

The Millstone of Style

Style is no longer simply in the clothing industry. The price of style, the new importance of styling in all industry, its possible place in production of the future is discussed by Donald Wilhelm, who contributed "Tomorrow's Gadgets" to a recent issue of NEW OUTLOOK.

By Donald Wilhelm

TECHNOLOGICAL production is, of course, designed for the economics of abundance.

Technological unemployment is characterized by, but by no means necessarily does it cause, the inability or the unwillingness of people to buy in abundance.

Style is a stimulant not without its uses and abuses. Consider the chorus girl that the late Flo Ziegfeld, specialist in femininity, once displayed on Broadway to an artist, saying: "Isn't she gorgeous! Isn't she beautiful!" To which the artist replied: "Her features are ugly! Her feet are ugly! Her figure isn't up to the brag! She thinks, she feels, she *believes* she's beautiful mainly because she's dressed beautifully! That's it!"

Styling, likewise not without its uses and abuses, is the *couturier*, the handmaid, to style. It can also be, as we shall see, a Frankenstein to those who put it into service; and further, because of the fact that we apparently have had no radical change in the consumer's thinking as the result of the adversities of the Depression concerning this expensive element in the material things which we buy, style must be accepted as a factor of continuing importance and a disturbing element in our production plans of the next NEW ERA.

So with the age-old penchant for style still actively with us and bound up as it is with technological production and technological unemployment let us proceed to—hats!

Here, now, is a woman in Our Town who in better days was accustomed and delighted to pay handsomely for her hats (although, to be sure not so very much for her Empress Eugénie). But here of late, the uses of adversity being what they are, instead of devoting repetitious, delightful hours to the quest of a perfect score in the matter of hats, she found herself in a Fifth Avenue shop selling hats! And there, slightly bemused, one of her first assignments was to mark-up approximately one thousand hats costing approximately two dollars each in such a way that they were to be sold, at



prices ranging from \$4 to \$22.50 each, to bring in a gross income exceeding \$6,000.

"Why such a hefty mark-up—of more than 300 per cent—when the average shop and department-store mark-up on women's apparel approximates only 50 per cent?"

"Because," she was assured, "it's worth it—to take the gamble on the curiously unpredictable acts of the human element in the merchandizing as well as the making of hats, to which matter many great minds have given and give ceaseless devotion." And she was told of one of the greatest of these great minds which first manifested symptoms of decay by screaming in the night "Hats! Hats! Hats!" and upon waking averred solemnly to all concerned that the world is a sea of hats, riding choppy waves forever to the horizon! There was, for example, the Eugénie of yesteryear! Women liked it. Women raved about it—for a time. Manufacturers could not produce enough of them. Retailers stocked up heavily with it until, plop!—all of a sudden you couldn't give a Eugénie away. And here, again, of late, thanks to the miracles of modern merchandizing and communication the automobile, fashion magazine and mail-order catalogue, the tiara popped into view, so quickly to be done for that some manufacturers and others were left wondering why the thing was ever started. So they said to their wives or daughters:

"Women are funny!"

But Percy Anderson, the artist whose paintings, reflected glamorously in hundreds of advertisements, have begun but faintly to make men hat-conscious, tells me that men are funnier! And the despair of hat manufacturers also, because they just will not, in general, acquire hat wardrobes, will not systematically suit their hats to the seasons or to their suits or topcoats, will not even accept and in sanctity preserve the upturned brims of off-the-face models! "To men, to most men," he assures me, "a hat is a hat and t'ell with it! Most men don't want to be seen coming out of a store under a new hat. Most of them buy a hat for three or four dollars, and wear it until their wives threaten to burn it!"

Men are, for the most part, simpletons also in the matter of other apparel, including shoes: In the course of a year, a normal year, the average American male acquires 1/2 a hat, 1/10 a pair of dress gloves, less than one pair of "good" shoes and 2/3 of a suit of clothes. In the matter of suits it is enough for the stylists of the major manufacturers to anticipate his slow-and-solid



antics by meeting in New York twice a year, to swap notes and redesign or rather readjust designs twice a year, to send salesmen out to jobbers and retailers twice a year.

Women, however, are by no means so easy to please.

Largely because they respond, are made to respond, to styling in the matter of footwear, one manufacturer assures me

that the life of a feminine pair of shoes is often not more than six weeks. And, thanks again to modern means of communication and to those humming hives of Parisian *couturiers* such as Chanel, Patou, Lanvin, Schiaparelli, Fioret, Mainbocher and Augustabernard and all their copyists, imitators and an army of designers and workers behind the lines, as it were, women's fashions are not only affairs of the heart and purse but also of numberless manufacturers. Indeed Sidney and Beatrice Webb once calculated that sometimes a rich woman will use—will *consume*—in her garments the whole year's labor of from 100 to 200 workers while, however, leaving textile manufacturers to worry about what textiles will be desired.

Actually from four to six months are ordinarily required for the economical production and delivery of mill goods. Accordingly, because the fear of style changes is prone to make women and retailers wait until the last possible moment before buying and garment makers must wait on them, a mill aiming to produce style goods in quantity often spends the first half of a period in anticipation of orders *mainly* and the second in feverish, perhaps over-time and in the end perhaps wasteful, effort.

In this arena of apparel, notably women's apparel, styling, oftentimes a millstone, round a manufacturer's neck, is in many instances, when he is lucky or established as a leader, his best buckler and shield. But by no means is styling and ceaseless restyling any more the unique concern and responsibility of hat, shoe and garment makers or merchandizers only.

All of a sudden (in large part we may thank the Depression for it) a new and widely varied classification of additional designers has appeared, ready, willing, even eager to serve anyone who has anything to sell—anything from a container containing a cosmetic to a can containing herrings called sardines, anything from a car, even a trolley car, to a baby carriage or a steam locomotive. As yet they are *not* undertaking to design and redesign buildings, which has long *been* the cherished activity of architects, not a few of whom have also become industrial designers. But, having been artists or stage producers, antiquarians or advertising men, engineers or interior decorators, draughtsmen, yes, and poets, even, they have of a sudden established themselves as a new industry or profession brought into existence by the exigencies of merchandizing the products and services of our technologic

era and able, ready, even willing to design or redesign almost anything and everything.

These *couturiers* to industry—for example, Geddes, Dreyfuss, Guild, De Vaultier, Switzer, Sakier, Kuhler, Rideout, Van Doren, Teague, Jensen, Leonard, Allan, Nash, plus scores serving various companies and advertising agencies anonymously—are, for the most part, on the credit side of the ledger in that they have helped manufacturers to sell goods, in some instances have helped them gorgeously, while creating new or better designs to live with. They have made bathrooms and kitchens, for example, “the best rooms” in the modern home. Here one has contrived a pre-fabricated unit—washstand, towel holders, medicine cabinet and lights—bathtubs with self-contained fixtures and other units which can be purchased in a variety of colors at low cost and be installed at minimum cost. Here another has redesigned a refrigerator after 100,793 housewives had replied to questionnaires asking them for suggestions, yearnings and remarks in the matter of refrigerators. Here, again, after General Motors had sent out more than a million questionnaires to car users, you find them undertaking to apply, in the persons of, or in coöperation with, automotive engineers, the findings in point. Here, too, we have Mr. Bel Geddes advising the Chrysler engineers on streamlining. And we have scales that make it a pleasure to weigh things, skillets that you are now loath even to refer to as frying-pans, washing machines which would have been deemed decorative in the parlors of living-rooms of houses designed in our Dark Ages period of architecture, that period in which our fathers and grandfathers made houses that combined all kinds of architecture while ignoring Colonial, with the skyscraper our only real contribution to architecture.

These *couturiers* to industry, to tin cans, to saltcellars, to glassware, to clock faces, fountain-pen sets, even railroad trains, are the shock troops of the industrial army expediting obsolescence. They are evangelists, gravely dubious of thrift, preaching the gospel of replenishment, tempting us to conclude that just because our living-room suite was a wedding gift rococoed and articulate with acanthus leaves that is no good reason why we should not buy another, or that just because our office or bedroom is modernistic there is no good reason why we must live with it the rest of our days; that what is bizarre, even fantastic, need *not* be artistic; that, in short, just because a thing is useful it need not be old-fashioned, ugly.

Manufacturers like that! It is logical, even reasonable; besides they've got a mountain range of new gadgets, with more and ever more ready for the making if only they can sell what they've got! They've got to sell! In our profit economy, some people say “lost” economy, they've got to sell or go bust! They don't want to go bust. And, after all, this new trend or twist does have additional considerations.

In cosmetics, one of our almost depression-proof industries, we find, as in the case of numberless specific and proprietary medicines, that frequently the container and label “selling all,” including the stuff in it, actually cost the manufacturer as much or more than the contents itself. By

no means so often, however, is all that true in the case of foodstuffs, of which we purchased at retail stores a whole 40 per cent less in 1933 than in 1929, disregarding fluctuations in prices along with a hefty increase in population working to offset those fluctuations. This huge loss in gross revenue, the difference between approximately 20 billions and 14, suggests how curiously housewives will in emergencies forego food, or at any rate the best grades of food, in order to buy cosmetics, which in degree at least answer to the lure of style. It has other implications, one of which is reflected in this industry's determination to make packaging, innovated on a large scale by John Arbuckle, more than a generation ago with a machine of his own design, more and more appetizing, tempting and attractive.

Such packaging or styling in the matter of foodstuffs, however such observers as Scot William McFee insist, handicaps buyer judgment. But unlike styling in other businesses, in itself it costs us as consumers little or nothing in the case of standard commodities at least. Also it has important sanitary and other values.

But in the automobile industry what amounts to styling, albeit it may not have cost us individually much or anything, so highly competitive is this industry, has broken the back of many of the manufacturers of those 800 different makes of cars which have in a generation appeared, only to be cast into the limbo of forgotten things. Year after year this industry has in the illustrative sense at least vied with the *couturiers* of Paris in its aim to please. Year after year each of its remaining units has, in the fall of the year and in many instances at other times, as in the case of The Ford Motor Company and some others, taken time out to complete the prodigious process underlying all changes of style in this field and which is called tooling-up.

Tooling-up is, of course, in some measure, to the extent that it provides for the embodiment in a motor vehicle of innovations or revisions of existing parts, a necessity. These innovations and revisions are the competitive answer, after all, to each manufacturer's desire to please, in other words to sell cars, buses, taxis, trucks. Dominating the whole picture is each unit's supremely important emphasis on styling. This emphasis is costly and without question to many a manufacturer of cars now out of business it has been ruinous. This tooling-up can cost automobile manufacturers each year, in terms of outlay and interruption, a million dollars and even more. It means as a rule shutting down the plant and halting all assembly. Then begins the casting of dies, the building of each model in wood so that steel dies can be made, the building of each model in clay and before that, an accumulation of days, weeks, months, in the case of some of the 400 main parts of a car perhaps years, of laboratory or other effort. It means, finally, some, perhaps extensive, rearrangement of machines, a deal of unemployment and in short such a burden that one manufacturer recently remarked to the writer, "With what it all costs I could, if it weren't necessary to our way of doing things, afford to give away 5,000 cars a year!"

In the narrow book, or cost-accounting, sense the aggregate expenditures by our automobile industry for tooling-up each year amounts to many millions. In the broader sense, if you could segregate any and all annual expenditures by the industry directly or indirectly energized by styling, the total would represent hundreds of millions and, I think, far, far more than any parallel sum annually spent in answer to the lure of style in women's apparel.

Styling in this huge industry is intimately coupled with, is often identical with and also is often energized or stimulated by, mechanical advances in the cars we buy,—often, but not always. Since 1927 there has been steadily increasing emphasis, for example, on streamlining, yet heretofore, the streamlining of cars has been of little if any intrinsic value, save in terms of styling; indeed there was at least one instance in which a manufacturer so unscientifically reshaped the front fenders on one car that, as wind-tunnel tests later showed, its front wheels when turning at high speed served—inversely, as it were—as turbines, to retard the speed of the car! Scientific, instead of merely stylistic, streamlining is revolutionizing railroad transportation of passengers. It is serving weightily to energize public interest in cars, is expediting obsolescence and making old cars seem older still, is being reflected directly and indirectly in the betterment of cars. But in another five years I feel confident to predict it will not have made cars in general use much faster than they are for the simple reason that I believe we are approaching, if we have not already reached, the practical limits of highway speed for cars in general, for reasons of human psychology rather than for mechanical reasons. It will have operated to make cars enjoyable and safer than they otherwise would have been at nearer their top speed. But five years from now, I think, streamlining will again have become far more important as a matter of styling and therefore of merchandizing than will the mechanics and intrinsic design.

We demand new styling, naturally enough, in things we are to use for a long time. We demand it also for social reasons. If we drove our homes round on wheels, no doubt we would rebuild or redesign them oftener! We get a fatter dollar's worth, too, when buying a car than when buying most any other considerable item. And so it would seem that styling, in the broad sense in which I am using it just here, has definitely justified itself in the case of the automobile.

On the social side, however, it is wholly conceivable that if we were not addicted to such gay and relentless styling and restyling of cars, there would be more stability of employment in the automobile industry. Careful study of the charts reveals, however, that the curve representing employment is by no means so violent in its antics as the curve representing automobile buying. Also it is obvious that the sum total of employment provided by the industry would be smaller by far if our automobile manufacturers did not so energetically and competitively use styling as their weapon, their buckler and shield. It is permissible at least to speculate as to why, when drafting its code, the industry did not win sanction for a sliding scale of car prices so that, for example, discounts would be provided buyers purchasing cars in slack rather than peak seasons, with *new* style the special premium for the

seasonal high price. Also I have wondered if, as and how soon we would all be yearning for more styling of the sort we are accustomed to if one unit—or if our government—owned and operated our automobile industry and if, competition having been eliminated, those in the saddle did not give two whoops and one holler about styling! Americans would like it not at all. For it is in us to respond to, in unique measure to insist upon, a sense of change, of movement, of progression in almost everything, no matter the cost.

And styling costs a lot. But within reason it would seem to be worth it!

However, the achievement of “new style” is not always the expensive thing in all trades which it is, and can be, in the automotive industry. Its actual accomplishment is not infrequently a matter of inspiration and simple ingenuity as was the case a few years ago in some of the largest textile plants in New England. A production engineer discovered that by simply loosening one single nut of a machine “mechanical gather” could be produced which gave a cloth into which a thing similar to the French knot was mechanically woven. Fine! Elaborate production plans to this end were made—there was reported a then existing demand for such fabric. Mills were speeded up. Great quantities of the new cloth soon filled the stock rooms, but by the time these new stocks reached the market of the ultimate consumer the style was declared dead and the cloth a drug on the shelves of the retailers.

Production of any and all fabricated materials or objects which rely on styling is simply chockful of dynamite, likely to explode at any time and spatter the manufacturer’s books with the finest of red ink.

If a desideratum of the economics of future production is simplification, more and more standardization, it is certainly obvious that in the matter of styling it has not been achieved. The rugged and serious thinking of the Depression has not produced any Spartan determination to ignore style. The producer has not changed. The consumer has not changed.

On the part of the producer, as the forces against quick sales became greater and greater, there has been more and

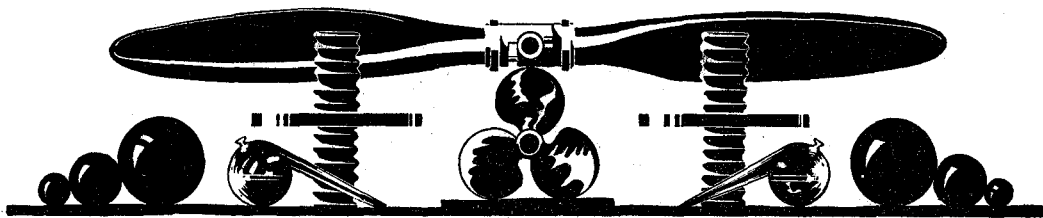
more reliance upon style, upon the use of the services of the stylists. This, in the largest measure, accounts for the recent, record increase in the activity in this field. If we are to believe the many reports of technological improvement of production machinery which has been going on, as it were, under wraps, during the Depression, it would seem that tomorrow more than ever will there be a demand for quicker and quicker changes in style as a means of speeding up obsolescence in consumers goods.

During the 19th Century beauty and practicality were divorced, if indeed they ever had affinity for one another. The machine age lugged in with it ugliness—ugly factories, ugly homes, ugly slums, ugly objects galore, including ugly tools and machines of all sorts no matter that, in their use and in their movement, in their shaping and rhythm, tools and machines have a beauty of their own to those who have an eye to see as clearly as Plato saw. Today, however, as we have seen, practicality is being tempered to the end that we shall have neater items, ways and means with which to be and with which to work, items in themselves beautiful enough to make mere contemplation of them what Plato referred to as the first of the “pure pleasures.” In a measure in our mechanistics we have come to recognize that in beauty there is often the highest efficiency. Thus many a practical fellow who has all along just taken for granted the symmetry of form and beauty of movement of such items as ship and airplane propellers, springs, roller bearings, machines, objects of glass, instruments, and much else might be amazed by the aesthetic delight which a selection of such common objects nowadays give visitors to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Styling can be “pure pleasure.”

It can be, in numberless instances is, an effective device of merchandizing, a concomitant of mass production, of mass employment, in degree a remedy for technological unemployment with other gratifications by no means amiss.

It can be, on the other hand, a Frankenstein—even to shop-girl budgets. In any case it answers to the yen in us for change, for going places, for getting there—and the possible goal is never considered.



The Consumer Comes of Age

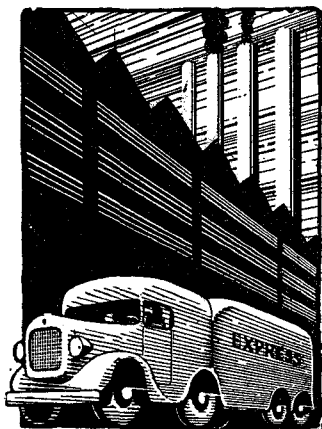
By Henry Carter

The American consumer has at last won recognition as a political entity. The fight has just begun. Mr. Carter tells of the personalities and agencies of the New Deal which are for, and against, the consumer.

WHETHER the New Deal fairly can be considered as revolutionary depends upon the point of view, as well as upon the ultimate outcome of the economic and political change which is taking place. On the surface, the New Deal has proceeded mainly within the limits of the law and the Constitution, and to that extent can avoid the technical stigma of revolution. However, behind it has been a change in the less trammelled field of thought, of political and economic viewpoint, which may become so far-reaching as to merit the revolutionary appellation. Of this not the least significant feature has been the growing recognition of a consumer interest in industry, as distinct from the interest of capital and of labor, and the birth, after much travail, of the consumer as a political entity.

The collapse of the economic structure of the United States, and of the rest of the world, four years ago and the subsequent depression, in which people starved in the midst of an over production of food products and went cold and unclad in the presence of an industrial machine of unlimited productivity, marked the end of an epoch. The industrial revolution which had begun at the end of the 18th Century had at last run its course and prepared the stage for a new era in which much of the economic theory and philosophy of the past was as out of date and inapplicable as the doctrine of the divine right of kings. We passed in effect from an economy of scarcity to one of abundance, and in solving the problem of production through the use of machinery and power we had found on our hands the greater and more difficult problems of distribution and consumption, toward the solution of which the history and experience of the past offered no adequate guide.

For four years past the best efforts of the best brains of the country have been devoted to the analysis and study of the situation in which we found ourselves, and if the solution has not yet been forthcoming, it will be remembered that the problem has been infinitely complex and human nature characteristic-



ally stubborn in its reluctance to leave the fancied shelter and protection of the past. Yet the country has been acutely conscious of the urgent and imperative reality of the problem, and while causes, diagnoses, measures and remedies are as yet imperfectly grasped and understood, the political convulsion of 1932 which brought President Roosevelt to power and the New Deal into being constituted a clear and unquestioned mandate for an advance from the past into the future, however dubious and uncertain the future might appear. As such the President accepted it and on that basis presumably he has acted.

Obviously the outstanding symptom of the Depression has been general unemployment, with its consequent contraction of purchasing power leading in turn to further unemployment in the vicious spiral described by countless economists. Yet unemployment has been the symptom and not the underlying cause of our economic maladjustment, and its reduction by spreading employment attacks the fundamental problem only so far as it places an increased purchasing power in the hands of a greater number of people. Over-production with its ensuing dislocation of purchasing power resulting in definite under-consumption lies more nearly at the heart of the matter, and unless purchasing power can be spread and increased to bring consumption and production more nearly into balance the capitalistic system presumably lies under sentence of death.

In point of fact, modern production methods, both agricultural and industrial, are now so far advanced that the economic needs of the country amply can be filled by an ever decreasing expenditure of human labor. New needs are born daily but neither they nor the increased purchasing power they require can keep pace with the revolutionary and never ceasing advance in technical and scientific methods of production. Actually—and this is borne out by current statistics—fewer and fewer people are needed for the work of production. Inevitably purchasing power will be narrowed if occupation in productive enterprise continues to be the principal basis upon which purchasing power is distributed. The Technocrats, however discredited and forgotten, deserve well of their country for having clearly defined this problem of industrial civilization. The question is no longer one of production for its own sake but one of consumption, and to consume, under the institutions of capitalistic society, one must have purchasing power; without consumers, organized industry and agriculture perish, as we have seen.

In his speech of March 5th President Roosevelt plainly stated that the major objective of the New Deal, and of