

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathy Lee Peiss. *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998. xii + 334 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-5550-4.

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In *Hope in a Jar*, Kathy Peiss examines cosmetics and beauty culture in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Peiss challenges current prevailing beliefs that the beauty industry was dominated by men to seduce women into narrowly defined visions of “beauty.” As she effectively demonstrates, the beauty industry, particularly between 1890 and 1920, was almost completely woman-run: women owned the companies producing cosmetics, women sold cosmetics, female beauty operators used and endorsed the products. In short, cosmetics provided employment in addition to beauty for many women.

This book is well-structured. Peiss first discusses what types of cosmetics women wore in the nineteenth century. Many women made their own powders, ointments and salves from recipes. Already, in the pre-mass manufactured age, there was a different aesthetic for black and white women, and advertisements used white as pure and black as dirty or impure. Peiss then deals with what might be termed the “golden age”: the era between 1890 and 1920 when women produced, advertised, and sold products. Next, Peiss examines the complexities of advertising, promoting and marketing cosmetics during the 1920s. A separate chapter is devoted to a discussion of black women because the tactics of firms marketing to white and black women began to significantly differ. Last, Peiss looks at cosmetics during and after World War II.

As Peiss traces the evolution of the production and social acceptability of cosmetics, she pays particular attention to race and different standards of beauty. If pale and creamy was the desired skin, the solution for white women lay in an array of powders, paints, and bleaches. But what were the ramifications for black

women? Peiss examines the hair and skin products sold and marketed to black women. Two of the largest companies within the black community did not sell hair straighteners or bleaches. The argument that black companies represented and created a black beauty aesthetic becomes tricky in the 1920s and 1930s, when several companies owned by whites tried to “pass” as black-owned. How cosmetics were used and perceived by various ethnic groups also merits attention. Although it might appear as if some firms promoted different “looks” for different ethnicities, even companies espousing “different kinds of beauty” used one basic (northern European) face in their advertisements.

Few companies from the “golden age” remain today, and that, Peiss asserts, was part of the nature of the cosmetics industry as it shifted and adapted in the post-World War I era. I was not convinced by the argument that women left the industry, or were replaced by men, after World War I. Peiss claims that the growth of cosmetics in the 1920s partly resulted from mass production and distribution networks placing products in drug-stores. The implication of this argument is that women were not useful in this new method and were edged out, although I cannot see why or how women would be unable to do this. At the same time that women were pushed out of production, women became increasingly important at advertising firms charged with “selling” the products.

It is clear, from census and manufacturing data, that cosmetics sales increased from hundreds of thousands of dollars in the 1910s to hundreds of millions in the 1920s; what is not clear is why. Peiss offers some new insights into this questions. To her credit, Peiss discusses advertising, magazines, and cinema as critical components, but

I think she does not go far enough in exploring the relationship between visibility of cosmetics and the increase in sales. Advertising alone did not create the market for the increase in sales. As Peiss suggests, younger women bought more cosmetics than older women. However, there is no economic breakdown to determine whether the working girl was a better customer, and steadier consumer, than the upper-class woman.

In several chapters, time jumps forwards and backwards, and it is often difficult to pinpoint a particular moment in time. In one paragraph (pp. 84-85), for example, a seamless narrative is dependent on sources from 1899 and 1920. One of the big disappointments of the book is the lack of attention to the Great Depression, precisely because cosmetic sales continued to increase. Many employed the rhetoric of psychology to justify cosmetics use during the 1930s in much the same way the government did during World War II. The illustrations are a tremen-

dous asset. Unfortunately, they were not referred to in the text although they are discussed in detail.

This is the first comprehensive book on the history of cosmetics in the United States in fifty years. It provides an interesting look at female entrepreneurship, employment, and decision-making in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The balance and attention given to racial definitions of beauty is an added dimension to the complex definition of an American beauty. The clear definitions and defined terminology—cosmetics, make up, beauty culture—were welcomed and useful.

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