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Woman's World: taste, agency and consumerism in post-war Australia

Abstract:

The post-war period in Australia (1945–1965) saw women returning to housework and housewifery from their wartime paid employment. To assist women in this role, Melbourne publisher M. A. White published *Women's World* (1958), a comprehensive training manual for women, in which its editor Alleyne Jukes referred to women as unacknowledged specialists. Men, she argued, spent years of their lives training for their chosen careers but women received no training for the significant role that they played in the home. The happiness of the whole family depended on their skill and knowledge, yet this was mostly gained through 'hit and miss methods'. *Women's World* offered to solve this problem by giving women access to a 'finishing school' – beyond the reach of most women but vital to their femininity. Making a good impression was paramount, and to do this a women needed – more than anything else – to have good taste. A closer look at *Women's World* shows, however, that the information in its many sections was provided by companies that saw this manual as a way of marketing products and services into households. Working from Kops, to focus on the home and, within that, the kitchen as a site of 'aspirational consumption' (2006: 1), this article uses *Women's World* to explore the link between 'taste' and 'consumerism' and investigate the agency this mobilisation of taste brought women in post-war Australia.

Biographical notes:

Jillian is a PhD candidate at Central Queensland University in the School of Education and Creative Arts. Her PhD uses creative non-fiction, based on oral histories along with research into food writing in post-war Australia, to challenge the static and often nostalgic impressions of the 1950s housewife. She has co-edited a special edition of online journal, *MC*, published papers in numerous academic journals and presented papers at local and international conferences. Jillian is president of Oral History Australia Inc.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Women's World – Femininity – Consumerism – Agency

Introduction

In 1958, Alleyne Jukes edited a major instructional manual for Australian women. Little is known about Jukes except that she was a working woman who was employed as a clerk, a secretary and a manageress in Melbourne during the 1950s and 1960s (Warrnambool and District Historical Society). Books on home management were not a new genre and household tips were often included as part of cookery books but Jukes' book differed from those that preceded it. In her introduction, she referred to the housewife as 'the unacknowledged specialist' (2). Simply because the housewife was born a woman, Jukes continued, it was believed 'she should be an expert in a score of fields without any training or apprenticeship whatsoever' (1958: 2). In their domestic roles, women were, she argued, like men in that they were professionals and needed access to training to carry out this all-important role. While finishing school, was beyond the reach of most women, *Woman's World*, which was created 'by an enthusiastic team ... and a great many individuals and organisations who realised the need to give every woman to satisfy her desire for knowledge and self improvement' (Introduction) could fill this training gap. The book was, Jukes claimed in conclusion, vital to any woman who cared about her role and her femininity.

Fig. 1. Cover of *Woman's World*, 1958

Woman's World offers a fascinating insight into women's lives in post-war Australia and clarifies what was socially acceptable (and desirable) for a young woman of the time. A close examination of the volume shows that much of its content was provided by retailers and manufacturers of goods and services. This was an effective way for these brands to attempt to gain legitimacy amongst consumers and for the publication to deliver targeted, trustworthy and effective advertisements to its readers (Crawford 2005: 222). It is for this reason that *Women's World* demonstrates the agency women enjoyed: they controlled and directed most household spending and, in marketing terms, they were powerful not pitiable.

Taste, consumption and the domestic space come together in the pages of *Woman's World*. A key message repeated throughout its pages relates taste and consumption, as in, 'Good taste should guide your shopping habits' (Jukes 1958: 130). Taste, for the purpose of this paper, is defined as 'highly personal, and yet collectively negotiated agent of aesthetic discrimination which is 'at work' continually, influencing the food

we eat, the music we listen to, the books we read, the way we adorn ourselves and the manner in which we modify the physical spaces we inhabit' (Sparke 1995, quoted in Walker 2009: 25). In contemporary Australia, the kitchen is a site of 'aspirational consumption' and serves two main purposes in the home: one where it functions as a showpiece and signifies good taste and social distinction; and the other where it functions as a place for the family to gather. In both cases, the kitchen is a place of sociability (Kops 2006: 1). In post-war Australia, the kitchen was a place of both economy and aspiration. While it was a space where thrift in terms of cookery and menu planning could be displayed, innovative planning and design replaced the makeshift set-up of many pre-war kitchens. A functional layout, new materials and finishes, and a variety of gadgets made the room more appealing, cleaning easier and saved time and energy. Women spent much of their time in their kitchens and it was thus the room in the home where women could show they had flair and good taste, and this was especially the case when it came to the way the kitchen was outfitted and decorated.

'Consumption,' argues Ian Woodward, 'serves a predominantly social role and conveys a social, cultural or identity message to others' (2003: 392). 'Objects' he also states, 'sometimes have a public role in the home as a signifier of style or taste' (394). *Women's World* used notions of good taste to encourage consumption by providing the advice women needed to plan, build and decorate their kitchens tastefully with a variety of products, objects and other goods.

Selling to women

Our collective memory of this period aligns with the tenets of second wave feminism, which argues the post-war housewife encapsulated everything that was wrong with women's lives (Johnson and Lloyd 2004: 7). Women were cast as victims of a patriarchal society that saw their role as one reduced to the service of the family. Lonely and alienated in their suburban homes, women are imaged as servants with little effective power outside that narrow sphere (Friedan: 1965). With its emphasis on paid work for women, second wave feminism represented the post-war period as one where women were trapped in these spotless homes, bored, unfulfilled and performing repetitive work – but, all the time, wanting equality with men in the form of paid work. Recent research has, however, questioned these limiting narratives that see all post-war women trapped in unhappy domestic roles (Freeman 2004, Johnson and Lloyd 2004, Thomson 2011).

The housewife was, instead, central to government policy of the time. In his 'Forgotten People' speech (1942) – the campaign speech that became the de facto manifesto for the Liberal Party in the post-war years (Cater 2012) – Robert Menzies, Australian Prime Minister from 1949 to 1966 made it clear to the Australian public that it was the middle class and their homes and their families that were key to his policy making because these elements formed the foundation of society: 'The home is the foundation of sanity and sobriety; it is the indispensable condition of continuity; its health determines the health of society as a whole' (Menzies 1942). Between 1947 and 1954, the percentage of Australians who owned homes rose from 45 to 63 per

cent and by the 1950s, owning a home was central to the 'Australian dream' and a way of life for new (migrants) and old Australians alike (Macknight 2010: 53). Macknight argues that this was the way in which Australia remade itself and became independent at the end of the war (2010: 47), and the housewife was at the helm of this important social force.

Fig. 2. 'Making your house a home', *Woman's World*, 1958: 444

At this time, major retailers and advertisers estimated that women constituted somewhere between 75 and 90 per cent of all their customers (Reekie 1991: 17). They recognised that the housewife managed the household budget and, therefore, it was critical to attract and maintain female customers. It was women who shopped for most household consumables, and women who almost always had the final say in major household purchases. Even if they did not make the actual purchase, they exerted influence, even over masculine commodities – for example, men might choose the brand of paint, but women chose the colour (Reekie 1991: 19). Women's magazines also recognised the influence of women on their advertising revenue. *The Australian Women's Weekly* identified that women controlled 90 per cent of a household's spending power (Griffen-Foley 1999: 33). The housewife was the purchasing manager for the household, and every home – not just wealthy ones – was, therefore, the target for the new consumerism. A 1960 survey of 1,400 Melbourne women claimed that the 'housewife is an extremely important figure to marketers of a great many products' (USP 1960: 1) and the findings of this survey were an important tool for companies wishing to formulate marketing and advertising strategies directed to housewives.

Fig. 3. 'Colour in the home', *Woman's World*, 1958, 434

FLOOR	WALL	FURNISHINGS
Red or Coral	Light Green or Off-White Pale Yellow-Green Pale Teal Shades of Green-Blue Pale Yellow Cream-Green	Light Green-Blue, Yellow or Coral Yellow or Teal Yellow or Teal Blue or Green-Blue, or both White and Red
Brown or Beige	White or Beige Shades of Grey Light Green or Yellow Teal Yellow-Green Light Yellow-Blue Cream-Green	Orange-Red or Green-Blue, or both White or Yellow-Blue Orange-Red or Yellow, or both Orange-Red Yellow or Teal Yellow or Coral Blue-Green, White & Orange-Red
Yellow & Medium Yellow-Green	Pale Deep Yellow Brown & Red Shades of Grey Pale Yellow-Green Pale Yellow-Blue Shades of Grey Shades of Grey Pale or Medium Green	Yellow, Yellow-Blue or White Bright Yellow or Orange-Red Bright Yellow or Teal Red or Orange-Red Red or Orange-Red Orange-Yellow, White, Black Orange-Yellow & White
Green	Shades of Light Green Cream-Green Cream-Green Light Yellow-Green Blue-Green Blue-Green or Teal	Red or Yellow, or both Red or Yellow Dark Blue, Cream-Green, or both Dark Blue Light Green & White Light Green & Yellow-Green, White
Blue-Green Teal	Yellow or Pale Green Off-White Light Yellow-Green Teal White-Green	White-Red Orange-Yellow, Black, White Orange-Yellow, White or both White, Black and Orange-Red Blue
Blue	Shades of Light Blue Light Yellow-Green Light Yellow-Blue Pale Yellow Pale Yellow	Light Green, Yellow-Green, White Orange or Red Dark Blue & White Dark Blue Dark Blue
Beige & Deep Blue	Shades of Light Green Shades of Grey Shades of Grey Shades of Grey Shades of Grey Shades of Grey	Bright Yellow or Coral Orange or Blue-Green Orange, Orange-Yellow Bright Yellow or Orange Bright Yellow or Orange Bright Yellow or Orange
Grey, Off-White	Any colour can be used with Grey, but the following are most effective: Dark Blue Dark Blue Dark Blue Dark Blue Dark Blue Dark Blue	White, Teal, Red, Orange White & Teal Light Blue or Bright Yellow Light Blue or Bright Yellow White, Teal, Orange-Red

Fig. 4. 'Guide to colour combinations', *Woman's World*, 1958, 443 Fig. 5. 'Living room', *Woman's World*, 1958, 445

Johnson and Lloyd argue that, at this time, the Australian woman emerged as 'a modern identity with responsibilities, entitlements, a sphere of importance in which to act and hence also the potential to move beyond this sphere and to begin to define her own responsibilities' (2004: 27). Almost immediately, women were singled out and sold the responsibility of planning and refurbishing houses and homes. As a consumer, these women were offered the power to dream about, design and create the perfect home for her perfect family. Where women's organisations in the 1940s were linked with the public good, the improvement of working conditions and the desire for paid work in or out of the home, concerns for these organisations in the 1950s were based around the immediate family as a group of private individuals organised around ideas of consumption (Johnson and Lloyd: 48–49).

Manufacturers of household appliances, products and new gadgets, as well as the producers of processed food and publishers of cookbooks and magazines, sent a clear message to the 1950's housewife through the advertising in mass circulation publications. These advertisements present a consistent narrative that certain products would enable the housewife to present her home as a showpiece whilst making her job, and therefore her life, easier and better. This would, the advertisements promised, increase her pride and satisfaction in a job well done, and importantly, show the world that she had good taste.

Fig. 6. Advertisement for Masonite, *Woman*. 30 April 1945, 36

Australian architectural writer Davina Jackson states that, in the 1950s, architectural styles were moderated by an influx of new ideas, technologies and commercial products that revised how the middle classes lived (2007: 169). In a climate of social optimism after World War II, mass-market home magazines in Australia urged their mainly women readers to abandon traditional aesthetics and welcome modern designs for their homes, interiors, furnishings and electrical goods (Jackson 2007: 169). She writes that ‘one outcome was a popular, utopian movement to blanket the nation with suburbs of glamorous, functional, healthy, bright and airy new houses: creating an all American domestic culture’ (Jackson 2007: 169).

It was in relation to the home that women received public recognition. Her advanced housewifery and parenting skills were central to this role but her decorating flair was also a way to show her taste and style. More than any other room in her house, it was her kitchen where this was most effectively expressed:

Meal machine, experimental laboratory, status symbol, domestic prison, or the creative and spiritual heart of the home? Over the course of the past century, the kitchen, more than any other room in the modern dwelling, has been radically altered by the technological, social and aesthetic conventions of the twentieth century. The modern kitchen epitomizes and embodies its owner’s lifestyle and relationship to consumer culture (Kinchin 2011: 5).

Magazine articles told women that it was important for their kitchens to be attractive as well as functional. ‘Spotlight on Your Kitchen’ in *New Country Crafts* recommended a ‘gay’ colour scheme, which meant bright and happy. American ideas were incorporated: a cork notice board and a meals bar – an alternative dining area, perfect for light snacks. If there was a handy man in the house he could perhaps make them! (Anon 1955: 16-17). In July 1957, ‘Margaret’ – supervisor of the Mayfair Colour Centre – asked her readers to assess their kitchens against local standards in an article, ‘Hints for Tints for Interior Painting, ‘My, oh, my, your kitchen looks lovely. Is that what your friends and neighbors are saying?’’ (Fitch 1957: 30-1). The modern kitchen incorporated elements of practical design and functionality that made working in it easier but at the same time it became an aspirational space, where women could

express their personality, flair and their good taste.

Woman's World: a wealth of advice ... and subtle advertising

Housework was seen as a legitimate employment choice and manuals designed to assist the modern housewife (and her husband) 'through the maze of new [domestic] developments' (Barnes c.1950: 2) were available. Many of these manuals had advertisements for household products in their pages. In 1957, for example, the past students of Melbourne's Invergowrie Homecraft Hostel produced a book of household advice, *Invergowrie Household Hints*, as a fundraiser for a building appeal. The Established in 1929, the Invergowrie Homecraft Hostel was a specialist school in the major capital city of Melbourne, where housewifery was taught as a set of professional-level skills. This book featured advertisements for products that related to the advice in corresponding sections. An advertisement for Seabrook & Sons Wines (Jukes 1958: 98) is, for example, presented opposite a section on 'Serving Wine' (99); that for McPhersons Limited tools, hardware and paint (92) sits next to a page of 'Hints for the Handyman' (93); Nylex Plastic Film (90) next to 'Care of Plastics in the Home' (91); Fowlers Vacola (88) next to 'Fruit Bottling' (89); and Grosvenor Plate (86) next to 'Your Cutlery and Silver' (83). Although the focus of the book was on tips to make housework easier and the home run more smoothly, and these advertisements were artfully arranged within the book to make a contribution to this content the placement of advertisements makes it clear that funds had to be raised to produce the book and advertising products was a means to this end.

Woman's World followed a different format. Its stated aim was to give women access to training in the skills vital to their demanding and multiple roles. It told them repeatedly that to perform these roles, and to make a good impression, they needed to have good taste. From its introductory pages, it encourages women to execute their tasks in a correct – which is framed as 'tasteful' way. The volume refers to Emily Post (1872–1960), the American author famous for her writing on home decorating and etiquette. It attempted to both educate women about a range of personal and domestic tasks and to validate women's work by raising the status of housework and comparing work in the home to that of men's work outside the home. Subtly, it also marketed a range of goods and services to women through its advertorial style 'courses' that advised how to achieve the desired outcome with flair and good taste.

Its six hundred pages were divided into courses (not chapters) covering beauty, fashion, poise and personality, cooking, money management, love and marriage, the home, the family, as well as hobbies and interests. Sixty-two companies were thanked for 'much of the information' and this provides a clue to one of the intentions behind the book. A selection of contributors included: Ansett-ANA (a major Australian airline until 1991), Berlie Ltd (makers of foundation garments), The Berlitz School of Languages, Georges Ltd, Myer Emporium (Melbourne department stores), Hardy Brothers (jewelry, crockery and silverware), Holeproof, Kayser (both stockings), Kraft Foods Ltd, May Burnett Underwear, Rene Henri Hairdressing Salon, Yardley of London and Revlon Pty Ltd (both make-up). Many of the articles included in the courses were contributed by companies and are advertorials for their products: The

Macleans Teeth Care Advisor provided a section: 'Is yours a dazzling Smile' (103–105); William Owens Optometrist provides a section on choosing frames for glasses, 'Framing your face' (114–16); the section on 'Handcare' comes from Revlon (117–20); 'Footsteps to Beauty' from Scholl footwear company (121–23); 'Colour in the Home' from Glazebrooks Paints Pty Ltd (434–43); and, 'Banking' was contributed by the E.S. & A. Bank Ltd. (370–73).

Course 7, 'The Home', covered buying a house or selecting land and building a home, colours and colour combinations, and making a house a home by furnishing and decorating it. The home was the housewife's domain and when decorating it, she was advised to make 'I'll please myself!' (444) her motto. Contrary to this recommendation, the advice on how to decorate tastefully contained in this course is prescriptive:

Over furnished rooms are neither attractive nor comfortable. Fine furniture is not compatible with too much 'company' – it detracts from its beauty ... Cut down on your furniture as much as possible' (444).

'Fussy' table arrangements are in bad taste' the reader was advised, as were heavily perfumed flowers on a dinner table. 'Keep it low' was the advice when dressing the dinner table (543). Patricia Gillard of Glazebrook paints advised women to try a new colour scheme (434) and, if she didn't have a lovely spacious home, 'complete with all modern appliances, luxurious furnishings and up-to-the minute décor', the housewife could still rely on ingenuity and tastefully decorate and furnish her home within her budget.

By careful planning in colour and furnishings you can achieve a feeling of welcome, warmth comfort and spaciousness. You can make your home individual, personally satisfying and beautiful, and if you want it so – the envy of all your friends (435).

But when it came to colour schemes she could not please herself. Instead, Gillard advised that the colour scheme chosen had to suit the woman's pattern of living and her personality but, most importantly, it should be based on her individual colouring. Brunettes should choose light-toned colours or those that are rich and vibrant, avoiding grey and blue; blondes should choose blue and violet tones and avoid yellow and green; redheads should use green to green blue and avoid red and orange. Only the so-called 'brownettes' [sic] had the entire spectrum of colours at their decorating disposal (437–38). A woman had to look her most attractive at all times in her home.

But it was in her modern kitchen, now often combined with the dining room (which once would have been considered to be in bad taste), where the challenge of decorating in good taste was most important. 'The kitchen has been 'promoted'' (447) stated one article, referring to its new status as a shared family and entertaining space. Like the contemporary kitchen, the modern kitchen of the post-war period was a 'utility room that has been thrust into the limelight and become a design statement' (Kops 2006: 5). It is in this room that the modern homemaker had her best opportunity to express herself to show her zest for living and her interest in the family. The kitchen was a room where, 'you sit and eat and talk and enjoy the good things of life' (447). The modern housewife had at her disposal modern and attractive kitchen utensils, gadgets and appliances designed by modern designers. When

planning a kitchen, *Woman's World* advised, 'don't just follow mum and buy the old cream refrigerator or the green and cream stove with the spindly legs. Inspect the beautiful colours now given to these appliances before you buy' (447). There were rules to be followed when decorating this space to ensure the most tasteful result:

When table-top and dressers are bare, place bowls of fruit on them with multi-coloured mats. Include perhaps the top section of a pineapple, a pomegranate, or a plain old pinecone. Never use artificial fruit (448).

Fig. 7. Table Setting, *Better Homes and Gardens New Cookbook*, 1953, 371

Products for home decorating advertised in popular women's magazines such as *The Australian Women's Weekly* echoed the advice of *Woman's World* – that good taste prefers less. But in this preference for less, these magazines, like *Woman's World's* courses and contributors, encouraged consumption and more spending.

Fig. 8. A modern kitchen, *Better Homes and Gardens New Cookbook*, 1953, 37

Conclusion

The post-war housewife was an important figure to marketers of a great many products (United Services Publishing 1960: 1). In order to formulate marketing and advertising strategies, companies wishing to sell goods and services to her devised and conducted surveys to try to understand how she made her purchasing decisions. A

close examination of *Woman's World* reveals that it too was a marketing device. An analysis of its content reveals the clear link between good taste – which was described as showing restraint, refinement, simplicity, flair and discernment – and consumerism. This duality was masked in an instructional manual on how to be a modern women and carry out the role of housewife with a professional edge. In carrying out these tasks, the post-war woman could do-it-herself embracing ‘an opportunity for creative and satisfying work’ (46) or consult an expert in the field, perhaps even one whose advice she had read in one of *Women's World's* courses. Whatever means she chose to decorate or redecorate, money was spent in order to do it tastefully.

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