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## Book Reviews

**IMAGINING CONSUMERS: DESIGN AND INNOVATION FROM WEDGWOOD TO CORNING** by Regina Lee Blaszczyk 2000, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 368 pages, \$39.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by James A. Delle

With this book, Regina Lee Blaszczyk analyzes one of the most abstruse spaces in the history of American capitalism: the gap between the imaginations of those who would make products, and the desires of those who would buy them. Blaszczyk's thesis states that successful manufacturers of durable products have been able to survive the ravages of free market competition by outwitting their competitors in crossing this gap, particularly by understanding consumers' material dreams, and then making and selling the things that best fulfill those desires. In understanding the consumer markets, these companies are able to "imagine consumers," specifically their needs or wants, and to transform the resultant conceptions of what would please consumers into popular and inexpensive products. Blaszczyk argues that this approach to understanding the consumer revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries explains the relationship between consumer and manufacturer better than the more common and more simplistic models that contend that successful companies are those that are best able to create markets for existing products.

Blaszczyk opens the first substantive chapter of the book, titled "Cinderella Stories," with a deconstruction of that famous coming of age fairy tale. Why is this particular story of a humble girl raised from servitude by a handsome prince so enduring in capitalist society? Blaszczyk argues that while some of the metaphors within this story have been particularly useful in teaching young girls gender-appropriate lessons—particularly that marriage and dependence on a male figure are the keys to happiness—embedded in the story is a lesson central to the reproduction of capitalist society, one that teaches children that the acquisition of material goods is the key to the discovery and maintenance of happiness.

After all, if it were not for the flashy gown, pumpkin carriage, and glass slippers, Cinderella may never have caught the prince's eye in the first place. If Cinderella can be conceived as a Victorian Age working-class girl, then the real suppliers of possessions can be seen to be like fairy godmothers: manufacturers who listen to the fantasies of the downtrodden, providing them with the products they require to make their dreams come true.

The remainder of the book is dedicated to illustrating to what degree specific firms and corporations were able to become the fairy godmothers of consumerism. To relate these tales, Blaszczyk combed several corporate archives, particularly analyzing the records of art and marketing departments to reconstruct how employees of these companies conducted market research in order to design and produce objects that could materially fulfill the fantasies of consumers. In the process, Blaszczyk engages several very interesting cultural phenomena of Victorian and early 20th-century America. For example, she adroitly reveals the roles that late 19th-century crystal and china manufacturers played in creating what is now thought to be a timeless tradition: the giving of expensive dinner sets and glassware to new brides. In a similar vein, Blaszczyk explores the origins of the hobby of collecting objects just to have them through her analysis of the peculiar phenomenon of "China Mania" which struck the United States in Victorian times. As is well known amongst historical archaeologists, this is the era in which the mass production of inexpensive white wares and semi-vitreous porcelains brought the bourgeois habit of serving dinner on matched sets of dishes within the means of many working-class families. Blaszczyk presents an explanation of why these things became so ubiquitous in the late 19th century.

That manufacturing companies consciously attempted to expand the ethos of mass consumption from the middle classes to the working classes is a theme that runs through the book. Blaszczyk is most successful in illustrating how manufacturers entered the working-class market in the third chapter of the book, which is dedicated to examining the

relationships that developed between manufacturers and mass retailers in the late 19th-century. During this period, retailers began using the now familiar strategy of giving away pieces of matched sets of dishes with purchases of non-durable commodities, particularly foodstuffs. In doing so, manufacturers and retailers were working together to bring the twin ethics of consumerism and mass material acquisition to an ever-increasing number of people, particularly working-class women.

One of the strengths of this volume lies in its ability to describe how firms adjusted their products to anticipated changes in demand. For example, Blaszczyk illustrates how a number of firms that had become increasingly dependent on the working-class market were forced to rethink their product lines and marketing strategies with the onset of the Great Depression. As illustration, Blaszczyk explores how the Homer Laughlin company was able to survive these hard times by combining art with technology, manifested in the popular, brightly colored, and inexpensive Fiesta Ware. The vibrant colors of the ceramics, new to the eyes of most consumers, coupled with a clever marketing strategy, made this particular type of ware very popular in the 1930s. Blaszczyk does a fine job in demonstrating how the desire to escape the gray mood of the Depression encouraged many consumers to brighten up their lives with brightly colored products; Homer Laughlin was able to take advantage of this phenomenon through its marketing of Fiesta Ware.

At times, the book reads much like a straight business history. Chapter 6, on the Kohler Company, the famous manufacturer of plumbing fixtures, is a case in point. The chapter is rich in detail about the upstart company's struggles to break into a market controlled in the 1920s and '30s by an oligarchy of powerful corporations. This chapter is less successful in analyzing the relationship between product and imagination than several of its predecessors, indeed perhaps, as Blaszczyk implies, because Kohler was less proactive in imagining its consumers' desires than reactive to the responses their product lines elicited among consumers.

In an interesting parallel discussion presented in Chapter 7, Blaszczyk discusses the

relative failure of the Corning Glass Company's Pyrex line to engage consumers' imagination in the '20s and '30s. Despite decades of market research, and ever expanding sales of its other products, sales of Pyrex bakeware remained flat for a generation. In the end, Blaszczyk attributes the failure of Pyrex to Corning's unwillingness or inability to imagine the desires of female consumers. The technology used to create Pyrex was first developed for laboratory glass ware, as such, those who designed the product had an overwhelmingly masculine imagination focused on efficiency. The early marketing strategies used for the Pyrex line created simile rather than metaphor: the kitchen was likened to the laboratory, where efficiency in production was the desired end. This scientific approach to domesticity apparently did not sell among the majority of working-class and middle-class homemakers.

Exploring how companies expressed and reconciled the contradictions that exist between the desires of masculine manufacturers and those of female consumers is a theme that runs through the book. Blaszczyk implies throughout that those firms that developed marketing schemes that could actively imagine and manifest the material desires of women were successful, while those that could not—or chose not to—see into the minds and hearts of women could not provide the products female consumers desired. In support of this argument, Blaszczyk contrasts the failure of Pyrex with the overwhelming popularity of its successor, the ubiquitous white with cornflower motif Corningware glass cookware, which remains popular to this day. In contrast to the masculine research that led to the development of Pyrex in the 1920s, Corningware was developed through research, largely conducted by women, amongst potential female consumers. Perhaps not surprisingly, the product research and subsequent marketing campaign were very successful in incorporating the imagination of female consumers, and resulted in one of the 20th century's most enduring products.

Although written as a business history, *Imagining Consumers* is a book that many historical archaeologists will appreciate. While we take for granted the importance of daily

consumer goods that we find in archaeological assemblages, we too often are content to discover when a certain object was made, and to deduce to what purposes it was put. Rarely do we think about what was going on in the minds of those that designed, created, marketed, and sold the millions of things we have collectively excavated over the decades. Blaszczyk's thought-provoking book provides an alternative way to think about these consumer products, and thus is of great interest to an archaeological audience.

James A. Delle received his B.A. from Holy Cross College in Worcester, M.A., in 1986, his M.A. from the College of William and Mary in 1989, and his Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts in 1996. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, PA. He is interested in the archaeology of colonial spaces, particularly examining how space as a form of material culture mediates the negotiation of social relations between colonizing and colonized groups. He has worked in Jamaica, Ireland, New York, and St. Eustatius, and is author of *An Archaeology of Social Space: Analyzing Coffee Plantations in Jamaica's Blue Mountains* (Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 1998).

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**DEATH BY THEORY: A TALE OF MYSTERY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY** by Adrian Praetzellis 2000, Altamira Press, California. 174 pages, \$59.00 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Diana DiPaolo Loren

Intrigue, suspense, romance, deception, exotic locations, and archaeology? Can one book capture it all and still make archaeological theory comprehensible to students? Yes, and Adrian Praetzellis has done so in this

important contribution that presents archaeological theory through narrative. This is a tale of mystery set on an island in the Pacific Northwest where archaeological theory as well as current issues and debates within archaeology are explained through character dialogue. Clearly there has been a need for such a volume. There are few books on archaeological theory written for undergraduate students. Large-scale volumes on archaeology often used in introductory courses tend to compartmentalize theoretical approaches in chapters dealing with regions or methods, while more advanced theoretical works adapted for introductory classes are often incomprehensible to students. And aside from *In Small Things Forgotten* (Deetz 1996) and *What This Awl Means* (Spector 1993), there are few popular books on archaeology that are written for a broad audience of archaeologists, students, and interested lay people. In *Death by Theory*, Praetzellis has provided both: a book about archaeological theories that is accessible to a broad audience.

In this book, characters espouse different theoretical approaches. Our protagonists are Hannah Green, a professor of archaeology at Ennui State University and aunt of Sean Doyle, a recently matriculated student with a B.A. in anthropology who is in search of a job (and, as it turns out, so much more). Hannah and Sean are contracted to work on a highly suspect dig, where they meet an interesting array of archaeologists. Through the volume, Hannah spends much of her time explaining or lecturing on the history and workings of archaeology to Sean and other characters. She also laments over the progress of her own book on archaeology theory (entitled *Archaeology from A to Z* to be published by Lascaux Press) which, like the author's, is a book on theory structured using mystery writer Sue Grafton's alphabet murder series. Other characters and their approaches include Alasdair, the materialist; bd starr, the ecofeminist; and Terry, the Marxist, just to name a few. Through their dialogue, theories are discussed, deliberated, refuted, and argued from various standpoints and positions. By presenting theory through characters in the book, Praetzellis hopes that the readers will see how "theoretical models are like these colored lenses,