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**Strange Bedfellows:
The Seduction of Modernist Art
by American Advertisers in the 1920s**

by Marnie Vihonen, B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Communication

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
December 1, 1997
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Date 12 January 1998

ABSTRACT

Using both primary and secondary sources, this thesis explores the seemingly paradoxical merger of modernism and American advertising in the 1920s. More specifically, it provides a historical account of the initial use of modernist art by American advertisers and investigates the conditions which facilitated and encouraged its exploitation.

The rise of modernist advertising was an evolutionary outgrowth of certain earlier changes within the advertising industry, a product of specific relations that prevailed between the worlds of art and commerce, and part of the larger development of a consumer society. However, modernist art was adopted with more cleverness than conviction and was never embraced wholeheartedly by American advertisers.

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1920s, the previously separate paths of American print advertising and what was becoming known as “modernism” began to intersect. Representations in advertising of familiar landscapes and comforting American scenes were increasingly replaced by symbolic surrounds of zigzagging lines, topsy turvy angles, geometrically inspired renditions of the human figure, and iconographies of modernity. For example, the illustration for the Standard Plumbing Fixtures ad of 1922 shows an everyday family scene of a mother washing dishes and a child playing at her feet, while the illustration for the Crillon restaurant ad of 1927 features a modernist surround of contrasting colour and design (see Figures A and B). In effect, the visual vocabulary of American advertising began a new conversation with the consumer.

Figure A. Ad for Standard Plumbing Fixtures, 1922.

Figure B. Crillon Restaurant ad, 1927.

For anyone familiar with modernism, it is puzzling how this radical transformation in the visual imagery of advertising could have taken place. As a culturally subversive aesthetic movement, modernism questioned the foundations of a Victorian society, increasingly driven by the imperatives of commerce and the acquisitive ethos of a consumer society. It was dedicated to an aesthetic of authenticity, to the pursuit of more genuine or “real” means of artistic expression, in contrast to the artifice inherent in advertising as the manufacture of illusions. Moreover, advertising was created in an environment of organizational and managerial impulses, which were inhospitable to the aspirations and commitments of modernism. In general, certainly, the relationship between modernism and advertising was one of antagonism, not congeniality.

Arising first in metropolitan centres such as Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and Madrid, modernism was an attempt to create new artistic languages through which to experience and express the complexities of contemporary life. It eschewed traditional concerns over realistic representation and artistic objectivity and no longer felt responsible for telling a story about the world. Instead, it aspired to create innovative and novel artwork which had value on its own terms, regardless of convention or tradition.

These aspirations and commitments were undermined, however, through the exploitation of modernist forms and techniques of late capitalism. Used to advertise consumer goods and services, modernism took on representational and utilitarian functions. Instead of enabling people to look critically at capitalistic consumption, it

began to further its aims. It became an ambassador for capitalism and took on responsibility for telling the story of the consumer society.

It is puzzling how this could have happened. Unlike the mass audience to which advertising seeks to convey its messages, modernism catered to a select elite. It produced artworks of great complexity and difficulty, which were incomprehensible to all but a few. Indeed, many modernists were quite content to have only a small circle of cultivated and discerning followers and were inherently suspicious of anything with a mass appeal. Nor was modernism an easy victor on the American art scene; on the contrary, it was subjected to a great deal of ridicule and contempt. How, then, could it have become a principal means of visual communication between American industry and the consuming public? And why, indeed, did advertisers turn to modernist art? What conditions not only facilitated but encouraged its exploitation by advertisers?

In point of fact, modernism was not, in the period under examination, ever embraced wholeheartedly by the advertising profession. During the 1920s, indeed, the use of any art in advertising was still a matter of considerable controversy among both artists and advertisers. Many of the former thought that commerce was detrimental to the function of art as a source of truth and beauty and constituted an inhospitable environment for the artist; many of the latter believed that art was unsuited to the objectives of advertising and would detract attention away from the selling of goods. During the 1920s, nonetheless, various features of modernist art became quite visible in American advertising.

The idea of discovering how this was possible was stimulated initially by a

comment made by Tony Pinkney in his introduction to a collection of material that the late Raymond Williams had intended to develop into a “possible book” on the politics of modernism. There Pinkney noted simply that “Williams’ thoughts on advertising as the final home of Modernism were never fully developed.”¹ Given what I knew about modernism at the time, this was an intriguing reference, in that it pointed to not only a paradox but an unresolved paradox. I determined to set about to resolve it, not philosophically or theoretically, but historically, that is studying the actual historical interaction of modernism and advertising. This thesis represents, in effect, an effort to further Williams’ project by looking at the initial use of modernist art in the citadel of modern advertising, the United States of America.

Until recently, accounts of modernism in advertising treated it either as an isolated vogue in advertising style and copy or as a reflection of social decay in which the forces of commerce have appropriated the art world and sullied the pristine soul of the artist. One exception to this is James Sloan Allen’s The Romance of Commerce and Culture (1983) which provides a thorough and extensive case study of the encounter of the Container Corporation of America with modern art during the early 1930s. Allen recounts how modernism was integrated into marketing strategies, from advertising to package design, in a systematic campaign of institutional advertising and corporate identification with modern art. Allen sees the Container Corporation of America as a pioneer in the turn toward modernism. But it was actually during the 1920s that the corporate interest in modernism was first established. During that decade, to be sure, neither modernism nor its application to advertising was fully

embraced. Modernism occupied a precarious place in American art circles at least until the 1930s and its use by advertisers was hotly debated. Nonetheless, modernist advertising reached such proportions in the 1920s as to constitute yet another milestone in the development of a consumer society.

What made the paradoxical merger of modernism and advertising possible were the specific relations that prevailed between the worlds of art and commerce in the 1920s. My account begins, therefore, with an exploration (in Chapter 1) of these worlds. It examines, in particular, the status of advertising illustration before the 1920s, discussing the economic, technical, and social factors which retarded the growth of commercial art. It also recounts the controversies surrounding the rise of advertising art, especially in the 1920s, situating them within a larger debate about the meaning and purposes of art and advertising. It concludes with an evaluation of the extent to which this debate was indicative of the realities at the site of advertising production.

Chapter Two begins with an account of the emergence and status of modernism in American society in the field of painting, focusing on Alfred Stieglitz's "291" salon and the Armory Show in 1913. It then looks at the forces underlying modernist art and the reception given to such art in America.

Chapter Three traces the rise of modernist advertising and its relationship to the program on "style" which swept American business circles during the 1920s. It also explains the controversies relating to product considerations which surrounded the use of modernist advertising and considers how advertisers resolved these dilemmas.

Finally, Chapter Four looks at the question of the audience's relationship to modernist advertising from the perspective of the producer and sees increasing concerns with the consumer personality as part of the maturation of a consumer society. It investigates the various factors which facilitated modernist advertising, including the emergence of competing conceptions of the consumer, the increasing influence of psychological doctrines, and changes in advertising style and copy. It concludes with an explanation of the heated debates which emerged over whether modernist advertising is a viable tool for communicating with consumers.

My account of the merger of modernism and advertising rests on an evidential base comprised of industrial trade journals for the advertising industry, symposiums on the status of art and commercial illustration, and memoirs of advertising professionals on the advertising industry. Of these, the industrial trade journals Printers' Ink and Printers' Ink Monthly constitute the bulk of primary source material. A systematic survey of these publications was conducted for the years 1920 through to 1941. Voicing the opinions of businessmen, advertisers, and artists, these journals offer a rich historical record from which to reconstruct the story of modernist advertising.

A few words about the scope of this project should be mentioned. First, my account of the merger between modernism and advertising is selective in that I have chosen to concentrate on two-dimensional advertisements used in mass-market magazines. During the 1930s, modernism was integrated in marketing strategies beyond that of advertising, especially in packaging and industrial design. While these developments are closely related to the topic at hand, this study is more concerned with

the conditions which facilitated the merger of modernism and advertising. Modernism as it manifested itself in production processes thus will not be an area of focus.

Secondly, although examples of modernist advertisements are considered at some length, a systematic survey of modernist advertisements in the period in question was not considered necessary for obtaining the objectives of this study. Finally, I have not compared or contrasted more traditional endeavours in painting with commercial illustration activities on the basis of aesthetic taste. Certainly, there were both good and bad examples of both modernist art and modernist advertising illustration.

However, my concern is not to judge these products on the basis of artistic merit, but rather to explain how and why features of modernist art first made their way into American advertising in the 1920s.

NOTES FOR INTRODUCTION

1. Tony Pinkney, Introduction, in Raymond Williams, The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists (New York: New Left Books, 1989), p. 2.

CHAPTER ONE

Art and Commerce: The Rise of Commercial Illustration, 1900-1929

When nations grow old
The Arts grow cold
And Commerce settles on every tree;
And the poor and the old
Can live upon gold
For all are born poor

William Blake, 1808-1809¹

After 1900, the increasing use of art by advertisers in America gave rise to heated debates within artistic circles, advertising agencies, and the commercial studios where advertising art was created. While certain elements within the advertising industry sought to reduce the growing tensions, the relations between art and commerce remained problematic into the 1920s, when modernist advertising first made its appearance. To understand the rise of modernism in advertising, therefore, we need to begin by examining the discussion of art and advertising generally in early twentieth-century America. While some of the difficulties over modernism arose from its inherent nature, others were a product of the troubled state of advertising as a whole.

Slow Growth of Commercial Art Before 1920

The idea that illustration is a necessary and desired component of advertising was slow to take hold within American advertising circles. Before 1900, advertisements or ads, as they came to be called, were primarily informative and editorial in character. For the most part, they simply announced the availability and

utility of merchandise, from rice and brandy to blankets, books, and the local interests of an area. Notwithstanding the purchase of Sir John Everett Millais's *Bubbles* by the Pears Soap Company in the 1880s, use was seldom made of recognized artists. Indeed, advertisers were reluctant to make use even of commercial illustrators in advertising campaigns.²

Until the turn of the century, the growth of commercial art was hindered by both economic factors, such as high costs, and technical considerations, such as poor presswork, lack of colour standards, and primitive reproduction methods.³ As Ernest Elmo Calkins, co-founder and president of the Calkins & Holden advertising agency, recalled with respect to the latter in 1930:

Colour was confined to the back covers of magazines; and even when we could find an artist who could and would paint an advertising picture, there wasn't an engraver who could reproduce it, or a pressman who could print it. I have seen the covers of eleven magazines, printed from four-colour plates of the same design, no two of which resembled each other, and none with the colours of the original, because each pressman had his own idea of what was blue, red, and yellow. They agreed only on the shade of black.⁴

The development of commercial illustration was further hindered by the belief that art would impede rather than promote the aims of commerce. The average consumer, it was argued, "was immune to beauty," unable to understand and appreciate the significance of "good art."⁵ Even the Pears Soap Company's use of *Bubbles* was considered by many to have been successful more for its use of press agency than for the artwork itself.⁶ The purchase of *Bubbles* was treated in the news as a scandalous affair, not only for its exploitation for commercial ends but also for the message that it sent regarding the status of artist in society and the decline of traditional patronage

channels.”⁷ The Pears Soap Company, of course, welcomed this attention and made efforts to publicize its patronage of the fine arts.

The idea that advertising illustration was a wasted effort was further strengthened by the lack of convincing evidence of any direct relation between the use of illustrations and increased sales.⁸ A scarcity of empirical evidence in support of commercial illustration plagued the advertising industry and remained a concern among advertisers as late as the 1920s. As R. J. Mooney of the Conover-Mooney Company wrote to Printers' Ink in 1920:

The other day I heard a so-called mail-order expert (oh, these experts!) make a speech in which he declared that colour pages in a catalogue pull fully ten times as much business as the black and white kind. This, of course, is a ridiculous statement and I am reporting it to you both as a matter of interest and also in the hope that you may be able to give us some reliable data upon which the relative pulling power of colour as against black and white may be computed.

Although the editor's response failed to provide exact figures on the “pulling power of colour,” Printers' Ink nonetheless encouraged extra expenditures on colour illustrations on the grounds of a “higher net profit return.”⁹ Further promotion of the use of colour as an advertising strategy was offered in another article in Printer's Ink which advised the reader to “watch for every added pigment that can be put on the payroll as a salesman for the campaign.”¹⁰

*Historically, art patronage had flourished under two main channels of support; the private patron or collector and the art market, with dealers buying artwork with the intention of secondary sale and museums acquiring pieces for their collections. However, as the financial budgets of museums declined and individual commitments to art patronage became increasingly more sporadic, new patterns of support, such as corporate patronage, developed alongside traditional patronage channels.

The development of commercial art was further retarded by the insistence of businessmen on overseeing all aspects of the production of visual imagery. The relatively low status of advertising professionals in general, and commercial illustrators in particular, provided for tenuous relations between already hesitant businessmen and the advertising industry.¹¹ As B. F. Berfield complained in 1925, “almost every agent has seen a good campaign go on the rocks because of the suggestions of a board of directors made up of men who knew a little about advertising art -- but not enough.”¹² Ernest Elmo Calkins similarly saw the problem of “advertisers posing as art critics” as an obstacle impeding the progress of commercial illustration.¹³

Any account of the heartbreaking sessions with some of those early patrons of the arts over designs submitted for approval would verge on the ludicrous. there was the advertiser who submitted all designs to his niece who painted china; the man who brought in blue-prints from his drafting room to check up on a perspective painting of his car; the one who wouldn't have any “foreigner” in his pictures . . . the “gentlemen prefer blondes” formula; and finally the chap who attacked the engraver's proof with a big blue pencil as if it were type and proceeded to delete a moustache and add a smile.¹⁴

Despite the various factors impeding the progress of commercial illustration, applications of art to advertising had become a flourishing enterprise by the 1920s. Improvements in reproduction technologies and colour printing methods, notably the screen halftone process, brought higher standards to the industry and greatly facilitated opportunities for visual communication to mass audiences.¹⁵ At the same time, the exorbitant costs involved in commercial illustration were greatly reduced, making the application of art to advertising campaigns a more affordable option. Paralleling these developments, moreover, was a general “awakening to aesthetics” as it pertained to the

objectives of commerce.¹⁶ An increasing number of advertisers began to turn to art.

Writing of the status of the pictorial in advertising campaigns during the early 1920s,

B. F. Berfield felt justified in writing:

Today the advertiser is as much interested in the illustrations that are to be used in his campaigns as he is in the copy or the mediums. He cheerfully approves artists' bills for amounts that would have sufficed for whole advertising campaigns thirty years ago -- and his cheerfulness comes from the happy consciousness that his money is well invested.¹⁷

Finally, as Calkins remarked, advertisers had learned that "beauty pays dividends, that ugliness repels even those who do not know its ugliness, that good taste attracts even those ignorant of art, that in short, sugar draws more flies than vinegar."¹⁸

According to a survey conducted in 1921 of Collier's, Literary Digest, and two Indiana newspapers, the number of ads including pictures increased from 30 per cent in 1894 to 90 per cent in 1919.¹⁹ In the case of the Ladies Home Journal, my own research found that the number of ads with pictures rose from about 64 per cent in 1900 to about 97 per cent in 1920. However, even these figures understate the change, since illustrations not only increased in number, but also in size and artistic appearance.

The New Look of Ads: A Comparison

Indeed, by the 1920s, the looks of ads had changed dramatically. Illustrations had become a standard feature of ads. For example, for the Wool Soap ad of 1900, the advertiser kept the ad free of illustrations and featured only an enlarged typeface and a description of the utility of the product (see Figure 1.1 below). In marked contrast, for the Jack Tar Togs ad of 1920, the advertiser not only included an illustration but

incorporated a selling message for the product within the picture itself, as seen by the little girl writing 'economy' on the blackboard (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.1. Wool Soap Ad, 1900.

Figure 1.2. Jack Tar Togs Ad, 1920.

As the number of illustrations in ads increased, so did their size. For example, the illustrations for Felt Tidy pens, the Imported Concert Flute, and the Gold Watches ads of 1886 are quite small when compared with the illustration for the Ascher's Knit Goods ad of 1920 (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4 below). Moreover, while the original 1886 ads, grouped together, occupy less than a quarter of a page, the original Ascher's Knit Goods ad itself occupies an entire page.

By the 1920s, illustrations also took on a more artistic appearance. The Ontario Resorts ad for the Canadian National Railway in the 1920s, for example, exhibits far more artistic appeal than does the Blue Label Tomato Ketchup ad of 1900 (see Figures

1.5 and 1.6 below).

A FELT TIDY FREE.

IMPORTED CONCERT FLUTE.

BARGAINS IN GOLD WATCHES

\$300

WARRANTED FOR 10 YEARS

GOLD PLATED CHAIN FREE!

CONNECTICUT MANUFACTURING CO., Hartford, Conn.

Figure 1.3. Ads for Felt Tidy pens, Imported Concert Flute, and Gold Watches, 1886.

ASCHER'S KNIT GOODS

SEWING AND KNOTTING

Figure 1.4. Ad for Ascher's Knit Goods, 1920.

ONTARIO RESORTS

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS

Figure 1.5. Ad for Canadian National Railway, 1920s.

CURTICE BROTHERS BLUE LABEL TOMATO KETCHUP

ADD MATERIALLY TO THE RELISH OF ANY MEAL OF WHICH IT FORMS A PART.

CURTICE BROTHERS CO., New Haven, N. Y.

Figure 1.6. Ad for Blue Label Tomato Ketchup, 1900.

Art for Art's Sake: For and Against

Having overcome technical, economic, and other barriers, however, commercial illustration soon became engulfed in debates over the relations of art and advertising. Advocates of art in advertising tended to fall into one of two camps. For advertising professionals and businessmen, advertising artwork was generally seen as a means to an end. Confident that illustration had a definite commercial value, the use of art was promoted for its capacity to adorn a campaign with a certain atmosphere, to attract attention, and most importantly, to incite desire and stimulate demand on the part of the consumer.²⁰ For commercial artists and persons of artistic orientation, however, advertising artwork was an end in itself. Construed in artistic terms, advertising illustration was an authentic mode of representation, capable of setting artistic standards and fulfilling the interests not only of advertisers and audiences but of artists themselves. Pursuit of the artistic in advertising was seen as a means of self-expression and an exercise in artistic autonomy. It was “art for art’s sake.”

By the 1920s, the “art for art’s sake” movement in advertising was causing a storm of outrage among advertisers. Expressing deep concern over the emphasis given to aesthetic matters, they charged that those who conceived of advertising illustration in aesthetic terms were “more concerned with art for art’s sake than [for] the sake of good advertising.”²¹ They demanded a return to more utilitarian objectives in advertising on the grounds that presentation was “evad[ing] its due subservience” to the principal aims of salesmanship and that an obsession with aesthetics was indicative of a lazy attitude among advertising professionals.

According to Henry FitzGerald, “the line of beauty is the line of least resistance,” whereas “the pursuit of the practical is something far more difficult.” The preoccupation with the artistic in advertising had become a fetish and, as a result, “American advertisements . . . give the impression that the entire advertising fraternity is bemused with beauty, caught up in the spell of it, as in the high fervour of some great Spiritual Crusade.” “And herein lies the danger,” FitzGerald warned; “that beauty of presentation should become an end in itself . . . in other words, that advertising should lose sight of its essential purpose and degenerate into a cult.” Lester Markel was similarly convinced that the essence of good advertising had been lost in the furious scramble to make advertising artistic:

In brief, a great deal of advertising these days is not graced with that fundamental of good copy – relevance. The man who is trying to sell cigarettes uses a hanging garden as the *piece de resistance* of his advertisement; the man selling hanging gardens uses an automobile; the man selling landscapes uses cigarettes. And so on, merrily around the vicious circle.

Claiming that consumers did not pay attention to ads that were not immediately relevant, Markel predicted that the emphasis on artistic advertising strategies was destined for failure. “It must be remembered that the reader will not expend on advertising the effort which he gives gladly to the crossword puzzles; he will not be led by round-about paths to the point; he will not come even half way.”²² Demanding a return to more straightforward approaches, Markel reminded his readers that the main objective of advertising was to “sell neither pictures nor imagination but shoes and ships and sealing wax.”²³

The “art for art’s sake” movement in advertising was also challenged by those

who refused to expand the definitional boundaries of art to include commercial endeavours. The commercial spirit, these critics argued, is entirely “inhospitable to the arts.” The fact that advertising illustration performs an essentially utilitarian function is not to be celebrated, but rather to be scorned. The purpose of art is to foster aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment, not to instill a desire for consumer products in the marketplace. Moreover, the commercial spirit would debase the inspiration and creativity inherent in fine art. As Franklin Ryder observed:

The commercial spirit, the spirit which results from concentration on sales for profit, will go as far as the authorities permit. When it has reached the phase of gibberish, it will graduate from there to sub-gibberish. Furthermore, it will spread gibberish and sub-gibberish so widely and pounding away at them so hard that they will ultimately become normal and acceptable. Where gibberish is the norm, the artist who talks straight will not be understood.²⁴

Richard Surrey, a contributor to Printers' Ink, offered a somewhat different perspective on the boundary between fine art and commercial art. Denying the applicability of art criticism to advertising, Surrey argued that art for art's sake is actually an impossible endeavour in advertising, where the word ‘master’ is quite inappropriate. Insofar as commercial artwork is a product of many influences and the joint work of many hands, it is virtually impossible to point to a ‘master’ of advertising.

“Too many people have contributed to it, too many circumstances have had their influence in moulding it, too many conditions, more or less unforeseen and often incalculable, stand between it and ultimate success.”²⁵

For most critics of art in advertising, the conditions under which the artist normally worked excluded commercial illustration from the realm of true art.²⁶ Unlike

the “solitary artist” driven only by imagination and the pursuit of self-expression, the advertising artist was constrained by conditions imposed by the campaign at hand: restrictions of space and shape, concern with the subject being advertised, considerations for reproduction processes, expectations of the art director, demands of the client, and so on.²⁷ The managerial and organizational environment in which commercial illustrators worked was considered to be entirely unsuitable for the production of authentic art.

At the heart of the matter, in other words, lay a belief in artistic autonomy and freedom as distinguishing characteristics of art. Romantic conceptions of the artist as an autonomous figure, removed from the realities of society and exercising artistic freedom to its fullest degree, wielded incredible influence in discourses surrounding the artist and society.²⁸ Although originating in Europe, such conceptions were of great importance in the United States, with its bourgeois ideals of individualism and democracy.²⁹ For an artist “to have traffic with commercial art,” one commentator argued, “was to sell his soul to perdition.”³⁰

Moreover, as Michelle Bogart has noted, traditional ideals of artistic service to the public were also given pre-eminent importance.³¹ In an era of rapid social change, the artist’s position in the social order, particularly with regard to social responsibilities, were of special concern.³² Thomas Craven, author of the non-fiction best seller Men of Art (1931) wrote that, “the general opinion is that art is an independent growth, the supreme flower of civilization generated somehow in a little world apart from sordid industrialism, and that the artist is a superior being whose sole

concern is the creation of clean and uncontaminated beauty.”³³ Echoing these sentiments were the observations of Walter Baermann in 1947:

Art and the artist’s case in our economy and our community is the case of humanity *versus* robotism. The struggle of the artist for his place in the social order is part of the fight for all deep human qualities, for freedom of soul and mind. His struggle is therefore significant; for in a world where mechanization and scientific rationalism have penetrated every sphere of our lives, the artist stands on an isolated island, working with tools far removed from the material realities of our time, stripped to his inner seeing and his senses.³⁴

Baermann thought, however, that these ideals would be quickly undermined if the artist was employed as an ambassador of modernity, in the world of commerce, that the social responsibilities of the artist could not be fulfilled.

In response to these criticisms, the advocates of art in advertising argued that commercial illustration is a legitimate art form, that it provides opportunities for sincere artistic endeavours and is deserving of aesthetic appreciation and judgment. Despite the fact that advertising illustration is created with certain specifications in mind and produced within an environment driven by commercial imperatives, it is still capable of authentic artistic expression. Regardless of the conditions under which an artist works, art is ultimately dependant on the artist himself – his personality, his imaginative and creative capacities, his artistic abilities and technical skill, and his own individual integrity.³⁵

Throughout the history of art, it was usually pointed out, the relationship of artist to patron was never one of absolute freedom.³⁶ As Craven noted, “the Old Masters, working on commission and earning their bread by the sweat of their brows, were commercial artists in the same sense that the modern artist is commercial.”³⁷ Or

as Calkins put it:

There is no practical difference between, say Pinturicchio's history of Pius II on the walls of the Duomo in Siena and Erza Winter's glorification of the age of sail in the New York offices of the Cunard Line, and certainly none between Perugino's frescoes in the Cambio at Perugia and the murals of Boardman Robinson in the Kaufmann department store at Pittsburgh . . . The specifications with which [the artist] approaches his work do not differ greatly from those given to Michelangelo when he painted the *Last Judgement* for the Sistine Chapel. The quality which makes art Art does not depend on the fact that Michelangelo painted religion instead of motor cars, but in the fact that Michelangelo was a great artist.³⁸

Rockwell Kent, a prominent artist and commercial illustrator in the 1920s and 30s went so far as to compare the Church of Rome with that of the modern corporation, both of whom were claimed to have displayed an interest in advertising:

Perhaps the greatest propaganda, or advertising commission ever executed was that of decorating the Sistine Chapel. Its purpose was to employ the empty walls of that chapel to proclaim the might, majesty, dominion and power of God, the dignity of the Prophets and, incidentally, the divine authority of the Vatican. Without irreverence, the worldly power of the Church of Rome of that day may be likened to the power of a vast modern industrial corporation. Its directorate wanted a job done and, after thoughtful consideration of artists available, decided wisely on Michelangelo of Florence. They left the job to him.³⁹

Art in advertising, said Calkins, was only the most recent endeavour to which art had been applied and only the latest source of "demands and stipulations" imposed on artists since antiquity.⁴⁰ And just as commissioned art had maintained its integrity, so too, Craven assured his readers, would be the case for commercial artwork.⁴¹

Changes in the Working Environment of the Commercial Artist

The controversy surrounding the freedom of the artist in the world of advertising was clearly shaped by personal viewpoints. These ranged from romantic conceptions

of the artist as creative genius and views toward advertising as the manifestation of consumerism's organized banality to more optimistic appraisals of the relationship between art and industry and perceptions of advertising as a source of stimulation and creativity for the artist. While such discussions were sometimes based entirely on personal opinions, they were also informed at times by observations of, or experiences within, the advertising world itself. From these accounts, it can be seen that the nature of artistic freedom in the advertising world was itself in a constant state of transformation. While certain developments within the advertising industry demonstrated an effort to make the world of advertising more hospitable for the commercial artist, tensions between the worlds of art and commerce persisted.

Stories abound about the less than hospitable working environment for the commercial artist. In the highly competitive world of commerce, the hustle and bustle of agency work and enormous time pressures placed on the artist often left little room for creativity and imagination. The subordinate position of the artist in relation to the copy department, and more generally within the advertising industry as a whole, encouraged little respect or appreciation from fellow advertising professionals and posed serious obstacles for artists interested in contributing ideas to an advertising campaign.⁴² Conceptions of the artist as asocial individuals, "brooding malcontents . . . who live in the clouds," or as a race apart, "not belonging in the normal sphere of normal humans and normal social activities," made the forging of relationships between artists and other employees exceedingly difficult and gave rise to numerous complaints of strife and conflict.⁴³

Such prejudices also affected the rigidity of work specifications and demands. Convinced that the artist was wholly ignorant of the world of business and hence of the intricacies and objectives of an ad campaign, and wary of what might occur if the artistic imagination was left to its own devices, advertising executives imposed rigid limitations on artistic freedom, presenting detailed work specifications in the form of idea layouts and even rudimentary sketches.⁴⁴ Sometimes ideas for a particular sort of illustration were concocted by the advertiser who, enamoured with his own creative capacities but lacking in technical skill, exploited the technical abilities of the commercial artist while ignoring his other talents.⁴⁵ It is not surprising that these practices disturbed and insulted the creative artist.

As advertising illustration gained in popularity and the numbers of artists employed in the advertising industry increased, however, advertising agents and advertisers found it more difficult to make decisions about illustration, design, and layout.⁴⁶ This development, in combination with a surge in demand for distinctive and unique advertising illustration, led to three changes in the field of advertising art that improved the working conditions of the commercial artist.

First, there was a new emphasis on the distinctive style of the artist as a criterion for employment. Earlier, the artist's ability to adapt his technical skills and alter his style of expression to meet the needs of an advertising campaign had prevailed in considerations for employment. This changed, however, with an increasing range of artistic talent from which to choose, coupled with the rush for distinctive and original modes of artistic expression among advertisers and their agencies.⁴⁷ Collaboration

between the artist and advertiser or agency executive in matters of illustration content, atmosphere, design, and layout increased, as did encouragement of artistic creativity and imagination.⁴⁸ In addition to these benefits for “in-house” commercial artists, there were opportunities for free-lancing and commission on contract. This avenue was particularly attractive for artists who were happy to be paid for doing commercial illustrations, but were still committed to artistic integrity. Included in this group were recognized artists who could afford to enter the world of commercial art at their leisure and desire, such as Rockwell Kent, Herbert Bayer, Edward Steichen, Raleigh and in later years, the great pioneer of modern art, Spaniard Pablo Picasso.

Secondly, the birth of the commercial art studio served to improve the working environment of the advertising artist. Independent of the advertising agency and not concerning itself with the business aspects of the industry, the commercial art studio worked on commission for advertising agencies, offering specialized services in advertising illustration, typography, and layout. According to William E. Mackelfresh, Jr., president of the Mackelfresh Studios, the mission of the commercial art studio in advertising was “to better serve the advertiser and the agency by offering the various types of work, not of one artist, but of many.” While Mackelfresh assured his readers that the successful commercial art studio neither catered to, nor was built upon, the “so-called artistic temperament,” the commercial art studio, in its recruitment of artists of distinctive expression and style, was nonetheless an appealing place of employment for the commercial artist.⁴⁹

The third development to improve the working conditions of the commercial

artist was the rise of the advertising agency art director, a position which, while created in the early years of the twentieth century, acquired new prominence in the 1920s.⁵⁰ Filling the gap created when advertisers and advertising agents were no longer able to personally oversee artistic activities, commercial art directors acted as a liaison between the agency executives or their clients and the artist.⁵¹ They were recruited from a variety of fields, including newspaper illustration, academy painting, and the exhibition circuit. Frequently, they were individuals of artistic talent and imagination themselves, and thus knowledgeable about creative matters and sympathetic toward the frustrations of the artist.⁵² Charles Coiner of N. W. Ayer and Ross Shattuck of J. Walter Thompson, who held joint exhibits of their paintings during the 1920s, were two such art directors whose artistic aspirations led them to pursue secondary careers outside of the advertising industry.⁵³

Most of the commercial art directors had trained at established art schools. For example, Vaughan Flannery, chief art director at N. W. Ayer from 1923 to 1930, attended the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. Gordon Aymar, art director at J. Walter Thompson, studied at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.⁵⁴ However, the art director's job was not entirely creative; it also involved administrative tasks, such as selling the pictorial product to the client and overseeing changes and adjustments in illustration, layout, and design. Integral to the art director's resume was an understanding of the managerial and organizational aspects of the advertising business, as well as an appreciation for the interests and objectives of applying art to the advertising productions of business. In effect, the advertising agency art director was both the

symbolic figurehead and ambassador for the merger of art and commerce.

Art and Commerce: An Uneasy Courtship

Despite the artistic orientation of the art director, his relationship with the artist was often one of antagonism. In the words of Frederick L. Cavally, art director for the Thompson-Koch Company in Cincinnati, “between the art director and the commercial artist stands the ugly wall, Misunderstanding.” Climbing atop the wall of “Misunderstanding,” in an effort to gain an “unobstructed view of both sides,” Cavally offered a personal account of the relations between the art director and the artist:

On one side we see the commercial artist at work. He has cast aside the cloak he wears when mingling among cold critics and supposed enemies, who, he feels, are everlastingly trying to place an embargo upon the sustenance to life. He is happy -- he feels the thrill of creation -- he sees the hazy visions stepping stepping forth into the sunshine. Hours pass, days pass, and finally the creation is complete. He views it with growing pride and carried away by enthusiasm, he dons his armoured cloak. Now he is the artist no longer and, as he nears the wall of “Misunderstanding,” faith and confidence desert him -- he feels awkwardly at a disadvantage in the hands of cold, unsympathetic critics; his assumed poise is now one of self-defence, which is so commonly and unjustly called “temperament.” Now let us gaze in the opposite direction and see what the art director looks like. Yes, he is also a busy man. True, his surroundings and tools differ from those of the artist, but is also enthusiastically creating -- visualizing a big idea, which later he will impart to an artist. The art director may paint a work picture for the artist, but in transmission through the trained mind’s eye of the artist, certain corrections, angles, perspectives, and ideals are subconsciously noted, so that both pictures now differ -- an offensive and defensive debate follow. The art director sizes up the artist as a stupid, temperamental ass -- the artist feels just as strongly that the director is a bigoted flour-flusher.⁵⁵

Cavally’s report of less than amicable relations between the artist and the art director was echoed by the recognized artist and commercial illustrator, Rockwell Kent. Kent advised that the art director “must be prepared to renounce [his] accustomed authority

as *dictator of art* and leave the art and all the thought and execution pertaining to it to the artist he has chosen.”⁵⁶

The position of art director as mediator between the artist and the client did not eliminate confrontations between the two parties. Advertisers continued to play a controlling influence over artistic illustration, albeit more sporadically. The comments of Geoffrey Archbold in 1938 reveal the persistence of communication problems between the artist and the client:

“It’s a pleasure to deal with an honest man” – trite, but particularly true in selling art. The honest man’s reasoning runs somewhat as follows: “I know nothing about art; my ignorance in that respect is that of the average man. This advertisement is aimed at the average man; it looks all right to me, hence it will be acceptable to the average man . . .” It’s a different story with Mr. Pomponius Ego; he may find no intrinsic fault in the work submitted, but feels that it would be an exposure of ignorance – an admission of weakness – for him to say so. Therefore, he covers up with irrelevancies: “How would it look if the building were more to the left? Probably this lettering would be more effective in Roman than in Gothic? Couldn’t we make the background blue instead of violet? In his more virulent form, this type of quibbler grabs a hard pencil and starts to demolish the drawing by sketching his ideas directly on its surface, instead of on the tissue flap provided for glyptomaniacs.”⁵⁷

Clearly, the experience of the artist within the advertising industry, at least with regard to personal relations with agency executives and clients, was often a frustratingly difficult one.

Whether to allow artists to sign their illustrations was reflected in the controversy over the status of the artist in advertising and the degree of authenticity in advertising illustration.⁵⁸ According to Gordon C. Aymar, art director for the J. Walter Thompson Company during the 1920s, practice on the issue of signature was divided.⁵⁹ Those who did not allow their artists to sign their illustrations believed that the artist’s

signature would draw attention away from the advertising message.⁶⁰ As J. Walter Thompson president Stanley Resor explained, “anything which tends to draw the attention from the illustration itself lessens the strength of the advertisements . . . we want the readers to be conscious only of the ideas expressed in the illustration, not of the artist who executed the drawing.” Other advertisers, however, allowed the artist to sign his name. Usually this occurred upon the request of the client and especially when the signature was that of a leading illustrator. It was believed that the artist’s signature lent prestige to the product and identified the company with that of the fine arts. Throughout the 1920s, ads for companies such as Texaco, Lux, and Marcus Jewellers bore the signatures of their creators’ names.⁶¹

* * * * *

The period from 1900 to 1929 witnessed a general awakening to aesthetics as it pertained to the objectives of advertising. The field of commercial illustration grew into a flourishing artistic enterprise. Yet its ascendancy introduced new debates and dilemmas surrounding the meaning and purposes of both art and advertising. The merger of art and commerce was a courtship greatly contested. The experience of the commercial illustrator within this tumultuous arena was often one of hardship and frustration. Even with developments such as the creation of commercial art studios, the introduction of the art director position, and a new emphasis on distinctive creative production, the advertising industry often remained a less than ideal environment for

the artist.

For many artists, however, commercial illustration offered opportunities which outweighed the disadvantages involved in entering the field of advertising. Not only did it provide a steady source of income for doing what artists wanted to do, but it also offered a means of entering into a visual dialogue with the public. For as we shall see in the next chapter, the precarious status of artists in American society, particularly those associated with modernist avant-garde movements, offered only limited opportunities for artistic recognition from more traditional sources of support.

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CHAPTER TWO

Modernism in America: Its Introduction, Reception, and Impact

There is an exhibition coming off . . . which is the most important public event that has ever come off since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, & it is of the same nature . . . There will be a riot and things will never be quite the same afterwards.

Mabel Dodge to Gertrude Stein
(24 January 1913)

Between 1900 and 1929, when advertisers began to make significant use of art, the art world itself underwent a major transformation in the kind of work produced by its artists. For centuries, artists had been expected to accurately reproduce or imitate realities that could be seen by the naked eye. But during the late nineteenth century, these traditions were called into question by a group of artists who believed that not all realities are perceptible to the eye and who tried to create art that could visually convey such knowledge. The various forms of art that emerged as a result are commonly associated with the cultural movement known as “modernism,” which, during the period from about 1890 to 1930, embraced not only painting but architecture, music, sculpture, literature and even endeavours such as science and philosophy.¹ In the simplest terms, modernism involved a reaction to the aesthetic traditions and moralism of the Victorian period. In painting, this took the form of intense experimentation with artistic methods and the creation of diverse new styles.

The new artistic languages of modernism emerged initially in European cities

such as Paris, Berlin, and Madrid and were scarcely known at first by American artists or in the public.² Early American exposure to modernist efforts in the arts was exclusively the experience of those who had the means to travel to the continent. Included in this group was the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who made the first attempt to introduce modernism to American artistic circles. In 1907, Stieglitz began exhibiting modernist art and sculpture at his small gallery in New York, known as "291" because of its location at 291 Fifth Avenue. Later, in February 1913, the Association of American Painters and Sculptors introduced modernism to the general public at the New York Armory Show. Through the efforts of Stieglitz, and especially the Armory Show, modernism made its entrance onto American soil and was established as a visual fact, at least, if not an accepted aesthetic, in American life.

This chapter will provide a historical account of the introduction of modernism to American society as it pertained to painting. Specifically, it will examine the exhibition circuit through which modernism was introduced to America and will investigate the reception given to modernism by the American public. It will be seen that modernism sparked longstanding controversies in America and was slow to be accepted in both the established art world and American society as a whole. The main reason for this hostility was the belief that modernist art posed a threat to the broader fabric of culture and society. The introduction of modernism to America had a direct impact on American advertising art, which during the 1920s, increasingly displayed techniques and images borrowed from modernist painting.

Stieglitz and Salon "291"

Born in America in 1864, Alfred Stieglitz dedicated his life to gaining recognition for photography as an art form. A tireless spokesman for photography-as-art, Stieglitz founded the Photo-Secession society in 1902 to further the cause of photographic art and in 1903 began publishing the magazine Camera Work.³ In 1905, he opened his first gallery at "291," where he exhibited both his own work and that of other pioneers in American photography.

Stieglitz's role as a "human conduit" for modernism in America has long been acknowledged by historians.⁴ Though initially simply interested in applying modernist values to photography, Stieglitz soon became an active patron of the new art and sculpture in general.⁵ In 1907, he began exhibiting modernist works of Cezanne, Matisse and Picasso, as well as those of American artists who embodied the ideas of modernism, such as Max Weber, John Maris, Arthur B. Dove, and Abraham Walkowitz.⁶ For the next five years, salon "291" acted as a kind of headquarters for modernism in America. Unlike the art at other New York galleries, that at "291" broke sharply with the tradition that art must conform to ordinary or "realistic" visual experience, use dignified subject matter, and avoid excesses of colour or emotion.⁷ And while giving support to artists who had already achieved recognition in European circles, Stieglitz also welcomed exhibits from struggling and unrecognized artists. His concern was associating "291" less with certain personalities than with a certain spirit. As he put it, salon "291" was open to any artist who "displayed honesty of aim, honesty of self-expression, [and] honesty of revolt against the autocracy of

convention.”⁸

Stieglitz’s crusade on behalf of modernism was immensely influential. As William Innes Homer has observed, he “played a determining role in nurturing the production and encouragement of avant-garde artistic currents in America.”⁹ Outside of American artistic circles, however, the audience for Stieglitz’s exhibitions remained limited.¹⁰ In fact, the rooms of “291” could only hold about a dozen viewers. But more importantly, Stieglitz himself refused to be a publicist.¹¹

The Staging of the Armory Show of 1913

The International Exhibition of Modern Art, held in New York City’s Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory in February of 1913 and known as the Armory Show, was the most important art exhibition in America to that date. Socialite Mabel Dodge gave it, albeit with some exaggeration, the same status as “the signing of the Declaration of Independence.”¹² Without doubt, it was the most dramatic presentation of modernist art ever encountered by the American public.¹³

The Armory Show was staged by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors (AAPS). Founded in 1912 by a group of painters distraught over problems of exhibiting and concerned with the plight of the artist in society, the AAPS objected to the conservative exhibition policies of the National Academy of Design, which left “stylistically unorthodox artists” in the shadows of the American buying circuit.¹⁴

Joining forces with the AAPS for the exhibition of 1913 was a group known as the Ash Can Realists, headed by Robert Henri. Although divergent in the artwork

which they produced, the Ash Can Realists focused on visual representations of the “world of the commonplace” — city carnivals, people doing their laundry, the poverty of urban slums — over a concern with abstraction and metaphors for human consciousness. At the same time, however, they shared with modernist members of the AAPS an antipathy toward the National Academy of Design and a belief in the future of American art.¹⁵ Their tenuous alliance with the AAPS was geared specifically towards spearheading the Armory Show. As John Sloan, an exhibitor at the show, recalled, “Henri and the rest of the [Ash Can] crowd were rebuffed whenever they asked questions.” As the Armory Show became a forum for European radicalism, relations between the AAPS and the Ash Can group dissolved.¹⁶

The inclusion of foreign paintings and sculpture at the Armory Show also caused strife among the members of the AAPS.¹⁷ Although the AAPS had pledged from its inception to hold “national and international exhibitions of the best examples procurable of contemporary art,” many of its members were mainly concerned with giving greater exposure to American paintings and sculpture.¹⁸ To their dismay, Arthur B. Davies, AAPS president, and Walt Kuhn, AAPS secretary and artist, not only spent months scrambling around Europe to get the most radical art possible, but gave it its pride of place at the Armory Show.¹⁹ Stieglitz, while not a member of the AAPS, helped Davies and Kuhn make the necessary contacts in Europe and provided advice and consultation for organizers less familiar with modernism.²⁰

When the Armory Show opened on February 17, it included approximately 1,300 works of art and sculpture: 400 of European origin and the remainder

American.²¹ But despite the fact that American works outnumbered European ones by a two to one margin, it was the revolutionary art of Europe “which stole the show.”²² The “old masters” of modern art were represented by the works of those like Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Seurat, while newer experiments and movements were presented through the works of Matisse, Vlaminck, Derain, Picasso, Braque, Duchamp and Kandinsky.²³ Such works clearly won the spotlight over American ventures in the realm of modern art and left realist achievements almost completely in the dark.²⁴

The Armory Show was geared from the outset for publicity and promotion. In contrast to Stieglitz’s antagonistic attitude towards publicity and breaking sharply from the restrictive approach of the National Academy of Design, the AAPS launched a publicity campaign similar to those employed in the commercial sector. It printed 50,000 catalogues for the exhibition; sent out thousands of postcards; persuaded newspapers and magazines to carry articles on the exhibition; and hired Frederick James Gregg, an editorial writer for the New York Evening Sun, as its “Publicity Man.” As historian Michele Bogart has commented, “the Armory Show was unprecedented in the size, scope, and ingenuity of the publicity enterprise. Its organizers’ strategies amounted to a new form of national advertising for art.”²⁵

Levels of Revolt in Modernist Art

Artists have always responded to the changing world around them, but rarely has this challenge been accepted with as great a sense of personal cause as it was by

artists of modernist influence. In an attempt to articulate the meanings and complexities of contemporary life, modernist artists generated an entirely “new look” in art, one which pushed past the boundaries of artistic experimentation and asserted a new found sense of freedom and liberation. In retrospect, the “new look” of modern art actually comprised a number of artistic approaches and individual styles.

Fauvism was one of the first developments in modernist art, whose artists created a radical new style through the use of violent colour and bold distortions. Many of the Fauvists were inspired by the primitive art of Africa and the work of Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Paul Cezanne. *The Joy of Life*, painted by Henri Matisse, a dominant figure in the movement, is one of the most famous Fauvist works (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Henri Matisse, *The Joy of Life*, 1905-6.

For those artists associated with the Expressionist movement, the new look in art was achieved through an emphasis on the artist's emotional attitude toward himself rather than on the reality of the external world. Expressionism is often characterized by the use of symbolic colours and exaggerated imagery to communicate strong emotion. One of the most important developments of Expressionism was its move toward abstraction, as demonstrated in Wassily Kandinsky's *Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)* (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2. Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)*, 1913.

For Cubist painters, modernism involved the development of a more intellectual conception of the art of painting in favour of providing realistic representations of the outside world or imaginative depictions of the non-objective realm. Characteristic features of Cubism included the reduction of objects to their

geometric equivalents and the simultaneous display of several different aspects of one object. Pablo Picasso was the founding father of Cubism and his first Cubist painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. 118), had a profound effect on later advances in Cubism and modernist art generally (see Figure 2.3). The influence of Cubism, for

Figure 2.3. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907.

example, can be seen in Marc Chagall's *I and the Village*, which blends Cubist techniques with exploration of the world of dream and fantasy (see Figure 2.4 below).

Finally, for the Futurist movement, whose artists sought to express the twentieth century's new sense of time, space, energy, and movement, technological industrial culture was the subject of both fascination and horror. Umberto Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Cyclist* provides a useful example of the Futurist affinity for the dynamism and speed of industrial society (see Figure 2.5 below). Indeed, for

Figure 2.4. Marc Chagall, *I and the Village*, 1911.

Figure 2.5. Umberto Boccioni, *Dynamism of a Cyclist*, 1913.

modernist artists of every current, the visual vocabularies of modernism were perceived as uniquely attuned to the experience of modern life.²⁶

Modernism has often been construed as the preoccupation of a small number of self-absorbed bohemian artists or as a limited high art. Defined along these lines, modernism was revolutionary only the extent to which it challenged artistic styles and traditions of the past. If modernism is conceptualized in relation to changes occurring in other realms of society, however, it becomes evident that it occupied a much larger territory. As Robert Crunden has written:

It was a religion of art, consciousness, and originality . . . It was a new psychology of drives, dreams, consciousness, and extreme mental states. It was a science based on new mathematical and physical ideas: matter was energy, the static was dynamic, and reality was relative . . . Instead of a certain and stable universe, [modernists] saw an indeterminate and relational one.²⁷

From this perspective, modernist art was less an isolated vogue of a small group of bohemian artists and more an aesthetic counterpart to a broader shift occurring in the culture and thought of Western society at large.

In the physical sciences, for example, concepts and categories which had served to organize the Victorian world were shattered and replaced by new theoretical doctrines based on relativism.²⁸ “In the twenty years between 1895 and 1915,” notes Alan Bullock, “the whole picture of the physical universe, which had appeared not only the most impressive but also the most secure achievement of scientific thought, was brought into question.”²⁹ Among the most significant developments during the period were the theories of Albert Einstein. Challenging previous conceptions of time and space as separate and stable entities, Einstein’s relativity theory advanced the notion that temporal coordinates were relative to specific reference bodies and

were thus to be placed on a continuum.³⁰ Einstein's theory had an impact far beyond the world of physics and was linked to developments in a host of other disciplines.

Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, for instance, applied Einstein's theories to the philosophy of perspectivism, writing:

There is no absolute space because there is no absolute perspective. To be absolute, space has to cease to be real – a space full of phenomena – and to become an abstraction. The theory of Einstein is a marvellous proof of the harmonious multiplicity of all possible points of view. If the idea is extended to morals and aesthetics, we shall come to experience history and life in a new way.³¹

Equally important challenges to the prevailing orthodoxy occurred in other fields of scientific thought. In the behavioural sciences, Sigmund Freud emphasized the role of unconscious in human behaviour and identified dreams as “the royal road to the unconscious.” He then proceeded to develop methodologies to understand the symbolic languages of dreams, the fruits of which appeared in The Interpretation of Dreams (1899).³² Extremely influential in their own right and opening up new vistas of inquiry and discovery, Freud's insights played an important role in revolutionizing the way in which human personality was understood.

The writings of the American philosopher William James demonstrated a similar concern with the nature of human consciousness and the complexity of its subjective realities. Rejecting conventional frameworks for discussing consciousness and the nature of human experience, James made important contributions to our understanding of change as an integral element of the human mind.³³ “Whatever is true of the river of life,” James wrote in The Principles of Psychology (1890), “of the

river of feeling, it would certainly be true to say, like Heraclitus, that we never descend twice into the same stream.”³⁴ For James, human thought is comprised of a synthesis of sensations and recollections, what he termed “a stream of consciousness.” Reality, in consequence, is both more complex and elusive than previously thought.³⁵ As David Shi has written, it now “encompasses the actual and the possible or imaginary, the concrete and the abstract, the objective and the subjective.”³⁶ Not the least of those influenced by this perspective was William James’ younger brother Henry, whose fiction revealed similar preoccupations with the nature of consciousness.³⁷

What all of these diverse developments had in common was a passion for discovering new ways of thinking about and experiencing reality. This shared desire to seek out new levels of reality has been interpreted as a reaction against Victorianism, with its deeply held beliefs in the immutable laws of science, morality, and religion, and immensely optimistic attitude toward the social and economic modernization of bourgeois-capitalist society.³⁸ Further, in an effort to interpret this movement as a full-fledged historical *culture*, these shifts in ways of thinking about reality have collectively been called “modernism.” As Daniel Singal has commented, “modernism should properly be seen as a *culture* -- a constellation of related ideas, beliefs, values, and modes of perception, . . . not just the plaything of the avant-garde, it has assumed a commanding position in literature, music, painting, architecture, philosophy, and virtually every other realm of artistic or intellectual endeavour.”³⁹ This profound shift in sensibility toward ways of thinking, feeling, and

seeing was in fact remarked upon by Virginia Woolf in 1924, who wrote that “on or about December 1910, human nature changed.”⁴⁰

The Impact of the Armory Show

The Armory Show was a public relations success not only in terms of bringing national recognition to the exhibition but, more importantly, from the standpoint of educating the public about the radical transformation underway in the art world and shattering the complacency of American art circles. Estimates of the show’s attendance range from 70,000 up to 300,000 and newspaper coverage amounted to over 3,000 columns worth.⁴¹ In addition, the European modernist artists exhibiting at the Armory generated \$30, 491 in sales.⁴²

As far as establishing modernist exhibitions as a “respectable tradition” in the American art world, however, the Armory Show was substantially less successful.⁴³ Art critic James Huneker wrote to his readers that “to miss modern art is to miss one of the few thrills that life holds.”⁴⁴ But there were also voices of unrest and uneasiness over the changes occurring in the art world. Indeed, despite efforts to promote modern art “as a more vital, sincere expression of true contemporary experience than academic art,” the exhibition was greeted with a storm of hostility and ridicule.⁴⁵ Francis Picabia, the sole European modernist artist on site at the Armory, may have contributed to this reaction with such manifestoes as:

Away with form! Out with perspective! Down with all effort toward materialization! Make way for the rhythm of impulse, the tonality of emotion, the equilibriumized expression of the inevitable.

If you want to have clean ideas, change them as often as you change your shirts. Our head is round enough so that our thinking can change directions.⁴⁶

But in any event, the art itself struck most critics and the general public as incomprehensible and diametrically opposed to what “art” should be. As historian Milton Brown has written, “what the public saw was a New Art that was shocking rather than reassuring and the ‘fakers,’ the ‘madmen,’ the ‘degenerates’ were abused, reviled, and jeered . . . the press and public laughed, the critics with their standards crumbling around their ears culminated, but it was all to no avail.”⁴⁷ Illustrative of this response was a “guide” for spectators printed in The Chicago Record-Herald, after the exhibition moved from New York to Chicago from March 24 to April 16, 1913:

Art – The portrayal in one perfectly stationary picture of about 5,000 feet of motion pictures: a “woosy” attempt to express the fourth dimension. *Futurist Art* -- Same as the former, only more so, with primeval instincts thrown in; Cubism carried to the extreme or fifth dimension. *Post-Impressionism* -- The other two thrown together. *How To Appreciate It* -- Eat three welsh rarebits, smoke two pipefuls of “hop” and sniff cocaine until every street car looks like a goldfish and the Masonic Temple resembles a tiny white mouse.⁴⁸

The work that attracted the most attention at the Armory Show was Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (see Figure 2.6 below). As Henry McBride recalled, “the cumulative effects of so many cerebral shocks became unbearable at the far end of the Armory where Mr. Duchamp’s painting hung.” Treated as scandalous and ridiculed incessantly, Duchamp’s work was described as an “explosion in a shingle factory” or, most often, as “Rude Descending a Staircase,” a description which was accompanied by a cartoon depicting a mad scramble down a

Figure 2.6. Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912

set of subway stairs during rush hour (see Figure 2.7 below). Former American president, Theodore Roosevelt, who attended the Armory Show on the day of Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, was one of many who joined in the game:

There is in my bathroom a really good Navajo rug, which, on any proper interpretation of the cubist theory, is a satisfactory picture. Now, if, for some inscrutable reason, it suited somebody to call this rug a picture of say, "A well-dressed man going up a ladder," the name would fit the facts just about as well as in the case of the cubist picture of the "Naked man going downstairs."⁴⁹

Figure 2.7. “Rude Descending a Staircase,” 1913

Roosevelt’s ridicule of modern art masked deeper concerns, as did most of the jokes which were launched at the new paintings and their creators. According to its advocates, modernist art stressed the subjective over the objective, the irrational over the rational, creativity and innovation over control and uniformity, and individualism over collectivism. But in its effort to reorient the visual experience of painting in this manner, it was perceived to carry not only aesthetic ramifications but ramifications for society at large. For critics concerned with the preservation of social order, “the lunatic fringe” fostered by modern art, as Roosevelt called it, was considered subversive to the goals of a “progressive” American society.⁵⁰ Values such as diversity, relativity, and authenticity threatened to undermine the orderly, rational,

uniform, and undivided society envisioned by the New Republic Progressives.⁵¹ As Roosevelt later commented in an article entitled “A Layman’s View of an Art Exhibition” (1913):

It is true, as the champions of the extremists say, that there can be no life without change, no development without change, and that to be afraid of what is different or unfamiliar is to be afraid of life. It is not true, however, that change may mean death and not life, retrogression instead of development.”⁵²

Modernist painting was, for Roosevelt, an example of retrogressive change.

Aesthetic and Political Radicalism: An Uneasy Alliance

For cultural conservatives concerned that modernism would incite social and political unrest, Benjamin de Casseres, a cultural radical and essayist for Camera Work, personified their greatest fears. In 1915, de Casseres ran for mayor of New York City on the “Smash It” ticket. According to de Casseres, modernist values were powerful weapons to be utilized in the fight against the increasingly commercialized and rationalized standards of American society, which were thought to systematically suppress individual rights and freedom. De Casseres’ election platform quickly made headlines, advocating the legalization of prostitution and gambling, the sale of liquor twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and the mayor’s “immediate impeachment” should he attempt to “regulate private morals.” Most of the time, however, his platform contained two planks: “Do as thou good-and-goddamned wilt! Do it in public.” Although de Casseres was not elected, he left the stage with a useful summation of his antagonistic world view: “Long live Socialists, Anarchists, Nihilists, Communists, Diabolists, Impressionists, and anybody anywhere who is in

favour of upsetting something somehow somewhere sometime.”⁵³

Alfred Stieglitz’s political views were less extreme. Unlike de Casseres, who entered the traditional realm of politics in his crusade for social change, Stieglitz believed that the new language of art would itself bring about a social revolution. Three principles summed up Stieglitz’s philosophy: “the artist’s need to fully express himself or herself; pluralism, the desirability of having a number of options open to both painters and lovers of painting;” and the belief that self-expression and pluralism were not merely ends in themselves but sensibilities “that would change the world.” Indeed, for Stieglitz, “art and life were synonymous.”⁵⁴

However, relations between modernists and political activists were in fact extremely tenuous. Notwithstanding the efforts of individuals like Benjamin de Casseres, modernism was collectively an elitist movement, thus making it difficult to unite the forces of political and artistic radicalism.⁵⁵ According to some modernists and their supporters, the masses were “not worthy of great art,” their incomprehension of modernist forms and styles taken as quick indicators of ignorance and stupidity.⁵⁶ After the Armory Show, Marcel Duchamp commented that he came to the United States as “a missionary of insolence.” Margaret Anderson, poet and editor of the Little Review, further exemplified this elitist attitude, writing, “it’s a fact that humanity is the most stupid and degrading thing on the planet.” Willard Huntington Wright, art critic and editor of Smart Set expressed similar sentiments: “the antagonism of the masses to the artist sprang up simultaneously with the disgust of the artist for the masses . . . to democratise art results only in the lowering of the

artistic standard.” Indeed, the question of how modernist elitism could be reconciled with political activism plagued those who hoped to unite the two forces and occupied many of the debates within little magazines such as The Masses, The Seven Arts, and the Little Review.⁵⁷

Modernism in America, the 1920s

A year or so after the Armory Show’s last exhibition in Boston, European nations began mobilizing for war. In the aftermath of World War I, modernism was simultaneously affirmed and denied by its pre-war opponents. For some, the war confirmed modernist conceptions of the irrationality of human nature and the self-destructive virtues of bourgeois society, and gave legitimation to continued modernist endeavours.⁵⁸ But the shocking effects of the war caused others to abandon modernism and seek refuge in more traditional aesthetic pursuits.⁵⁹ For them, the blood and destruction of World War I demonstrated that the languages of modernism were virtually powerless against the languages of war.

Throughout the 1920s, modernism continued to occupy a precarious position in American society. Although exhibitions of modernist works could be found in the smaller galleries across America, modernist artworks were rarely found on the walls of established museums and academies. As Alice Marquis has commented, many museum curators and collectors believed that modernist works were a speculative and risky investment. Moreover, when contemporary works were exhibited, they were routinely removed on the slightest note of disapproval from museum audiences.⁶⁰ In

1921, for example, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York exhibited a collection of post-1880 European paintings, a group of anonymous supporters of the museum protested. In their written pamphlet, entitled “A Protest against the Present Exhibition of Degenerate ‘Modernistic’ Works in the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” they described modern art as “Bolshevistic” and wrote, “we believe that these forms of so-called art are merely a symptom of a general movement throughout the world having for its object the breaking down of all law and order and the Revolutionary destruction of our entire social system.” Later, in 1929, socialite Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney offered her entire 600-item collection of American modern art to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, along with funds for the construction of a wing to display and maintain it. The museum’s director, Edward Robinson declined, saying, “we don’t want any more Americans. We have a cellar full of that kind of painting.”⁶¹

Part of the problem involved in the establishment of modernism in America was that its meaning remained elusive. Ignorance surrounding modern art was not only a problem for the general population; it also reached high into the ranks of museums and educational institutions. Not one college course dealt with the history of modern art, and discussions of modernism in scholarly journals remained almost non-existent. Alfred Barr, a strong supporter of modern art during this period, could recall only one American scholarly article dealing with modern art prior to 1931, and it was hostile.⁶²

A distinctively new era of modernism in America emerged with the opening

of The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York on November 9, 1929. As a result of the efforts of those associated with the MOMA, most notably those of Alfred H. Barr, who developed an immensely influential overview of the history of modern art for the museum, modernism achieved definitional form and acceptance, even dominance, within American society. The shift in public opinion toward modern art was enormous. On the MOMA's tenth anniversary in 1939, even former President Theodore Roosevelt would ambitiously speak of the MOMA as the "citadel of civilization."⁶³

* * * * *

Modernism's introduction to American society sparked heated controversies and was slow to be accepted in established art circles as well as in the public at large. Indeed, the idea that modernist art related to issues surrounding things such as self-definition, perception, and social values, generated longstanding debates. The modernist controversy even attracted the attention of advertisers. During the 1920s, advertisers increasingly used techniques and images borrowed from modernist painting. In doing so, the modernist controversy was shifted to a commercial context, with modernist art's utility as an advertising tool, rather than its impact on the social order, the focal point of discussion. It is to this story which we now turn.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER TWO

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CHAPTER THREE

Engineering Consumption: Modernism and the Program on Style, 1920-1929

Stories of Alfred Stieglitz's salon "291," the Armory Show and its aftermath, and the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in 1929 tell only in part the story of how modernism was established as a visual presence in American life.

Notwithstanding the significance of these efforts to further the cause of modernism, it was through the sales strategies of advertisers in the 1920s that most Americans became familiar with the cultural forms of modernism. With its characteristic zigzagging "cubo-futurist" lines, topsy turvy angles, and geometrically inspired renditions of the human figure, modernism was put to work for consumer capitalism by representing its goods and services and conveying its latest tastes and tempos.

It is puzzling how modernism and advertising became intertwined, given that they were utterly different in ideology, aspirations, and interests. The relationship between modernism and capitalism was far from congenial. As John Nerone has observed, "the capitalist environment could hardly be considered rich ground for modernism, which was a harbinger of cataclysmic change in Europe." In Nerone's view, "... modernist forms had to enter by a circuitous route, which bled them of their political associations and turned them, ultimately, into tools of corporatism and consumerism."¹ As a culturally subversive aesthetic movement, modernism dedicated itself to questioning the very foundations of a Victorian society driven by the imperatives of commerce and consumption. It endeavoured to create new artistic

languages through which to experience and express the complexities of contemporary life. Advertising, as the pre-eminent manufacturer of illusions and artifice, was thus a primary target for modernist revolt.

The Program on Style

From the perspective of advertisers, however, modernism was considered to be quite serviceable to corporate interests. In its capacity to portray ideas of novelty, movement, and progress through the juxtaposition of diagonal lines and abstract shapes, modernism came to be seen as a viable advertising tool (see, for example the Crillon Restaurant and Sak's Fifth Avenue ads in Figures 3.1 and 3.2). In particular, it was

Figure 3.1 Crillon Restaurant ad, 1925

Figure 3.2. Sak's Fifth Avenue ad, 1927

amenable to a “program on style,” as Calkins called it, which swept American business circles during the 1920s and marked a turning point in the development of a consumer society. Signifying more than changing modes of fashion or dress, the corporate turn toward style was a strategic manoeuvre to help promote modernization. Central to this program of style was the principle of stylistic obsolescence, which assumed that “what is new is desirable.”² From the automotive industries to high fashion, the impulses of modernism provided an exciting and dynamic language for expressing the stylistic frenzy of the era.

According to Abbott Kimball, manager of the New York advertising agency Lyddon & Hanford, the new preoccupation with style was driven by a general cultural desire for novelty after World War I. In his view, the turn toward style had first taken form in the International Exhibition of Modern and Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925, which had dramatized the new impulse in “strikingly new” designs in “all the accessories of living.” Through the efforts of a commission of merchants and advertisers selected by the U. S. Department of Commerce to attend the show, the story of the “new style” was spread among manufacturers and advertisers and “set . . . in motion with a tremendous impulse.” Comparing the rage for style to cultural renaissances of previous post-War eras, Kimball asserted that the new movement was “simply history repeating itself under twentieth century conditions.”³

For others, the rage for style was to be located in the changing attitudes and demands of consumers. According to Grace Walton, advertising manager for Julius & Co., the program on style in Kayser advertisements for women’s hosiery, underwear,

and gloves had developed in response to market research inquiries on what women really wanted in fashion items and luxury goods (see, for example, the Kayser hosiery ad of 1927 in Figure 3.3).⁴ In Walton's view, it was of the utmost importance

Figure 3.3. Ad for Kayser Hosiery, 1927.

for the modern woman to learn the secrets of “Parisian Chic” and keep pace with the latest in “Paris Styles.”⁵ I. A. Wyner, Vice-President of Shawmut Woolen Mills, makers of woolen jersey products for women, agreed with Walton on the origins of the stylistic frenzy of the era. Telling the story of the catalyst which spurred him to enter the “good old practical and workaday jersey” into the “style race,” Wyner writes of the “masses of women, with an ever higher standard of dress,” who increasingly came to

the company in demand of “not only practical clothes but stylish clothes.”⁶ In response, Shawmut Woolen Mills made style an imperative, introducing changes in its entire merchandising strategy, from product design to advertising campaigns and distribution.⁷

The most frequent and convincing interpretation of the preoccupation with style focused on the new marketing needs of the 1920s. Confronted with problems of overproduction following World War I, proponents of this explanation argued, the commercial sector began a desperate search for new ways to encourage consumption.⁸ The shift to stylistic concerns was a direct response to these commercial imperatives.⁹ “Overproduction,” Henry Ford commented, “means something out of date.”¹⁰ As Charles F. Abbott, executive director of the American Institute of Steel Construction, further explained:

We know that *if we are to keep large-scale production, there must be large-scale consumption*. We must either use the fruits of our marvellous factories in this highly efficient “power” age, or *slow them down or shut them down*. The way to keep them going is to foster the spirit of style and colour and change and alter up-to-dateness in our purchases, not only for efficiency, but for style and for pleasure in change.¹¹

In American Prosperity: Its Causes and Consequences (1928), Paul M. Mazur also looked to challenges faced in the realm of production:

Newness or style became the new order of the day. Retailers looked for novelty with which to tickle the jaded appetite of lady consumers. Sales organizations began to urge production changes instead of standardized low-cost units. Saturation came quickly if the market bought to satisfy demand, but saturation would never be reached if what was in style could be changed quickly enough and made soon obsolete. *Standardization became increasingly subordinated to style: uniformity of production was subordinated to style appeal.*¹²

Underlying the shift to stylistic preoccupations was a new scientific approach to business known as “consumer engineering,” a phrase coined by Egmont Arens of Calkins & Holden advertising agency during the 1920s.¹³ Systematic in its approach, consumer engineering was a significant change in business philosophy toward both production and distribution.¹⁴ Its primary objective was to instill the principle of progressive obsolescence, which was defined by Charles F. Abbott as “the readiness to scrap half-worn goods for new.”¹⁵ “Goods fall into two classes,” explained Ernest Elmo Calkins; “those we *use* such as motor cars or safety razors, and those we *use up* such as toothpaste or soda biscuits.” “Consumption engineering must help us use up the kind of goods we now merely use.”¹⁶

Consumer engineering was built upon the idea that overproduction could be eliminated by “stylistic obsolescence,” or the use of stylistic change to render products obsolete.¹⁷ Recapitulating a conversation which he had with a manager of a garage on this subject, Brian Rowe wrote to Printer’s Ink Monthly that:

He was telling me of a convention he attended in Detroit, and of a high official in one of the greatest automobile companies, who with some strain of humour informed his audience that so long as his research department continued to make people reasonably dissatisfied with the cars they owned, it was doing its job . . . this deliberate creation of obsolescence; the invasion of many realms by Style, once the prerogative of women; the great rapidity with which style changes; the rapidity with which one’s possessions grow out of date, and lose almost every vestige of value; the constant purchasing of things which one would prefer to purchase once and for all.¹⁸

Rowe’s conception of the purpose of style clearly is, to be sure, quite different from that offered earlier by Abbott Kimball. Style is no longer associated with post-War cultural renaissances or used to signify a coherent historical epoch. Instead, it has

become an indicator of what must be continually consumed. As historian Stuart Ewen puts it:

In the commercial world of style, the fundamental assumption underlying the “shaping of everyday life” is that life must visibly change, every day . . . The facades of style . . . are ever-changing, often incoherent. Style is something to be *used up*. Part of its significance is that it will lose significance . . . The meaning that *will* remain constant, that *will* be expressed across the shifting tableau of style – regardless of the skins it appropriates – is the continual message of consumption.¹⁹

In response to problems of overproduction and unprecedented marketing needs, therefore, the corporate world turned in the direction of style.

The Growth of a Consumer Society

This was not the first time that the corporate world had adopted new strategies in an effort to curb problems in the marketplace. The increased preoccupation with style in advertising was both an expression of, and a mechanism for, the complex growth of a consumer society, structured by large hierarchically organized business enterprises.²⁰ Advertising was expected to play a pivotal role in fostering an ethos of consumption by “stoking the fires of demand” and exciting desires for material goods.²¹

Patterns of mass commodity consumption have been traced by social historians as far back as the middle of the eighteenth century.²² It has been argued, for example, that commodities such as furniture, tableware, and household utensils were readily purchased by not only members of the English colonial elite but also those of the working class. Lois Carr and Lorena Walsh conclude that “by the late 1750s, items of comfort and convenience had ceased to be luxuries, being commonly found in middling

as well as wealthy households, and increasingly at the bottom too.”²³ In a similar vein, Alice Jones has noted the “substantial size and character of wealth in consumer goods among free colonists on the eve of Revolution.”²⁴ Evidence of a material culture became even more prevalent as American society matured and prospered in the decades following the Revolution. By the middle of the nineteenth century, carpeting, glassware, fashions, food items and collectibles were all being produced in mass quantities for a populace increasingly able to consume.²⁵

Whether these patterns of consumption are, in fact, indicative of an early consumer culture has been a matter of debate. Neil Harris has suggested that, up until the mid-nineteenth century, patterns of consumption were indicative less of a consumer society and more of a materialist society. “Materialism,” he writes, “was tied both to production *and* consumption, [and] . . . if a man desired what he could not yet afford to buy, he could either enlarge his fortune or apply his own talents to imitation.” As a result of new technologies, urbanization, and industrialization, however, the ability to manufacture one’s own material environment declined, and consumers were unable “to match, in precision, variety, attractiveness, and especially cost, the provision of objects produced by American manufacturers, from clothing and furniture to food and drink.” Locating the emergence of a consumer society at this historical juncture, Harris concludes that “it is . . . the declining ability to manufacture one’s own material environment that precipitates a growth of interest in the purchasing act.”²⁶

For most scholars of the subject, the shift to a consumer society gained new momentum, even if it did not originate, in the period between 1880 and 1920. Among

the factors contributing to its growth were: reorientations in thought and culture, urbanization, revolutions in transportations and communication, industrialization, worker grievances and unrest, a growing need to dispose of mass outputs of commodities, periodic depressions, and, last but not least, advertising.²⁷ For it was advertising that enabled the “masters of production” to also become “engineers of consumption.”²⁸

A clear indication of this shift can be seen in the proliferation of branding strategies which appeared in advertising campaigns toward the end of the nineteenth century. Although brand names such as Fairbanks Scale, Singer Sewing Machines, and Remington Firearms originated before the Civil War, the practice of branding did not become widespread until later in the century. The United States Patent Office recorded only 121 registered names and brands in 1871, compared to over 50,000 by the late 1910s.²⁹ The extensive use of branding marked an important shift in the development of modern advertising, transforming the role which advertising had formally played in the marketplace. Instead of focusing on the availability, costs, and characteristics of commodities for sale, advertising increasingly took on the role of stimulating consumer demand on a national scale.³⁰ Branding was used as a way of differentiating products from those of competing manufacturers, identifying the manufacturer, and establishing a direct relationship with the consumer, thereby creating consumer demand.³¹

Along with brand names, advertisers made increasing use of slogans, trademarks, and other packaging considerations.³² “Force” cereal introduced “Sunny

Jim” to consumers; Ivory Soap described its product as “99 44/100 per cent pure”; and the National Biscuit Company touted its “In-Er-Seal.”³³ Speaking of the impact of the “Sunny Jim” campaigns during the first decade of the twentieth century, the editor of Printer’s Ink commented that “no current novel or play is so universally familiar, he [Sunny Jim] is as well known as President Roosevelt or J. Pierpont Morgan.”³⁴ An article on brand names published in the first volume of the Journal of Applied Psychology in 1917 reported that of 300 men interviewed, each was able to rehearse the names of at least one brand of fountain pen, watch, soft drink, and soap. Studies carried out in the 1920s revealed that this familiarity was translating into sales, with brands dominating consumer purchases in a predominant number of industries.³⁵

By the 1920s, however, the effectiveness of salesmanship strategies such as branding were increasingly called into question. As a result, the corporate world looked to “style” as a new strategy for stimulating the American marketplace.

Although branding practices were by no means abandoned, the importance of the brand name was increasingly usurped by concerns over style. In the words of Ernest Elmo Calkins:

Something of this spirit must be added to all the old selling qualities which were once so potent. The old names are still good to conjure with, the old qualities are still held in high esteem . . . but they are no longer enough . . . [the manufacturer] must give to his products a certain intangible, indefinable something that will display this spirit, give them vogue, show them in a new light as it were . . . there must be some touch of brilliancy, something to suggest that they are part and parcel of this new, changing, colourful, sophisticated world; that wearing them, or using them, or eating them, conveys more than these words imply, that by so doing you stamp yourself as in the know, as up-to-date, as being aware of what is being done.³⁶

In advertising, that “indefinable something” was modernism.

Various Styles of Modernism in Advertising

During the 1920s, advertisers used techniques borrowed from various modernist movements, including Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism. The most popular techniques adopted were certainly those of the Cubist school. The John Ward Men's Shoes ad, for example, draws from Cubism in its use of contrasting colour and geometric shapes (see Figure 3.4). Sometimes advertisers even attempted to copy the styles of individual artists, such as Picasso, as seen in the interpretation of Gershwin's “Rhapsody in Blue” for Steinway pianos (see Figure 3.5). Futurism was

Figure 3.4. Ad for John Ward Men's Shoes, 1928.

Figure 3.5. Ad for Steinway Pianos, 1928.

also frequently used by advertisers. For example, an Ovington's ad of 1928 made a dramatic attempt to recapture the Futurist sense of movement and energy (see Figure 3.6). The influence of Expressionism, while less frequent, can be seen in a Lenthéric perfume ad of the same year (see Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.6. Ovington's ad, 1928.

Figure 3.7. Lenthéric Perfume ad, 1928

Constraints to Modernist Advertising

Modernism was employed by advertisers for a variety of consumer products and services. The automobile industry and advertisers of women's luxury apparel were among the most consistent patrons of modernism. Yet the symbolic surrounds of modernism could also be found in ads for such things as household appliances,

furniture, tooth powder, metal manufacturers, and hotels. In its ability to provide a visual vocabulary for the stylistic frenzy of the 1920s, modernism was increasingly employed throughout the American industrial and business world.

There was, nonetheless, heated debate over the use of modernist principles and techniques in advertising. Other than the advice of advertising professionals, which was rarely impartial, there were no guidelines to indicate what type of advertising campaign modernism was suited for. Nor were there any guarantees that modernist advertising would succeed. For advertisers accustomed to relatively agreed upon strategies for salesmanship, ventures into the realm of modernism remained treacherous. Debates surrounding modernist advertising thus continued even during its peak of popularity in the later 1920s.

Part of the problem surrounding the application of modernism to advertising had to do with modernism itself. As noted, only a small proportion of the American population was familiar with the cultural forms of modernism, and for those who were, even fewer could claim to understand the new art. Remarks of ridicule and contempt entered into most discussions of modernism, even in the established art world. Modernism, we have seen, was banished from museums and scholarly institutions throughout the 1920s. Indeed, whether the use of any kind of art in advertising was a sound selling strategy was still a persistent question among business circles.

Another problem lay in the fact that many of the actual products to be advertised had not yet themselves incorporated modernist ideas of style. Much of the reluctance to embrace modernism for advertising purposes, in other words, had to do with

concerns surrounding the representation of products. Indeed, there was a widespread belief in advertising circles that certain products could be harmed if the product was “lost in a welter of futuristic movement” or if outlandish and bizarre techniques were carried to an extreme.³⁷ Although consumer engineering called for the integration of production and distribution, in most cases the application of modernism to advertising proceeded in advance of its application to production.³⁸ Until at least the late 1920s, practices of “styling the goods” were for the most part confined to automobiles and fashion goods or, as Calkins put it, “motor cars and ruffs and cuffs and farthingales and things.”³⁹

Advertisers confronted the problems surrounding the use of modernism in advertising in various ways. For some, the struggle for attention within the highly competitive business climate of the 1920s outweighed the risks involved with modernist advertising. Expressing little, if any, concern over the controversies surrounding modernist advertisements, many eagerly embraced the new trend. Even when faced with denunciations of modernist advertising as nonsensical and extremist, many advertisers turned a blind eye to such attacks and ventured directly into the realm of modernism for inspiration for their advertisements. For others, however, modernist advertising was simply too radical and “freakish” to be employed as a sound advertising strategy.⁴⁰ Instead, traditional approaches in design and layout and realistic pictorial techniques were retained as the primary means of visual communication from the advertiser to the consumer.

Concern over product representation was rampant when the topic of discussion

was food. Not only did ads for food have to attract the consumer, but they also had to succeed in sparking the appetite. In the opinion of many food advertisers, the principles and techniques of modernism were simply not applicable to matters of the stomach. With the creation of a “taste appeal,” rather than “style appeal,” given pre-eminent importance, food advertisers were among the most steadfast defenders of realistic illustrations. According to one food advertiser:

When a woman starts to work in her kitchen she want to make dishes that look like the dishes in the advertisements. She accepts them as patterns. If her concoctions don't come up to the pictured ones she is dreadfully hurt. Can you imagine her trying to copy some of the modern impressionistic pictures? I can't. I think that some of the efforts made to improve on nature are maddening. Both in colour and execution food should be pictured as real as possible.

Or as Aesop Glim, art connoisseur and commercial artist, wrote:

Planning twenty-one meals a week is no sinecure. Women are up against one of the world's worst jobs. I have always felt that women are interested in exact detail – particularly in foods . . . A woman does not want to see an art gallery picture when she looks for cooking ideas. She wants something that she thinks will please John and her boys.⁴¹

The reluctance to apply modernism to food commodity advertisements continued long after modernism's application to a wide variety of other products. As late as 1930, questions surrounding food advertisements and modernism remained unresolved, with realistic representations for food ads predominating.

Some advertisers who, while expressing discomfort at the thought of embracing modernist advertising wholeheartedly, were nonetheless fascinated with the possibilities of the new trend. Painfully aware of the storm of criticism of modernism, but not wanting to be left out of the latest vogue in advertising illustration, advertisers

of this more timid character urged forward the development of a hybrid approach which blended traditional and modern influences. They sought, in other words, a happy medium which would bring a new face to their ads, but yielded a product only “comfortably away from the conventional.”⁴² According to Charles Brodie, President of the Advertype Company, this merger was essentially an attempt to “curtail any exuberance of spirit in the interests of sanity of display.”⁴³ These ads fused the “old with the new,” retaining what were considered to be the best qualities of each approach: the comforting and easily comprehensible touch of the “old-spirit” and a “faint hint of jazzy compositions and queer techniques” from the new.⁴⁴ Particularly suitable for advertisers intrigued by modernist advertising, but hesitant to take a definitive departure from tradition, pictorial strategies which blended the “old and the new” were immensely popular during this period (see, for example, the Vincennes Phonographs ad in Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8. Ad for Vincennes Phonographs, 1927.

There was a widespread belief within the automobile industry that the use of modernism in advertising was a risky business move. Pictorial strategies which blended traditional and modern influences were thus appealing for many automobile advertisers.⁴⁵ This was especially true in the case of new models, which constituted the life of the industry and governed manufacturers' future prosperity. At the same time, however, modernism's capacity to convey movement was a source of much intrigue for automobile advertisers who were self-described as living in a "speed age in which seconds count."⁴⁶ Advertisers for the Franklin Automobile Company succeeded quite early in negotiating the problem of product representation with modernist advertising. In the 1925 campaign for the new Franklin, advertisers amalgamated the principles and techniques of realism and modernism in such a way as to set a precedent within the field of advertising illustration.⁴⁷ In each advertisement for the campaign, the automobile itself was pictured accurately and faithfully, keeping "jazzed ideas at a distance" and the product "free from eccentricities of technique."⁴⁸ But after this point, the advertisement was saturated with modernism, situating the car within a decidedly modernistic background "made up of queer angles, planes, and curves, . . . purely abstract in conception and dynamic in character."⁴⁹ Described as "50 per cent modernistic and 50 per cent legitimate," the Franklin ad was proclaimed a success by even the most timid advertisers and rewarded for its pioneering and ingenious approach to negotiating the problem of product representation and modernism (see Figure 3.9 below).⁵⁰

Figure 3.9. Franklin Automobile Ad, 1925.

One of the most popular techniques used by commercial illustrators to blend traditional and modern influences was modernism's highly creative approach to perspective. In the art world, modernism had revolutionized traditional rules of perspective by allowing the artist to present many points of view at once, rather than a singular, linear perspective.⁵¹ According to historian Donald M. Lowe, Cubism's liberation of art from the stranglehold of linearity was indicative of an entirely new sensibility, a sensibility in which space and time no longer remained unquestioned and no version of a given reality was definitive.⁵²

Some advertisers were very enthusiastic about modernist approaches to perspective and even labelled the most popular techniques with specific names, including, "Bird's-eye View," "Worm's-eye View," "Optical Illusion," and "Topsy-

to capitalize both on modernism's utility as an advertising tool and on the ridicule it had received as a salesmanship strategy. In an ingenious move, the advertisers embraced the very qualities of modernism ridiculed by critics by applying an extreme dose of modernist illustration and type face layout and then, anticipating a confused and bewildered reaction on the part of the reader, quickly following with a selling message for the product (see Figure 3.12). The illustration was described as so eccentric that

Figure 3.12. Dr. Lyon's ad, 1925.

“all of its forms mean nothing, and could only be interpreted by a confirmed futurist of the most rabid type.” According to a commercial art manager involved with the Dr. Lyon's campaign, the advertisers insisted that not only must modernism be embraced to its fullest degree, but that it was to be taken “a step farther.” What this entailed was linking the reader's confused reaction with the selling message for the product.

“Should we add to your confusion?”, the advertisers asked:

Confusion about the care of your teeth – just to make things sound big? We could add some ingredient to our product, almost anything – just a little – that would not do you any good, possibly not any harm, but would make for a big story. And spurt up sales - - for a while. However, we feel sure there is enough confusion already surrounding this simple question of personal hygiene. For that is all there is to using a dentifrice – cleanliness.⁵⁴

Forging a link between a confusion surrounding the care of one’s teeth and confusion on the part of the reader when confronted with illustration and layout of modernist influence, the advertisers thus offered a simple remedy – the purchase of Dr. Lyon’s tooth cream and dental care products.

The Degree of Modernist Advertising

In December of 1928, Don Gridley, a regular contributor to Printer’s Ink Monthly, sought to provide concrete data on the status of modernism in advertising and the degree to which it was being employed. His study, entitled “A Statistical Glass Applied to Modernism” was in part a response to adversaries of modernist advertising, who had recently declared the movement to be an isolated vogue among a relatively small group of advertisers. But it was also an effort to inform interested persons of the extent to which modernist advertising had swept the advertising world. It was heralded as the first attempt to quantify the significance of modernism in advertising.

Gridley’s focus of study were the November 1928 issues of two magazines catering specifically to women, a choice considered by Gridley to be warranted on the grounds that it was in ads for women’s luxury and fashion items that modernism had received “its greatest impetus.” Gridley was particularly concerned to provide data

that would accurately represent the advertising practices of the leading advertisers, a group indicative of the most important advertising trends, but regarded by Gridley to be “on the whole conservatives.” Gridley thus included both conservative and radical magazines, though identifying these only as Magazine A and Magazine B. “A” was classified as conservative on the basis of its editorial policy, while “B” was described as radical because of its use of innovative design and fashion principles. Three categories were used to classify the ads: Modernist, Transition, and Old School. The reader was only provided, however, with only a general description of the criteria for each category. For example, ads in the Transition class were described simply as meeting neither strictly modern nor old style criteria, but which “could not have been made if the artist had not been influenced by Modernism.”⁵⁵ The question of what constituted modernism, itself, was effectively eluded.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, Gridley’s analysis yielded some interesting results (see Table 1 below). It shows that modernist ads appeared in both radical and conservative magazines; that applications of modernism to advertising were certainly not an isolated vogue; but that modernism was nonetheless more prevalent in ads in radical publications.

Table 1
Gridley's Analysis of the
Degree of Modernist Advertising

Advertisement	Percentage of ads in Magazine A*	Percentage of ads in Magazine B**
Modernist	20	51
Transition	17	11
Old School	64	38

* Magazine A had 266 ads in total.

**Magazine B had 194 ads in total.

* * * * *

The turn toward modernism by advertisers was closely aligned with an increasing preoccupation with style. The turn toward style was part of a larger change taking place, that being the development of a consumer society. Modernist advertising can thus be understood as both an expression of, and a mechanism for, this larger transformation.

For the most part, however, modernism was applied to the advertising productions of business with more cleverness than conviction. Whether for reasons having directly to do with modernism or because of concerns surrounding the representation of the product, advertisers were reluctant to embrace modernism wholeheartedly. Indeed, even when modernist advertising was employed, it was not to further the cause of modernism, but rather to encourage the purchase of consumer

goods.

The task of encouraging consumption, however, brought with it the task of determining the most effective method of communicating with the audience. As we shall see, the relationship of the audience to modernist advertising was a subject of much debate within advertising circles.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Consumptionism: Modernist Advertising and the Audience

Two things are essential to understand the seemingly paradoxical use of modernist art by American advertisers in the 1920s. The first is to grasp the extent to which modernist advertising was an evolutionary outgrowth of earlier advertising forms and techniques. The second is to see why modernist advertising was perceived by advertisers to be a useful tool for attracting consumers and instilling desire for the consumption of goods. What conceptions of the consumer personality, or the consuming public, facilitated the turn toward modernism as an advertising strategy? What made modernist advertising particularly amenable to consumptionism or the new art of selling goods?

This chapter will address the relationship of modernist advertising to the audience from the perspective of the producer. It views preoccupations with the consumer personality as a significant development in the growth of a consumer society and investigates the various factors which facilitated the turn toward modernist advertising as a strategy. Just as there existed problems surrounding product representation and the use of modernism, equally important dilemmas confronted advertisers with regard to modernist advertising and the audience. The heated controversies surrounding the use of modernist advertising and the audience will be examined, as will the extent to which these discussions reflected the paradoxical nature of the intersection of modernism and advertising more generally.

The Evolutionary Nature of Modernist Advertising

In Chapter One, one showed how the use of art in advertising depended upon the meeting of certain economic, technical, and social obstacles before the 1920s: high costs, primitive reproduction methods, and the belief that art would impede the aims of commerce. In this chapter, it will be shown how modernist advertising in particular depended upon certain additional developments; namely, changes in advertising style and copy, preliminary applications of experimental psychology to advertising, and an increasing interest in marketing research methods. It will be seen that modernist advertising was an outgrowth of these developments, putting into practice ideas which had been circulating within advertising circles for years. Its adoption, therefore, was much less of a paradox than first imagined. For in effect, it was in large measure an evolutionary outgrowth of earlier changes in the advertising industry.

Changes in Advertising Style and Copy

Around the turn of the century, innovations in advertising style and copy began to demonstrate an increasing emphasis on the personality of a representative consumer rather than on the product. Instead of merely announcing the availability of a product and giving “plain-spoken” descriptions of its nature, they adopted a more literary approach which focused on words and strategies of persuasion.¹ Among the most celebrated examples of this shift were the familiar trademark personalities like Aunt Jemima and Sunny Jim and the advertising jingles which often accompanied such characters:

Jim Dumps was a most unfriendly man,
 Who lived his life on the hermit plan;
 In his gloomy way he'd gone through strife;
 And made the most of woe and strife;
 Till Force one day was served to him --
 Since then they've called him "Sunny Jim."²

This innovation was soon succeeded, however, by the advent of what was called "Reason-Why" copy, a "hard-sell" approach to salesmanship which placed emphasis on providing consumers with convincing arguments of the features and benefits of a product.³ Stripped of familiar trademark personalities and catchy rhymes, the new "Reason-Why" approach was modelled on the so-called "salesman, foot in the door" approach to selling, which sought to overcome buying resistance with an arsenal of "reasons-why" the product should be bought (see, for example, the Crisco ad in Figure 4.1).⁴ As John E. Kennedy, brainchild of the "Reason-Why" approach described

Figure 4.1. Crisco ad, 1920.

it: “True ‘Reason-Why’ Copy is Logic, plus persuasion, plus conviction, all woven into a certain simplicity of thought – pre-digested for the average mind, so that it is easier to *understand* than to *misunderstand* it.”⁵ As historian Roland Marchand has commented, even though most advertisements during this period remained product-centered, “Reason-Why” copy marked a shift toward a human interest approach where advertisers made efforts to “imagine themselves selling the product to an individual consumer” rather than to an anonymous crowd.⁶

The “Reason-Why” approach to selling was soon itself replaced by one which involved more suggestive and oblique salesmanship strategies. Commonly known as “atmosphere advertising,” this approach made use of art, striking layouts, and dignified, elegant copy. Like the “Reason-Why” approach, “atmosphere advertising” featured the benefits of buying the product, but did so indirectly by giving the ads a certain aura or ambiance. As Cyrus Curtis commented in 1916, “it’s the *atmosphere* in these ads that sells, the quality that gives prestige, the little imaginative sure touches that bring the thing out before you.”⁷

The most famous demonstration of “atmosphere advertising” was the “Penalty of Leadership” ad in 1915 for the first high-speed V-8 Cadillac. Created by Theodore F. MacManus, star copywriter for General Motors, the idea behind the “Penalty of Leadership” ad grew out of a need to restore the reputation of Cadillac as a leader in reliability and quality.⁸ MacManus’ ad had no illustrations and made no mention of the Cadillac name. Instead, it relied on an association between the plight of being a

leader in the automobile industry and the plight of being a leader in society:

In every field of human endeavour, he that [sic] is first must perpetually live in the white light of publicity. When a man's work become a standard for the whole world, it also becomes a target for the shafts of the envious few. There is nothing new in this. It is as old as the world and as old as the human passions – envy, fear, greed, ambition, and the desire to surpass. And it all avails nothing. That which deserves to live – lives.⁹

While “The Penalty of Leadership” ad was first greeted with amusement and disdain among McManus’s colleagues, it proved to be an unqualified success and was reprinted for years afterward. In the mid 1940s, when Printers’ Ink asked its readers to identify the greatest ad of all time, “The Penalty of Leadership” won hands down.¹⁰

Preliminary Applications of Psychology and Marketing Research Methods

Atmosphere advertising was the result in part of an increasing interest among advertising professionals in the field of psychology. Of particular interest were the psychological doctrines of a new breed of social scientists who challenged dominant conceptions of human nature as rational and autonomous and advocated instead a model of human nature as irrational, reactive, and “endlessly malleable.”¹¹ These social scientists first had their influence on American industry in the realm of production, where their findings were applied to the workplace, under the auspices of “scientific management,” as a means of bringing greater efficiency through the definition of standards and the scheduling of tasks.¹² However, they soon turned their attention to the realm of consumption, becoming increasingly preoccupied with the powers of suggestion, persuasion, and emotional appeal.

In 1903 Walter D. Scott applied their theories to advertising in an influential

book entitled The Psychology of Advertising. “Man has been called a reasoning animal,” Scott wrote, “but he could with greater truthfulness be called the creature of suggestion.”¹³ Dismissing the “Reason-Why” approach in advertising for its dependence on a rational model of human nature and its emphasis on the internal reasoning of the consumer, Scott provided theoretical support for adherents of the “atmosphere” approach, putting forward the claim that “the actual effect of modern advertising is not so much to convince as to suggest.”¹⁴ Powers of suggestion required the utilization of external stimuli such as coupons or pictures, especially those based on an emotional appeal.

Harry L. Hollingworth, an instructor in business psychology at Columbia University and New York University, had similar interests in applying the new psychological theories to advertising and salesmanship. In Advertising and Selling: Principles of Appeal and Response, published in 1913, Hollingworth synthesized the bulk of psychological wisdom as it pertained to the practices of advertising and selling and suggested directions for further empirical study.¹⁵ Compiled as a quick reference for the “active and prospective business man,” Advertising and Selling had chapters entitled “The Nervous Basis of Mental Processes” and “Sex and Class Differences of Interest to Business Men” and sections on the laws of catching and holding attention, the nature and laws of suggestion, and the nature and strength of instincts.¹⁶

Despite a growing curiosity about the use of scientific methods, however, early advertising professionals were often hesitant to apply these psychological theories. As Stephen Fox has argued, applications of psychology to advertising before World War I

amounted more to “appearance than substance.”¹⁷ Caught in a stalemate between two approaches to advertising which embraced starkly contrasting conceptions of human nature (Reason-Why versus Atmosphere), advertisers remained divided over the question of effective advertising. To answer this question, some advertisers turned to the consumers themselves. In November of 1907, Everybody’s Magazine asked its readers which ad in that month’s issue was the most effective and why. Ten prizes of \$25 each were awarded to those respondents with the best essays. In 1909 Colgate sponsored a contest in which nearly 60,000 individuals were asked to compare an ad based on rationality with one based on suggestion. It was, however, unable to determine a winner, since “the opinions were almost equally divided.”¹⁸

Indeed, advertisers displayed increasingly more concern with the personality of the consumer and sought to tailor their messages to market research findings that dispelled “notions of the ‘single type’ of consumer and the undifferentiated audience.”¹⁹ “I prefer knowing my consumer to knowing my product,” remarked one contributor to Printers’ Ink.²⁰ Applications of such knowledge to advertising practices were hailed as major achievements within the advertising industry. The advertising industry took a major step forward, when, J. George Frederick observed in 1925, “‘arm-chair’ copy-writing gave way to market-survey built copy . . . [and] intuitive insight into the public mind began to be supplemented by research-backed judgements of consumer reactions.”²¹ While methods of scientific marketing increased in popularity after 1910, however, their more systematic application had to await the 1920s.²²

General Concern About the Audience

Given these developments, it is not surprising that the 1920s was a decade of unabashed confidence in the power of advertising.^{23*} Modernist advertising, with its off-centre layouts, zigzagging lines, and abstract shapes, put into practice ideas which had been circulating in advertising circles for years. Central to modernist advertising was the idea that the image itself can be the primary mode of communication, that it is not necessary to feature a product explicitly or make use of direct sales tactics.²⁴ In other words, *how* a thing is said is of pre-eminent importance over *what* is said.²⁵ This approach was clearly anticipated by the atmosphere approach to advertising before the war, but modernist ads went even further in making emotional appeals to the consumer. “Since emotion is the essence of modern art,” Art Deerson of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency asked, “is there not a special field for its adaption in American advertising today?”²⁶ According to Deerson, an enthusiast of psychological doctrines, a painting of an “orange panel within nothing but an upward movement of white lines” could create feelings of joy on a much more consistent and successful basis than any “commonplace picture.”²⁷ But by far the most articulate advocate of the benefits of modernism for advertising was Ernest Elmo Calkins. “Modernism,” he wrote, “affords

* Another factor contributing to such confidence was the experience of advertisers during World War I, when advertising agencies were enlisted by America’s first public opinion commission, the Committee on Public Information (CPI), to offer their advice and assistance in the national propaganda effort. World War I marked a significant turning point in the development of the modern advertising apparatus, offering an opportunity for the industry to popularize its capacities for media management and mass persuasion, thereby gaining a new and somewhat presumptuous sense of power.

the opportunity of expressing the inexpressible, of suggesting not so much a motor car as speed, not so much a gown as style, not so much a compact as beauty, charm, sex appeal.”²⁸

However, the confidence displayed by advertisers about the consumer personality was more rhetorical than realistic. While advertisers had certain ideas about characteristics which made up the consumer audience, these were formed mostly from individual opinions rather than empirical study. As Jackson Lears has argued, “despite the panoply of statistics, charts, and graphs that accompanied nearly every new business presentation by the 1920s, advertising remained less science than art.”²⁹ As late as 1930, advertisers remained uncertain about consumer preferences. In 1930, for example, George L Welp, chairman of the committee for the Exhibition of Advertising Art, tried to evaluate the effectiveness of advertising illustrations in catching the reader’s attention. Proclaiming himself to be “the poorest judge of the Ninth Annual Exhibition of Advertising Art,” Welp invited his “philosophical friend Steve -- carpenter, amateur electrician, porter, man-of-all-work,” to assist him in reviewing the show. Carefully watching the reactions and listening to the comments of his assistant reviewer, Welp steered his friend among the artworks on exhibition, which ranged from a painting of chocolate cake and cookies to photographs of perfume and a modernist depiction of an American negotiating his way among a crowded Paris Street. “Suddenly it dawned on me,” wrote Welp, “that Steve’s opinions were not widely different from that of a professional person. Steve did not like all of the things I liked, he liked a great many things I liked. My opinion would have differed in like manner

with that of a more professional critic.” Still, one thing became apparent to Welp in seeking out the “everyday” insights of his friend:

The most important quality of a picture was what it said — not the way it said it. He was concerned with the subject — the story — rather than the technique. In this I think we have a warning. It is good to express ourselves, but we must be sure we have told the manufacturer’s story or we will fail of our chief goal — the reader’s interest.³⁰

As late as 1930, uncertainty about the most effective way to capture the attention of the audience remained. While Welp and his friend Steve certainly had their own opinions on what kinds of illustrations were most effective, these opinions were directly opposed to the dominant trend in advertising illustration during the 1920s, that of modernist advertising.

Modernist Advertising and the Audience

Throughout the 1920s, debates over consumer consciousness were especially heated when the topic of discussion was modernist advertising. Underlying this debate were differing conceptions of the nature of mass audiences, class audiences, rural and urban populations, and the relationship between art and the audience. Even though the advertising industry frequently boasted of its powers of persuasion and knowledge of the consumer personality, these debates made it evident that such proclamations were overstated. Uncertainty surrounding the effectiveness of modernist advertising was the rule, with advertisers relying upon their own opinions of the matter rather than on market research methods.

Competing conceptions of modernism among advertisers further exacerbated

the problems surrounding modernist advertising and the audience. As we have seen, modernism had evoked mixed reactions since its introduction to the public at the Armory Show in 1913. Spectator response to modern art was characterized more by ridicule and confusion than by appreciation or understanding. This remained true even in artistic and scholarly circles, where modernism was banished from the established art world and dismissed as a cultural form unworthy of academic study. Indeed, throughout the 1920s, modernism held a very precarious position in American society.

Modernist advertising was greeted with outrage and disdain by advertisers and businessmen. Questions about the meaning and significance of the new vogue of modernist advertising circulated throughout the commercial world. What could this madness mean and who was responsible for it? What impact would it have on the world of commerce and on the American public? Was modernist advertising a foolhardy use of advertising money, or was it a strategy capable of attracting the attention of the consumer and stimulating demand for consumer goods?

In a search for answers to such questions, some of the critics of modernist advertising began refreshing their memory of the Armory Show and its aftermath. As Thomas Erwin, Director of Service for the Frank Seaman Company, recalled:

Back in 1913 there was assembled in New York an exhibition of paintings that rocked the town with laughter. Newspaper humorists fell upon it with glee – “The Nude Descending a Staircase” was a *success de scandale*. The “Woman with a Mustard Pot” was parodied by newspaper cartoonists. American painters were too indignant to laugh – these monstrous creations from France were clearly the work of madmen bent upon making the noble art of painting ridiculous.³¹

The historical record of the relationship between modernism and its audience

was capitalized on by critics of modernist advertising. In the years since the Armory Show, it was argued, the vast majority of the American public remained unable to comprehend the meaning of modern art.³² In consequence, modernism was an unsuitable ambassador for the world of commerce. While modernist advertising might succeed in attracting the attention of the consumer, this would be done at the expense of comprehension. According to J. R. McKinney, art director for the McLain-Simpers Organization, “the trouble with most of the present stuff parading under the name of ‘Modernism’ is that everything is sacrificed to gain attention, regardless of whether or not any one can read it or understand what it is all about. Get attention at any cost! Scramble everything to do it!”³³ Similarly, Myron Perley, art director for Lennon and Mitchell, commented:

I think that in the name of “modern” there have been a great many things done from the standpoint of pictures that are hard to understand. As a matter of fact, I don’t believe that a good many of the things have been understood by the fellow who did them . . . In the name of the modern you might see a man with his nose on the back of his head or his ear on his elbow – shafts of light driving through. This is hard to understand. Art used commercially that is not largely understandable to the majority is not worth the powder to blow it up. It just doesn’t belong.³⁴

James Montgomery Flagg was among the most strident opponents of modernist advertising. In an article for Printers’ Ink Monthly in 1927, Flagg offered a particularly imaginative account of modernist advertising. According to Flagg, the new trend in commercial art was to be attributed to a “Cubist- Futurist disease,” which had spread with frightening rapidity through the minds of advertisers, agents, and artists alike:

[T]hese dreadful china skeletons some with necks like giraffes, mouths like murderers and figures like aspirin capsules. Some have *bouffante* skirts that

cover the entire world behind their deformed and degenerate forms; the Aubrey Beardsley moon sits side by side with a Zodiac sun with corkscrew curls and a tubercular spotted deer with jade earrings on stands on his tail in a platter of Ovington fruit! And how does the melting soap-fat man without a head and his gangrened right arm in a sling, his left arm made up of breakfast rolls weakly holding up a family of inflated bladders advertise CRAVATS? In your hat! If these sick paper-doll drawings are smart, so poor little three-year old Willie with the rickets is smart. If these sunken-eyed Quoth-the-Raven dames whose *dejeuner* consists of decayed strawberries with formaldehyde are chic than so is Barren Island! If these Fifth Avenue advertisements of part-time ladies and gents with seven league legs and shrivelled feet and gorilla arms and pussy-cat eyes and Black-Hole-of-Calcutta mouths and Pterodactyl claws are fine, healthy, cheerful and sane, then so is a picnic on the last slab in the morgue! Take it away – away! It's mad! ³⁵

Modernist Advertising: Mass versus Class

Criticism of modernist advertising often rested on a distinction between class audiences and mass audiences. The ability to comprehend modern art was considered to be the exclusive talent of an elite and cultured few, “the intelligentsia” of society.³⁶ Mass audiences, by contrast, were conceived as unintelligent and thus wholly ignorant of modern art. Psychological studies of human intelligence during the 1920s provided justification for such appraisals. Advertisers were constantly provided with shocking statistics of the intelligence of the American public -- “most of us have the mind of a child of ten,” or “it has been established that the average intelligence of the American people is that of a thirteen-year-old child.”³⁷ For critics, the belief that the American public was unintelligent served to validate their accusations that modernist advertising was a foolhardy use of advertisers’ money. “Modern art is an outgrowth of a class appeal,” one critic contended; “sometimes it is so freakish as to be almost beyond the comprehension of the average individual.”³⁸

The fact that distinctions between class and mass audiences were usually made by advertisers in terms of family income or wealth, rather than levels of intelligence, was used to bolster this line of argument.³⁹ As Thomas F. Walsh put it with regard to the female consumer:

It is well to consider the type of homemakers to whom one is appealing -- their likes and dislikes. It should not be forgotten that the great majority of women in this country operate on family incomes that are below \$5,000 a year. This great majority is not in the country club bracket. They have other things to do than to discuss the merits of Kant or Keats; they are not "up" on modern art; they follow the style world but they are not familiar with its centres.⁴⁰

The art director, Walsh continued, who is convinced "that subjects pictured modernistically and impressively with an appeal to the intellect will succeed regardless of market, has his audience poorly pictured."⁴¹

Advertisers in the public-utility sector were enormously influenced by the "mass versus class" debate on modernist advertising during the 1920s. Faced with the task of changing public sentiment toward public-utility corporations and relieving themselves of a tarnished reputation gained from years of costly fees and poor service, the adaptation of modernism for advertising purposes was contemplated by public utility advertisers as a means of presenting a fresh face to the public and symbolizing the beginning of a new relationship between the public corporations and the consumer. However, the proposal that modernism be adopted for public-utility advertising was opposed by both advertising and industry professionals. As public service corporations, it was contended, public-utilities occupied a unique position in the community, a position which posed "special problems relative to the use of Modern

art.”⁴² At the heart of the matter was the issue of “mass versus class.” According to Kenneth Magers, advertising manager for the Union Gas and Electric Company:

Our own is a business that deals with all walks and conditions of life, all varieties of business organizations. Frequently it is faced with the necessity of directing messages to its entire group of customers – messages that must carry perfectly clear to all of the mental capacities represented, and avoid the serious consequences of twisted and misunderstood meanings.⁴³

The 1928 report of the Better Copy Committee of the Public Utilities Advertising Association made this point even more explicit in cautioning against the use of modern art in public-utility advertising. “The public utility business is a mass business,” it stated, “utilities cater to people of all classes and creeds . . . Public Utilities – Beware of Modern Art.”⁴⁴

Some advertisers negotiated the problem of “mass versus class” and modernist advertising by selecting different types of ads for different publications. One silver plate manufacturer explained his choices as follows: “Modernistic illustrations and male servants to appeal to the most exclusive sophisticates; maids and more conservative art for ‘quietly prosperous’ Mary Smith; suburban chintz curtains, bright peasant ware, and no maid for Mary Jones with her nice little house and garden; and movie-star testimonials for Mary White.”⁴⁵ Though common, the practice of selecting the type of ad on the basis of the choice of medium was not universal. As Roland Marchand has observed, many advertisers used the same campaign for all publications. For the Proctor and Gamble Camay ads of 1930, for instance, Cosmopolitan, the Saturday Evening Post, and Photoplay all received identical copy and illustration.⁴⁶

The mass versus class argument was also used by advocates of modernist

advertising. While acknowledging that it was of “pre-eminent importance to know your audience,” they argued that critics of modernist advertising were mistaken in thinking that modern art catered only to the “intelligentsia” of society.”⁴⁷ On the contrary, modernist advertising actually pandered “to a popular group,” and those who were repelled by the “impossible figures and outlandish settings” were in the minority.⁴⁸ According to Milton Towne, president of the Joseph Richard Company, the rise of modernist advertising was a result of “an accurate sensing by advertisers and by editors of the new interests, new standards, and new discriminations of a new generation.”⁴⁹ In the opinion of one commentator, the turn toward modernism was not only indicative of a new generation, but of the American way:

The whimsicality, the irresponsibility, the abandon of the idea is a part of the American way. We demand just this individuality. The eccentric in art is in demand. We seem to want to see things as we have never seen them before. We crave the unusual viewpoint. We ask for originality of conception. That is what the public wants, say what you will.⁵⁰

Moreover, the fact that an understanding of modern art seemed to elude the public was considered by some to be of no detriment to the objectives of commerce. The complexity of modernism could in fact work in the interests of commerce. As one commentator explained, “I think the popular appeal of the futuristic school of art is closely related to the mystery which attaches to it [;] . . . people seem to like that sort of thing, and the majority rules.”⁵¹

The idea that modernism had mass appeal was at odds with the elitist mind-set of modernist artists. As discussed in Chapter Two, modernism was, at least collectively, an elitist movement. Modernist artists often looked to the masses with

contempt and disgust, even though many modernists belonged to the political left. In addition, modernist artists strove toward complexity and difficulty, specifically catering their works to a highly intelligent and cultured audience, judged to be like themselves.⁵² To be sure, concern over the comprehensibility and intelligibility of art was low on the modernist agenda. In contrast to the art world, where modernism and elitism were intimately linked, commercially-oriented modernism was associated by its advocates with the masses.

Modernist Advertising: The Rural-Urban Split

Debates over modernism's relationship to audiences also centred on competing conceptions of rural and urban populations. Urban populations were perceived by advertisers to be more sophisticated, cultured, and eager for the new and the modern in life than rural populations. In consequence, many small-town advertisers were reluctant to adopt modernism for their campaigns, believing that their residents were simply "not educated up to cubistic curves and dynamic symmetry." One small town advertiser was particularly concerned that modernist advertising would be ridiculed by audiences for its artificial and "goofy" renditions of nature. To make his point, the advertiser took a 1926 shoe advertisement of modernist influence as an example:

In this advertisement, a blue bird, or a swallow, was falling on set wings down a shaft of lighter grey, straight for the safe haven of a patent one strap pump with center buckle and spike heel. These intersecting shadows and interrupted angles are foolish, impossible and meaningless -- no self-respecting bird ever flew in that ridiculous position.⁵³

"Is the small-town ready for modernistic advertising?" small town businessmen asked.

Is it possible that while we New Yorkers are buying up Currier & Ives prints and Godey Book illustrations in Lexington Avenue shops, the small town cognoscenti are going in for the latest things in modern art? Is this type of advertising art, ‘over the heads’ of the folks in the small town and cities? Does it produce a smile of amusement or a gleam of interest? Is the small town ready?”⁵⁴

In the opinion of V. R. Blackledge, advertising manager for the Post-Enterprise, rural residents were indeed ready for modernist advertising. Things had changed, Blackledge assured his readers, since allegations of rural folk as “backward” had carried a ring of truth:

Granting that the differences in the small-town audience as compared with that of the city were once as great as many advertisers may still believe them to be, surely these differences are rapidly disappearing. In the traits or influences that affect his buying, the small-town man is either a half-step ahead or a half-step behind the man in the city. I am not sure which, but either way it is only a half-step. He reads the same magazines as does his friend in the city. He wears the same make of shoes, smokes the same brand of cigarettes, drives the same make of car, and reads the same news in his evening paper.

Not only are the people in the cities “principally small-town folk,” Blackledge continued, but “many of the residences of the small town are former city dwellers, now reformed.” Yes, Blackledge concluded, “the small-town is ready for modernist advertising.”⁵⁵

* * * * *

The effectiveness of modernist advertising remained a persistent question within advertising and business circles throughout the 1920s. While modernist

advertising increased markedly during this period, this did not resolve the controversy over its utility. As we have seen, advertisers held competing conceptions of the consumer audience and were uncertain about the relationship between modernist art and the general public. But at the heart of the problem was a lack of good marketing research indicating modernist advertising's ability to reach consumers. Without this, advertisers were left to draw their own conclusions about the utility of modernist advertising.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER FOUR

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CONCLUSION

A story read fifty years ago in the old St. Nicolas comes to my mind. An ancient eastern potentate in the days when kings were all powerful and everyone and everybody went barefoot stepped off the end of the red carpet that was always unrolled when he went forth and hurt his great toe on a sharp pebble. Thereupon he summoned his Grand Vizier and commanded him to cover the world with leather before sunset of the third day under penalty of losing his head. The Grand Vizier retired to his apartment, rent his beard, put dust on his head, and prepared for the worst. On the morning of the third day he was waited upon by a shabby young man who modestly promised to cover the world with leather and asked to be taken into the presence of the king. Instead the Grand Vizier escorted him to the front door and kicked him down the palace steps . . . But the young man found a way to the king who immediately summoned his court to sit in the palace yard, gave the young man an audience and bade him to do his stuff. Whereupon the young man unwrapped a parcel, took out a pair of what today are known as shoes, fitted them to the king's feet and begged him to walk upon the rough stones. The king did so with delight. The young man pointed out that so far as the king himself was concerned the world was covered with leather. He was given the Grand Vizier's job and the hand of the princess, and everybody lived happily forever after except the Grand Vizier . . .

Ernest Elmo Calkins, 1930

This fable symbolizes the changes which swept over American industry from around the turn of the century until the 1920s during its transition to a consumer society. The fate of manufacturer's unwilling or unable to meet new demands of the marketplace is represented by the Grand Vizier. The young man is "consumptionism," defined by Calkins as the "new art of selling goods, which takes its commands from the public and performs wonders with apparent ease." The king is the consuming public, whose tastes, desires, and personalities are the increasing focus of attention of advertisers during these years.¹

The rise of modernist advertising occurred as a result of the new marketing

needs of the 1920s. In response to commercial imperatives to find new ways to encourage consumption, modernism came to be seen as a viable advertising tool. As we have seen, however, the use of modernism was accompanied by considerable controversy, and underlying this controversy were problems peculiar to modernism itself. In the first place, as a culturally subversive aesthetic movement, modernism posed difficulties for advertisers seeking to incorporate its vocabularies in the commercial world. But in addition, given its elitism, modernism was hostile toward the very efforts of advertisers to communicate with the masses. It is these aspects of modernism which underlay Raymond Williams's intention to investigate the appropriation of modernism by advertising. Indeed, for anyone familiar with modernism, it is puzzling how this could have happened.

The extent to which advertisers recognized these problems is difficult to say. At least within the trade journals, where most of the discussions about modernist advertising took place, there is little to suggest that the more subversive characteristics of modernism were widely acknowledged among advertising professionals. The fact that these trade journals sought to inform not only the advertising industry but its clients as well may provide a partial explanation as to why the more subversive aspects of modernism were not discussed. Nevertheless, it is much more likely that knowledge of modernism was much greater among those of more creative orientation, namely, the artists and art directors. Many artists and art directors held secondary careers in the more established art world and were thus more likely to be exposed to the discourses surrounding modernism. And of course, many were not only familiar with modernism,

but aspired to make their own contributions to the new look of art. To voice their knowledge of modernism's subversive face, however, would have forced artists and art directors to confront the discrepancies between their daily efforts to employ modernism for advertising purposes and their nightly pursuits to further the cause of modernism in the established art world.

For the most part, the advertising community ignored the epistemological and philosophical underpinnings of modernism in favour of an emphasis on its stylistic and technical qualities. Stripped of its foundations, modernism could be conceived as demonstrating certain affinities with the commercial world: the pursuit of the novel and the unique, a desire to be kept up to date and "in style," and a love of the modern. In effect, the modernist attempt to visually convey the complexities and contradictions of contemporary life could now be associated with more optimistic appraisals of the achievements and agendas of modernity.

NOTES FOR CONCLUSION

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