

Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning*

WIM GILLES

Blaszczyk, Regina Lee. *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xiii, 380 pp., illus., paper, US\$49.95, ISBN 0801861934.

When, in the 1960s, I made acquaintance with the expertise of marketing, it promoted the maxim "stop trying to sell what you make: make what you can sell." I was to believe that this was one of those typical post-Second World War management concepts, a panacea for failing sales departments. Although the slogan was right, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning* proves that the suggestion that this was a novel idea was wrong. Regina Blaszczyk's book describes in detail how, as early as the second half of the eighteenth century, famous British potter Josiah Wedgwood and his commercial partner Thomas Bentley successfully operated on that modern marketing principle, albeit that their methods differed from today's. Regina Blaszczyk's thesis is that Wedgwood's eighteenth-century case is the model for the development, manufacture and distribution of durable consumer products in nineteenth-century United States. The characteristics of this model are a clear division of the various labour tasks, a flexible production output of small batches of goods in a wide variety of designs, and the study of customers' opinions mainly obtained at showrooms and points of sale.

Imagining Consumers paints a comprehensive and well documented picture of Wedgwood's innovative management and the operation of his industry. It details the role of Wedgwood's designers-cum-modelers, known as "practical men," a group of "labour aristocrats" that also included the company's decoration designers. Practical men held the key positions in a technologically developing industry of fine earthenware whose customers belonged to a "middling class of people," who, unlike Britain's genuine aristocracy, could not afford the luxury of porcelain, imported from the European continent.

With the Wedgwood model in mind, and based on an abundance of archival material, the author outlines the evolution, between the American Civil War and the Second World War, of the product design and development practice in three major sectors of the American industry of durable

domestic products: that of decorative pressed-glass products, the related decorative cut-glass and the industry of heat-resistant tempered pressed-glass ovenware; the larger sector of decorated china tea and tableware; and, the industry of domestic ceramic and vitreous enameled cast iron sanitary ware.

In each of these sectors the author introduces the reader to the major manufacturers and their associates, recounting their management exploits, illustrated with many quotes and anecdotes. She details the contributions to the product development process of various labour aristocrats, such as the designers and makers of the steel moulds in pressed-glass product manufacturing and the practical men, modelers and decoration designers in the china industry. The book further identifies those who, in each of the sectors, gathered the information about the consumers' wants and desires, where and how they got that information and how they intervened with the design process. They comprise the "jobbers," and retailers not only in the glass and china trade but also in that of toilet and bathroom products, the buyers of the "dime stores," of the large department stores and of the companies that offer china and glass products as "premiums" for the stamps that went with tea, coffee, cereals, and so on. Particularly in the early twentieth century, manufacturers increasingly relied on the opinions of fashion intermediaries, often journalists from the growing number of popular women's magazines, such as *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Ladies' Home Journal*.

It is interesting to read how the industry of cut pressed-glass products serves markets for women and men, the latter mainly buying elaborately cut crystal as gifts, whereas the china crockery market almost entirely served women of all classes and backgrounds, in stores running from specialty retailers to designated sections in department stores and mass-marketing "five and ten" outlets like F. W. Woolworth's. An entire chapter deals with the successful design and marketing of the Laughlin China Company's novel Fiesta line of colored "tempered modernist" tableware, carried out by the company's amalgam of expert salesmen, chief decorators, modelers, and crockery buyers. Another intriguing and detailed chapter of *Imagining Consumers* recounts Corning Glassworks' struggle to market its superb

Pyrex press glass oven-to-table ware that did not meet women's expectations. Those responsible for the product's development and marketing were unaware of the practices in the pressed-glass trade of imagining female consumers. The rhetoric of efficiency only confused the product's promotion, a problem Wisconsin Kohler Company resolved by stimulating people to "make people want things" by using three interrelated strategies of enticement: product design, national advertising and consumer credit. *Imagining Consumers* describes the company's visionary president, Walter J. Kohler's, distinctive approach to design, innovation and marketing and his company's corporate strategy of emphasized continuity between his family firm, its community and its customers.

While Regina Blaszczyk's restricts her study of the product management's environment to the United States at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, it is useful to note that the European situation in the same branches and the same period and even in the first two postwar decades was not much different. The problem of who the consumers are and why they buy has not changed and, aside from techniques such as consumer panel discussions,

the department stores' buyers play a decisive role in the design selection process. The author does not give much information about what precisely the design criteria are other than those pertaining to quantity and price.

While the book clearly identifies the consumers of glassware, pottery and bathroom products as mainly female, it neither offers an analysis of typical feminine product design traits in the discussed products, nor does it record such feminine product design characteristics as should have resulted from the imagining process. Most likely, the available archival material did not refer to any such characteristics. One can even speculate that the imagining experts, many of whom were female, but none of them designers themselves, failed to be specific in this difficult matter. The problem was — and still is — that they, like the jobbers and the department store buyers, could do no more than imagine what the consumer would accept or reject from what the practical men and decoration designers proposed.

Regardless of the above flaw, for which Regina Blaszczyk obviously is not to blame, *Imagining Consumers* is a fascinating story that offers a wealth of information about the development of America's proto-consumer society.