

Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing. By Pamela Walker Laird. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xiv + 479 pp. Illustrations, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$42.50; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-801-85841-0; paper 0-801-86645-6.

Reviewed by William L. Bird Jr.

Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing tackles the theme of “progress” in advertising history, which is most closely associated with the late Roland Marchand’s *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940*. Laird’s book may be read as a prequel to Marchand’s, as it considers the notion of progress in the 1880s and perhaps even a little earlier. Inspired by an exhibit of nineteenth-century advertising handbills, trade cards, and novelties mounted by the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, in 1977, Laird begins her interpretive history with a discussion of the iconography of smokestack abundance and blissful domesticity and applies her skill in visual analysis to good purpose. Relying on biographical and trade-press source material, Laird tracks advertisers’ increasingly vocal promotion of the theme of progress. The straightforward sale of products emerging from the factory floor underwent a transition, first to copy that emphasized the “reasons why” people should buy such products, and then to the strategy of exerting emotional “pull” (enhanced by graphic developments in printing and publishing). Her method, especially in later chapters, is a close reading of the advertising industry trade press, notably *Printers’ Ink*. The result is a “thick description” of the trade drawn from its uncritical press, in which admen (with apologies to J. Walter Thompson’s copywriter, Helen Lansdowne, a.k.a. Mrs. Stanley Resor) ascend from patent medicine “drumming” to the service-oriented economy of consumer desire, eventually reaching the pinnacle of progress, which they define as themselves.

However inspired by the colorful iconography of progress, Laird is less concerned with actual ads than with the thought behind them. To Laird’s credit, *Advertising Progress* disposes of the mirror theory of analysis (in which advertising is seen as mirroring society), focusing instead upon advertising’s necessity in a distended consumer society. The book’s central strength is its synthetic outline, with section headings—“Production,” “Specialization,” and “Consumption”—that provide a useful template for the contemplation of advertising, which Laird defines as “the business of progress” (p. 2). Another strength is Laird’s nearly encyclopedic treatment of the history of the printed images, forming a canon of visual progress. Before the advent of the advertising specialist, Laird argues, the portrait of the factory owner and the picture of his factory advanced the ideal of “material and therefore, cultural progress” (p. 102). In the most effectively

argued portion of the book, Laird describes the persistent picture of the factory “in settings that seem incongruous now” (p. 96) and notes the factory’s eventual displacement by now-familiar scenes and settings conducive to consumption. This change, Laird argues, signals the beginning of the shift in power from client to specialist. Though it is not clear that ascendant specialists succeeded in banishing the factory and its owner-operators from their own advertisements within the time frame of this study (the age of television, for example, is marked by the determined appearance on screen of owners hawking their wares), Laird has successfully opened consideration of the question in the 1880s.

In Laird’s view, the trend toward specialization was tied to the rise of the mass circulation magazine and advertising specialists’ inroads into the ranks of corporate middle management. As a point of reference, Laird analyzes the sentimental printed images favored by local job printers that foreshadowed the “consumer-oriented content” of a truly modern advertising language, which abandoned the industrialists’ “individualized messages” (p. 151). Laird mines trade-press source material to flesh out the niche between advertiser and publisher that was filled by J. Walter Thompson, N. W. Ayer & Son, and the George P. Rowell Advertising Agency. These specialists successfully argued that changes in marketing practices necessitated investment in advertising to maintain “high-volume production and sales” in “capital-intensive, continuous process industries.” Increasingly, the managers of such firms sought “professional assistance” to meet prevailing market conditions (p. 209).

The third and final section, which treats “Consumption,” describes the interests and activities of the specialists who packaged and promoted advertising as an overarching business service, and who organized professional associations, codified predictive models of effect, and transformed the nascent profession into progress itself. Laird suggests that specialists practiced neither science nor art. Helen Lansdowne, for example, “aim[ed] for personal, familial, social emotion” (p. 263). Though specialists like Lansdowne might peruse the latest treatise in social psychology, advertising’s method remained a matter of intuition, informed by available information.

Advertising Progress is for the student and historian of advertising, printing, and publishing. General readers will perhaps be pushed beyond their limits by the weight of long passages quoting trade-press sources, particularly in the latter chapters, where verbatim reportage should have been leavened by some editorial commentary. Nevertheless, Laird has supplied the cultural context of an emerging profession as it formulated its particular ideology of progress.

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