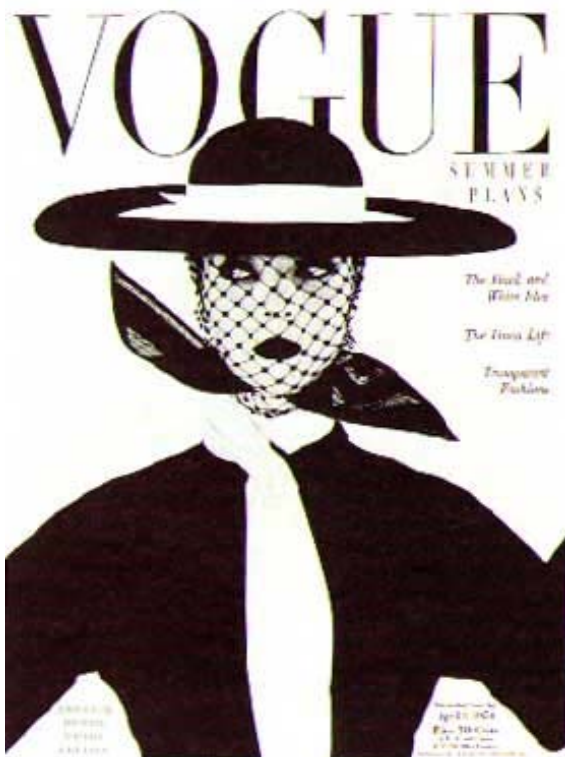


The Power of the Gaze: The Stereotypical Image of Women in Advertisements

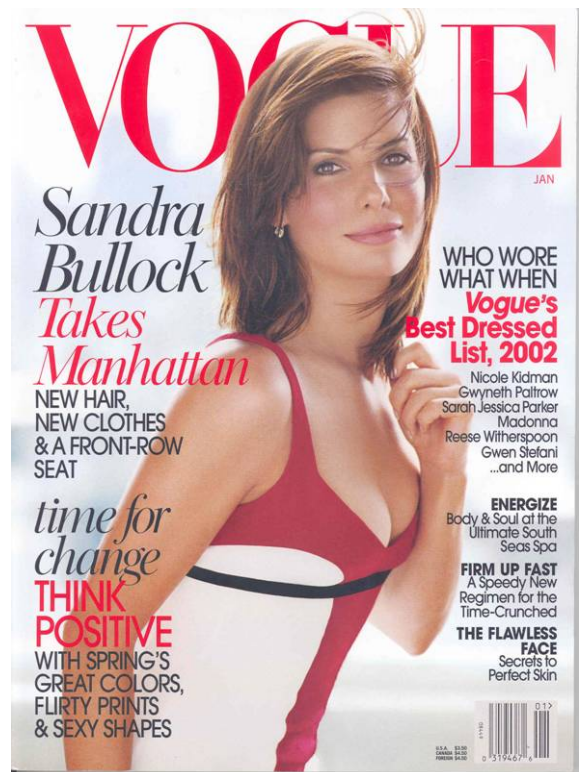
Then

⌘

Now



(1950)



(2003)

The 1950s were characterized by the traditional television family image of the woman at home, cooking and cleaning for her husband and taking care of their children. Few women worked and those who did were never seen as anything close to equal with their male co-workers. Through the years, and countless feminist movements and strides towards equality, this image of women has changed. There is an abundance of women in the work force who are respected and the family life has changed so that women aren't seen as the only caregivers. The negative still remains, though. While the 1950's woman was supposed to be a great mother and wife, the woman of today must be a great mother, wife, and career driven- a superwoman who does it all.

The world of advertising has changed since the 1950s, but despite changes in the real world, the image of women in advertisements, in magazines such as Vogue, has not gone far in the direction of a positive improvement of the female image. Stereotypes from the past have vanished, only to have new ones take their place, while other stereotypes have not changed at all. Whether the year is 1950 or 2003, women have a particular place within the confines of both the society and the home that must be met. The women in the advertisements from 1950 and present day strongly represent the stereotypical labels of the particular time period and they all service the fascination with women as objects to be looked at.

The 1950's advertisements displayed women as innocent, weak, and quiet individuals. Most women were pictured looking down or away from the camera—avoiding the eyes of the viewers.

Another advertisement showed a woman shocked with a naïve expression on



her face. The most common portrayal of women was of silence. Even when a smile was cracked, it was a closed mouth grin. The rest of the women all had had somber or plain expressions on their faces. This depiction of women displayed the thinking of the

time—that **women should be seen and not heard.** Women were objects to be looked at, not intelligent individuals that should be listened to.

Another element, of the notion of women as objects, displayed in the advertisements was the air of mystery that accompanied the photographs. In one particular ad, a woman is posed on a table, looking away from the camera with a cigarette posed between her fingers. Her shadow hovers tall above her. The pose is nearly mimicked in



another advertisement, but the women pictured instead is leaning across the table more, facing the camera with her cigarette holding hand covering half of



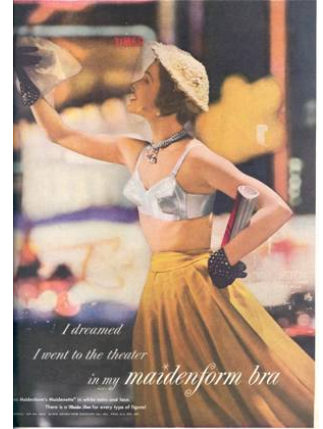
her face. The women are draped in a way that says “look at me.” The hovering shadows show the stereotypical notion that women need to be protected, if even just from their own menacing shadows. The way the one woman covers her face also sticks with the idea that women should be quiet. She is posed so that men should look at her, but enforces the idea that she won't talk back since

her hand is blocking her mouth. The women are portrayed as weak and fragile beings that are **controlled by the power of the gaze**- held by men.

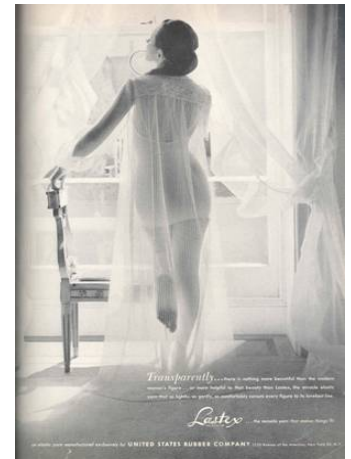
In the 1950s women were always depicted as being very dignified and polished, at all times. Every thing about a woman should be perfect no matter what she was doing. This idea is exemplified with an advertisement for a “walking suit.” Two women are dressed up very nicely in skirt suits, while out WALKING THE DOG! One must assume by this that women did everything- cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children- in full dress suits. But alas, it was the 1950s and women were always the picture of perfection, right?



The best aspect of advertisements in the 1950s was the lack of excessive female skin being strewn across the pages. When skin was shown, it was for undergarment advertisements and was done rather modestly. Every where else, the women were covered up more than



some of the most conservative women of today. The lack of skin shown supported the idea of women being innocent. They didn't flaunt themselves and were portrayed as pure and untainted. Even when they did depict sexuality it was quite reserved as in the advertisement where a woman has her back to the camera, the only skin shown is her arms and legs which are themselves draped in a sheer covering.



The body image of 1950s women was a healthier than today, but still provided an unrealistic depiction of most women. The women shown in advertisements were thin, yet curvy with a small waist and fuller hips. Their skin was perfect and they always looked elegant. Thus the ideal woman was supposed to look like the ones portrayed in the advertisements.



The basis of all the stereotypes in the 1950s revolves around a basic idea that **women are the object of the male gaze**. Women are displayed in a fashion that appeals to men; what they want in a woman, how they want her dressed, how they want her to act. The women in the advertisements are being watched by men, as well as women, under the power of the gaze.



The most noticeable flaw in advertisements in the 1950s is the lack of racial diversity of the women featured. Stereotypically, the only women worth featuring were non-Hispanic Caucasians.

Present day, 2003 advertisements feature women in a vastly different way



than fifty years prior, but the stereotypes and negative images still abound. One ray of positive light is the use of minority women in advertisements, providing a more realistic depiction of society's women. The common racial model is African American, which still leaves a void for all the other minorities such as Asians and Hispanics, for example.

Women of today are portrayed as stronger and pose in more defiant stances than before. Models are directly eyeing the camera and asserting themselves, taking away the weak

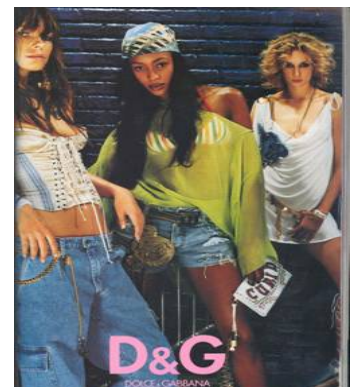
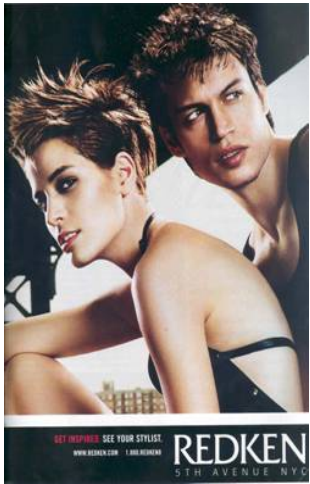
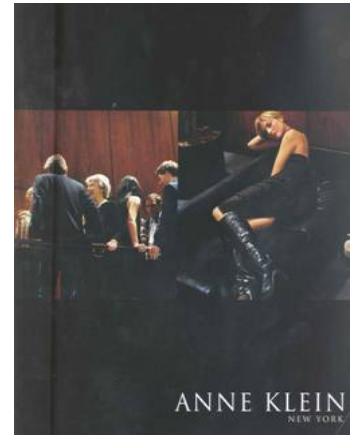


image of the past. Some women have even taken on male characteristics with a similar image as shown in the Redken advertisement which pictures a male and



female, the two with the same style hair, the woman eyeing the camera and the man looking away. The weak woman stereotyped hasn't completely vanished, however, as the man is also hovering over the woman, protecting her from whatever she needs protecting. Women are also



still shown in subservient poses, lying back in an unprotected position, vulnerable and the object of the gaze.

The ideal female body image is much worse than in the past. Today,



women are supposed to be stick thin, but with large breasts- a near physical impossibility. The body must be perfectly toned in all the right places and women should be willing to do anything to look like the models featured.

Surgery, diet pills- anything possible

to not have any extra weight on their figures. A normal body type must be fixed, and diet pills will do the trick! The face, like in the past, must be perfect and this image is held to be what all women should, and must, look like.



While in the 1950s, women were shown quite modestly, the women in advertisements today are highly sexualized. The world is obsessed with sex and this combined with the very powerful gaze deployed upon women leads to the vast exploitation of the female body. A woman's body is used as a canvas for art as her face is painted up in an absurd way, while a purse- the subject of the advertisement- is hanging around her neck, covering her naked body. Why must she have crazy make up and be naked to sell a purse? The ad isn't interesting otherwise; the gaze is more powerful when the subject being looked at is more desirable. Another



advertisement features a woman completely naked with her full body in view, posed just right as to be decent enough for a public magazine. The woman is naked except for one thing- a pair of shoes. The ad tells women, "buy these shoes and you'll be as sexy as her!" And that is what society's stereotypes have driven into the minds of every individual. Women should be sexy to be worthy of any type of respect

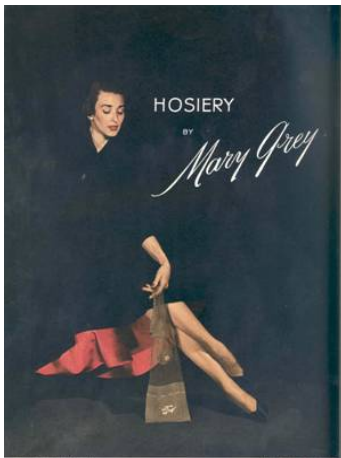


and attention. Advertisements for Victoria's Secret are notorious for their highly sexual models and photographs. Men borrow, or buy themselves, the



catalogs or stare for hours at advertisements in other magazines, all just for the sexualized female images. Women are again beaten in the head with the notion that they MUST look like this. After all, it is possible; just look at all the models that do look like this, never mind the countless touch ups and enhancements that are done to the photographs.

While the 1950s' advertisements used women as the object of the gaze, it was nothing compared to the image of women today. Women today have made numerous gains in society and have made serious advancements as far as equal rights. However, women today are depicted in advertisements as objects, not even human. Their bodies are used to sell, to provoke, to serve as the objects of



the gaze. Compare the two advertisements for nylons. The fifties ad shows a fully clothed women with the pantyhose hanging from her hand across her leg; a sexual yet severely modest pose. The 2003, present day ad is a far cry from the past image. A completely naked woman, except

the sheer pantyhose on her legs, is crouched over so that her legs are the main focus. Her head isn't shown, providing an inhumane look at the female body. She is an object, nothing more.



Advertisements from the 1950s clearly look dated to any modern viewer. The clothes, the styles, are all absent from today's culture, however, the ways in which women are portrayed in ads has not transformed much in fifty years. Women are still seen as objects and women are expected to look and act like those portrayed in advertisements. The women in these ads represent what society, especially the men of society, holds as the ideal image for a woman. While it can be argued that the image of women today is much more revolutionized than in the past as women are taking a more assertive role and influencing how their image is rendered, it can also be argued this revolution came at cost to the respect that is held towards women. Yes women are seen as stronger than before, but their bodies have become nothing more than objects for exploitation. The images of women today are highly sexualized to appeal to those looking. As in the fifties, women in the twenty-first century are under the power of the gaze, the male gaze.

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