

## Making Sense of Advertisements

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Advertisements are all around us today and have been for a long time; advertising-free “good old days” just don’t exist. This guide offers an overview of advertisements as historical sources and how historians use them, a brief history of advertising, questions to ask when interpreting ads as historical evidence, an annotated bibliography, and a guide to finding advertisements online. Author Daniel Pope has taught at the University of Oregon since 1975 and is currently Associate Professor and History Department Head. He teaches courses on American economic and business history and on the history of American radicalism. He is the author of *The Making of Modern Advertising* (1983) and editor of *American Radicalism* (2001); he has written many articles on the history of American advertising, marketing, and consumer culture, and on the history of nuclear power and anti-nuclear activism.

### Introduction

Over a century ago, *Harper’s Weekly* commented that advertisements were “a true mirror of life, a sort of fossil history from which the future chronicler, if all other historical monuments were to be lost, might fully and graphically rewrite the history of our time.” Few if any historians today would claim that they could compose a complete history of an era from its advertisements, but in recent years scholars have creatively probed advertisements for clues about the society and the business environment that produced them. The presence of many excellent online collections of advertisements provides learners as well as established scholars the opportunity to examine these sources in new ways. The experience can be tantalizing and frustrating, since advertisements don’t readily proclaim their intent or display the social and cultural context of their creation. Yet studying advertisements as historical sources can also be fascinating and revealing.

Most of us—avid consumers though we may be—pride ourselves on being able to “see through” advertisements. We can interpret this phrase in several ways. Most simply, we “see through” ads when we are oblivious to them—when we look right past them, as we do with most ads we encounter daily. Much of what advertising professionals do is aimed at “cutting through the clutter,” overcoming our propensity to ignore most ads. In another sense of “seeing through,” we dismiss ads because we judge them to be misleading or dishonest. As historians, however, we need to focus on ads and see or hear them. As Yogi Berra put it, “You can observe a lot by watching.”

### American Advertising: A Brief History

Despite or because of its ubiquity, advertising is not an easy term to define. Usually advertising attempts to persuade its audience to purchase a good or a service. But “institutional” advertising has for a century sought to build corporate reputations without appealing for sales. Political advertising solicits a vote (or a contribution), not a purchase. Usually, too, authors distinguish advertising from salesmanship by defining

it as mediated persuasion aimed at an audience rather than one-to-one communication with a potential customer. The boundaries blur here, too. When you log on to Amazon.com, a screen often addresses you by name and suggests that, based on your past purchases, you might want to buy certain books or CDs, selected just for you. A telephone call with an automated telemarketing message is equally irritating whether we classify it as advertising or sales effort.

In United States history, advertising has responded to changing business demands, media technologies, and cultural contexts, and it is here, not in a fruitless search for the very first advertisement, that we should begin. In the eighteenth century, many American colonists enjoyed imported British consumer products such as porcelain, furniture, and musical instruments, but also worried about dependence on imported manufactured goods.

Advertisements in colonial America were most frequently announcements of goods on hand, but even in this early period, persuasive appeals accompanied dry descriptions. Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* reached out to readers with new devices like headlines, illustrations, and advertising placed next to editorial material. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century advertisements were not only for consumer goods. A particularly disturbing form of early American advertisements were notices of slave sales or appeals for the capture of escaped slaves. (For examples of these ads, visit the Virginia Runaways Project site at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/subjects/runaways/>) Historians have used these advertisements as sources to examine tactics of resistance and escape, to study the health, skills, and other characteristics of enslaved men and women, and to explore slaveholders' perceptions of the people they held in bondage.

Despite the ongoing "market revolution," early and mid- nineteenth-century advertisements rarely demonstrate striking changes in advertising appeals. Newspapers almost never printed ads wider than a single column and generally eschewed illustrations and even special typefaces. Magazine ad styles were also restrained, with most publications segregating advertisements on the back pages. Equally significant, until late in the nineteenth century, there were few companies mass producing branded consumer products. Patent medicine ads proved the main exception to this pattern. In an era when conventional medicine seldom provided cures, manufacturers of potions and pills vied for consumer attention with large, often outrageous, promises and colorful, dramatic advertisements.

In the 1880s, industries ranging from soap to canned food to cigarettes introduced new production techniques, created standardized products in unheard-of quantities, and sought to find and persuade buyers. National advertising of branded goods emerged in this period in response to profound changes in the business environment. Along with the manufacturers, other businesses also turned to advertising. Large department stores in rapidly-growing cities, such as Wanamaker's in Philadelphia and New York, Macy's in New York, and Marshall Field's in Chicago, also pioneered new advertising styles. For rural markets, the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward mail-order catalogues offered everything from buttons to kits with designs and materials for building homes to Americans who lived in the countryside—a majority of the U.S. population until about 1920. By one commonly used measure, total advertising volume in the United States grew from about \$200 million in 1880 to nearly \$3 billion in 1920.

Advertising agencies, formerly in the business of peddling advertising space in local newspapers and a limited range of magazines, became servants of the new national advertisers, designing copy and artwork and placing advertisements in the

places most likely to attract buyer attention. Workers in the developing advertising industry sought legitimacy and public approval, attempting to disassociate themselves from the patent medicine hucksters and assorted swindlers in their midst.

While advertising generated modern anxieties about its social and ethical implications, it nevertheless acquired a new centrality in the 1920s. Consumer spending–fueled in part by the increased availability of consumer credit–on automobiles, radios, household appliances, and leisure time activities like spectator sports and movie going paced a generally prosperous 1920s. Advertising promoted these products and services. The rise of mass circulation magazines, radio broadcasting and to a lesser extent motion pictures provided new media for advertisements to reach consumers. President Calvin Coolidge pronounced a benediction on the business of advertising in a 1926 speech: “Advertising ministers to the spiritual side of trade. It is a great power that has been intrusted to your keeping which charges you with the high responsibility of inspiring and ennobling the commercial world. It is all part of the greater work of regeneration and redemption of mankind.” (This address can be found online at a Library of Congress site on “Prosperity and Thrift,” which contains many documents on consumer culture in the twenties; visit <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/coolhtml/coolhome.html>.) Advertisements, as historian Roland Marchand pointed out, sought to adjust Americans to modern life, a life lived in a consumer society.

Since the 1920s, American advertising has grown massively, and current advertising expenditures are eighty times greater than in that decade. New media–radio, television, and the Internet–deliver commercial messages in ways almost unimaginable 80 years ago. Beneath the obvious changes, however, lie continuities. The triad of advertiser, agency, and medium remains the foundation of the business relations of advertising. Advertising men and women still fight an uphill battle to establish their professional status and win ethical respect. Perhaps the most striking development in advertising styles has been the shift from attempting to market mass-produced items to an undifferentiated consuming public to ever more subtle efforts to segment and target particular groups for specific products and brands. In the 1960s, what Madison Avenue liked to call a “Creative Revolution” also represented a revolution in audience segmentation. Advertisements threw a knowing wink to the targeted customer group who could be expected to buy a Volkswagen beetle or a loaf of Jewish rye instead of all-American white bread.

### **What Is the Ad Trying to Do?**

Usually the ad is trying to sell a product, but this is only an initial response to the question. Does it aim to persuade readers to buy something for the first time or to switch brands? The tobacco industry, for example, has consistently maintained that its ads are aimed at maintaining brand loyalty or inducing smokers to switch. (Hence a prominent campaign a generation ago for a now-forgotten cigarette brand featuring models with bruises and black eyes saying “I’d rather fight than switch.”) Yet critics have noted the themes of youth, vitality, and pleasure in these ads and have exposed documents in which marketers strategize about attracting new smokers.

What group did the advertisement try to reach? What publication did it appear in, with what kind of readership? Perhaps the most famous instance of a shift in target audience came in 1955, when the Leo Burnett agency revamped advertising for Marlboro cigarettes, formerly a minor brand marketed for their mildness and aimed at

women smokers. Burnett introduced the Marlboro Man, models of rugged cowboys on horseback, smoking “a cigarette designed for men that women like,” in the words of the manufacturer’s ad director. Sales shot up immediately. Marlboro eventually became the world’s best-selling cigarette brand. And the Marlboro Man became one of the most widely-recognized (and reviled) advertising icons.

What does the ad want the reader to do? Ultimately, of course, commercial advertising aims to win sales, but some advertisements seek primarily to gain the reader’s attention or stimulate interest in hopes that purchases will follow. On the other hand, repetitive ads for familiar products often aim to short-circuit the conscious consideration of purchase decisions. They try to stimulate the consumer to pick up the soft drink or the toothpaste or the detergent as she moves down the shopping aisles.

### **Who Is the Intended Audience?**

In the first half of the twentieth century, most national advertising portrayed and promoted a world of mass produced, standardized products. Advertising and mass consumption would erase social differences. “We are making a homogeneous” people out of a nation of immigrants, proclaimed agency executive Albert Lasker in the 1920s. In more recent decades, however, marketing’s emphasis has been on segmentation—fitting a product and its marketing strategy to the interests and needs of a distinct subgroup. The historian Robert Wiebe has even suggested that the divisions—by economic, social, cultural and even psychological characteristics—now mark the United States as a “segmented society.” [Robert Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).] Few advertisers try to sell the same thing to everybody today; too often that has meant selling to nobody.

If segmentation is the norm in advertising, then it is crucial to ask for whom an advertisement or a campaign is intended. In the 1950s, the automobile industry was a stronghold of mass production and “follow the crowd conformist marketing. The Doyle Dane Bernbach agency’s campaigns for the Volkswagen, introduced in 1959, broke out of the mold. Most frequently applauded for their visual and verbal wit and dramatic, uncluttered layout, the Volkswagen ads also stand as a triumph of segmentation marketing. (Visit the “Volkswagen Gallery” of ads at Center for Interactive Advertising at [http://www.ciadvertising.org/student\\_account/spring\\_01/adv382j/ifsg336/vwgallery.htm](http://www.ciadvertising.org/student_account/spring_01/adv382j/ifsg336/vwgallery.htm) ) To sell the VW in the late 1950s was a challenge. Volkswagen was a brand that Adolf Hitler had touted only two decades before as the German “people’s car.” It was small and spartan as American cars grew, sprouted tail fins and ornamentation, and added comfort features. Rather than reach for a broad market, the ads emphasized Volkswagen’s difference from the then-reigning “low-priced three” of Chevrolet, Ford, and Plymouth. Bold headlines proclaimed it ugly and small and boasted that its design had barely changed in years. The campaign depended on a devoted minority to make Volkswagen a marketing triumph. The Volkswagen buyer, in the eyes of marketers, shunned ostentation and took pride in practicality. One famous ad invited buyers to “Live Below Your Means,” presenting a car for people who could afford to spend more but chose restraint.

Selected by *Advertising Age* magazine as the greatest advertising of the twentieth century, the Volkswagen campaign accelerated a trend toward segmentation marketing. It is worth noting that the advertising did not exist in a marketing vacuum. Sociologist Michael Schudson pointed out that Volkswagen registrations in the United States grew

more rapidly the year before the campaign began than in its initial year. [Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 35-36.] To some extent, the vehicle, not its promotion, appealed to a certain class of auto shoppers. Nevertheless, advertising both aims at market segments and helps to shape those segments. A recent example of what can happen when a manufacturer attempts to redraw the boundaries of those communities can be seen in the anger of some Porsche owners at the sports car maker's introduction of an SUV. In what must be one of the most vehement reactions, Mike Dini told the *New York Times*, "Every S.U.V. I've seen is driven by some soccer mom on her cellphone. I hate those people, and that Porsche would throw me into that category made me speechless. Just speechless." [Mr. Dini's comment appeared on 13 December 2002, p. A1.]

### **What Strategies Are Used to Sell the Product?**

After we have a sense of what the advertiser is trying to accomplish, we can ask how they go about achieving their marketing goals. Does the advertisement offer a "reason why" to buy the product? Or is it oriented more to emotional appeals? Does the ad feature the product or does it focus on the people using it? Does it address the reader directly with suggestions or commands? Does the ad offer a reduced price or a premium? Does a celebrity provide an endorsement? Does it play on fear or anxiety or make positive appeals?

Most of the ads you examine will contain both illustrations and text. Advertising researchers devote large sums to testing consumers' responses to different colors, shapes, and layouts. Especially in recent decades, advertisements often have been composed with minute attention to detail and extensive pre-testing, so even the smallest facet of an ad may reflect a marketing strategy. But deliberate or unintentional, details of an advertisement may reveal something about the assumptions and perceptions of those who created it. A hairstyle, a print font, a border design all may have something to teach us.

How does the ad attract the reader's attention? What route do your eyes follow through the ad? How do styles fit with cultural trends? What are the implications, for instance, of the stark black-and-white photographs in many Depression-era ads that mimicked the tabloid newspapers of the day? Does the rise of "psychedelic" graphic styles in the late 1960s and 70s support Thomas Frank's contention that "counter cultural" values of personal fulfillment and immediate gratification fit post-industrial corporate marketing needs? Do earth tones in recent advertising support "green" marketing strategies of companies hoping to appeal to environmentally-conscious buyers?

Virtually every advertisement provides opportunities for this kind of analysis. Following Roland Marchand's masterful interpretation of a 1933 gasoline ad, we can examine the poses of father and son. (See the advertisement in the Roland Marchand Collection at A History Teacher's Bag of Tricks, Area 3 History and Cultures Project at <http://historyproject.ucdavis.edu/imageapp.php?Major=AD&Minor=G&SlideNum=24.00>.) The father looks fearful, fatigued, and aged. Marchand sees the boy's clenched fist as a symbol of advertisers' implicit claim that will, determination—and consumption—could overcome the Depression, but his face also shows worry and shame. The relation of the two images—the son foregrounded, the father behind him and set against a darker-colored background—suggests that the father is not only

falling behind in life's race but is also failing to provide patriarchal leadership and control.

The advertisement's words complement the image. The boy's alarm—"Gee, Pop—They're all passing you"—sits in a cartoon "balloon." Depression advertising, stripped of the subtleties of more prosperous times, often adopted the blunt, lurid style of comic strips. The text below directly addresses those who "must make your old car do a little longer" in "these days when we have to do without so many things." Taken as a whole, the language, design, and image of this advertisement evince the fear and humiliation of hard times and try to convert these worries into motives to buy.

### **What Do Ads Reveal or Conceal about an Era?**

In examining ads as historical documents, we also should look at what the ad seems to take for granted. Inferring social conditions from advertisements is not straightforward. Ads are highly selective in their depiction of the world. Notably, historical and contemporary studies abound showing that advertising's depiction of American society has been highly skewed in its portrayal of race, class, and gender.

Until a generation ago, African Americans and other people of color were virtually invisible in mainstream advertising, except when they were portrayed as servants or as exemplifying racially stereotyped behavior. Note, for example, the frequent portrayal of African Americans as children, or, tellingly, as childlike adults. (See some examples and follow the successive pages at an online exhibit by the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign Library at <http://door.library.uiuc.edu/adexhibit/racism.htm> and at the Authentic History Center site at [http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/images/diversity\\_african\\_images01.html](http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/images/diversity_african_images01.html)) Images of women in advertising have hardly been uniform, but several themes recur: the housewife ecstatic over a new cleaning product; the anxious woman fearing the loss of youthful attractiveness; the subservient spouse dependent on her assertive husband; the object of men's sexual gaze and desire. (See a 1951 cosmetics ad on the Ad\*Access site featuring one of these themes at [http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu:80/cgi-bin/nph-dweb/dynaweb/adaccess/beauty/cosmetics1950s/@Generic\\_\\_BookTextView/260%20](http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu:80/cgi-bin/nph-dweb/dynaweb/adaccess/beauty/cosmetics1950s/@Generic__BookTextView/260%20).) Advertising also gives false testimony about the actual class structure of American society. Advertising images consistently show scenes of prosperity, material comfort, even luxury well beyond the conditions of life of most Americans. The advertising industry prefers to picture the world that consumers aspire to, not the one they actually inhabit.

David Ogilvy, one of the icons of mid-century American advertising, perhaps knew better than anyone how to use snob appeal for mass audiences. His campaigns for Hathaway Shirts, for example, presented a sophisticated White Russian aristocrat mysteriously wearing a patch over one eye. For Schweppes Tonic Water, Ogilvy not only coined the term "Schweppervesence," but linked the product to a dignified British naval officer, Commander Whitehead, who extolled the mixer at elegant soirees and descended from jets onto a red carpet to associate the beverage with the heights of cosmopolitan sophistication. (Visit <http://www.ogilvy.com/memorial/html/center.htm> for a memorial Web site featuring some of Ogilvy's most famous print and television advertisements.)

Even in the striving, materialistic climate of the post-World War II boom, consumers no doubt saw the Ogilvy campaigns as something other than hard-nosed realism. Middle-class Americans would not see a shirt or a soda brand as their ticket to

high society. The advertisements were not dishonest in any direct sense. But David Ogilvy's ads presented a distorted image of society and did so in the service of selling his clients' products. Advertising, in Michael Schudson's phrase, is "capitalist realism," an art form that abstracts from and reconfigures the world as it is to fit the marketing needs of the business system. He concludes, "Advertising is capitalism's way of saying 'I love you' to itself." [Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*, 232.]

### **What Else Do You Need to Know to Analyze an Ad?**

As we see the ads, we may also be able to "see through" them to broader social and cultural realities. We can note three contexts for these documents. First of all, they are selling tools and reflect the business needs of the corporations that pay for them. Posing the questions about purposes and methods will give us insights into the role of advertising in business. Second, advertisements are cultural indicators, though distorted ones. Finally, bear in mind that ads emerge from a professional culture of the advertising industry and suggest the aspirations and anxieties of the men (and sometimes women) who create them.

To see through ads, we should also look at these creators. For about a century, major national advertisers of brand-named goods and services have employed advertising agencies to plan out their campaigns, write and design the ads, and follow a media strategy to reach targeted buyers with their sales messages. Although advertising men (and women—from early in the 1900s, the industry employed a small but significant number of women in copywriting and art design positions) have long been the butt of cynical jokes about their subservience to advertising clients, advertising took on the trappings of professionalism quickly. As Roland Marchand and others have pointed out, those who created advertisements designed them with the "secondary audience" of their peers in mind. Especially before the 1960s, when agencies diversified ethnically and opened more doors to women, the industry was socially distant from its audiences.

Viewing consumers as irrational, ill-informed, and uncultured, advertising agencies often created ads that reflected their own surroundings rather than those of the buyers they wanted to attract. The subculture of the advertising industry is an intense one. In part this follows from the enormous difficulty of judging the effectiveness of advertising. Without clear-cut measures, advertising workers turn to their peers for validation. The fact that agencies can lose accounts (and workers lose jobs) overnight also makes Madison Avenue an anxious place where fads and gurus may shape campaigns.

If you are using the web for a comprehensive historical analysis of advertising, you will likely face a significant problem. Ads on the web are usually separated from the editorial matter and the other advertisements that surrounded them. For example, in the Model Interpretation that follows, a researcher examining a print ad in an issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* could compare its themes with the short stories in the same magazine, could judge whether its style differed from other soap and beauty ads in the issue, and could evaluate its impact by considering its size and location in the magazine. Some sites (such as the online collections of Duke University's John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History) provide information about the placement and production of the images they feature, but others present ads without captions about the media they appeared in, their size, the date of their appearance, etc.

This seemingly technical problem emphasizes a broader reality that you should bear in mind. While we can glean a lot from the visual and verbal elements in advertisements, advertisements are almost always designed to be part of a media context. The placement of a print ad in a newspaper or magazine, the station, time of day, and program where a commercial appears, the traffic flow past a billboard are all intimately related to the message in the advertisement itself. Understanding advertising thus entails more than just studying advertisements, illuminating as the ads themselves can be. The web is not—at least not yet—an ideal way to put ads in their marketing and media context.

In a few cases, however, we can find Web sites that provide background information for our advertising analysis. The Library of Congress's *American Memory* site, "Fifty Years of Coca-Cola Television Advertisements," (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ccmhtml/colahome.html>) offers not only a selection of the commercials in streaming video but an essay on the agencies, advertising strategies, and technologies that Coke has used since the 1950s. The site also gives detailed attention to the making of one of the most famous television commercials ever made, 1971's "Hilltop," where young people congregated to sing, "I'd like to buy the world a Coke." One truth that emerges from the "Hilltop" material is that producing a television commercial for a major campaign is a complex undertaking indeed. An ad agency creative director's vision that an invitation to share a Coke "was actually a subtle way of saying, 'Let's keep each other company for a little while,'" led to a song, "I'd like to buy the world a Coke" and then to grandiose plans for a massive chorus of youth from around the world performing the song on a dramatic hillside. The travails of casting, locating, and filming reveal that commercial production is hardly an exact science. (For example, the female lead was discovered pushing a baby carriage down a street in Rome.) They also indicate the lengths to which major advertisers and their agencies will go to "get it right."

### **Model Interpretation: "A Skin You Love to Touch"**

With the "questions to ask" in mind, we can investigate one of the most striking advertisements of the early twentieth century. Dermatologist John Woodbury invented a soap in the 1870s. The wrapper bore his name and also his picture—a rather simian image of his face cropped above the neck. The Andrew Jergens Company bought Woodbury's Facial Soap in 1901 but continued to feature the doctor's face on the wrapper and in advertising. Woodbury's sales lagged far behind the leading facial soap. In 1910, however, the firm turned the account over to the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency. Helen Lansdowne, who headed the newly-formed Women's Editorial Department, studied the marketing problem for six months before preparing a series of advertisements focusing on "Nose pores—how to reduce them" through regular use of Woodbury's Soap. Although this approach may seem unappealing, even distasteful, today, it innovated by discussing the concerns of the consumer rather than the qualities of the producer.

The real breakthrough for Woodbury's Facial Soap, Lansdowne, and J. Walter Thompson came in 1911, with ads using the slogan "A Skin You Love to Touch." The phrase appeared over gauzily romantic paintings of elegant young ladies, happily receiving the admiring attention of dashing young gentlemen. (For an example visit <http://historyproject.ucdavis.edu/imageapp.php?Major=AD&Minor=T&SlideNum=>

102.00) Mass circulation magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal* ran these ads regularly. Sales soared in the following decade. Tame as it may now seem, several historians of advertising have called the "Skin You Love to Touch" campaign the first to use sex appeal in modern advertising.

One way to analyze the Woodbury's campaign is to ask what it says about women, beauty, and sexual appeal in American culture in the World War I era. But this question may be too broad. Woodbury's advertising showed young, white women, apparently in comfortable if not luxurious circumstances. They were unmarried, if the poses of young men leaning over them are any clue. The settings showed leisure and sociability, as indicated in the figures' attire. Can we say that the Woodbury campaign was designed only for women in those life situations? No, because advertising often appealed to the aspirations as much as the realities of people's lives. But we can surmise that the women who saw the ads, paid attention to them, and then bought the soap could at least imagine themselves as the alluring objects of male attention.

These delineations of race, age, marital status, and social class are imprecise, but they suggest some of the dimensions of a social analysis of advertisements. They begin to identify the women who sought to inhabit a skin one would love to touch. What other social facts do these ads lead us to? Broadly speaking, the ads reflect urban, middle-class America. Notions of "separate spheres" for men and women were less pervasive and less powerful than they had been in the nineteenth century. Young women, increasingly free to live away from parental restraints and less likely to be married at an early age, would find new opportunities to meet and perhaps find romance.

Historians who stress how innovative the sexual theme in the Woodbury's campaign was may exaggerate its novelty. Richard Ohmann notes that even in the 1890s, themes of physical attractiveness ranked high in magazine advertisements, especially those addressed to women. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine the Woodbury ads in mass circulation magazines a generation or even a decade earlier. Conversely, by the 1920s Woodbury's advertising—with the slogan altered to "The Skin You Love to Touch"—must have seemed more routine than risqué. So we can say that the campaign evidenced a moment of lessened restrictiveness about the expression of erotic desire. At the same time, however, the controlled and limited sexuality in the ads show the restraints that still prevailed. And we might also note that the advertisement, like many others before and especially since, promised that purchasing and using a commodity was the route to gratify that desire.

At the same time that Woodbury's ads are documents about gender relations and sexuality in early twentieth-century America, they are also evidence of the marketing situation of American consumer goods manufacturers. As historian Kathy Peiss points out, soap and cosmetic advertising helped to shift "beauty culture" from small-scale production, often by women entrepreneurs, to an industry based on the sale of mass-produced commodities. Woodbury's also reflected a transition from nineteenth-century advertising's emphasis on product-centered appeals to depictions of those who use the product. Probably the most successful American soap campaign prior to "A Skin You Love to Touch" was Procter & Gamble's advertising of Ivory Soap, beginning around 1882. Ivory was "Ninety-nine and 44/100 Percent Pure," it proclaimed. "It floats," initially a secondary appeal, soon became Ivory's primary slogan. The soap bar itself was at the center of illustrations. Here, the physical characteristics of the product—only tenuously related to its use or its users—bore the task of selling the soap. In the Woodbury's advertisements of the 1910s, the bar itself appeared only as a reminder in

the lower corner of the page, a throwback to product-centered advertising of earlier decades. The promise of the ad was in the social interactions it would inspire.

Nevertheless, the presence of the soap bar suggests that advertising and marketing transitions were usually gradual and incomplete. Although advertising featuring the product and its origins—often with a picture of the factory or of the firm’s proprietor—had lost popularity, the Woodbury’s campaign retained its link to the soap’s earlier identification with the cut-out image of John Woodbury. Early ads also informed readers they could request a sample of the soap by writing to the manufacturer, a common nineteenth-century marketing device used less often in the twentieth century. Yet despite these elements of continuity, in its provocative allusions to sexuality, its targeting of younger, single middle-class white women, and its prominence in new mass-circulation magazines like the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, “A Skin You Love to Touch” indicates some of the new conditions of advertising in Progressive Era America.

To round out our analysis of the Woodbury’s Soap advertisements, let’s also look at the people in the advertising industry who produced them. In a male-dominated advertising industry of 90 years ago, the Woodbury’s campaign stood out because it was created by women. In particular, it owed its direction to Helen Lansdowne Resor, one of the most important women in the history of American advertising. [For a brief acknowledgment of her role, see an entry in *Advertising Age’s* listing of the most influential advertising people of the twentieth century at <http://adage.com/century/people/people014.html>. Several Web sites trace her life and work, including: [http://www.ciadvertising.org/studies/student/00\\_spring/theory/asfeezor/public\\_html/helenresor/helenresor.htm](http://www.ciadvertising.org/studies/student/00_spring/theory/asfeezor/public_html/helenresor/helenresor.htm)] Following high school, Helen had found a position as an advertising copywriter in her hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio. Along with Stanley Resor, whose advertising forte was in planning and administration rather than copywriting, she joined one of the oldest and most prominent advertising agencies, J. Walter Thompson, in 1908. In early 1911, she received a promotion to the main office in New York. There, in addition to Woodbury’s, she developed successful advertising campaigns for Pond’s Cold Cream, Maxwell House Coffee, and Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix, to name a few.

Helen Lansdowne’s marriage to Stanley Resor, who rose to J. Walter Thompson’s presidency as the agency grew to be the largest in the United States, did not end her advertising career. Nor did she abandon her commitment to women’s success, particularly in the advertising business. She marched in parades for women’s suffrage and consciously set out to provide opportunities for well-educated young women to advance their careers at J. Walter Thompson. These women, who formed a separate Women’s Editorial Department, were exceptionally well-educated, ambitious, and independent-minded. Several of them were active in feminist causes. Helen Lansdowne Resor maintained that she and her female colleagues “supplied the feminine point of view,” but few, if any, lived lives that had much in common with the women they were trying to reach with their campaigns.

In *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture*, Jennifer Scanlon points out the layers of irony in the work of Resor and her contemporaries. A woman who asserted her own independence and helped others achieve it as well created a campaign that promised to make women the objects of male sexual desire. Feminists in recent decades who have turned their attention to the objectification of women in advertising may not realize that a woman created one of the prototypes of such campaigns. Nor are they likely aware that she did so in

advancing the opportunities for women like her in the new consumer society. More generally, as Scanlon observes, “These advertising women, in writing ads that provided a narrow definition of women’s lives—a definition confining women to home and market—secured their own independence, financial and otherwise.” [Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender and the Promises of Consumer Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 193.]

### **Advertisements Online**

The Web has opened up myriad possibilities for the historical study of advertising. Comprehensive collections of advertisements draw together resources that would take a single researcher an eternity to compile. Specialized Web collections—ranging from notices for escaped slaves to celebrations of recent advertising campaigns—supplement the general sites. Old advertisements formerly available only in research libraries (and not always there, since many libraries cut out advertising sections or front and rear covers before binding popular magazines) or (haphazardly) in “coffee table” books are now accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.

But this commercial cornucopia has limitations. Most collections of advertisements concentrate on print ads, and in particular those in national magazines. Access to television advertising (certainly the dominant medium since the 1950s) is more scarce; most sites feature current commercials, not older ones. Another technical problem results from the digitizing process and the graphic formats used. Sometimes, ad details don’t appear or are difficult to discern. This may serve the purpose of the Web site perfectly well, but it hinders scholarly research.

Combining these problems with the difficulty of contextualizing advertisements appearing outside their original media framework, the challenges of using the Web for advertising history should not be underestimated. Yet the Web’s resources are vast and ever-growing. Combined with research in more traditional sources, studying advertising history on the Web should be a stimulating and fruitful experience. This list of sites is intended as a brief overview, providing links to some of the largest collections of advertisements of various types, as well as a glimpse at the diversity of materials available online. Many other collections can be found in *History Matters*.

### **Ad\*Access, Digital Scriptorium, Duke University**

<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/adaccess>

This well-developed, easily navigated site presents images and information for more than 7,000 advertisements printed primarily in the United States from 1911 to 1955. Material is drawn from the J. Walter Thompson Company Competitive Advertisements Collection of the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History at Duke University. The advertisements are divided into five main subjects areas: Radio; Television; Transportation; Beauty and Hygiene; and World War II. Ads are searchable by keyword, type of illustration, and special features. “About Ad Access” provides an overview of advertising history, as well as a list of advertising repositories in the U.S.

**Adflip.com**

<http://www.adflip.com>

Adflip is a privately financed archive of more than 6,000 print advertisements published from 1940 to the present. Products advertised, including everything from dog food to DeSotos, are divided into 17 search categories, from automotive to travel, and eight themed categories such as comic books and obsolete products. The site may be searched by year, product type, and brand name. Many ads may be sent as electronic postcards for free. For each ad, the site tells when and where it appeared. This collection includes advertisements from 65 magazines and comic books, from *Archie* to *Wired*. Downloads may be slow.

**All Politics Ad Archive, CNN Online**

<http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/candidates/ad.archive>

A video collection of 11 television presidential campaign advertisements from 1952 to 1988. Includes three from the 1952 Dwight D. Eisenhower-Adlai Stevenson election and three from the 1988 battle between George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, including the infamous “Willie Horton” ad. Also offers such memorable classics as the “Daisy” ad used in Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1964 campaign against Barry Goldwater and the Ronald Reagan 1984 “Morning in America” creation. Limited but useful for studying communications and postwar American politics trends in the effective use of the media for selling presidents to the American public.

**By the People, For the People: Posters from the WPA, 1936-1943, American Memory Library of Congress**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaposters/wpahome.html>

This colorful online exhibit showcases more than 900 original Works Project Administration posters produced from 1936 to 1943 as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program to support the arts. The silkscreen, lithograph, and woodcut posters were designed to publicize health and safety programs, art exhibits, theatrical and musical performances, travel and tourism, educational programs, and community activities in 17 states and the District of Columbia. Each poster is accompanied by very brief (15-20 word) descriptions and notes on the artist, date, and place produced.

**The Commercial Closet, Commercial Closet Association**

<http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/index.html>

Advertised as “the world’s largest collection of gay advertising,” this site provides video clips, still photo storyboards, descriptive critiques, and indexing to more than 600 television and print media ad representations of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and the transgendered. Users can access ads by year; brand; company; business category; themes; region; agency; target group (gays or mainstream); and portrayals (“what the imagery/narrative conveys about gayness”) categorized as vague, neutral, positive, or negative. Although the earliest ad is from 1958, the majority are drawn from the 1990s. Creator Michael Wilke, a business journalist, notes that “the project is also creating a historic document that charts the burlesquing of the gay community and the move toward more positive and inclusive portrayals.”

**Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850-1920, Duke University Digital Scriptorium**

<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/ea/>

Contains more than 9,000 advertising items and publications from 1850 to 1920. Selected items illustrate the rise of consumer culture in America from the mid-nineteenth century and the development of a professional advertising industry. The images are grouped into 11 categories: advertising ephemera (trade cards, calendars, almanacs, postcards); broadsides for placement on walls, fences, and sides of buildings; advertising cookbooks from food companies and appliance manufacturers; early advertising publications created by agencies to promote the concepts and methods of the advertising industry; J. Walter Thompson Company "House Ads," promotional literature from the oldest advertising agency in the U.S.; Kodakiana collection of some of the earliest Kodak print advertisements; Lever Brothers Lux (soap) advertisements; outdoor advertising; and tobacco advertisements. Each image includes production information such as the date issued, advertising agency, and product company.

**Fifty Years of Coca Cola Advertisements, Library of Congress American Memory**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ccmhtml/colahome.html>

Highlights of Coca-Cola television advertisements, including 50 commercials, broadcast outtakes, and "experimental footage reflecting the historical development of television advertising for a major commercial product." There are five examples of stop-motion advertisements from the mid-1950s, 18 experiments with color and lighting for television ads from 1964, and well-known commercials, such as the "Hilltop" commercial featuring the song "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" (1971). Also offers the "Mean Joe Greene" commercial (1979); the first "Polar Bear" commercial (1993); the "Snowflake" commercial (1999); and "First Experience," an international commercial filmed in Morocco (1999).

**A History Teacher's Bag of Tricks, Area 3 History and Cultures Project**

<http://marchand.ucdavis.edu/>

This memorial to Roland Marchand, a well-known historian of advertising and popular culture, includes a slide library with more than 3,000 advertisements drawn from Marchand's collection. Each image includes a citation and many also offer Marchand's notes. The images are organized into 31 subcategories, from "aging" to "class and status" from "technique" to "women."

**Library of American Broadcasting Sound Bites, University of Maryland Libraries**

<http://www.lib.umd.edu/LAB/AUDIO/soundbites.html>

Part of the Radio Advertising Bureau Collection, this site offers a sample of 13 audio files of radio commercials from the late 1950s through the early 1960s. The Bureau, a national trade organization, was formed in 1950 (as the Broadcast Advertisers Bureau) to promote radio as a medium for advertisers. The samples are available in .WAV and .AIFF include ads for toothpaste, cold medicine, soft drinks, gasoline, beer, cigarettes, cookies, automobiles, dog food, deodorant, and pimple cream.

**Phillip Morris Advertising Archive, Philip Morris Incorporated**

<http://www.pmadarchive.com/>

More than 55,000 color images of tobacco advertisements, dating back to 1909, are now available on this site, created as a stipulation of the Master Settlement Agreement with

the tobacco industry. In addition, more than 26 million pages of documents concerning “research, manufacturing, marketing, advertising and sales of cigarettes, among other topics” are provided in linked sites to the four tobacco companies involved (Philip Morris, R. J. Reynolds, Lorillard, and Brown and Williamson) and to two industry organizations (the Tobacco Institute and the Council for Tobacco Research). Ads and documents are accessible by date, brand name, title words, and individuals mentioned, among other searchable fields. Images may be magnified and rotated.

### **Virginia Runaways Project, University of Virginia**

<http://www.wise.virginia.edu/history/runaways/>

Provides full transcriptions and images of more than 2,200 newspaper advertisements regarding runaway slaves, mostly from the Williamsburg *Virginia Gazette*, between 1736 and 1776. Includes ads placed by owners and overseers for runaways as well as ads for captured runaway or suspected runaway slaves placed by sheriffs and other governmental officials. In addition, the site’s creators have included ads for runaway servants and sailors as well as military deserters, to offer “a unique look at the lower orders in eighteenth-century Virginia.” Searchable by any words appearing in ads.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972.

Berger, an artist, critic, and novelist, presents insights about imagery and how we view it. This is an influential work that analyzes advertising with the tools of both an art critic and a cultural historian.

Ewen, Stuart. *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977.

A stimulating and original study that views the advertising as crucial to the displacement of class conflict and inculcation of consumer consciousness when distribution, rather than production, became the fundamental problem of capitalism.

Fox, Stephen R. *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators*. New York: Morrow, 1984.

A popular and well-informed overview that contends that at times advertising reflected American culture, at other times helped to shape it.

Frank, Thomas C. *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counter Culture and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

A biting (and very funny) critique of advertising and marketing in the sixties and beyond. Frank contends that businesses fostered seemingly-radical themes of individual freedom and revolt against conformity because they fit corporate interests.

Glickman, Lawrence B., ed. *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.

An excellent collection of writings on consumption ranging from theoretical insights to empirical studies and covering topics dealing with early European-Native American contact to contemporary issues.

Goodrum, Charles and Helen Dalrymple. *Advertising in America: The First Two Hundred Years*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990.

A lavishly illustrated history of American advertising. Although the authors' tone is generally positive, their book is well-researched and they include some pointed criticism of advertising practices.

Laird, Pamela Walker. *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

A carefully researched study of advertising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Laird emphasizes the theme of progress—economic and cultural—that advertisements espoused and that advertising practitioners adopted as an ideology.

Lears, Jackson. *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.

An innovative and learned survey. Less interested in the business context of advertising, Lears maintains that we have lost a sense of the magical and enchanted properties of the material world as advertising offers us an abundance associated with the mechanistic and confining world of the factory and the office.

McLuhan, Marshall. *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1951.

A pioneering work by the provocative and controversial Canadian media expert. In this early work, McLuhan presents stimulating, sometimes mystifying, commentary on advertising imagery in mid-twentieth century America.

Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Marchand's study of advertising in the 1920s and 1930s is a model for its integration of business and cultural history and for its masterful analysis of both the copy and the artwork of magazine advertisements of that era. He was also the author of the posthumously-published *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), which has many insights on advertising campaigns to enhance corporate reputations.

Ohmann, Richard. *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets and Class at the Turn of the Century*. London and New York: Verso, 1996.

In his analysis of new mass-circulation magazines in the 1890s, Ohmann discusses how their emergence both reflected and promoted the formation of a new kind of middle class in the United States. Advertising, both as the economic foundation for these magazines and as a molder of class and culture, figures prominently in his analysis.

Pope, Daniel. *The Making of Modern Advertising*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

This book views advertising from the standpoint of business history. It contends that the basic structures of American advertising were molded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the rise of big business.

Presbrey, Frank. *The History and Development of Advertising*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1929.

A celebratory history by an advertising man. Although it lacks a scholarly approach, it is full of information and contains many illustrations.

Scanlon, Jennifer. *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender and the Promises of Consumer Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

An intriguing recent study that stresses the gendered nature of consumer culture. Scanlon demonstrates that advertisements—as well as the fiction and advice in America's first mass-circulation women's magazine—portrayed a society where women would find meaning and satisfaction in their lives through consumption.

Schudson, Michael. *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.

Schudson, an historical sociologist, raises significant challenges to those who see advertising as an all-powerful social force.

Strasser, Susan. *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1989.

Strasser places the development of national advertising in its marketing context, stressing its role in the development of mass produced, standardized products.

