became patriotic as war became a reality (Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich). As if to overcompensate for the war, post-war fashions in the late 1940s transformed what had been practical and comfortable into ultra-feminine styles (Christian Dior). The 1950s fashion industry marketed the cute and innocent package with a focus on the teenager and leisure time (Sandra Dee, Hayley Mills). Youth became even more popular in the 1960s where androgynous, beautiful people in psychedelic colours promoted peace, black, feminist and gay liberation (Twiggy). In the 1970s reality was encountered at a political and economic level and fashion and beauty echoed this premise with a look of realism. Women preferred to look natural without masks or bras (Lauren Hutton, Cheryl Tiegs, Farrah Fawcett). Fashion and beauty in the late 1970s and the 1980s shocks the public once more. The woman-child portraying both innocence and sexuality brings into view an essential contradiction in women's role today (Brooke Shields, Roseanne Vela).

Social psychological research on attractiveness attitudes are measured and examined in "Psychology and Beauty," which includes an interesting discussion on stigmas attached to the very beautiful. Lakoff and Scherr question their respondents about what makes beauty an issue for women. Although we do not discuss the topic openly, their findings reveal that it is an important concept for women to come to terms with, especially since for many it is seen as the ultimate in competitiveness — that which separates woman from woman. As the authors maintain,

> *We are willing to go to all kinds of pain to achieve it, but deny any evidence that pains have been taken. Beauty is the only means by which women reach power and influence, but we do not take seriously those women who possess it... Beautification is a tireless and exhausting effort for which women receive little credit if they are successful, and much contempt if they are not...*

The devastating power that beauty has come to possess is a major issue for Lakoff and Scherr and one with which they deal perceptively. The pathology of beauty is evident cross-culturally, for it is acknowledged that undesirability is a universal threat for women. In our quest for beauty, women have submitted to a multitude of dangerous practices and *rites de passage*. Unhealthy diets, drugs, anorexia nervosa, bulimia, scarification rituals, footbinding, clitoridectomy, cosmetic surgery, facelifts, silicone transplants, etc. etc., all testify to this bizarre crusade for ideal female beauty.

In a passionate and emotional chapter entitled "Beauty and Ethnicity," the authors make known the endless pains of women of colour who judge themselves according to American standards and ideals of feminine beauty, who have themselves created

> *a hierarchy of beauty based on the closeness of their approximation to the white ideal... which has been extended into other countries, where women scramble to bleach or straighten their hair, undergo operations to round their eyes, narrow their lips, or reshape their noses.*

In all, Lakoff and Scherr discuss the importance of the concept of beauty by reviewing its varying forms, our attitudes, our myths, our feelings about it, the lengths to which we will go to achieve it — and ultimately its power in separating woman from woman, woman from herself, woman from man and race from race. It is in this latter sense that Lakoff and Scherr see beauty as political. Yet in coming to terms with the source of political power that beauty holds, Lakoff and Scherr disappoint us. In their explanations of how beauty holds power the authors fall into the trap of psychoanalytic reductionism. It's worth noting that other excellent qualitative feminist works such as Lilian Rubin's *Intimate Strangers* and Kim Chernin's *The Obsession* have also fallen prey to such a framework. In *Face Value* Lakoff and Scherr squeeze their psychoanalytic model into the last few pages of the book, almost apologetically, as if they aren't convinced themselves of its value. The authors admit that they cannot prove that "Beauty is for women... as the penis is said to be for men," yet they defensively write that there is a symbolic association worthy of study merely because of the mysterious and pervasive power that these symbols have over us.

And finally, speaking of symbols, my only other irritation with the book is the way in which the authors seem to be obsessed with blonds and blondness. To quote a few of the many examples,

> "It was not just a blond, it was, I realized, *all* blonds who made me feel different."
>
> "Well, the most immediate problem was that princesses are always blond — at least the good ones..."
>
> "Blonds have more fun...No identity crisis for them."
>
> "...blondness is, for us, the quintessence of the utterly feminine... the proverbial *tabula rasa* to be written upon, to absorb and reflect the ideals and illusions of those who look upon her... The blond, as *tabula rasa*, is someone who does not make a clear, bright mark upon her environment... and the best blond is the one who is the most passive, has the least direct influence on her environment."

But as a blond, myself, perhaps I am just being oversensitive!

WORKING WOMEN

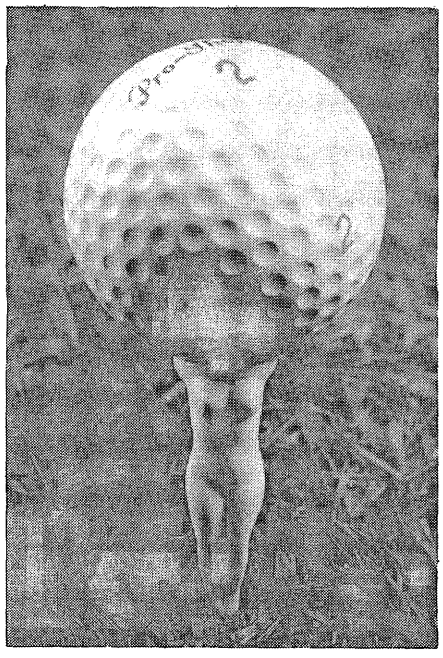
Jessica Strang. New York: Harry Abrams, 1984.

Judith Posner

Working Women is an intriguing and sometimes delightful collection of images of functional objects which depict the female form or parts thereof. The introduction refers to them euphemistically as "women being employed to perform rather incongruous tasks." The two hundred image book is a distillation of several thousand images by photographer Jessica Strang, and my strongest regret is that it is not possible to see the entire collection. An actual exhibit of these items would make a wonderful women's occasion.

The text is brief and factual, individually describing the photographed pieces, but without analytic commentary. The author's selection of items and organization by themes (from tea cosys to golf tees) is the viewer's only analytic framework, save a brief politically vague introduction by Lorraine Johnson which only alludes to a feminist polemic. Johnson helped to initiate the project which is appropriately sub-titled *An Appealing Look at the Appalling Use and Abuses of the Feminine Form*: "Most of the *Working Women* were probably conceived, designed and/or manufactured by men. Why didn't they chose to exploit the male form instead?"

This is followed by increasingly politically limp remarks such as the following:



Should we be flattered that men choose us to adorn one of their most coveted sporting trophies or insulted because they force us into an idealised, erotic body designed to open their beer bottle?

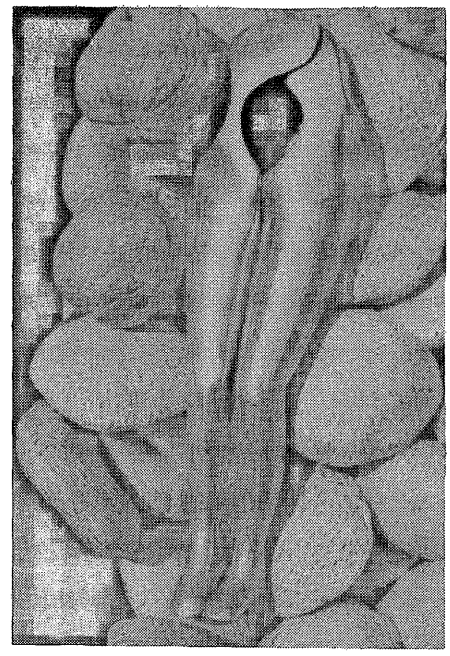
culminating in the apolitical

...one cannot make too serious judgements about the meaning behind a design, knowing that the creator probably had a variety of justifications for his *creations* (emphasis mine).

But in the last analysis, I believe what I see with my own eyes and tend to ignore what I hear. Fortunately for us, Johnson and Strang practice better than they preach, which means Strang has compiled a wonderful feminist visual documentary here, however unwittingly. On the other hand, it is too bad that they feel so conflicted and apologetic about their attraction to these images, because at times they are "appealing," even humourous, as well as "appalling." This is lesson #1 in the analysis of visual imagery. Things may be amusing and attractive in and of themselves, but this is quite a different thing than the macroanalytic meaning of motifs. In fact, this is why Johnson's remark about what the designer had in mind is intellectually naive, if not politically irrelevant. Johnson appears to have in mind some stereotypic notion of feminist vigilance, and so has difficulty dealing with what seems to me to be an appropriate ambivalence towards these items. Thus, it may be just as well that these images are left to speak for themselves because it is doubtful that either Johnson or Strang are comfortable speaking for them. Indeed it is possible to take images quite seriously and to refuse to resolve their paradoxical attraction and repulsion. There is also something all the more powerful about letting these images speak for themselves, something I will now briefly attempt to undo.

Working Women is a strong visual statement about the exploitation of the female form. The innuendo about women's exploitation in the work force is an added extra. It is a useful contribution to burgeoning studies on images of women in the mass media, popular culture and femininity. More specifically, although the voiceless text does not address contemporary relevant issues, the images collected clearly do. More specifically the collection is a brilliant visual documentation of several major themes central to the analysis of female depiction — trivialization, gratuitous eroticization and objectification. In fact, one of the final images in the book even exemplifies eroticized violence so pervasive in contemporary pornography as well as the generalized mass media. It depicts a bizarre and functionally incongruous coffee table comprised of a glass top supported by a kinkily clad female crouching on all fours.

Other items depicted range from classical to contemporary — from architectural functions — Greek column caryatids — to more personal ones — nail files in the form of a woman's leg. As the literature on female depiction reveals, the fragmentation or dismemberment of the female form is part and parçel of our artistic traditions as well as popular culture motifs. Strang's collection reveals the use of dismembered legs in everything from toothbrushes to toast holders. Turning the pages quickly resembles a vast chorus line. The gratuitous eroticization of the female form, another major theme in mass media studies, especially in relationship to advertising, is well illustrated in a variety of objects ranging from nude bottle openers and swizzle sticks to a golf tee in the shape of a headless female nude. In addition, we find the stereotypic figureheads on sailboats depicting buxom females falling out of their gowns and a topless mermaid in the shape of a fish hook. One of the most incongruous items is an ashtray comprised of a reclining female who kicks her bare legs up in the air. One item which is at least closer to the truth of things (i.e. it is sexual, but not gratuitous) is a plastic bed warmer in the form of Jayne Mansfield. And although she is dressed in a rather appropriate set of black bikini lingerie she wears an incongruous pillbox hat which unscrews for the purpose of adding water! Of course the entire collection exemplifies the concepts of objectification and trivialization.



The contemporary images in Strang's collection are clearly quite the most blatant. A high heel shoe which simulates the female body posture. Sunglasses whose side arms are legs. A toast rack made up of several sets of female legs. And a variety of anthropomorphized and, more importantly, genderized chairs, complete with breasts, to sit on. Not to mention the now infamous giant red lip sofa named Marilyn. (Thank God the mouth is closed.) All in all the book offers us a wonderful visual documentary that could complement any introductory lecture on sexism or be more useful still to advanced analyses of visual imagery and depiction.

I only have two other rather minor points of criticism. Whole genres of objects seem missing from this collection, such as musical instruments where one frequently finds women's heads carved on the end shaft of a cello or viola. On the other hand, some of the items included here do not appear to be specifically female in gender.

And finally, if the book is not meant to be especially polemical in tone one can only wonder about the choice of cover image — some brass nutcrackers in the shape of a pair of women's legs from 1930s England. What a charming coincidence of a political commentary!