, see Clarke, *Tupperware*; Sparke, *The Sexual Politics of Taste*. For a Canadian study that offers an illuminating comparison, see Parr, *Domestic Goods*.

125. My appreciation to Jeffrey Meikle for helping to develop this point.


