The Color Revolution by Regina Blaszczyk (review)

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Technology and Culture, Volume 55, Number 1, January 2014, pp. 261-263
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/tech.2014.0002

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Accessed 11 Oct 2016 03:01 GMT
economists in business were the development of recipes to popularize a manufacturer’s products and the creating and testing of new products. Yet, beyond these functions, they too envisioned themselves as advocates of rational consumption, though this goal could, and did, clash with companies’ imperatives to sell products and services. For many years, home economists in the commercial arena fought for recognition as professionals within the discipline of home economics, arguing that because of their academic training, they were different from their profit-minded employers.

By the last half of the twentieth century, as Goldstein’s astute analysis demonstrates, home economists were less visible in both the government and the commercial spheres, as social forces such as second-wave feminism attacked the field, as the values home economists sought to instill became normalized, and, most significantly, as consumerism was increasingly challenged in United States society. But the issues that led the first generation of home economists to apply contemporary science and technology to the problems of family and home continue to concern today’s society. Goldstein’s telling of their story helps us reclaim women’s critical position in the history of science and technology.

RIMA D. APPLE

Dr. Rima D. Apple, professor emerita, University of Wisconsin–Madison, is author of Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America (2006). Most recently, she was visiting professor at Glasgow Caledonian University.

The Color Revolution.


Historians of technology are not especially known for their great sense of style. Regina Blaszczyk’s The Color Revolution may change that, not through fashion advice for the twenty-first-century scholar, but by providing an original and well-researched account of how color came to play a central role in twentieth-century American consumer culture. Contrary to intellectual histories tracing the evolution of scientific and philosophical ideas about color, or more anthropologically inspired studies of color symbolism, Blaszczyk focuses on the everyday business of color, more specifically, the wide-ranging if underappreciated role of color experts in American manufacturing, retailing, and advertising from the 1890s to the 1960s. The color revolution, she demonstrates, was not the result of chemical innovations alone. Obviously, synthetic dyes and car paints, not to mention awe-inspiring light displays, contributed to making everyday life more colorful than ever before. Yet, according to Blaszczyk, what was most revolutionary was less color per se than the new technologies—color wheels and cards—and
new forms of knowledge—color streamlining, forecasting, and psychology—developed by a coterie of innovative individuals to manage this chromatic cornucopia.

Contrary to the notion that all things pertaining to fashion, color trends in particular, are wholly irrational and therefore unsuited for the detailed historical analysis afforded other aspects of industry, “the color revolution,” Blaszczyk insists, “grew out of American industry’s drive for efficiency in design, production, and distribution” (5). Moreover, she argues, it was American businesses’ commitment to scientific management that anchored the color revolution in the United States, as opposed to Europe, where several of the new color technologies and related commercial practices originated.

The book begins with two chapters tracing the beginnings of the color revolution, focusing on the dramatic development of synthetic dyes starting in the late 1850s and the cross-Atlantic efforts of Michel-Eugène Chevreul and Albert Munsell to develop a universal system for identifying colors and, through the promotion of certain colors or color combinations, improve public taste. However, as Blaszczyk convincingly demonstrates, it was only after the First World War that American businesses began paying serious attention to the market value of color. Indeed, the book’s central arguments are primarily developed in the subsequent five chapters, where the author describes in fascinating detail the expanding reach of color and color experts during the interwar period. By the mid-1920s, for example, the Textile Color Card Association of the United States, building off the success of the color card system it developed during the war, firmly established itself as a leader of color standardization and forecasting. Around the same time, producers of durable goods also embraced the rainbow as a lucrative sales strategy. H. Ledyard Towle, originally at DuPont, became one of America’s top automotive colorists by transferring the camouflage techniques he had learned during the war to the design of cars. Towle, together with successor Howard Ketcham, increased the connection between the automotive and fashion industries through the strategic application of visual streamlining techniques and the perfection of color forecasting tools. Around the Second World War, experts began shifting their attention to color’s ability to influence people’s moods and behaviors. Faber Birren, the leading color expert of the time, specialized in advising companies on how best to use color to reduce accidents and keep up workers’ morale, highlighting how ties between color and scientific management remained strong well into the 1960s.

*The Color Revolution* makes an original and important contribution to the history of American business and design. Yet, scholars of American commercial culture likely have most to gain from Blaszczyk’s work. The breadth and depth of the author’s research illuminates surprising connections between Europe and the United States, fashion trends and the auto-
motive industry, and artistic creativity and scientific management, providing readers with a more nuanced picture of how aesthetics, commerce, and culture intersect than that generally provided in studies relying on “cultural representations” alone. However, this same historical richness occasionally detracts from the book’s central arguments. The multiplication of examples and anecdotes, some of them only tangentially connected to a chapter’s argument, often obscures more than it illuminates. More attention could surely have been devoted to the book’s images, which are not closely analyzed by the author. Why is it, for example, that, despite experts’ emphasis on simplification, the images that appear in advertisements so often prioritize variety and choice? Finally, for historians of technology interested in how stylists have come to acquire such influence in high-tech industries, *The Color Revolution* suggests several new avenues of research. Fashion and style may not be out of the historian of technology’s purview after all.

LAURA KALBA

Laura Kalba is assistant professor of art at Smith College. Her book project, *Color in the Age of Impressionism: Technology, Commerce, and Art*, examines the impact of new color technologies on French visual and material culture.

**A Handbook of California Design, 1930–1965: Craftspeople, Designers, Manufacturers.**


*A Handbook of California Design* is the companion to an exhibition held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from fall 2011 to spring 2012. It shares the comprehensive approach of the exhibition, generally eschewing a singular focus on well-known designers for a more egalitarian and wide-ranging assemblage of relevant practitioners, manufacturers, and promoters involved in the Los Angeles design world at mid-century. The format reflects this ambition: after a modest introduction, the book consists of a series of one- to two-page introductions to these figures and their practices.

Of course these individuals are held together not only by shared temporal and geographical space, but also by their participation in the emergence of a certain style. Though claiming a geographic egalitarianism (i.e., a willingness to include the Bay Area), the book is mostly interested in Los Angeles and its aesthetic hinterland. The premise that there is a specifically Californian design has been commented on extensively, for example in Esther McCoy’s engaging and supportive 1960s writings on *Arts & Architecture*’s Case Study House program. Thomas Hines’s more recent *Architecture of the Sun: Los Angeles Modernism 1900–1970* (2010) has reiterated these issues in architectural terms. This California imagination came to de-