

# Advertising's Portrayal of Women in the Workplace from the 1930s to the 1950s

by Peggy Preston

Advertising is a powerful tool used by the media to portray an image, change an idea or shape an attitude. Although society usually considers advertising a medium to sell products, it can also sell a person, or, in this case, a gender role. In *Killing Us Softly, Advertising's Image of Women*, the narrator says, "the effects of advertising are inescapable, they sell images, values and goals, they shape our attitudes and our attitudes shape our behavior." <1> This is an accurate description of how women were portrayed during the times of national world crises -- it also accurately describes how many women will act. In the first half of the twentieth century, the world was faced with several crises including the Great Depression, World War II and the economic changes which occurred after this war. During these crises, women were forced in and out of the work place depending upon how they were needed. What did advertisements do to reflect work requirements of women?

In the depression years of the 1930s women were portrayed in the home; in the war years of the early 1940s women were pictured in ads as the heroines of the assembly line; and after the war women were expected to, and portrayed as, returning to the home to allow their men to have their jobs. Using Campbell's Soup and other advertisements from various magazines, this paper will show how advertisements manipulated society's attitude toward women.

The Stock Market, which crashed in October of 1929, sent America into the worst depression it had ever experienced. "Men, who were the support of families, lost their jobs. Women too. But that seemed more natural, somehow less tragic. In fact, there were those who began to say that women should voluntarily step out in order that men might remain." <2> A movement was occurring to deny women employment, to refuse to hire wives or women who might be independently wealthy, so as to free more jobs for men. Employed wives were considered to be "thieving parasites of the business world and married women whose husbands have permanent positions should be discriminated against." <3> As representative Florence Kahn of California said, "Women's place is not out in the business world competing with men who have families to support." <4> The future Secretary of Labor, Francis Perkins, declared: "Any woman capable of supporting herself without a job should devote herself to motherhood and the home." <5> Women were encouraged to volunteer their time, stay in school or return to school for classes. "The role of the housewife was defined by magazines as exciting, rewarding and creative." <6> "Homemaking," the *Ladies Home Journal* declared in 1929, is today an adventure -- an education in color, in mechanics, in chemistry." <7> *McCall's* asserted "that no other task possessed such universal appeal." <8> Magazines directed themselves toward the glorification of homemaking in hopes of encouraging more women to stay home. The government passed laws to eliminate the woman worker from her job. "From 1932 to 1937 federal legislation prohibited more than one member of the same family

from working in the civil service. Designed to combat nepotism, the law in fact discriminated almost exclusively against women. In nearly every state, bills were introduced to restrict the employment of married women, and at times whole cities embarked on crusades to fire working wives." <9> To evade these laws women lied about their marital status in order to attain jobs.

To reinforce the concern of society to get women out of the workplace, advertisements portrayed women at home, in the kitchen or with the children. Advertisements portraying men, on the other hand, placed men in the workplace. "He is working to improve your model," declares a 1935 *Time* magazine advertisement which pictures a man working upon an engine for General Motors which has not yet been perfected. In April of 1930 *Time* displays an advertisement for Western Electric which pictures "the MAN behind the iron mask," featuring a welder working on a switchboard frame. Other pictures in the same ad display men working to improve a telephone system. A *Time* advertisement of 1930 selling kitchen ventilators shows the "lady of the house" working hard on the evening meal while the food odors are being sucked out of the kitchen by her new ventilator. Another ad featured on the same page reads, "When the Watchman carries his Conscience," advertising an alarm clock which will wake the bread-winning man up in time for work. A life insurance advertisement pictures a mother at the door of the family home and two children running toward the reader who, it is assumed, is the father coming home from work to his wife (who does not work) and children. Finally, a Campbell's Soup advertisement pictured in *Life* during 1936 features a woman in a colonial log cabin setting, cooking soup over the fireplace preparing it for her man, who waits patiently at the table. All of these advertisements reflected the needs of the times. Women were being discouraged from the workplace in order that men may have jobs. The emphasis was on woman in the home (especially kitchen) taking care of the children while her husband is at work. This did not change until the 1940s when the United States entered World War II and women were needed in the workplace.

The late 1930s were filled with conflict as the United States watched the leader of the Nazi party, Adolf Hitler, gain control of Germany and begin to strengthen the country's military defenses in violation of the treaty of Versailles. The United States entered World War II when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. This brought about drastic changes in industry, but, "it was almost two years before the government took measures to strengthen national defense capabilities and employers began to respond to the increasing demand for war materials," <10> before the need for women in war-time industries was acknowledged. "By mid-1942 employers were willing to hire women in 70 percent of the anticipated semi-skilled positions and 63 percent of the professional and managerial openings." <11> This was due to the large media surge which began to portray women as being able to work at a man's job. "The war Manpower Commission sponsored local recruitment campaigns in areas of critical labor shortages and with the Office of War Information, launched national media appeals to draw women into the labor force." <12> Thus came the encouragement for not only single or lower class women to work but middle and upper class married women to join the workforce as well. "World War II further extended the vocational roles for middle class women. Not only were more

women employed; but they were employed on jobs requiring a higher degree of technical skill and nearer approach to actual combat conditions in World War II." <13>

Advertisements would be both recruiting techniques as well as selling points. "The images of the war workers in advertising during much of the recruitment campaign had the central purpose of attracting women into fields drained by the enlistment of men and encouraging public acceptance of women in new roles. This was accomplished by demonstrating that women were capable of non-domestic work." <14>

Also developed was the war heroine campaign in which the working woman was the savior of the industry. "The Pennsylvania Rail Road informed readers that women were filling jobs that required strength and coolness and had proved that they can fill I these roles capably." <15> They re-introduced Molly Pitcher, a heroine of the American Revolution, who was now titled, "Molly Pitcher 1944." Pitcher was pictured as the woman who had multi-talented abilities when at her job. These women were portrayed in "the non-traditional jobs valiantly leading the nation to victory." <16> Always an important part to these campaigns was that the women could not only work, but they could also fulfill their needed tasks at home. The war women of the 1940s were no longer the homemakers of the 1930s.

The advertisements of this time featured these women in areas of the industrial world. "Great Girl, Mary Purdue! She's a championship parachute maker!" This is the heading for a Wheat Sparkies advertisement which pictures a young woman making parachutes. "Pay day is War Bond Day" announces a General Electric ad which pictures women on the assembly line as well as at home, enforcing the message that working women could handle the tasks of job and home. "His is to serve, Hers to Inspire --" announces a Coty ad reminding women, while attempting to sell them cosmetics, that men also need beautiful support in their effort toward the war. "We are the unseen," announces a Bell Telephone ad which tells of the courage of dedication of the unseen telephone operator whose long distance operation unites the country in the cry for victory.

Advertisements also pictured women in uniform (possibly members of the WAAC's -- Women's Army Auxiliary Corps -- who were highly advertised during this time) who were serving their county in the military. "They deliver more pleasure", says the Chesterfield Cigarette ad which pictures a woman in uniform on a motor cycle, presumably delivering cigarettes, destined for the boys on the front line. In another ad, Camel Cigarettes pictures a woman pilot of the Civil Air Patrol who "Has Got What it Takes." The ad features two small biographical notes about the two women pilots: both smoke Camels. These and other ads portray women as independent; advertisers begin featuring women driving alone in a car -- as opposed to ads of the 1930s which featured the entire family in the car. If women were to work, they must be independent and capable beings who were putting their best efforts toward the war. A Campbell's Soup advertisement of 1942 also portrayed the change of the times with a picture of a table laden with pie, salad, sandwiches and soup set around a note from mother who has rushed off to her first aid class in her own personal effort for the war. Advertisers changed with

the times, attempting to recruit salaried women and volunteer women to join the war and help the allies win.

However, advertisers had never expected these women workers to want to stay with their jobs once the war was over. "Believing that wartime employment patterns for women were a temporary stopgap measure, necessary only while the men were gone, advertisers assumed war workers would either go home or seek jobs in female areas." <17> Not only were advertisers aware of the social concern that women were to return to their traditional role after the war, but "the selective service act of this war made it mandatory for employers to reemploy the returning soldier if there is any job at all for him, ejecting the employee hired since the soldier left in order to make room for him." <18> The fear was "that they (women) will not be willing to call it a good day's work and go home, when the war is over and Johnny comes back for his job." <19> Advertisers thus began a new push as 1944 dawned and peace drew near.

The campaign encouraged women to realize that their position was only temporary; once the war was over they would be needed full time at home. General Electric, for example, ran an ad in *Ladies Home Journal* during 1944 which portrayed a man and woman getting ready for work. He in a suit and she in overalls, the ad says, "His wife is doing the man-sized job at the war plant but -- How is she going to feel about going back to the same old house keeping routine after the war?" The advertisement was offering the latest in household equipment which would make her work in the home easier. Also, "the initial idea that working mothers could raise happy children was replaced by the tragic portraits of families breaking under the strain of mother being away." <20> An Adel Precision Products ad portrays a mother in overalls on her way to work being questioned by her daughter: "Mother, when will you stay home again?" The Answer: "some jubilant day mother will stay home again, doing the job she likes best - making a home for you and daddy." The heroines of the war world such as Molly Pitcher turned into the villains of advertisements as they are pictured in ads with "a factory worker having to plead before a judge for her son as she is labeled Victory Vandal and a hysterical girl is carted away to a foster home because her mother has to work -- all contrasted by ads showing mothers at home with their children playing happily nearby." <21>

More ads attempted to make the women feel guilt as well as fear of the possible loss of something precious if they did not give up their jobs. Advertisers focused on the family, which was seen as lost when husbands went to war and mothers went to work, and which now needed to be returned to its pre-war status. "Homemakers became the vital defenders of the nation's homes." <22> The advertising did influence many. "By VE day, about a million women production workers had left the nation's aircraft plants, shipyards, ammunition factories and other industries that produced so prodigiously for the war. " <23> Advertising was, of course, not the only reason women left the war industry; other factors influenced women's flight from industry. "The reabsorption of returning service men along with the indecision of some workers, both men and women, concerning their future plans. The lack of job opportunities commensurate with the skills and wages of displaced women and the desire by some displaced workers to take a rest before looking for jobs. Finally, the expected voluntary withdrawal of large numbers of women who

were duration workers, all affected the status of women in industry." <24> The advertisers portrayed accurately what a large percentage of the women were doing. Yet, because many women did not want to stop working, it was necessary after the war that women be persuaded by advertisements portraying them in traditional roles and no longer pictured industry workers.

Advertisements began after the war to portray men in the factory and at the office. An Imperial whiskey ad shows men working at the loading dock and a corner caption of two men casually drinking-the men were home from the war and back in industry. Women are pictured in the traditional position at home. Campbell soup advertisements reflect this trend. A March 3, 1947 ad featured in *Time* shows a husband coming home from work and proclaiming, "Hiya Hon, I'm home from work and hungry!" The ad proceeds to detail the woman's happiness at having the convenience of Campbell's soup. Another ad in *Life* dated 1950 shows a mother, flanked by her two children, giving them soup for lunch. "Soup is a dandy children's lunch an all-the-family-lunch or when you lunch alone" (implying she is a homemaker who does not work). Other ads follow this same trend. Cannon Percale Sheets pictures a woman saying, "There's a trick up my frilly sleeve!" (no more overalls worn by these women). The wife then tells the reader how she tricks her husband into letting her buy Cannon Sheets. "I try so-o hard to be a good housekeeper, Cannon Sheets are so fine and light weight that bedmaking and washdays will be easier for me! And if I know Joe, he'll agree that such a smart wife deserves a new hat!"

In advertisements after World War II, gone were factory workers and war heroines; they were replaced by secretaries, nurses and homemakers. These were the traditional roles which women could fulfill. The Ralph C. Coxhead Corporation, which sells Vari typewriters, has a man saying, "Look! my secretary set the type for this ad!," as the secretary sitting behind him at her typewriter smiles. Another ad shows a distraught secretary on the phone saying, "Mr. Black could answer that but he's out of the office!," implying that she needs to buy the 3 steps book which will help organize her life. The nursing profession also is used to advertise working women. Coca-Cola portrays two nurses at a soda machine poised to buy two ice-cold Cokes in a *Time* ad of 1948. Another, shows a nurse advertising for Amuro1, a toothpaste which will fight tooth decay. No longer are women factory workers, uniformed for service, they have become mothers, secretaries and nurses which portray the tranquility of the 1950s. This decade was to become the family years as men had come home from the war, expecting their women to be there poised and ready to greet them with a hearty meal on the table.

Advertising can shape the way we think and act. What did advertisers attempt to do during the years of the Great Depression through and beyond World War II? Advertisements attempted to influence society's attitude toward the role of women in the workplace and at home. Understanding that war advertisements shaped female behavior in the past; we are more aware of the influences of advertisements on women today, and on our own lives.

## Notes

- 1 *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*, Director: Jean Kilbourn.
- 2 Rita S. Hole, "Do You Need Your Job?," *Good Housekeeping*. September, 1932, pp. 24-25.
- 3 William H. Chafe, *The American Woman Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles*, p. 108.
- 4 Hole, p. 25.
- 5 Chafe, p. 107.
- 6 Chafe, p. 105.
- 7 Chafe, p. 105.
- 8 Chafe, p. 105.
- 9 Chafe, p. 108.
- 10 Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940's*. p. 53.
- 11 Hartmann, p. 55.
- 12 Hartmann, p. 55.
- 13 Elizabeth Nottingham, "Toward an Analysis of the Effects of Two World Wars on the Role and Status of Middle Class Women in the English Speaking World," *American Sociological Review*, 1945, p. 673.
- 14 Maureen Hone, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender and Propaganda during World War II*, p. 110.
- 15 Honey, p. 111.
- 16 Honey, p. 113.
- 17 Honey, p. 120.
- 18 Elinore M. Herrick, "16 Million Women at Work: What Will Happen after the War?," *New York Times Magazine*, 1943, p. 19.
- 20 Honey, p. 125.
- 21 Honey, p. 124.

22 Honey, pp. 131, 135.

23 Frieda Miller, "What's Become of Rosie the Riveter?," *New York Times Magazine*, 1946, p. 21.

24 Miller, p. 21.

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