ADVERTISING IN AMERICA

THE FIRST 200 YEARS

CHARLES GOODRUM

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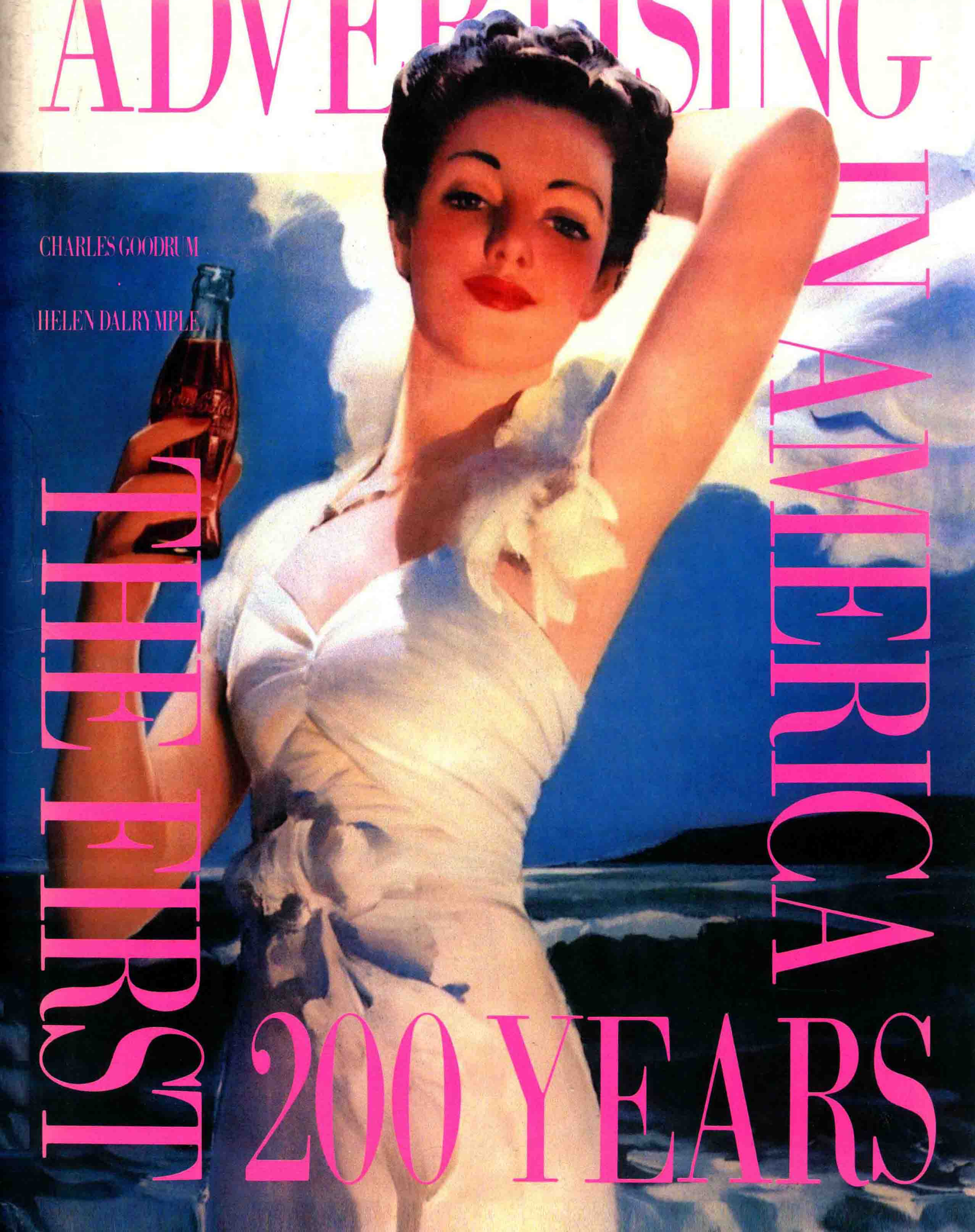
HELEN DALRYMPLE



Charles Goodrum and Helen Dalrymple

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Harry N. Abrams, Inc., *Publishers,* New York

Editor: Edith M. Pavese
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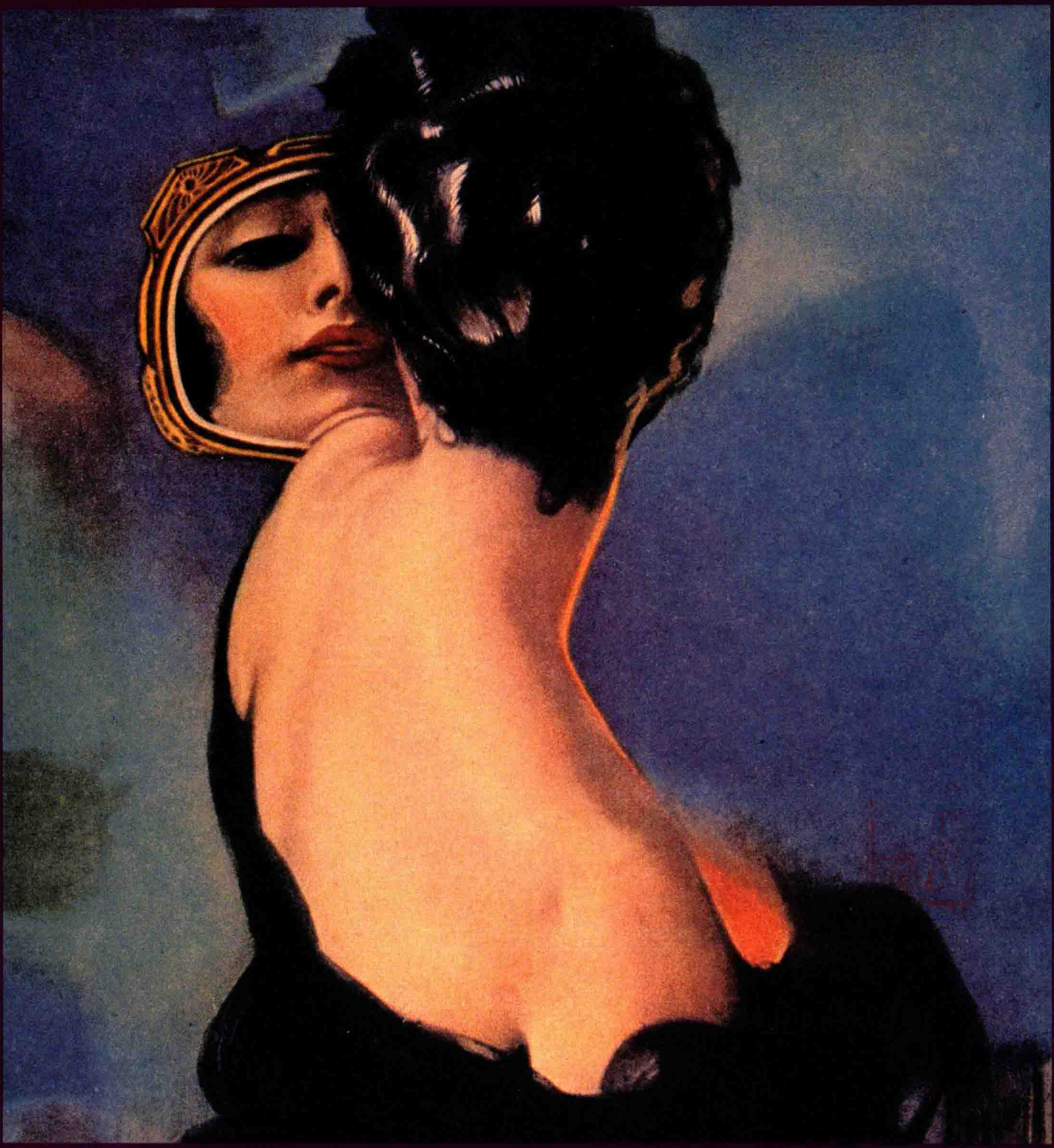

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Introduction

WE ARE ABOUT TO LOOK at two hundred years of American advertising.

There are few things we see more often or feel more strongly about than the endless stream of ads sprayed at us night and day. We are indignant every evening when our meal and news are interrupted by pitches about human ills we wouldn't discuss in a locker room, much less at our dinner tables. We are insulted by slice-of-life vignettes on the whiteness of towels or the wonders of a breakfast food that seem to assume we are childish idiots on our first day out of the cave. Yet we carefully examine the ads' hints on the latest in women's clothing fashion, about men's shaving gadgets, and everybody's electronic equipment, new housing, travel, and books. It's hard to generalize. When we're looking for an apartment, we're grateful for the want ads, but when we open our magazines we're furious at the sheaves of cardboard that must be dealt with before we can read the words we paid our money for. In this book, we're going to examine what's behind all of these ironies, but with such a controversial topic, it's only fair to declare the rules by which we're going to play right at the start.

First off, the above is about all the time we're going to spend viewing with alarm. It is foolish to act as if advertising is some kind of a threat to Western civilization and if only we would face up to it we could get it under control, maybe even make it go away. That's nonsense, and we have neither the time nor the space to belabor it. In this book we're going to look at how advertising got the way it is today, and how it works. We're not going to worry about whether it's good or bad.

Admittedly it is filled with paradox and anomaly. At one point in our research we had a chapter entitled, "They Must Think We're Stupid" into which we accumulated examples of assaults on our intelligence, taste, credulity, and good sense. In no time at all it was so filled with examples that we abandoned it; it was overwhelming all the other aspects we were trying to explore. But it did force us to ask, What is there about this endeavor that seems to strain so many expected givens? Why are there so many ironies? And from this exercise came the various areas we will explore in the coming chapters. Note some of the oddities:

Many of Us Are Threatened by Advertising

We are suspicious of it, even frightened. Why? We're afraid

1880

This is typical patent medicine advertising. Today we sell drugs for slimming; in Grove's day healthy equalled plump. Since there was as yet no way to get color register in mass-produced newspapers or magazines, colored ads came from hand-fed lithograph and job presses. Thus advertising in color was limited to trade cards, multi-sheet posters, and counter cards like this one.

A good example of "advertising as cultural history." The costume is clearly stated, the layout shows the influence of the then-recent Art Nouveau style, and the overall design of the ad seems "modern" albeit it is eighty years old. The slogan "That Highest Expectations meet Fulfilment," is, however, a long way from "Coke is it."

c.1907

the advertisers know too much about us for our own good. Do they really? They certainly have spent a vast amount of time, money, and energy counting us and filing what we do. They've found such items as:

Forty percent of housewives do not put the spread on the bed in the morning when they make it.

Women will look at a picture of a nude woman longer than a man will. (Gloria Steinem says they are seeking comparison.)

Twenty-five percent of all food is eaten between meals.

Women in New York City use nearly 30 times as much makeup as those living in Vermont.

Eighty percent of all beer is drunk by 20 percent of the beer drinkers.

Women buy 45 percent of all Chevrolets.

The average person spends 3.2 seconds reading a magazine page.

Shoppers will pick up a package with a picture on it faster than if it simply has a design.

Shoppers will buy a round package faster than a square one.

Teenage girls now spend an annual average of $1,500 each in grocery stores (because 70 percent of teenage girls have working mothers who have their daughters do the shopping while the mothers are at work).

1913

This is advertising as the educator of new technology. Here, thirty years before the ordinary citizen had heard of air conditioning, General Electric is promoting a new appliance which proved to be a godsend to urban man.

Note the assurance that the fan is "readily attached to any lamp socket." When existing houses or apartments were first wired, only the drop light wire was installed; wall outlets did not come for another decade or more. The ad contains the copywriters' traditional line, "gives a lifetime of satisfactory service." Little did they know. There are still thousands of these actual fans working without difficulties seventy-five years later.

Our fear that the advertisers can make us think and buy anything they want proves to be somewhat excessive. Studies made outside the advertising world showed that 75 percent of all advertising is either ignored or forgotten. The first full year after tobacco advertising was taken off TV, the sales of cigarettes went up 3 percent and the manufacturers were able to save $70 million that they'd spent on commercials just two years before.

We Don't Believe What We See in Ads

The Victorian lady said, "It must be good; the advertisement spoke so highly of it." A contemporary ad director is shaken when his son shows him a picture in the latest magazine and asks, "Is this true or is it an ad, Dad?" In 1974 a major poll revealed that 59 percent of the public regarded advertising as dishonest; in 1986 the Ogilvy & Mather agency tried it again and found that 70 percent now believed that ads, in general, do not "present an honest picture of the products advertised." Yet another poll asked what kinds of ads had led them astray, and the answer was overwhelmingly, "Not me. I've never been taken in, but they're dangerous to other people."

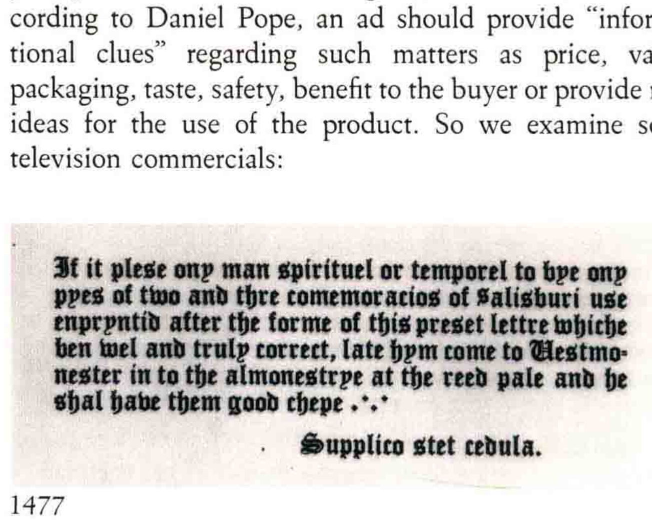
Who then? "Elderly people." Your mother or father? "Heavens no. They're more cynical than I am." Children? "Hardly. Saturday morning television commercials have conditioned them never to believe anything they see in ads." How so? "No toy is ever as big, or as dramatic, or does such wonderful things as they're promised. Once they've been disappointed three times, they discount anything they hear on the tube forever." Then who is being taken in? "Well, people on farms and in the ghetto."

So Why Is There So Much Appalling Advertising?

Mainly, we are convinced, because no one knows what a really good advertisement looks like. Once the violin and the bicycle were invented, there wasn't too much more you could do to improve them. But with an advertisement, there is an endless, almost metaphysical number of ways it can be created but no way of knowing which one is best—or even which one works at all.

This seems impossible to believe, but it is so. One of the classic quotes in advertising (it has been attributed to John Wanamaker in this country and Lord Leverhulme in England) is: "I am certain that half of the money I spend on advertising is completely wasted. The trouble is, I don't know which half." If this was bad in Wanamaker's time, think what it is like when you spend $1.3 billion a year as Procter & Gamble does. If the half that is wasted out of this could be put in the stockholders' pockets, it would make a nice start toward a vacation in Cannes.

Consider this catechism: Why do you advertise? To sell your product. What should a good advertisement do? According to Daniel Pope, an ad should provide "informational clues" regarding such matters as price, value, packaging, taste, safety, benefit to the buyer or provide new ideas for the use of the product. So we examine some television commercials:


If it plese ony man spirituel or temporel to bye ony pyes of two and thre comemoracios of salisburi use enpryntid after the forme of this preset lettre whiche ben wel and truly correct, late hym come to westmonester in to the almonestrye at the reed pale and he shal have them good chepe .·.·

Supplico stet cedula.

1477

This is the first ad in English; it was written by William Caxton, and tells us that he is offering a volume of Easter rules. The books are for sale at his printshop under the sign of the red shield in the Westminster building where welfare payments are passed out. There the books can be had "good cheap."

One of the most famous advertising campaigns of all time is "Coke is it." That's all; that's it. It ran for years and that is all that was ever said. When General Motors was under its greatest pressure by Japanese carmakers to explain why its cars drove better, lasted longer, were safer, and got better mileage than the imports, it threw massive resources into a saturation campaign based on the single, repeated statement: "Listen to the heartbeat, Listen to the heartbeat, Listen to the heartbeat . . . of America." Many of the television commercials in the series showed only a single, one-second silhouette of the product, in this case, a Chevrolet. (In a recent year, by the way, Chevrolet spent over $150 million on advertising, which worked out to $71 per car sold. Not too bad considering the competition, but was it the advertising that sold the car or . . . ?)

The early soap manufacturers would have said that "Coke is it" was plenty. Pears' soap, promptly copied by Ivory, believed that the idea was simply to put the word Pears' (and then Ivory) in front of the reader again and again and again. You didn't have to tell what Ivory was or what it did just so it was in every magazine and every paper at least once a month—or week—forever. "Keep the Name before the People."

The N.W. Ayer ad agency's motto was, "Keeping everlastingly at it brings success." Bell Telephone believed this for almost a century even when the product it was selling was a monopoly, but they hoped to make Ma Bell so much a part of our consciousness that we would never challenge its role. Scholars presently studying what led to the painful break-up of AT&T lay much of the blame on the house advertising which, for example, Steve Coll charges against the flood of words which "impressed a lot of people in Washington with a kind of arrogance, [so] that nobody believed them." If this is so, Ma Bell should have followed William A. Shryer's advice from the 1920s: "The law of diminishing returns . . . is the real law of advertising." He said that you gradually convinced the customer "until the buying threshold was crossed"—then you stopped the campaign. After that your ad money was simply going down the drain. How could you tell when the threshold had been reached for the greatest number of customers? He finally concluded that a good manager could "just feel it in his bones."

But Can't Research and Polling Tell Which Ads "Worked" and Which Didn't?

No, unfortunately, they can't. There is still no way to determine whether it was the current campaign that got the product sold, or residue from previous campaigns. Was it the innovative presentation that got the customer out of his chair, or the economic situation, his colleagues' advice, his wife's impatience, or simply that the old one wore out right now and he "always" buys that brand. (Seventy percent of owners of anything re-buy another one just like the last one. Either satisfaction or habit.)

Well, at least the famous ads that we know and remember worked. Recall Alka-Seltzer's "I can't believe I ate the whole thing!" series? Sorry. Not a good example. The more those ads ran, the more Pepto-Bismol was sold. We all laughed at the miserable victim, but when we became miserable ourselves we thought, "Alka-Seltzer thinks it's all a big joke and doesn't take my symptoms seriously. I feel awful. I want something serious to fix me up. Better buy Pepto-Bismol. All it ever promises is to coat and soothe my stomach walls, and boy, do my stomach walls need soothing." Remember how surprised we were when the Alka-Seltzer series was abruptly cancelled? (The lying Joe Isuzu car salesman was the most remembered of all television commercials two years running with the highest "sympathetic" response from the viewers researched. During the same two years, the number of Isuzu cars actually sold sagged steadily downward.)

1926

A typical ad of the 1920s–1930s. The panel tells a story, a "slice-of-life vignette." The sales message goes straight to the throat to get your attention, load your guilt, and get you to send in your payment. This was before Social Security, however, and a lapsed policy could indeed have tragic consequences—though not necessarily the orphan asylum.

It is enough to make an ad director weep. David Ogilvy, one of the most powerful of these himself, was bemused by Harry McMahan's analysis of the winners of the prestigious Clio Awards. The Clios identify the finest television commercials each year, and Ogilvy reports: "Agencies that won four of the Clios had lost the accounts. Another Clio winner was out of business. Another Clio winner had taken its budget out of TV. Another Clio winner had given half his account to another agency. Another refused to put his winning entry on the air. Of 81 television classics picked by the Clio festival in previous years, 36 of the agencies involved had either lost the account or gone out of business."

Well Then How Should a Perfect Ad Look?

People have been trying to design the perfect advertisement for centuries. The earliest advertisement in English was written by William Caxton in 1477 to sell a prayer book he'd published on his new press in Westminster Abbey. A facsimile of the ad appears on page 8.

Fine copywriting skills turn up early in the American story. Here's one written by Paul Revere in 1768 to sell his own brand of false teeth:

> Whereas many Persons are so unfortunate as to lose their fore-teeth by Accident, and otherways, to their great detriment not only in looks, but speaking both in Public and Private:—This is to inform all such, that they may have them re-placed with artificial Ones that look as well as the Natural, and answers the End of Speaking to all Intents, by PAUL REVERE, Goldsmith, near the Head of Dr. Clarke's Wharf, Boston.

As James Playsted Wood used to say, note the "modern" technique of his copy: He stresses the improvement of the buyer's "looks" first, how it will improve his public and private speaking second, and avoids the unglamorous gnawing of food altogether.

In the coming chapters, we'll see examples of really fine, honest, innovative ads through all the two hundred years, but as we searched the rows of magazines, what struck us most forcibly was the amount of repetition that occurred within any time period. In any decade, "they all seem to look alike" and from this comes a fundamental discovery: Since no one knows how a good advertisement really should look, whenever anybody thinks of one that appears to work, everyone copies it constantly—until the readers become first numb and then resentful. (But note that we customers are equally to blame for this endless duplication. Nowadays with so much money at stake, all ads and commercials are tested ad nauseum. Soap commercials, for example, are screened before club groups, church organizations, and faculty wives. At every showing, at least three possible ads are shown ranging from the "arty" to the hard sell, and time after time the review groups vote for those "hidden camera" routines showing the woman astonished that the whitest stack of towels was washed with New and Improved Bubbly. We too expect an ad to look like all the other ads we know.)

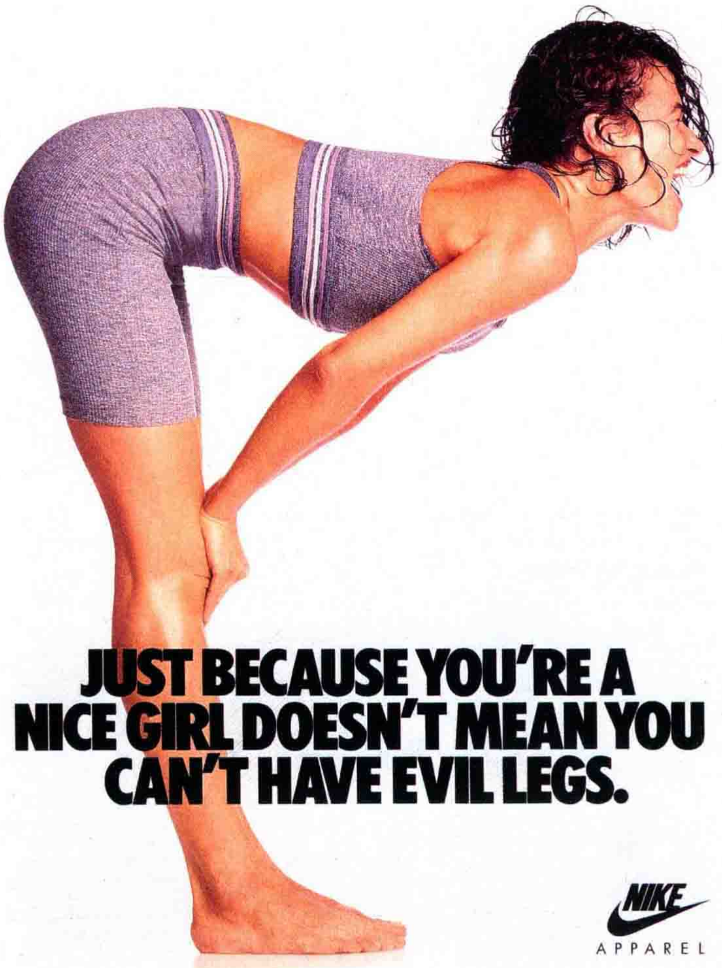
As we will see, the ubiquitous Benjamin Franklin and a man by the name of George P. Rowell invented the way an ad looked in the early days of the Republic. A couple of generations later P.T. Barnum revolutionized the pioneer image. Two generations more and the patent medicine kings F.G. Kinsman and J.C. Ayer did it again. Then with the twentieth century the imitating comes faster. All automobile ads looked alike in the Twenties, Depression advertising looks like it was rubber stamped (among other things, refrigerators are always examined by men in tuxedos and women in evening gowns). In our day, innovators like William Bernbach with his Volkswagen ads, Calvin Klein with his perfume and blue jeans, and Claymation with its dancing raisins make a creative breakthrough, and then everyone else mirrors that one image until somebody gets a new idea and the profession stampedes to copy the new approach. Why does this happen? Three reasons at least: 1) Advertising now costs so much everyone wants to go with a sure thing; 2) The man paying the bill says, "I want an ad just like X; it looks great and my wife likes it"; and 3) There aren't that many Bernbachs and Kleins and Della Feminas to go around.

Enough of This for the Moment

The above ironies and paradoxes are simply samples of the kinds of things we will discover in the following chapters. What are we looking for in this book? Primarily how advertising got to be what it is in America. We're trying to find out how it has influenced our taste, the way we live, the places and clothes we live in. We will try to discover these matters in the following steps:

1963

Bill Bernbach's famous Volkswagen campaign began in 1959 and soon symbolized the "creative advertising" approach of the 1960s. It embraced humor, single-point sales emphasis, dramatic layout, and honesty. Not only did it chalk up one of the highest readerships of any ad campaign ever, but it sold cars.



1988

Advertising as social history can only be carried so far. Sometimes it reflects the way things were; usually it shows how the viewers of the time hoped they would be. It can be trusted to reveal aspirations—the wish book—but not necessarily reality. Here we see the hopes of Nike's target audience in the 1980s; it would have been less successful with the lady on page 7.

We'll start with a short, fast history of the whole topic so that we have established a timeline on which to hang more detailed examinations of parts of it. (The most astonishing thing we'll discover about the historical aspect of the subject is that almost everything that's used in today's advertising—all the ways the seller tries to get our attention and tries to convince us to buy his product—had been tried, perfected, and locked into the national perception of "how an advertisement looks" well over a hundred years ago. The ideas that were tried, failed, discarded, and haven't been used again, are as interesting as what seems to have worked.)

We will then examine some of the original shakedown experiments. Cereals, soap, and sex. And then exhume the first advertisements for some of the remarkably ancient products we still see advertised on tonight's television. Is there some great truth in the fact that a good majority of these started out designed for a completely different purpose from what we use them for today?

We will next note how ads for different kinds of products each have a theme and a tempo of their own—ways to change our appearance, travel, nudity or the lack of it, and special devices whose selling techniques have been refined and repeated through the years until they've become as ritualized as a religious litany. We meet these ancient protocols in the way we're sold cosmetics, automobiles, cigarettes, and underwear.

The ad makers have gotten very good at telling us their various stories, but occasionally they've overshot. We will look at some of their excesses at which we flinch and say, Oh no! They wouldn't dare. But they did. A gallery of shudders.

We will be looking at print images, not television. The printed ad spans the full two hundred years, the video only the last forty but it represents a whole world of its own and deserves a separate book to examine its techniques and idiosyncrasies. For comparison purposes, what TV sells and how it does it will be noted in the text but not in the images.

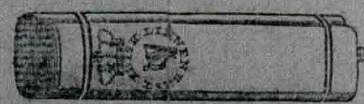
We must remember throughout our two-hundred-year sweep that the people who saw these ads were just as smart as we are, and just as unlikely to be taken in as we think we are. We must also recall throughout that the sole purpose of the ads from 1789 to date has been to sell us something. They want 1) to get our attention; 2) to convince us that what they're selling is desirable; and 3) to get us to go out—rise from our chair or couch—and *do* something. Half the fun is to ask, Did it work? Did they do it fairly? Would we have been convinced when they first appeared—indeed were we convinced in our own time? (And did the product work out the way they promised?)

For these reasons, scattered in among the intriguing examples of two hundred years of style and invention are some examinations of the reality of it all: how advertising functions, how it uses the skills of the artists and the creative writer, and how it seizes onto devices of each generation to hold our attention.

And having been bemused by the occasionally frivolous and superficial, we will end by looking at how advertising has changed our thinking about some things truly fundamental and significant.

What *isn't* here? As we have noted, television is given too short a shrift. The other element that is missing is the life stories of the great figures of the trade: the Albert Laskers and George Washington Hills and the many innovative minds of our own time. Examples of their work and the significance of what they did are here, but we have not done justice to their interesting and often colorful personalities. Again, the product seemed more important than the person when there wasn't room to do both. Our apologies to the people who did these creations, but the choice was ours. Don't blame the publisher.

Except for these admittedly major omissions, we hope there follows a fair examination of the first two hundred years of American advertising. Please join us. Lean back and enjoy.



James Walker,

At the Sign of the PIECE of LINEN, No. 14, WILLIAM-STREET,
Is now Selling off by the Piece or at Retail,

A variety of SEASONABLE *and* FASHIONABLE

DRY GOODS,

Many of them are bought at Public Vendue for lefs than prime coft, which he is enabled to fell from 1 to 25 per cent. CHEAPER than they are in general fold for;

VIZ.

SUPERFINE Broad, fecond and claftic cloths,
Buff, white and coloured caffimeres,
Double milled drab cloths,
Plain frizes, German ferges, coatings flannels and baizes of different widths and colours,
Rofe and ftriped blankets,
Milled and other fwanfkins,
Red, blue, green and white ferges,
Ladies fuperfine coating,
Moreens, rattinets and fhalloons,
A fafhionable affortment of coat and veft buttons,
Taborets, durants, wildbores and tammies
Camblets, callimancoes and bird-eye ftuffs,
Silk and worfted crapes,
Sattinets, laftings and florentines,
Princefs ftuff and princetta,
Hair and worfted plufhes,
Gentlemen's patent filk, cotton and worfted hofiery,
Twilled velvets, corduroys and thickfets,
Cotton-denim and royal rib.
Silk florentines and fattins of different colours, Nankeens by the Bundle or piece
Pealongs, modes, and farfnets,
China and mode ribbons,
India taffaties and luteftrings of different colours,

Ladies black, white and coloured filk, gloves and mitts,
Kid, dog, lambfkin and worfted do.
An affortment of gentlemens buckfkin woodftock, beaver and kid gloves,
Black filk and wafhleather do.
Striped, check, jaconet and book muflins,
Do. Handkerchiefs,
Muflinets and dimities,
Marfeilles and mock marfeilles quilting and drawboys,
Chintzes, callicoes and cottons of various patterns, furniture do.
3 1-2, 4, and 4 1-2 pins,
Shawls and cotton handkerchiefs,
Pocket do.
Printed linens,
Linen from 9d to 8s 6d per yard,
Cambricks and lawn,
Lenau and Scotch nets,
Scotch and coloured threads,
Bedticks by the yard or in patterns,
Silk cotton, cap, ribbon and fkeleton wires,
Gentlemens fancy, velvet, and toilanet veft patterns,
Mens youths and childrens beaver, caftor and wool hats, of different colours,
Ladies, fattinet, callimanco and lafting fhoes. &c. &c.

NEW-YORK: Printed by HARRISSON & PURDY, No. 3, Peck-Slip, where Printing in general is performed with neatnefs, accuracy and difpatch, and on the moft reafonable terms.

1790

At the Sign of the Piece of Linen in New York, James Walker tells his customers he has colored cashmeres, green serges, worsted plushes, and beaver skin gloves. He also has "Taborets, durants, wildbores, and tammies" with "camblets, callimancoes and bird-eye stuffs." This is a typical broadside ad used to escape the cramped space of contemporary newspapers. Note the variety of readable type styles and intricate borders.

A Short History of Advertising in America—From the Founding of the Republic to World War I

WE PICK UP THE STORY of American advertising in 1789—the year of the founding of the Republic. By the time we start, advertising is already here and remarkably well developed, having been imported from England where it is already a major, thriving business. Shop signs, the earliest billboards, have been in use in the colonies since the 1600s. The word "advertisement" has headed posters and broadsides nailed to post office and court house walls since 1660. By the end of the Revolution there are some 43 weekly newspapers in existence, and in 1784 the first daily has begun. But we have to be careful of the scene we paint, because it has some oddities in it. It is not today's commercial scene simply in period costume.

First, what are they advertising? Three things will cover 80 percent of the copy: land, runaways (slaves and indentured servants), and transportation—the latter announcing stagecoach schedules and the arrival and departure of ships with descriptions of their cargoes. The remaining 20 percent of the ads will be lists of goods offered for sale by local merchants and descriptions of books newly published. The point: these are simply announcements essentially answering the reader's two questions—where and when? Does anyone in the community have thread for sale? Has anybody got any cheese? When will there be a ship going to Charleston? Apparently the thirst for this kind of advertising was enormous. The first daily newspaper had 10 columns of advertising in a paper of 16 columns. That was in Philadelphia. The first New York daily in 1785 was overwhelmingly advertising with a thin film of news; it had pictures of furniture and cuts of three-masted sailing ships. This ratio of ads to news continued without change right into the 1800s.

This gets to the second element we should remember. *Where* you made your announcement governed what your advertising looked like. There were fully developed type fonts up to 36-points, but there was very little paper to print them on. All paper was 100-percent rag—marvelous stuff that was flexible, durable, and took ink beautifully—but was very hard to come by. Even before the Revolution, when most of the rags for paper came from England, they were always in short supply because rags were perpetually recycled by the consumers. They went from shirts and dresses into quilts and coverlets and then braided into rugs so it was years before they were sufficiently deteriorated to be sold by the pound for paper. Even then there wasn't much money to be made in it. It took three men a whole day to make enough paper for that day's newspaper, but you couldn't charge more than a few pennies for the edition, leaving very little for the paper it was printed on. The largest paper mill in New England was run by the *Hartford Courant* which could produce a bit over a thousand sheets a day, but the sheets (folded once to make four pages) produced a newspaper no larger than a present-day *Time* magazine page. Hartford was at the top of the scale. Many major urban papers had to get by on 300 to 400 sheets a day.

When the British were here and paper was more plentiful, creative publishers like Benjamin Franklin could produce beautiful newspapers—and very appealing advertisements. Franklin had been the first to use pictures to break up blocks of text; he used lots of white space around centered headlines, and made special engravings of spectacles and gloved hands for special customers. But by our 1789 date these aesthetics were disappearing fast. Paper was so scarce that