

The Popularized “Housewife” in Advertisements

by

Michael Naughton

In the periods before, during, and after World War II, popular magazine advertisements provided a glimpse into the outside world for readers. While seeing what items the advertisers wanted them to purchase, women also saw in the advertisements how other women acted and lived in an idealized world. Obviously, the scenes depicted in these ads were not representative of real life, yet many women forgivably believed that they, too, should live in the ways the ads portrayed women to live. The advertisements of household products in the immediate post-WWII period established the image of the housewife, representing women whose collective job was entirely a domestic one. The advertisers did this by first creating the housewife as women's expected full-time job, then making the job look sexy and appealing, and finally allowing women to see themselves in those same roles.

While the United States was supplying mostly male troops to fight in WWII, the government used propaganda to get women into the jobs men had left behind. This propaganda also spilled into advertisements portraying "Rosie the Riveter," a woman working in the factory jobs to support the war effort. As soon as the war ended, however, and men came home searching for work, a new set of propaganda arose, this time urging women to go back to the home. While the image of the homemaker began replacing Rosie the Riveter as the national female model in advertisements, a new, post-war culture was growing. The culture became increasingly domestic, as the return to a booming peacetime economy created a huge market for consumer goods.¹ The home, family, and children were at the center of this culture, and advertisements portrayed these trends.²

¹ Lois W. Banner, Women in Modern America, A Brief History (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 215.

² Carolyn Hitch, The Girl on the Magazine Cover (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 148

The woman, as the spender of this new household unit, understandably became the target of many consumer products.

Advertisements, by their very nature, did not serve only to sell an item. They, along with other articles or radio broadcasts of the time, showed the public how other people in the world acted. In essence, a successful advertisement strove to turn the consumer into the eager buyer portrayed in the ads.³ Therefore, whether intentionally or not, the creators of household product ads made it appear that the full time job of a woman should be a housewife. As opposed to what many people believed, these images of women in the home did not accurately represent women of the time; after the war, women were still entering the workforce at a very high rate.⁴

The advertisements communicated that this ‘housewife’ role was the normal, full-time job of all women through many techniques. One way they did this was by exhibiting all the numerous tasks expected of housewives. In an ad for NIL, a spray meant to “NIL odors” around the house, there is a collection of seven areas of the house, with a cartoonish-looking housewife spraying the NIL product in each. These seven areas represent a huge amount of work for this housewife. The caption under one of these scenes even reads, “A clean, odorless toilet bowl is a sign of a fastidious housewife.”⁵ The huge task of keeping the entire house tidy discourages women from performing any other work. This ad also represents every one of the tasks a housewife is supposed to accomplish, creating a virtual “job description” right here in the advertisement. The ad points out that NIL can kill odors in the nursery, kitchen, and

³ Glenna Matthews, *“Just a Housewife”: the Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1987), 148.

⁴ Banner, 252

⁵ *Life*, “NIL ad,” Jun 16 1947, 121

living room, insinuating that it is the housewife's job to maintain cleanliness in all these areas.

Not only did these advertisements portray the many tasks in a housewife's job, but many also made housewives feel they had to compete with one another. In an ad for a General Electric dishwasher, the text reads, "Even sticky pots come out sparkling clean!" and "Your kitchen's cleaner all day because G-E holds (and hides) dirty dishes and utensils as you use them."⁶ From whom would these women have felt they needed to hide their 'dirty dishes?' Obviously, these women would have been hiding their dishes not from their husbands, or children, but instead from their neighbors. This ad emphasizes an idea that these women must be competing to have better functioning homes than their neighbors, the other housewives. Moreover, in an ad for Hotpoint Appliances, the advertisers showed this competition was worldwide for housewives. It reads, "All (appliances) are custom-matched to make your kitchen and home laundry one of the most beautiful and most efficient in America."⁷ These advertisements made it appear that having the best-run house was incredibly important, but to compete, women would have needed to devote all of their time cleaning and working as housewives.

These ads also showed that women, as full-time housewives, were expected to be full-time servants for their husbands. An ad for Schlitz Beer summarizes this expectation fully, as the image shows a woman cooking food for her husband. She has burned the food and is quite upset that she has ruined her husband's dinner. Obviously, it is not acceptable that she has burned the food, since the text later reads, "There's hope for any

⁶ *Life*, "General Electric Ad," Feb 11 1952, 7

⁷ *Life*, "Hotpoint Appliances Ad," Feb 11 1952, 60-61

young bride who knows her man well enough to serve him Schlitz beer.”⁸ Even though this is a beer ad, the image of women serving men was so well known that the advertisers needed not show beer in the scene; instead, they showed a woman in her understood role, serving her “man of the house.” The theme of ‘time saving,’ closely related to serving, is also present in many ads of the time. The title of a Norge Appliance ad reads, “Think first of yourself,” and the text reads, “You women – always thinking of others. But when it comes to. . . Norge Appliances, you will find the answer to your dreams in lightened domestic duties.”⁹ The expectation, as the ad first implies, was not that the women would use this time for themselves; instead, time would free up so that they could serve their husbands even more. Also, in a pre-rinsing dishwasher ad, the expectation visually presents itself once again: while the man lounges comfortably in the living room, the housewife, almost out of sight, is rinsing dishes after supper. With images like these flooding magazines, it becomes clear how quickly women understood their serving role in marriage, and part of their job description was to always make their husbands happy.

In addition, the ads in the post-war era showed that women, in their housewife role, had immense responsibilities toward their children. Advertisements often warned women directly about their great responsibility as buyers, for purchasing the wrong products would bring harm to their children, who are at the center of the new baby-boom culture.¹⁰ Only women who were informed of these dangers, as it were, could be the best housewives and mothers, and images stressed this fact.¹¹ For example, in a Miss Curity Bandage ad, an information box on the ad itself explains what mothers should do in case

⁸ *Life*, “Schlitz Beer Ad,” Feb 4 1952, 90

⁹ *Life*, “Norge Appliance Ad,” Jun 16 1947, 69

¹⁰ Hitch, 172

of burns. This creates great responsibility for women, making them believe that they must always have been on call in case something happened to their ‘helpless’ children. This ad also shows how important this housewife job really was, as the text reads, “Use the same first-aid dressings most leading hospitals do – Curity.”¹² Curity blatantly argued that this housewife job was as important as that of an emergency room worker. Any woman following these guidelines, then, had this immensely important housewife task as her number one priority.

Finally, the ads show that the housewife, like any man with an occupation, had a certain uniform and office. The ads showed women doing housework and wearing aprons, skirts, high heels, and pearls. Men realized the importance of this uniform and what it represented; one newspaper opinion read, “It is only since some of the girls began to climb out of the Hoover aprons and into the Chanel and Dior suits . . . that the boys have gone in for headshakings and mutterings . . . about woman’s place being in the home.”¹³ The ads also showed that women were expected to be in this ‘professional uniform’ at all times. In a Postum coffee ad, while the man has just woken up and is in his pajamas, the woman is already in a professional-looking nightgown that looks like housewife-wear.¹⁴ Even in terms of dress, society expected women to be presentable housewives at all times. Moreover, the fact that ads almost always represented women in the kitchen, as in the GE pre-rinsing dishwasher ad, indicates the kitchen was their office. The architecture of the kitchen, as a white box separated from the public, set up a work

¹¹ Daniel Delis Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman 1900-1999* (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2002) 79

¹² *Life* “Curity Ad,” Feb 4 1952, 102

¹³ “Woman in the Gay Flannel Suit,” Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, *New York Times*, 29 Jan 1956, 196.

¹⁴ *Life* “Potsum Ad,” Sept 4 1950, 91

area analogous to offices of white-collar middle-class men.¹⁵ In a Hotpoint Appliance ad, for instance, the kitchen is clean, white, shiny, and very pleasant-looking. The kitchen – the work area – completely surrounds the housewife with appliances, flowers, and white cabinets, indicating that women should spend their time here to make it look so pleasant and clean. The establishment of job elements, like uniforms and offices, solidified that the housewife was, indeed, as important a job as any other was.

Once this job had been established, the ads next strove to convince women that it was also the job for them. Advertisers needed to make this task look appealing and sexy so they could sell their domestic products. For instance, Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, a woman heading an advertising agency, argued,

“I was dismayed to learn . . . the average woman feels there is something demeaning about caring for a home and that she feels defeated when she has to write down her occupation as housewife. That’s feminist propaganda . . . don’t you believe one word of it.”¹⁶

It was apparent that advertisers like Fitz-Gibbon wanted women to accept their positions as housewives, so ads also made women who performed these tasks appear attractive and happy. Sara Evans, the author of Born for Liberty, proposes that sexuality arose in advertisements only when the woman portrayed was married; the ads made it sexy to be married or a mother.¹⁷ For instance, in a Scot tissue ad, the housewife is intimately caring for her child. She is very beautiful, smiling, and undoubtedly shown in an appealing manner.¹⁸ Women, of course, would like to appear sexy and desirable for their husbands, and ads show them that one surefire way to become sexy would be to become housewives. They also would have wanted to know their work would be

¹⁵ Evans, 249

¹⁶ Fitz-Gibbon, *New York Times*

¹⁷ Evans, 248

rewarding; in the Hotpoint appliance ad, the woman is practically jumping with excitement to see her dishes are clean.¹⁹ It must have been hard for woman to reject a job that intentionally appeared so appealing and fun.

The final tactic advertisers utilized to convince women to take up housework as their occupation was craftily making the reader see herself in that role. First, to do this, advertisers illustrated universal and slightly vague scenes. Today, there are a few illustrated ads, for we use celebrities or shots of real people to sell products. Illustration was the standard in the 50's, however, and it was quite effective at manipulating woman's perceptions. For example, the housewife cleaning dishes in the Hotpoint appliance ad is illustrated, and her head is turning away from us. Any woman, with some imagination, could wishfully project herself in the illustrated housewife's position.²⁰ In the Ms. Curity ad, on the other hand, the artists decided not even to draw the housewife's face, as we can only see her helping hand offering a bandage to a crying child.²¹ This lack of specificity not only serves to allow women to see themselves as these housewives, but it also creates a sense of universality, or that every woman in the world is doing the same as these illustrated women are. And again, as all the images in magazines served as views to the outside world for readers, a woman in the Cold War era would not have wished to appear different from these women she saw. These ads, however, did not represent the reality for women by any means, as many indeed had jobs outside the home. However, the lasting housewife image was what remained imprinted in the minds of all, convincing society that the home was and had always been the correct place for women.

¹⁸ *Life*, "Scot Tissue Ad," Feb 4 1952, 97

¹⁹ *Life*, "Hotpoint Appliance Ad," Feb. 11 1952, 60-61

²⁰ *Life*, "Hotpoint Appliance Ad," Feb 11 1952, 60-61

²¹ *Life* "Curity Ad," Feb 4 1952, 102

Advertisements of household products after W.W.II created the image of the housewife as the expected job for women. They did this by outlining the various tasks a housewife would have to deal with, portraying competition with other housewives, showing how women should serve their husbands and children, and demonstrating that housewives, like many other occupations, also have uniforms and offices. In addition, after the ads established this as a woman's expected job, they made it appear irresistible through sex appeal and universality in the ads. One can argue that the tasks of housewives were necessary for the functioning of the family unit. Still, these tasks were often grueling and they restricted women's creativity to the confines of the house. Advertisements, in trying to sell their products, created the idea that women should be locked in these domestic prisons throughout the 50's; it would take a revolution to release them, both physically and mentally.

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