Maytag Washer, 1939

Harold Van Doren & Associates with Thomas R. Smith (engineer), *Washer Model E*, patented 1939, The Maytag Company, metal, enamel, plastic, and rubber, 44.25 × 38.75 × 26 inches (112.4 × 98.4 × 66 cm).
The Alliance of Art and Industry: Toledo Designs for a Modern America opened last month. The focus is on the 1930s and ’40s, when the Ohio city emerged as a hotbed of product design. . . . A 1939 Maytag washing machine was so smoothly rounded and practical that its design remained unchanged for 40 years.

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Maytag, you crafty girl, you got your picture in the papers. You got them to look at you, coolly appraising your rounded, “practical” curves, your tapered legs and porcelain skin. Maytag—ingenious lovely thing—you worked your way out of the basement.

In “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” writing in the wake of what was then regarded as surely the last Great War, poet William Butler Yeats mourned the passing of “many ingenious lovely things,” delicate old masterworks of art and intellect that now lay buried under the brute rubble of history. These were ornamental things that once had seemed “sheer miracle to the multitude”—polished ivory statues, beribboned dancers, bronzed peacock feathers—refined and precious monuments to a view of civilization that should have been “protected” from the routine violence that “pitches common things about.” Or so the poet thought.

By the beginning of the next war, the multitudes were turning to the more practical miracles of “common things,” mass-produced and easily replaced. Already in 1934, Philip Johnson had gathered hundreds of ingenious lovely things for a show of masterworks of design at the
Museum of Modern Art. He called these democratized treasures “Machine Art”—industrial bolts and screws, household tools, electrical coils, incandescent bulbs, bronze bearings, tire treads—all of them showcased as organic forms, at once functional and beautiful. Except that by the 1930s Yankee ingenuity had managed to collapse the distinction: these things were beautiful in use.

It was Yeats again who, early in the century, had invented a “beautiful mild woman” to speak for him on the beauties of industry: “To be born woman is to know / Although they do not talk of it at school— / That we must labour to be beautiful.” Yeats called this labor “Adam’s Curse,” and spoke of it as the fine and difficult work of poets and women.

You knew about Adam’s curse, Maytag, ingenious and lovely thing, rocking in rhythmic labor in the steamy basements of Ohio—that 1930s “hotbed” of industrial design. And in your presence, clustered around you with our mothers, their faces blushed with steam, we would learn what it meant to be born a woman: the intricate mechanics of beauty and use. In those days, to find a mother—usually any mother would do—we raised the heavy trapdoor to the cellar, making our way through the canopy of dripping clothes suspended over a delicate cat’s cradle of waxy rope. The clotheslines were themselves ingenious webs, crossing over and under each other in that cramped space, lowered to receive the dripping weight of the laundry, then hoisted toward the basement ceiling on flimsy notched poles. Although they had not learned of it at school, our mothers understood this levered counterpoise of heft and height: lifting the newly laundered sheets above the floor on sagging stilts, then lowering them dry and almost weightless. Briskly, they would pinch off the colored plastic clothespins, folding the sweetened basement air into the sheets as they wrapped them loosely into themselves, then nestled them, like bunting, in the wicker laundry baskets.

Any Monday, we could follow the sounds of the Maytag down through the veils of linens and delicately patterned housedresses, the stiff dark cotton of uniforms and “work clothes,” the soft muslin diapers and summer-printed sunsuits. We followed the rhythmic humming and the heavy
smells of potions until, somewhere below that damp canopy, we found our mothers gathered—Pauline, Yolanda, Josephine, Nelda, Connie—with the Maytag wringer washer, rocking as it worked, all of them beautiful in use.

The mothers were busy mixing lotions and powders with modern chemical names, their faces reddened in the warm fog of perfumed salts: “Oxydol” for heavy-duty cleaning, its name a potent blend of chemistry and girlish play; “Fels Naptha,” to be scrubbed with wiry brushes over grass stains and the greasy knees of work pants. For whiter whites, there was the mystery of “Rinso Blue,” which came in two forms: a thick, cobalt-stained syrup or a tidy wafer, like a poker chip, dissolving in a whirlpool of molten blue when dropped into the churning cauldron of the Maytag.

The gentle washing of fine things required a box of “Ivory Snow,” which, even before we peeled back the cover, seemed buoyant, a cache of paper thin, luminescent flakes. Each of us begged to be the helper chosen to drift the flakes in a simulated blizzard over the tub. There they would quickly melt into a layer of yellowed suds, swirling back and forth in the repeated, half-circular motion of the Maytag’s busy agitator. Delicate garments were tagged “Ivory Washable, 99⁴⁴⁄₁₀₀% pure.” But Ivory was not just for lingerie.

For a few weeks back in 1940, eight hundred people a day had visited the “Ivory Washable House” at Radio City in New York. Garishly colored ads in House Beautiful touted “the famous house that could be washed from front door to back,” but only with Ivory Soap, 99⁴⁴⁄₁₀₀% pure. Those lucky New Yorkers who toured the house must have left Radio City with a deep appreciation of Adam’s curse. “As practical as it is decorative,” the ads proclaimed. Like other miracles of machine art, the Ivory House promised to be beautiful in use.

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My mother and I worried that impurities might lurk in the remaining ⁵⁶⁄₁₀₀ of 1 percent. For us, then, there was a dangerous white jug of “Clorox Bleach,” surely 100 percent pure. Clorox represented the epitome of better-living-through-chemistry, so powerfully clean that they called it “Ox”—or so I thought. My mother stirred it into the washtub with a sawed-off section
of broomstick, scrubbed to the color of raw oak by its weekly plunge into the rinse water.

When the Maytag’s churning action stopped, our mothers used the broomstick to fish the sodden fabrics from the sudsy mix and move them to the rinse, lines of bluing running up their arms toward the caplet sleeves of their housedresses. Then, one piece at a time, they fed the dripping laundry through the hard rubber lips of the wringer. Behind it, one of us was stationed to catch the flattened garment, pull it through in a ropey twist, and layer it like ribbon in the basket, ready for the clothespins and a space on the line.

Fels Naptha for work clothes . . . Rinso for whites . . . a heady mix of chemical smells, dampened voices, and steady industrial sounds that I remember still, fifty years later, as both sweet and strong. In the cellar, as they scooped and measured potions, even their language seemed to be processed through the pursed lips of the Maytag: “That bitch Marie—she put my brother through the wringer. And now, mark my words, she’ll take him to the cleaners, too.” Tide for colors . . . Dreft for baby things. “‘Hazel,’ I told her, ‘don’t you let that man soft-soap you.’” Giggles bubbled up through the mass of steamy ringlets bobbing over the tub. Someone replied, “Listen to me, honey. You need to put some of that starch in your undies.” The vaned agitator, metal before the war but now a rugged plastic, forced water through the clothes. These were the luxurious, sloshing sounds of your labor, Maytag. Always you seemed overfull.

Pictured here in the morning paper, you are still lovely, though no longer in use. The stuff of your labors is hidden now, injector hoses coiled behind the tub, agitator finally at rest in the gray, freckled cavity beneath the porcelain lid. “Well-rounded design, then and now: A 1939 Maytag Washer.” With a mild shock, I realize that I am looking at a crude metallic rendering of a woman, solid and big-bellied. Her slim legs barely support her swaying girth. She stands on exhibit at the Toledo Museum of Art, turning slightly to the side, a pregnant woman, at once proud and bashful. Her shapely
legs, smooth and white, thicken into thighs where they extend up the side of the tub. These are legs “that go all the way up to her ears”—the manly compliment I overheard from my uncles, laughing on the porch stoop where they huddled after work. Four legs, not two; this design was an improvement on nature: two legs to support the heavy belly, two to hold up the wide hips at the back. From the base of the tub, they taper to slim ankles banded in chrome bracelets, then slip into tiny round-toed shoes on black castor heels. Against the stark backdrop of her museum perch, the Maytag poses hieratically, like an Egyptian wall princess, all four small feet fixed at the same sharp angle perpendicular to the body, as if to prevent her from slipping away. Circling the top of the tub, a girdle of bright chrome holds the enormous, bulging cavity in place. Squarely in its center is a protruding black navel—a plug of some sort—for filling and emptying the tub.

And there, above the enormous belly, is the small head of the Maytag, its mouth a wide black hole hooded by a red metal lipstick smear. Just visible inside that chasm are the tight, rolling lips of the wringer. At once prim and merciless, those lips could pull you in, then send you out stiff and one-dimensional. A single arm holds the head in place. Above it, instead of an ear, rests the tiny mind of the clutch. The Maytag’s head can be moved aside for easier access to her trunk. The only other flash of color is a word in neat, feminine script, written in lipstick cursive across the tub: “Maytag,” your name, a game for girls in spring.

When the wash was done, the fierce agitation finally quiet, the clothes, still heavy with sweet-smelling water, sagging just above the cement floor, my mother would rinse the Maytag with Clorox and polish it dry. She would leave it, cool and empty, prepared for tomorrow. Immaculate metal—you could see yourself in it.