

Advertising to the American Woman, 1900–1999. By *Daniel Delis Hill*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002. 329 pp. Illustrations. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN 0-814-20890-8.

Reviewed by Lori Loeb

Studies in the history of consumerism over the last fifteen years have been dominated by theory. Daniel Hill's *Advertising to the American Woman* diverges from this trend with an empirical analysis of more than 20,000 illustrated print advertisements. Most are magazine ads drawn from mainstream women's or general interest periodicals such as *Ladies' Home Journal* or *Life* and trade publications such as *Printers' Ink* or *Advertising Age*. Beginning with the premise that advertisers have targeted women as their main consumers (even for masculine products, such as men's clothing), Hill argues, following Roland Marchand in *Advertising the American Dream* (1985), that advertisements throughout the twentieth century have not reflected women's reality but instead have mirrored their aspirations and shaped their expectations.

Chapters are arranged by themes, which are constructed sometimes by product (e.g., appliances), sometimes by market segment (e.g., children), sometimes by iconography (e.g., brides). Each of the eleven chapters is richly illustrated with as many as fifty black-and-white photographs, many of which are directly considered in the text. Part of the book's appeal lies in the products themselves. Readers will enjoy seeing pictures of early household gadgets, packaged foods, and patent medicines. It is fun to revisit popular campaign slogans, such as Listerine's famous "Even your best friend won't tell you" (1937), or Clairol's "Does she . . . or doesn't she?" (1957). And it is fascinating to see the initial resistance of consumers to such ubiquitous products as gas stoves, microwaves, eye makeup, and bikinis.

Hill analyzes a number of social themes, including beauty myths, independence for women, sex, and gender and racial stereotypes. The analysis of these themes is superficially feminist. Hill quotes Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Susan Faludi on topics like housework and Barbie. He concurs with historians Ruth Cowan (*More Work for Mother*, 1983) and Susan Strasser (*Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 1989) that inventions like dishwashers, sewing machines, cake mixes, and frozen food, although marketed as

time savers, have increased work for women essentially by raising standards. The social stigma of using processed food, for example, has decreased, but it has been replaced by a fear of dishpan hands and spotted glassware. The Barbie controversy is outlined briefly: Does Barbie represent an unrealistic physical ideal borrowed from German pornography or changing notions of glamour and adventure? But curiously for a chapter on sex-role socialization (Chapter 8: "Teach Them Young") only one Barbie ad from 1969 is reproduced, and Hill does little to extend the analysis beyond M. G. Lord's book, *Forever Barbie*, of 1994.

Some readers may take issue with the educational value of ads. Have consumers in all income groups really followed DeBeers's advice (from 1983) that an engagement ring should cost two months' salary (p. 74)? One wonders whether there is market research on that subject. On the other hand, it might be credible that consumers have learned about changes in household technology through advertisements. However, it is really tricky to argue that "many ad messages convey valuable health information to consumers such as the need for proper dental care or personal hygiene," or even that women "began to benefit from the availability and affordability of many health products" (p. 133). Among the products he considers are Midol, Listerine, and Lysol. How much have women really learned about their health from ads for Midol? Moreover, many readers will want to see this analysis conducted within the broader context of the pharmaceutical industry's treatment of women.

Sometimes it would be nice to know something about the response to ads. For example, Hill chronicles the changing face of Aunt Jemima. The original image from 1890 was borrowed from a blackface comedy routine by Milling Co. entrepreneurs. Throughout the following decades "Aunt Jemimas" toured the country doing cooking demonstrations. By the 1980s the historical figure of the antebellum plantation cook was replaced by a contemporary-looking black model who discarded her gingham head cover and wore pearl earrings (p. 280). One is left to wonder if consumers complained about older images and if new ones were well received. Obviously, the product endures, but it would be interesting to explore consumer reactions. Similarly, Hill looks at sex in advertising, including controversy generated by the Calvin Klein campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s but does not delve very deep. A consideration of discussions of these

campaigns in the popular press, including letters to editors, might have been a useful addition to this section.

The chapter “Achieving Independence” tracks the imprint of women’s liberation on advertisements. We see women on bicycles and women in cars in the 1920s (but none of the sexy sirens who sold cars to men in later decades), clerical workers and telephone operators at work in the 1940s, college girls drinking Coca-Cola in the 1950s and using typewriters in the 1960s. But ads showing working women in the more recent past are relatively few. Hill reports that despite the fact that the percentage of women who worked crossed the 50 percent line in 1982, by the end of the 1980s advertisers still thought that even working women preferred the fantasy of the “kept woman” (p. 190).

Advertising to the American Woman does not offer one overarching conclusion. Indeed the book lacks even a concluding chapter. Readers will find no discussion of the most recent scholarship. There is, for example, no consideration of T. Jackson Lears’s contention, in *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (1995), that America has created a therapeutic culture. However, Hill’s richly illustrated synthesis of some of the major advertising campaigns of the century and the controversies they have generated does, in itself, provide intriguing reading.

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