

Images of Women in the Magazines of the '30s and '40s

Heather Rymell

*L'auteur nous présente des images de la femme
dans les réclames publicitaires des années 1930 et 1940.*



It is commonplace to assert that magazines and other forms of media serve as a mirror of society. They are also responsible, to some degree, for creating the scene they reflect. While it would be absurd to imagine a group of magazine executives actively collaborating to dictate norms to their readership, it can be said that their decisions regarding content do have an effect on the public mind.

In the case of women, this choice of content raises a number of questions. For example, have magazines portrayed women as housewives because they do indeed fill that role, or because society feels that they should? Do magazines portray the real or the ideal?

Do they merely congratulate women who live within an expected framework or do they chasten those who do not?

Are fashions displayed because women demand them or because the industry requires a market and employs the media to create one? From the *Mayfair* of the 1930s to the *Vogue* of today, fashions have been predicted and dictated. Were women presented as working outside of the home during war-time, and not before, because this was the reality or was this a form of propaganda? It would seem that the occasional advertisement placed in middle-class magazines urging girls to join the Armed Forces during the Second World War were deliberately

aimed at an audience which disapproved of such careers for women.

This article will explore these questions by examining the advertising in Canadian family magazines of the 1930s and 1940s. This time period has been selected because the years of the Second World War were, to some extent, an interlude during which society's norms were bent to serve the needs of expediency.

As Ruth Pierson's work has shown, the entry of women into the workforce did not reflect a true shift in attitudes.¹ Society had not come to believe that women, under ideal conditions, should be employed. Women were viewed as a reserve labour force, to be drawn upon only as long as the war continued.

The prevailing belief that woman's

place was in the home, as the bulwark of the family, was evidenced by the reluctance to employ married women. The registration of single women was undertaken in order to decrease the necessity of hiring wives and mothers. Schemes were put forward to relocate rural women in industrial areas, rather than make use of local married women. In short, society at large only grudgingly accepted changes in the status quo, and then only on a temporary basis, in order to weather the storm of the war. Once the war ended, women were told they should vacate their jobs and make room for returning soldiers. To act otherwise would be disloyal to those brave men who had fought for them. Giving women a pat on the back and heaving a sigh of relief, the country prepared to return to life as it had been before the war. The concept of woman had never really changed. And the magazines of the era not only reflected but promoted this situation.

Mayfair, in the '30s, published by the MacLean Publishing Company, was a high fashion magazine catering to the wealthier segment of Canadian society. Stories and photo layouts of lavish weddings, cruises, horse shows and debutante balls filled its pages. It was published monthly, each issue was thematically subtitled, such as Spring Millinery (March/30), Brides and Bridegrooms (June/30), and Debutante (Nov./33). The covers of the magazine were very much in the style of *Vogue*. The advertising was dominated by designer fashions, beauty products, automobiles and an assortment of luxury items.

Maclean's and *National Home* were aimed at a more middle class readership and contained a wider variety of advertising. The magazine presented beauty products, fashions and cars, and devoted a good deal of space to mundane ads such as toothpaste, laundry detergent, and baking needs. Although articles in both of these magazines were written for readers of both sexes, the bulk of the advertising was directed toward women.

The advertising campaigns in these three publications are remarkably consistent in the attitudes and assumptions they betray. Women are seen occupying a certain sphere, within which they fulfill particular roles. All of these roles can ultimately be related to woman's function. She is the centre of the home and family, which in turn forms the foundation of society. Such roles can be viewed in a chronological manner as they trace a woman moving through the various perceived stages of her life. (Although the advertising seldom if ever presents women in old age.)

The first stage which appears in magazine advertising is the female as a young woman. In *Mayfair*, she is

portrayed as a young lady — not a young individual. She is primarily a potential wife, the beautiful object which she will continue to be after her marriage. Prior to the war, she is seldom shown as employed. In the rare cases when she is working, usually as a secretary, she is invariably awaiting the coming of marriage. We see her partying, worrying about dates, occasionally attending college. In *Mayfair*, she is the eager Debutante — pages are devoted to the 'debs' of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. This young woman, eagerly in pursuit of her man, is the target of ads enticing her with a myriad of products designed to enhance her desirability. Jergens Hand Cream will stand as an example of the unsubtle manner in which young women were wooed by advertisers. The reader was regaled with the man-attracting qualities of this product: 'Rough, old-looking hands regain young softness — then romance begins.' 'Delightful hands appeal to a man'. Woodbury Soap had debutantes extolling the restorative qualities of a Woodbury Cocktail: 'It looks like l-o-v-e when a man gazes dreamy-eyed at a girl. That's the objective of clever girls. They enlist the Woodbury Facial Cocktail'. Naturally, 'Men fall in love with skin that's smooth and soft' and from Pepsodent: 'When someone's eyes are judging you, Can you be sure it's safe to smile?' Perhaps the epitome of this kind of blatant advertising is a Palmolive ad in which an enraptured bride writes to the Dionne quintuplets: 'Dear Quints — I have to thank you for my lovely new Palmolive complexion. P.S. And for my nice new husband!'

Passing from maidenhood to marriage, the young woman becomes a wife and enters the next sphere reflected in advertising. *Mayfair* celebrates this passage in its pages and pages of wedding photographs, documenting the daughter of one man becoming the wife of another. As a wife, she assumes several functions but continues to serve as an object of beauty. According to the advertisers, having acquired a man, she must now concentrate on keeping him. Beauty is cast as the basic necessity in her life. The advertisements insinuate that the wife (who is always a girl) risks losing her husband on the slightest pretext: 'The 'Other Girl' knows a man loses interest when a girl's hands grow rough and coarse' (Jergens). Hidden within the insinuations is the implication that a woman without a husband is a misfit, unable to occupy her proper place in society. The advertisers during this period use the vulnerability of women as a mainspring effort for selling products. This is a characteristic held in common by these beauty ads as well as those for household products. Women are made to struggle against perceived inadequacies, whether in

their complexions or their skills as housekeepers.

When the advertisements are dealing with the young, single woman, she is portrayed outside of the home, socializing or occasionally employed. However, to state that she is shown outside of the home is not to imply that she is apart from it. At this stage (as at any other) the advertisers of this era assume that women are intimately linked with the home and family. The ultimate purpose of the young woman's socializing is to find a husband and begin to build a new family unit.

A survey of the magazines reveals that married women are presented almost exclusively within the physical boundaries of their homes. The question of working wives is not a issue. The magazines reflect the middle class outlook of the time, characterizing women as wives and mothers, completely fulfilled by the duties imposed on them. Even in *Mayfair*, a publication related more to the social calendar than to the affairs of the home, there are ads which call the gift of a refrigerator the 'thrill of a lifetime' and which ask 'Where is the woman whose heart would not thrill at the gift of a beautiful Bentwood blanket?' (Dec./33, p.60).

The advertising campaigns approach the role of housewife from two slightly different bases. One method is to glorify housework, the other is to threaten women with the results of 'sloppy' housekeeping. The glorification of housework is especially evident when it extends into the area of childcare — or when the mundane chores of cooking and cleaning are dressed up with a 'modern', 'scientific' approach. Advertisers once again reveal their opinion of women as vulnerable and insecure when they threaten them with husbands disgusted by slovenly housekeeping: 'Dear Mother' writes a young bride in a 1938 ad for Fels-Naptha Laundry Soap, 'The Honeymoon is over'. She is distraught because her husband is complaining that his mother got his shirts much whiter than she does! Naturally, her mother responds with advice about Fels-Naptha. The result — 'Ted's simply tickled about his shirts. And glory, but it's swell to have him tossing bouquets at me again!' (*National Home*; Feb./38, p.29). The ring-around-the-collar was ever with us.

As a wife, one of woman's primary functions is as nurturer of her children. So say the advertisers. The assumption reflected in the magazines is that a wife automatically becomes a mother. The childless couple, like the working mother, is not an issue. *Mayfair* is primarily a fashion magazine but even high society ladies are mothers. Although women are assigned the all-important task of raising children they

my crystal so delicately protected

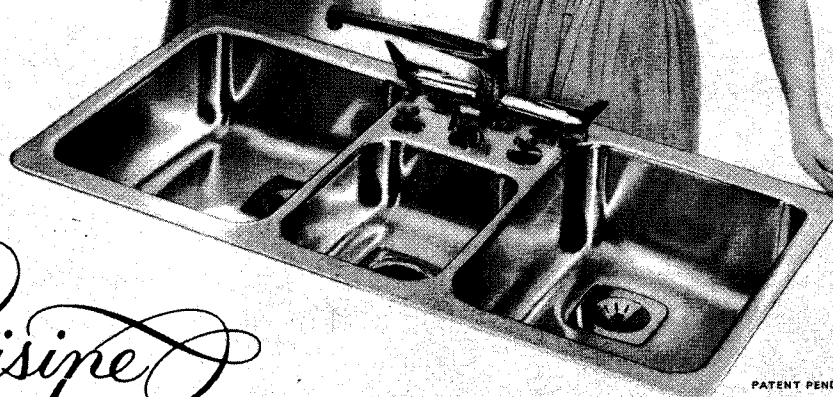
fruits and vegetables easily prepared

Successor to the Kitchen Sink

disposer sink — magic for table clearing

and cutting board for preparing snacks—salads

with unique Raymond Loewy design,
such elegant beauty, beyond words.



PATENT PENDING

Cuisine
entrée

distinctive models and sizes in nickel stainless steel

ELKAY

are not seen as capable of doing this without expert guidance. The advertising often uses scientific jargon to instill confidence and impress potential buyers. An ad for a sunroom, the Lord and Burnham Vitalarium, combines this technique with an appeal to the mother's concern for her children's health: 'Don't give in to those wearisome grey days. Get the most out of them for the children and for yourself. It is the ultraviolet rays that make your blood richer in iron and red blood cells. It may add years to all of your lives'. A 'Vicks' ad warns that: 'The modern Mother knows how important it is to use the proper medication at the proper time.' (*National Home*; Feb./38, p.49). The wife's nurturing role extends to her husband as well as to her children: 'Men are such babies, especially about colds...so thoughtful wives remind them to use specialized medicine'. A further aspect of nurturing is that of educating children. A 'Magic Baking Powder' ad reflects this: 'No mother-daughter combination can ever be complete without Magic. There's a thrill for your little daughter in copying you — a thrill for you in being her "model". And you'll be a truly worthy model for her.' (*National Home*; Feb./41, p.45).

There is an inherent contradiction in this belief that women are the very centre of the family and, at the same time, are unable to function outside of the home. Women are granted 'power' within the family but are relegated to the status of children in the larger sphere. This contradiction is abundantly illustrated in the magazine advertising, which burdens mothers with vast responsibilities and at the same time conveys the idea that women are hapless and helpless. We are presented with a strange creature, the child-like mother, the civilizer who cannot cope with the simple mechanism of a Kodak camera. A Kodak campaign of the period stresses the simplicity of operation of the camera. One ad pictures a woman and her children using a camera and makes the comment: 'A movie camera that understands amateurs'. The camera is so simple to use that: 'She can make just as good movies as he can, because it is really the camera that does the trick for her' (*Mayfair*; Dec./33, p.67).

Advertisements for cars take for granted female ineptitude. In the majority of advertisements, men are shown as the drivers and owners of the cars. While most of the ads in the magazines are directed toward female readers the car ads are always designed to attract males. The advertising motto for Packard automobiles, 'Ask the man who owns one' reflects this, as does the

wording of most car ads, which praise speed, economy and efficiency and refer to the driver as 'he'. One ad which is designed to appeal to women, and which does show a woman driver, does not deal with the car itself but with the upholstery. The advertising campaigns mounted by insurance companies also take advantage of the belief that women are unable to fend for themselves. The Prudential Insurance Company is one of these, referring to the 'indescribable feeling of pride and possession that only a bridegroom knows ... for now Ann has entrusted her life to your care'. The insurance ads are one of the few groups of advertising directed consistently to men during this period and they always link women and children in their dependency on men.

Woman, then, is characterized in two related roles, as a young single woman and as a wife and mother. She is a civilizing and nurturing force but she requires protection and guidance. Her place in society is defined by her relationship with a man. This is the image of woman which is put forth by the advertising of the 1930s. I would argue that this concept was not changed by the experience of women during the 1940s and through their involvement in the war. In 1945 the manufacturers of Ipana toothpaste could still seriously proclaim: 'Well, the Ouija Board didn't find me a man, but my sparkling new smile certainly did!' After the war, most advertising campaigns remained virtually unchanged. The tone of Jergens ads, for example, changed very little from the 'Soft hands are lucky in love' of 1938 to 'Romance comes a-running to her hands' of 1945. Jergens ran such ads throughout the decade. Ads which depicted women as workers or members of the Armed Forces remained in the minority and were coupled with articles which stressed the fact that a woman could work and keep her femininity. And the concept of femininity would include those qualities which would enhance the young woman as a potential wife. Lotta Dempsey writing in *Maclean's* in 1943 (title "They're Still Feminine") about women in the armed forces is typical of the writing of the period. A survey of the advertising shows that this title could be taken as the battlecry of a society determined not to change the status of its women. The question raised by the article is 'What happens to Ma's old flair for making apple pies, when Ma gets busy building bombers?'. The answer, apparently, is 'nothing'. Dempsey is at pains to prove to her readers that working in the Armed Forces or a factory will have no lasting influence on the 'softer side of womanhood'! She supports her

argument with stories of women shedding their uniforms in the evening for 'an exquisite array of rainbow-coloured dressing-gowns' and of the frightened young recruit who encounters her stern Sergeant-Major transformed into a 'slender vision in a pale pink satin dressing gown, with tiny blue ribbons in her hair'. She bolsters this evidence with the testimony of British psychiatrists, who found that 'any show of masculinity among women war-workers is a sort of teething stage ... it soon wore off when English women really hit their stride'. She closes with one final piece of comfort, assuring her readers that the conversation in the barracks, as in any place where women gather is of 'families, clothes, hair-do's and men — Especially the men that they are married to — (or will be married to) — and will go back to keep house for when the war is over'.

To a public in need of such comfort, the advertising of the period must have been reassuring. War-workers who do take their places in the ads are always single young women and are only superficially different from their older sisters of the '30s. But the young woman is still presented as a potential wife.

Beauty continues to be a basic necessity of her life. The Woodbury Deb is now the 'Prettiest Canadian War Worker in the States'. Yardley maintains that 'Beauty helps Duty'. Palmolive sponsored a 'Miss War-worker' contest. Even when she is helping in the manufacture of weapons, this young woman is busy at her true role of nurturing. 'Rushing battleship bolts to her boyfriends ... she uses Aspirin for speedy relief!'

Obviously, the advertising placates an uneasy public. A review of these magazines shows the employment of women was merely a temporary expediency, which would end and have no lasting influence. Women would further prove their femininity by gracefully retiring to the home when the emergency ended.

The concept of woman in magazine advertising was not changed during the course of the war nor during the years which followed. The magazines continued to bolster the belief that women belonged in the home and that feminine women would accept their role willingly. The advertising not only reflected the reality of the times but helped to shape that reality by convincing readers that their picture of the world was a real one. ☉

NOTES:

¹Ruth Pierson, *Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Labour Force in W.W.II.*