The Early American Style: A History of Marketing and Consumer Values

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1876 Centennial, furniture companies, decorators, and home builders have incorporated early American designs into their products. This article recounts the marketing history of this style and some clusters of consumer values—the search for authenticity, status presentation and ethnic identification, nostalgia and tradition making, domesticity and femininity, and aesthetic conservatism—with which early American objects and architecture have been associated. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

During the Civil War, union supporters in New York, Philadelphia, and other northern cities organized charity bazaars they called *Sanitary Fairs.* Among the most popular exhibits were recreations of colonial New England kitchens (Roth, 1985). Part museum display and part living history demonstration, these kitchens featured big, open fireplaces equipped with antique cooking utensils and surrounded by other period artifacts, such as windsor chairs, tall clocks, and spinning wheels, that were (and still are) icons of colonial times. Costumed men and women served "olde tyme meals" to paying guests, while fiddlers played and "spinsters" demonstrated their craft. Similar kitchens, as well as replicas of log cabins and other colonial structures, appeared at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia (Figure 1) and at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition (Schoelwer, 1985). In 1896, pioneering the concept of the historical period room, Charles Wilcomb

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Figure 1. The New England kitchen at the Philadelphia centennial, 1876. Source: *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, June 10, 1876.

opened a colonial kitchen exhibit in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park and, in 1910, created a second one for the Oakland Museum across the bay (Frye, 1985).

These New England kitchens may not have been entirely accurate in their depictions of colonial interiors, but they did stimulate a widespread interest in early American life. By the 1870s and 1880s, affluent antiquarians were collecting American furniture, silver, and other objects made in the colonial and federal eras (Stillinger, 1980). Meanwhile, patriotic associations in New England and the middle Atlantic states were preserving and restoring memorials to the Revolutionary War (Hosmer, 1965). Between 1890 and 1910, middle-class readers made best sellers out of historical novels set in the colonial period (Seaton, 1985). In the visual arts, Eastman Johnson, Frank Benson, Childe Hassam, and other talented American artists painted quiet colonial or New England interiors as backdrops for their pensive, *fin de siecle* female characters (Betsky, 1985) and even Thomas Eakins, the acclaimed realist painter, produced several variations of a colonial spinner at her wheel (Monkhouse, 1983).

Various brands, stores, and advertising campaigns appropriated the names of historical figures from the colonial era. For example, Quaker Oats adopted a William Penn–like character as its trademark in 1877 and, in addition to extremely ambitious advertising campaigns, hired a

Quaker man to appear at state fairs and town celebrations (Margolin, Brichta, & Brichta, 1979). Benjamin Franklin's name was taken by an 1890s typewriter company and the first mass-marketed instant coffee, introduced in 1909, was called G. Washington, a brand name that perhaps intended to impart a traditional image to a new time-saving innovation (Koepp, 1986). In a 1910 broadside, United Cereal Mills promoted Washington Crisps with the "familiar face perked up and dandified by a goodly application of rouge" (Horwitz, 1976, p. 18).

Above all, the New England kitchen inspired the building of new early American homes and the marketing of reproduction furniture and accessories. This architectural and decorative style, which actually embraces a number of different design elements from the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries, has become the most enduring one this country has ever known (Barendsen, 1983). Today, millions of people live and work in colonial-style tract houses, commercial structures, and public buildings and, across the country, many interiors contain at least some early American decorative touches (Ames, 1985). Marketed by real estate developers, furniture companies, independent craftspeople, museum stores, and a multitude of retail catalogs and shops, current reproductions range from line-for-line copies of the originals, to looser adaptations and interpretations, to often fanciful colonial kitsch.

Art, architectural, and decorative arts scholars have examined such colonial revival phenomena in some detail (see, for example, Marling, 1988; May, 1991; Rhoads, 1977). However, the evolution of the early American style is equally germane to the interests of marketing historians and consumer researchers. The styles and assemblages of buildings and their furnishings embody both individual and collective visions of the past (Clark, 1986; Davis, 1979; Joy, Hui, Kim, & Laroche, 1995). Issues of style and its expression are relevant to those researchers who want to know how and why consumers form their aesthetic criteria (Wallendorf, 1980) and assemble their domestic product combinations (Kehret-Ward, 1987; McCracken, 1988, 1989). Further, variations in the pursuit of authenticity, the degree to which consumers choose designs that conform to the originals, constitute a problematic characteristic of buyer behavior for consumer researchers interested in the postmodern concept of hyperreality, "the power of simulation in determining reality" (Firat, 1990, p. 70). Above all, stylistic variations and their development are important indicators of cultural and consumer values (Belk, 1986; Prown, 1980).

The following section presents a brief account of the early American style from the late 19th century until the present. The search for authenticity, the preference for objects and architecture similar to original forms, provides the dominant narrative theme. Next, attention turns to some additional consumer values—status presentation and ethnic identification, nostalgia and tradition making, domesticity and feminin-

ity, and aesthetic conservatism—that have been associated with the marketing and consumption of early American objects. Finally, some implications of this history are discussed in the concluding section.

As with most historical writing, the primary objectives are to describe and explain a specific phenomenon rather than to build and test theories according to positivist criteria (Firat, 1987; Nevett, 1991; R. A. Smith & Lux, 1993). Written data sources for this project include the secondary literature in the fields of material culture, architecture, and decorative arts; collector and decorator books and periodicals from the 1890s up to the present; and dozens of different brochures and catalogs for reproduction furniture and accessories. Having grown up in a Cape Cod–style home largely furnished by Ethan Allen, as well as being a collector of Americana and a woodworker and furniture-builder, the present author has had direct experience with a variety of early American reproductions and period originals. The writing of consumer history benefits greatly from the analysis of such *material* data sources (Belk, 1986; Prown, 1982; Schlereth, 1983; Witkowski, 1994b).

A HISTORY OF EARLY AMERICAN REPRODUCTIONS

One might argue that colonial styles in architecture and decorative arts never really died out. In the early 19th century, some people continued to build Georgian homes long after they fell out of favor with urban trendsetters and wealthy southern planters (Rhoads, 1977). Shaker furniture, made throughout the 19th century for the religious community's own use and for sale to the outside world, was basically a refinement of late 18th-century American country furniture (Fairbanks & Bates, 1981). However, such designs were not self-conscious reconstructions of the past, but rather anachronistic holdovers.

Victorian Eclecticism—1876 to 1910

Inspired by the Centennial Exhibition, architects quickly started designing colonial revival houses for wealthy clients in the North and, by the 1890s, in the South. Although some architects, designers, builders, artisans, and manufacturers strived for and accomplished reasonable levels of authenticity, most styles before 1900 were quite unlike colonial originals. Frequently very pleasing on their own terms, these early colonial revival homes often combined regional styles and period architectural elements in inventive ways never found in genuine colonial buildings. Some of these homes even incorporated gothic and mid-19th-century Greek revival motifs (Teitelman & Fahlman, 1985).

Successive revivals of earlier or exotic styles, including Egyptian, Greek, gothic, renaissance, rococo, and Turkish, characterized the Victorian age. Designers and their customers also prized eclecticism where

elements from two or more different styles were imaginatively combined in, say, a building or in a piece of furniture (R. C. Smith, 1959). Thus, mainstream American consumer culture in the latter half of the 1800s was quite open to imitations (Orvell, 1989), but not overly demanding about adherence to the originals' designs.

Reproduction furniture accompanied the building of the first colonial revival homes. During the 1880s, a small number of furniture companies in the East and Midwest began manufacturing colonial pieces and promoting them in their catalogs. Both product-line breadth and promotional hyperbole expanded over the years. In 1900, the Berkey and Gay Furniture Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan, titled its catalog "The Old Feeling, or the Past Revived." Illustrations and elaborate copy showed how pieces recaptured the past *and* built moral fiber, as in the following description of a colonial toilet table:

> Who could be brought in daily association with such unassumed, impressive elegance, without being somewhat fashioned after it? As well say that the rays of a 4th of July sun could not warm your body as to say that such furniture can have no bearing on the development of refinement in character (cited in Lindquist & Warren, 1993, p. 39).

In 1902, the trade magazine, *The Grand Rapids Furniture Record,* published an illustrated article on "Colonial Styles in Furniture, Antique and Modern" along with an ad for the Barnard & Simonds Company of Rochester, New York headlined "Furniture of our Forefathers" (Roth, 1964).

The first furniture reproductions diverged just as much from their prototypes as did houses (Lindquist & Warren, 1993). Using steam-driven machines and thin veneers rather than hand tools and solid woods, the makers of what is sometimes (and erroneously) called centennial furniture, stressed slender, more vertical proportions in their designs rather than the thicker, horizontal shapes of period pieces (Ketchum, 1982). Colonial revival furniture often incorporated elements from several different periods (Queen Anne, Chippendale, and federal) and was frequently reduced in size to accommodate current tastes. Manufacturers also introduced new types of desks, dressing tables, and china cabinets that were never made in earlier times. An ad from 1916 placed in *Country Life* by Smith & Beck of Philadelphia boasts "Just Like Original Colonial Furniture" (depicted in Orvell, 1989, p. 167), but the illustration depicts an odd china cabinet with Sheraton legs and a Chippendale bonnet quite unlike any period forms known to this author.

Consumers could complete their colonial decor with reproduction accessories. Beginning in the 1870s, Tiffany of New York and Gorham of Providence, Rhode Island, sold machine-made reproductions of 18th-century sterling silver flat- and hollowwares. Between 1890 and 1905 dozens of companies produced thousands of different souvenir

spoon patterns commemorating the people and places of American history (Carpenter, 1985).

The Pursuit of Authenticity—1910 to 1945

In the early 1900s, colonial revival designs were becoming increasingly correct, indicating greater knowledge of, and buyer demand for, old work (Rhoads, 1977) and, at a more general level, the rise of authenticity as a primary cultural value (Orvell, 1989). To encourage authenticity (and sell more wood), the White Pine Bureau and later Weyerhauser Forest Products sponsored an outstanding series of photographic essays, published between 1914 and 1940, that recorded the exteriors, interiors, and architectural details of hundreds of surviving colonial buildings (Mullins, 1987).

Early in this century, builders responded to the colonial taste of the middle-class market. In 1918, for example, Aladdin Homes sold a largish two-story model, "The Colonial," for a then midrange price of $2,518.45 (Rhoads, 1977). During the First World War, colonial designs predominated in housing projects for blue-collar, civilian war workers (Rhoads, 1977). From 1908 to 1940, Sears, Roebuck and Company catalogs successfully marketed over a dozen different types of prefabricated colonial house kits delivered by train and assembled on site (Stevenson & Jandl, 1986). Although some models were generic colonials, the "Jefferson" (Figure 2), offered in 1932, 1933, and 1937 for $3,350, resembled Mount Vernon (not Monticello) and the "Alden," priced from $2,418 to $2,571, featured a second-story overhang similar to that of the Paul Revere House. In the 1930s, the winners and runner-up houses in national architectural contests were usually "out-and-out colonial designs" (Gebhard, 1987). Eventually, colonial revival homes would dominate entire suburbs, especially east of the Mississippi (Ames, 1985). Throughout this century many college and school buildings, Protestant churches, country clubs, small hospitals, funeral parlors, post offices, and town libraries incorporated colonial revival designs. Even the Adult Correctional Institution in Cranston, Rhode Island was based on the 1770 University Hall at Brown (Monkhouse, 1989).

Around the turn of the century, the arts and crafts movement philosophy—stressing design integrity and first-rate craftsmanship, attributes sorely missing in some overly ornate and machine-made high Victorian styles—was encouraging more upmarket lines of early American reproductions. Circa 1900, for example, S. Bent & Bros. of Gardner, Massachusetts, reproduced thousands of Windsor armchairs "which, because of their sturdy construction and practical utility, have served the public well" (Fairbanks & Bates, 1981, p. 468). In Fayetteville, New York, Leopold Stickley made high-quality furniture "with a predominant stamp of the English culture which left its mark when British colonists penetrated the Cherry Valley wilderness in their trek from

THE JEFFERSON

The Jefferson is designed along the same lines as historic Mount Vernon and is a true example of southern colonial architecture—the same type that has endured in many instances for generation after generation. Exterior walls of white painted brick provide a substantial appearance and form a pleasing background for the dark green shutters and roof.

Details and features: Eight rooms and two and a half baths. Brick exterior; two-story colonnaded porch. Fireplace in living room; open stairs.

Years and catalog numbers: 1932 (3349); 1933 (3349); *1937* (3349)

Price: $3,350

Figure 2. The Jefferson: A 1930s Sears Roebuck mail-order home. Source: Stevenson, K. C., & Jandl, H. W. (1986). *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company* (p. 184). Washington, DC: The Preservation Press. The authors' brief description is excerpted from the original catalog.

Massachusetts to the uncharted West" (Stickley, n.d.; ca. 1985). After 1900, furniture catalogues reveal large numbers of fairly faithful reproductions offered by many different companies (Lindquist & Warren, 1993).

In the tablewares department, Tiffany and Gorham started copying early American silver about 1912, while the silversmith George Gebelein of Boston embraced both 18th-century styles and traditional handcrafted procedures in the making of expensive tea and coffee services he sold in the 1920s and 1930s (Carpenter, 1985). Good reproductions of glass figural flasks and candlesticks, some imported from Czechoslovakia, also entered the market during this period (Spillman, 1983). These artifacts, along with buildings and furniture, document how 20th-century notions of correct authenticity began to compete with the 19th-century culture of loose imitation.

Few people in the reproduction business prized authenticity more than Wallace Nutting (Dulaney, 1979, 1983). A former Congregational minister who established a thriving business selling hand-colored photographs of New England scenes and colonial interiors (Barendsen, 1983), Nutting established his furniture and ironware workshop in

1917. By the mid-1930s he claimed to have reproduced a thousand different items of furniture, some of which his employees copied so accurately that they can still deceive unastute buyers who take them for period antiques (Ketchum, 1982). Nutting produced some items for Colonial Williamsburg and a few major collectors, but most he sold to the general public, distributing through gift shops as well as department and furniture stores. Despite his professed reverence for the old, Nutting sometimes tried to improve upon originals via bolder turnings and more monumental proportions. Bowing to the dire commercial realities of the 1930s, he produced "17th-century versions of an oak radiator cover, a stenographer's swivel chair, and oak typewriter chest and a check-writing desk intended for bank use" (Dulaney, 1983, p. 71).

Reproductions Since 1945

Consumers sustained their interest in early American styles after the Second World War. This included corporate consumers, for whom builders added red brick walls, white trim, gable roofs, and little cupolas to a wide range of commercial structures, from shopping centers to funeral parlors. In 1968, Standard Oil of Indiana stated it had erected more new gas stations in early American than in any other style (Rhoads, 1977). Because of its relatively small scale, however, the colonial style was most suited to and most frequently adapted for domestic architecture (Ames, 1985). Many postwar housing tracts featured colonial revival houses, some of which may have been inspired by sets from the 1948 movie "Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House" (Bold, 1991). In this author's suburban, southern California community, built in the late 1950s, the developer named a two-story, Cape Cod style model the "Williamsburg" and, inexplicably, designated some *ranch houses* as the "Pilgrim" and the "Plymouth" models.

Postwar consumers filled their homes will all kinds of early-American reproduction furniture and accessories. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the colonial and the ultramodern could coexist in the same house "and no one would give it a second thought" (Hine, 1986). In the 1970s Scholtz Homes sold a semi-prefabricated house with a colonial-style facade and a quite modern back side (Wilson & Leamon, 1975). Occupying the middle of the market, the Ethan Allen company featured early American coffee tables, low benches, love seats, and numerous other furniture forms, all built from hard-rock maple and designed to accommodate television-oriented living rooms.

An important development in recent years has been the increase in museum-sponsored reproduction programs stressing fine workmanship and authenticity (Lindquist & Warren, 1993). Colonial Williamsburg, the Henry Ford Museum, the Winterthur Museum, and numerous other institutions license lines of furniture and accessories sold through museum shops, furniture stores, and direct mail catalogs. Visitors to living

history museums have been fascinated by old technologies (Cotter, 1970; Leon & Piatt, 1989) and constitute an eager market for items produced on the premises. More traditional art museums also have learned to manipulate and cater to consumer demand. In 1992 a sizeable exhibit named "American Rococo, 1750–1775: Elegance in Ornament," traveled from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Bowman & Heckscher, 1992a, 1992b). After moving through perhaps a dozen rooms of spectacular artifacts, the Los Angeles visitor entered the museum store annex where several Winterthur reproductions were arranged in their own museum-like installations. Not only was the transition from original to re-creation practically seamless, but the new pieces were on sale at a purported discount from their list prices!

CONSUMER VALUES

In addition to authenticity, the historical record indicates that the early American style has been associated with four additional categories of consumer values: status presentation and ethnic identification, nostalgia and tradition making, domesticity and femininity, and aethestic conservatism.

Status Presentation and Ethnic Identification

Affluent Americans have used reproductions (not to mention genuine artifacts) to present and defend their social status. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, native-born WASPs praised and even appropriated early American life in order to assert their social standing and cultural hegemony and to set themselves apart psychologically (Stillinger, 1980).

> Puritan? By the end of the century the term mostly meant pure stock. Conservationism snuggled up to conservatism. The colonial revival interior came to represent physical and social exclusivity (Betsky, 1985, p. 266).

Veblen (1899/1953) wryly observed a leisure class that could conspicuously downplay its wealth by glorifying the simplicity of the past. Although colonial revival propriety, conservatism, and elite consumption began to fall out of favor in the more populist 1930s, early American antiques and heirlooms continued to have status implications (Warner & Lunt, 1941). More recently, the colonial style still suggested high social standing (Fussell, 1983).

Gebhard (1987) notes that in the 1930s, "the characteristic Beverly Hills house of motion picture stars and directors was a colonial one" (p. 116). However, using such status markers has been problematic be-

cause the colonial revival also has had strong associations with the middle classes who bought all those moderately priced houses and furnishings. In the 1930s, to make matters worse, the Roosevelt administration sponsored the Arthurdale community in West Virginia, a social experiment where poor mountaineers crafted reproduction furniture, ceramics, and fireplace implements (Rymer, 1985). To finesse these complications, elite consumers have stressed authenticity in their purchasing and decor. The ability to judge authenticity can involve knowledge acquired through reading, visiting museums, and, because good-quality reproductions are relatively pricey, hobnobbing with high-end furniture dealers. In the final analysis, the connoisseurship necessary for the successful pursuit of authenticity can be a powerful status marker (Hirschman, 1990).

The people who designed and commissioned the first colonial revival homes were, according to Rhoads (1977), all from old American stock. Francis P. Garvan, a wealthy early 20th-century collector and benefactor of Yale University, was not asked to join the Walpole Society, a club for leading antiquers, because he was an Irish Catholic (Stillinger, 1980). This and much additional evidence suggests that, for some WASP consumers, the early American style was (and perhaps still is) a symbol of their Anglo-American ethnicity (Hirschman, 1985). Ethnic identification is a social process through which groups define themselves and form boundaries with other groups (Barth, 1969; Roosens, 1995). Ethnic articulation tends to accelerate when different groups come in contact, as they did in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when native-born, Protestant Americans confronted an influx of Catholic immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and southern and eastern Europe. In addition to being descendants of the British settlers who became patriots during the revolutionary period, WASP ethnics adopted and reproduced the material objects of their forebears as totems. A myth of common ancestory, shared historical memories, and other differentiating elements are attributes that characterize many different ethnic communities (A. D. Smith, 1991).

Nostalgia and Tradition Making

The twin upheavals of the Civil War and rapid industrialization in the 1860s and 1870s prompted nostalgia for the American past that was expressed through antique collecting, historic preservation, and buying reproduction early American houses and furnishings. The early American style has suggested an escape from the mechanical, commercial, and overly crowded present and a return to a good time when people were supposedly more virtuous. This is especially true when reproductions are handcrafted rather than mass produced. Through their bro-

chures and catalogs, furniture makers rarely miss an opportunity to establish a sense of continuing craftsmanship.

> In an age now centuries removed from the practice of colonial trades, a small circle of Baker craftsmen still wrestles with the ways of the old masters. Neither heroes nor heretics, these dissenters live each day with the aroma of freshcut cedar, the luster of the rarest woods, and the warm "hand" of tools passed from generation to generation. It is as it has always been, a shop at arm's length from progress and the cradle of skills elsewhere forgotten. (Baker Furniture Co., 1992, p. 3)

In a postmodern environment, both the *process* of reproduction, as well as its resulting product, can satisfy consumer nostalgia for authenticity (Belk, 1991).

Referring to early 20th-century consumers, Orvell (1989) states "an implicit rejection of modernity was evident in the widespread middle-class enthusiasm for imitation Colonial furniture and architecture" (p. 167). The rejection of modernity has been only partial, however, for few consumers have been willing to give up the conveniences of improved heating, lighting, plumbing, and cooking technologies. Rhoads (1977) states that the first (circa 1890) generation of "colonial revival houses generally were filled with all the modern inventions that their owners could afford" (p. 398). Shortly after the turn of the century, writers began referring to "modern colonial" homes based upon progressive design tenets including the use of new technology and materials (May, 1991). In the 1930s, magazine articles showed owners how to rebuild valuable *antique* furniture to accommodate radios and turntables. Today, one can buy a reasonably faithful copy of a period cabinet that has an interior adapted specifically for use as an entertainment center (Bartley Collection, 1993) or a computer-sized "Salem Work Table" proportioned "to fit the needs of the 20th century home office" (Cohasset Colonials, 1993, p. 12). People still set out candles and candlesticks, but more for their elegance and charm than for their illumination. Unlike the tallow ones housewives dipped and molded in the past, modern wax candles rarely run, smoke, smell, gutter, or require constant snuffing.

Despite McCracken's (1988) contention that "virtually no one buys furniture with the expectation that it will be of utilitarian and symbolic value to the next generation" (p. 42), some middle-class buyers of reproductions apparently do anticipate creating a tradition. Bartley Collection catalogs frequently refer to their reproductions as heirlooms to be treasured by succeeding generations. Kit customers can even purchase brass or silver plaques, on which their names will be inscribed, and affix them to the backs of pieces they have assembled and finished. Other tradition forming is less deliberate. Many consumers acquire small antiques and reproductions as souvenirs to commemorate family

visits to historic sites and museum exhibits or as simply something to buy while on New England back roads. Objects make these experiences tangible (Belk, 1991). They are portable trophies that can be toted back home, shared with friends and relatives, and enjoyed over and over again.

Domesticity and Femininity

From the beginning, the marketing of early American reproductions has centered upon the single-family home and its furnishings. Proponents of neocolonialism had a specific domestic vision: "Colonial meant cozy —a cozy home with a big kitchen, a broad chimneypiece, and ancestral relics strewn about in quaint profusion" (Marling, 1988, p. 34). Victorians practically made a cult out of domesticity, and late 19th-century city dwellers, living in an environment becoming more vertical, faster paced, and more impersonal by the day, found the perceived intimacy of 18th-century life attractive. One hundred years later, magazines like *Colonial Homes* and *Early American Life* make domesticity their central theme. Photo essays and furniture ads that depict lovely colonial living rooms, dining rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms encourage readers to contemplate their own domestic interiors.

When the interest in early American reproductions began to gain in popularity during and after the Civil War,

> Women embodied historical continuity in a more profound way than men, who, with the rise of industrialized production and commercial markets, had to split their time between the workplace and the home. Females in Victorian America remained homemakers as their mothers and grandmothers had been; in this sense they were living icons of a pre-industrial golden age that stood for simplicity, agrarian self-sufficiency, family and social cohesion. (Robertson, 1989, p. 13)

Because homes and the household were a woman's domain, the focus on domesticity clearly feminized the early-American style. Almost invariably, the numerous photographs of colonial interiors by Wallace Nutting and Mary H. Northend (Figure 3) depicted authentically costumed women socializing or doing household chores (Barendsen, 1983; Dulaney, 1979; Marling, 1988). These pictures were extremely popular wedding gifts in the 1920s and 1930s and are highly collectable today. They have imprinted several tableaux—a thoughtful woman drinking tea from a dainty cup; an energetic mistress spinning thread by her glowing kitchen hearth—as *the* colonial images (Monkhouse, 1983).

Figure 3. A Mary H. Northend photograph: Domesticity and femininity. Source: Mary H. Northend Collection 14123, Visual Resources, Winterthur Library.

Aesthetic Conservatism

Consumer enthusiasm for early American reproductions has had aesthetic implications. Around the turn of the century *The House Beautiful* complained about excessive colonialism: "O friends, it is a wearisome thing to visit living-room after living-room and find each aping the same period" (cited in Davidson, 1969, p. 197). Although decorative arts reformers tended to like early American styles for their simple elegance and implied craft tradition, not all of them favored exact reproductions. Writing in his *Craftsman* magazine in 1915, Gustav Stickley (Leopold's famous brother) advised woodworkers to first study colonial designs and then create their own interpretations "because the personalities and environment of modern Americans differed from their colonial ancestors" (cited in Rhoads, 1977, p. 375). In the 1940s, some advocates of ranch house modern argued that colonial designs were "pathetic little white boxes" that did not recognize the changing needs of family life (Clark, 1986). Carpenter (1985) argues that colonial revival styles have had a "stranglehold on American decorative arts" and have "stultified American design for much of the twentieth century" (p. 158). Because people continue to buy it, the early American style would seem to be a

relatively safe choice for marketers. However, it may be less expressive of our times than more contemporary designs such as postmodern architecture.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The early American style has been marketed for well over 100 years. Today, as in the past, consumers can be differentiated according to their stylistic choices, which indicate their visions of the past. Both reproduction marketers and their customers have balanced a demand for authenticity with the need to accommodate a modern life-style. In addition, early American houses, furniture, and accessories have been vehicles for expressing other consumer values, including status presentation and ethnic identification, nostalgia and tradition making, domesticity and femininity, and aesthetic conservatism.

Interestingly, many early American reproductions have now become, in effect, important historic artifacts. Colonial revival homes, some of which are a century old, are appreciated for their own uniqueness and timeless designs. The high-quality reproduction furniture made by Wallace Nutting, the Stickley brothers, and other craftsmen and factories has become highly collectable in its own right (Lindquist & Warren, 1993). Folk paintings and sculptures with an early American theme, some made as recently as the Bicentennial, are treated as important works of art (Horwitz, 1976).

Early American reproductions sometimes distort consumer perceptions of how people lived in the past. For example, artisans at reconstructed glassworks have been known to deliberately put more bubbles in their product than did 17th-century blowers (Hume, 1970). Having been exposed to quaint colonial revival misconceptions about the appearance and quality of early glass, this is what the public expected to buy. In this instance, romanticized but inaccurate recreations have been accepted as genuine, a process postmodernists refer to as "hyperreality" (Firat, 1990; Firat & Venkatesh, 1993).

Reproductions also have been made with intent to deceive. Strong consumer demand for a finite supply of genuine Americana drove up prices and tempted concocters as early as the first decade of the present century (Sack & Wilk, 1986) and continues to do so today (Kaye, 1987). Other reproductions, honestly made but not permanently labeled, have been sold as original by dishonest dealers. Although a less serious ethical problem than fraud, the reproduction furniture trade can be accused of misleading consumers with lyrical claims of hand craftsmanship. Manufacturers such as the Baker, Century, and Kindel furniture companies use impressive arrays of power tools to make their museum-sponsored reproductions and achieve remarkable finishes with technologies unknown in the colonial period.

Receiving a gift with an early American motif, inheriting a few pieces of antique furniture, or simply buying something on impulse can trigger a long sequence of purchases. Acquiring an early American object or two can change a person's life when existing decorations are upstaged and suddenly look wrong or out of place. McCracken (1988) calls this process the *Diderot effect,* "a force that encourages the individual to maintain a cultural consistency in his/her complement of consumer goods" (p. 123). Once ignited, the desire to extend or complete collections can be very powerful, sometimes obsessive (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, & Holbrook, 1991).

The ongoing interplay between the real past and its reconstruction has been a central theme throughout the history of the early American style. The remaking of historic architecture and domestic artifacts represents a comment on the past by the present. Although reproductions have varied greatly with respect to the preferred degree of authenticity, there may be, as Ames (1985) argues, an archetypical notion of "early American" that provides stylistic continuity. With this perspective, as well as the analytical categories described herein, further historical research should investigate further examples of consumer historicism. For instance, Americans have had a long fascination with the Wild West and its history, artifacts, and symbols (Witkowski, 1994a). People live in ranch houses, collect Colts and Winchesters, visit Little Big Horn, wear cowboy boots, and consume countless products, services, and media images with Western associations. Finally, marketing historians should take a comparative approach and explore the evolution of architectural and decorative styles across different countries. Consumer cultures are distinguished not only by their history, but how their people consume that history.

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