

Power to Sell



Unknown artist
Pears' Soap for the Complexion
reproduced from the *Graphic*,
30 March 1889
(London: Edward Joseph
Mansfield, 1889)

Gwen Rankin examines the female form in advertisements, as revealed in the Library's Newspapers Collection

The National Library's extensive collection of newspapers and journals not only offers readers a glimpse of a bygone world but a perspective from which today's experiences and values take on new meaning. The advertisements

WOMEN AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE COMMODITY CULTURE

of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example, chart the emergence of consumerism throughout the Western world. This shift ushered women into the public arena, according them an economic significance that is not always fully appreciated even in today's commodity-driven society.

Well before the end of the nineteenth century, historian Octave Uzanne had established the singular dependence of the French economy on the fashion and cosmetic industries, and the advertising, overt and otherwise, that ensured the ongoing health of these concerns. As the art of advertising was developed and refined, the ability of the feminine to mitigate the vulgarities of the commodity culture and arouse desire (often irrational) for a bewildering range of goods and services was recognised as crucial to the success of what had become an industry in its own right. Woman had become the prototypical consumer.

In the nineteenth century, newspaper editors relied on the skills of artists to produce pictures suitable for engraving. Illustrated advertisements, in consequence, often reflected the prevailing trends of high art. In 1885 the London *Graphic* ran a series of images promoting Pears' soap, any one of which could feasibly have been inspired by the teaching of Sir Edward Poynter, at that time Director of England's National Gallery. In one notable example, a girl of Grecian appearance and clad in the flimsiest of wet drapery slumbers on a flower-strewn bank. Beside her, a dark skinned, bare-breasted attendant leans forward to wield a solicitous fan. On the billowing clouds that surmount the scene, two cherubim display a cake of the soap itself. The message, conveyed in the accompanying text, is that Pears' soap has

been scientifically formulated to enhance the complexion and smooth the hands. The question of how many of the predominantly male readers of the *Graphic* were swayed by this information remains open to speculation. As Christopher Wood observed in his book *Olympian Dreamers*, 'For a supposedly puritanical age, the Victorian public also had a positive obsession with pretty girls.'

In that this particular obsession outlasted the Victorian period, it's hardly surprising that images of women were found in increasing numbers in the advertising pages of later newspapers and journals. In many instances this reflected, as could be expected, the expanding market for feminine attire and related products. Millinery, jewellery and accessories featured prominently in pages devoted to women, as did lengthy discussions of the latest fashion trends. Less easily explained, at least in terms of the commodity culture alone, is the Edwardian proliferation of images of women wearing corsets of every conceivable shape and style, from low-cut lace-trimmed models designed for the evening, to Dr Scott's shapely 'Electric Adjustable', alleged to alleviate not only back ache but also incipient consumption, epilepsy, dropsy and loss of voice. These advertisements, along with similarly graphic promotions for methods of bust enhancement, appeared in papers such as the Melbourne *Punch* and the Sydney *Bulletin*, sometimes cheek by jowl with others for tractors and light industrial machinery. In an era in which mixed bathing was frowned upon on Australian beaches and costumes strictly regulated in the interests of 'decency', the advertisements suggest a double standard by which the female form could be legitimately revealed to an ever-expanding male audience.

The patent medicine was another commodity given greater credibility by association with the feminine. In 1894, Felton, Grimwade and Company promoted their 'Homocea', an unguent targeting ailments ranging from influenza to convulsions, as a new 'virtue' and appealed to classical tradition with the image of a shapely young woman in academic cap and gown. Appearing in Henry Hyde Champion's *The Sun: The Society Courier*, the company's campaign was aimed at the upper middle



left:
Rottnest for Glorious Holidays
 (Perth, WA: Rottnest Board of Control, Government Tourist and Publicity Bureau, 1925–26)
 brochure; 21.0 x 13.5 cm, 28 pp.
 Ephemera Collection
 nla.aus-vn587240-4

below:
 Unknown artist
Dunlop Tyres
 reproduced from *Australasian*,
 2 October 1909
 (Melbourne: Hugh George, 1909)

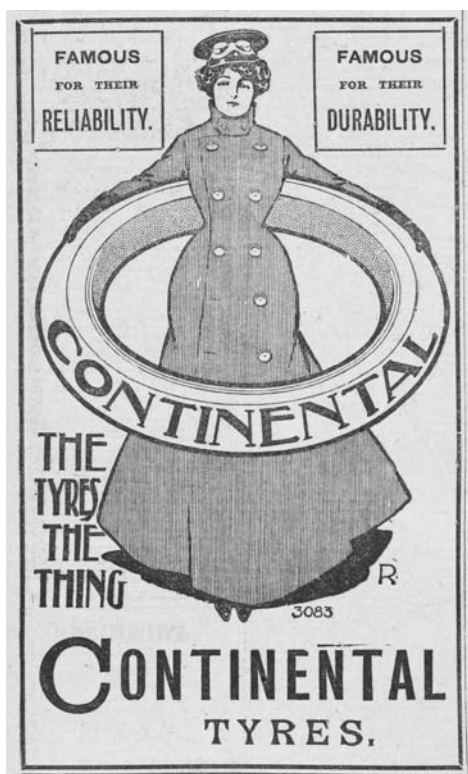
class, in which circle the education of women was steadily gaining prestige.

In similar manner, a renowned authoress was called into service in 1900 to verify the efficacy of a lotion, 'Koko', to prevent dandruff and baldness—her testimony accompanied by the picture of a girl flaunting singularly luxuriant locks. The manufacturers of Beecham's Pills, Sanatogen, Hearne's Bronchitis Cure, Abraham's Pills and Laxo-Tonic Lozenges were among others who used eye-catching women exhibiting various degrees of vitality or debility to promote their products, in the years that followed. Some of the products have since been identified as discreetly advertised abortifacients, the most effective means of birth control available to women



top:
 Unknown artist
*Continental: The Tyre's
 the Thing*
 reproduced from *Australasian*,
 23 October 1909
 (Melbourne: Hugh George,
 1909)

bottom:
 Unknown artist
'My Beautiful Benz!'
 reproduced from *Punch*,
 30 July 1914
 (East Melbourne: John Joseph
 Halligan, 1914)



of the time but also a significant factor in a consistently high maternal death rate.

Not all the advertisements in which women appeared, however, were for products traditionally associated with femininity. In the *Lone Hand* throughout 1909, Dunlop advertised garden hoses, bicycle tyres and rubber heels, in each instance featuring a photograph of a demure muslin-clad girl engaged in related, if somewhat implausible activity. The flowing white skirts of an otherwise intrepid cyclist, for example, appear destined to tangle with spokes and chain, while the fair gardener is more concerned with managing the complex drapery of her costume than the spray she directs inexplicably into mid-air. In October of that year the *Australasian* ran a promotion for Continental Tyres, in which a curvaceous girl in a clinging chauffeur's uniform displays the company's product, balanced hula-hoop fashion around her slender waist. (It is tempting to speculate that this image may have inspired the derogatory 'spare tyre' designation sometimes applied today to overweight women and men.)

In the years between 1914 and 1930, the potency of the conceptual link between sophisticated women and luxury cars became apparent. The Benz Motor Agency led the way with an advertisement in *Punch*, in which a seductively feline figure clutched a convertible of model dimensions to her fashionably attired bosom. In the years that followed, other companies took up the theme. General Motors pictured their Cadillac being inspected by an elegant woman from behind a wall of classical architectural construction. The message was clearly one of luxury and refinement. In a different vein, Nash promoted their latest sedan with a flapper behind a wheel engineered, according to its maker, to offer 'super-easefulness' in steering, particularly for women motorists. In the meantime, the Vacuum Oil Company had identified the car itself as female, promising that, once filled with Plume, 'she leaps into instant action ... ready and eager to continue the trip'.

Other advertisements were of a less exotic nature, with a number, as today, directed at mothers of young children. Allenburys Milk Foods, Steedman's Soothing Powders for Teething Infants, and others of similar ilk, used techniques that would

**For the children's sake and your own—
Get a NEW EDISON**

Bedtime music is better than fairy stories, because it has a more soothing influence on the children's minds and they sleep sounder and more restfully.

And don't they just revel in good music, too! It is hard to say whether they, or you, will get the most pleasure from a New Edison.

The New Edison absolutely re-creates the human voice and musical instruments. So perfect is it that its reproductions cannot be detected from the original by direct comparison, and many, who have no time for ordinary talking-machines, are very enthusiastic about the New Edison.

A New Edison means enjoyment for all the family and friends. You should certainly write for illustrated literature. Post free on request.

THOMAS A. EDISON, LTD., 364-372 Kent Street, Sydney.

Miss Jessica Harcourt
Acclaimed by artists the most beautiful girl in Australia

The beauty of Miss Jessica Harcourt, her delicately modelled features, her expressive eyes, are enhanced by the precious possession of a skin of exceptionally fine texture and clear colour. Miss Harcourt preserves the fresh purity of her complexion by regular use of Mergolized Wax. Women who have skin less lovely should use Mergolized Wax to remove soiled outer cuticle, and continue to use it instead of face cream in order to preserve the new, natural beauty. Any chemist or store can supply Dearborn genuine Mergolized Wax. Try the new 2 1/2 jar.

Pure Mergolized Wax

be recognised by most modern television-watching families. On a more impressive scale, Thomas A. Edison exhorted the readers of the *Bulletin* in 1920 to buy a New Edison 'for the children's sake', reinforcing this directive with an idyllic image of mother and children relaxing to the strains of recorded music that would make all 'sleep sounder and more restfully'. On the same page, a kimono-clad woman contemplating a claw-footed bath discusses with another the ability of the Safety Taps of the Daspyl water-heater to protect home and family from gas explosions in the bathroom. Camera manufacturer Kodak was also among those to exploit the maternal market, using (in the *Bulletin* and other widely circulated papers) a romantic family image to stress the need to record the fleeting moments of childhood.

One outcome of even a few hours spent browsing the papers and journals of yesteryear is the realisation that the psychology of advertising has changed very little. An example from the *Home* of 1926 indicates the continuity of woman's desire for physical perfection. A photograph of mannequin Jessica Harcourt, 'acclaimed by artists as the most beautiful girl in

Australia', endorses the use of Dearborn's Pure Mergolized Wax to improve and refine the complexion. As her description suggests, Miss Harcourt's aura at the time was closely akin to that enjoyed by super-model Jennifer Hawkins today. Two years earlier, Grace Hall (wife of Bernard Hall, artist, and Director of the National Gallery of Victoria) had met the lady in her husband's studio. Her response to the inevitable self-comparison—'my vanity is in the dust'—is recorded in her diary, as is her subsequent visit to her hairdresser seeking a radical change of style. Many twenty-first century women could relate to this. Even so, there is a sobering aspect to the advertisement itself. Mergolized wax, promoted in the United States at the time as a 'lightener' for dark skin, contained sufficient mercury in its original formulation to jeopardise the health of any user. It can only be hoped that today's female consumer, together with the woman who gives substance to her desire, is less susceptible to promises that disguise such a deadly reality.

GWEN RANKIN'S PhD thesis on the representation of the feminine in art will be followed by an intensive study of L. Bernard Hall, his life and work

above left:
Unknown artist
Get a New Edison
reproduced from the *Bulletin*,
17 June 1920
(Sydney: John Haynes and
J.F. Archibald, 1920)

above right:
Unknown artist
Pure Mergolized Wax
reproduced from *Home*,
1 January 1926
(Sydney: Art in Australia, 1926)