Imagining Consumers: Manufacturers and Markets in Ceramics and Glass, 1865-1965

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For decades, historians of production and consumption have inhabited distinct camps in the academic landscape, with few scholars crossing disciplinary boundaries to integrate the study of business, technology, and culture. On the one hand, business and technological historians have primarily, but not exclusively, labored in the shadows of Alfred D. Chandler's and Thomas P. Hughes's commanding paradigms [5, 11], adding much to our knowledge of the managerial and technical functions of the large modern business enterprise [10]. On the other hand, cultural historians have drawn heavily on Antonio Gramsci's hegemony theory to critique the emergence of advertising and mass consumption in the context of power relations in industrial society [e.g., 6, 12, 13, 14]. Few business historians address issues concerning cultural historians, and vice versa. As a result of this scholarly fragmentation, we understand very little about the relationships among manufacturers, retailers, and consumers that lay at the core of modern consumer society [2a].

This dissertation blends the subdisciplines of business, technological, and cultural history to shift the debate on mass consumption from the broad culture to the business institution. In a series of case studies of manufacturing firms in two industries across one hundred years, it examines layers of corporate actors as they read the marketplace, or "imagined consumers," and labored to create saleable durable goods, often developing new technologies along the way. Manufacturers in the pottery and glassware industries made some of the most commonplace modern household furnishings. These domestic accessories were distributed by a range of vendors, from china stores in the nineteenth century to five-and-dimes in the twentieth century, and, in turn, these goods were used by men and women of all socio-economic classes. In nine chapters, this dissertation uses a variety of sources – including untapped corporate archives, family papers, trade journals, mail-order catalogues, interviews, and artifacts – to explore the dynamic among manufacturers, retailers, and consumers of pottery and glassware. As such, this study of producer-

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audience relations in the home-furnishings trade delineates what Louis Galambos called "the mechanisms by which demand shaped supply" [7, pp. 7-8]. By demonstrating that consumers, rather than producers, commanded center stage in the product development process, it provides a new perspective on the construction of American consumer society.

Whether in 1865 or 1965, china and glass had figured prominently as artifacts of status display or anchors of memory, as essential devices in domestic ensembles that signified milestones such as birthdays, weddings, or anniversaries. Pottery and glassware were far more emblematic of individuality and class than were mass-produced durable goods, such as automobiles and telephones, or disposable goods, such as detergent and canned tomatoes, which were made and distributed by big businesses. Men and women, rich and poor, black and white, relished decorated pottery and glassware, prominently displaying these possessions in their offices and homes. There was more to china and crystal than met the eye, and successful product design and development lay in recognizing, deciphering, and interpreting the contours of this slippery, often symbolic landscape.

In this cultural context, smart pottery and glassworks managers pursued competitive advantage by approaching markets in investigative ways, seeking to understand consumer wants. They imagined consumers with the assistance of various *fashion intermediaries* who worked both inside and outside the manufacturing sphere. These fashion liaisons included merchants, retail buyers, advertising executives, industrial designers, salesmen, and home economists. How effectively these go-betweens helped manufacturers to imagine consumers and to create appealing products depended on myriad factors, as demonstrated by empirical studies of five leading firms, each serving different markets: the Jesse Dean Decorating Company (New Jersey), the Hawkes Rich Cut Glass Company (New York), the Homer Laughlin China Company (Ohio and West Virginia), the Kohler Company (Wisconsin), and Corning Glass Works (New York).

These family firms were leaders in their product categories, and, as a group, they represented a spectrum of organizational styles, from the sole proprietorship to the integrated corporation. In manufacturing typology, these companies fit Philip Scranton's categories of craft and batch production, with the larger firms – Homer Laughlin and Corning – respectively venturing into mass and quantity production in response to burgeoning but still highly variable markets. As Scranton reminds us, flexible specialization entailed elasticity in a range of functions [15, 16]. Product development was no exception, so pottery and glassworks managers never hesitated to stretch and bend as they garnered vital information about the marketplace.

In the late-nineteenth century when the American pottery and glass industries were in their infancy, practical-men-turned-entrepreneurs scrutinized the marketplace with the ultimate objective of satisfying consumers' diverse tastes. In this vein, Jesse Dean and Thomas Hawkes each combined their craft knowledge with the fashion feedback of intermediaries to create artistic pottery and luxurious cut glassware. Dean rode the crest of the aesthetic vogue of the 1880s, creating the nation's largest china-decorating workshop by responding to consumers' penchant for sentimental household accessories [1, 2b]. With the assistance of ceramics technicians and urban merchants, Dean developed novel motifs and decorating technologies, including a process for embellishing artifacts with customers' favorite photographs at little cost. In contrast, Hawkes fully understood that expensive cut glass was especially appealing to status-conscious customers, including railroad managers, who displayed these jewel-like goods in curio cabinets or on executive

desks [2c]. Again and again, Hawkes and his merchant mediators developed goods that status-conscious consumers subsequently used as instruments of social distinction. As always, the product developer's objective was not to judge, control, or stabilize consumer desires. The goal was to decipher, evaluate, and interpret taste, and ultimately, to give tangible form to another novelty that would realize profits.

As the pottery and glass industries expanded in the early-twentieth century, astute managers like W. Edwin Wells of the Homer Laughlin China Company fused lucrative liaisons with the nation's mass merchandisers, which commanded volume sales of inexpensive and moderately priced tableware. By the 1920s, feedback from crockery buyers at five-and-dimes (including F. W. Woolworth and Company), department stores, and premium vendors recast Homer Laughlin's approach to the design and manufacture of dinnerware. Again and again, retail buyers collaborated with Homer Laughlin's managers, salesmen, artisans, and designers to determine which shapes, glazes, styles, and decorations would meet consumer expectations. In response to the eclectic needs of customers in their diversified product portfolio, Homer Laughlin's managers mixed manufacturing styles, developing a "flexible mass production" system that allowed their firm to make large quantities of goods without jeopardizing its commitment to product differentiation [2d, 2e, 2f, 3]. In contrast, managers who failed to listen to expert advice on fashion, style, and taste watched new products languish in the marketplace, as did Kohler executives with their depression-era line, Color Ware, which consumers rejected on the basis of appearance and price [2g]. In contrast to Homer Laughlin's managers, Kohler's executives had clearly overlooked a fundamental rule of the fashion game by refusing to take their cues from consumers.

To be sure, successful product innovation was a task that required constant watching, and few understood this principle better than managers at Corning Glass Works. At the turn of the century, Corning executives crossed numerous boundaries as they embraced a science-oriented corporate strategy that was unique among the nation's glassmakers and distinct from the approaches of the country's "R&D pioneers" [2h; 9, p. 21]. In the 1900s, Corning's first research scientist, William Churchill, forged trusting relationships with signal engineers as he developed Nonex, a borosilicate glass that was pressed and blown into globes and lenses for the railroads. When he coordinated the creation of Pyrex baking ware in the 1910s, Churchill adapted this strategy of cross-fertilization to suit consumer product development, collaborating with various go-betweens, from restauranteurs to leading domestic scientists, to read tastes and fulfill customer expectations. By the interwar years, Corning boasted a corporate culture dominated by experts who appreciated the fluid, interactive character of product innovation and, as such, were equipped for revamping the firm's expensive Pyrex line in the light of flagging sales. Among those corporate experts was Lucy M. Maltby, who directed the Corning's home economics department beginning in 1929 [2j, 4].

Maltby and her staff of home economists functioned as Corning's eyes and ears in the marketplace, that is, as the firm's in-house team of fashion intermediaries.[2] In part, these middle managers were consumer educators responsible for developing heuristic tools such as recipe booklets that showed homemakers efficient ways of using Pyrex baking ware. But their jobs also entailed preserving, assisting, and encouraging the vital flow of information from consumers

[2]Maltby's responsibilities paralleled those of other corporate home economists studied by Carolyn M. Goldstein in *Mediating Consumption* [8].

to the corporation, so as to facilitate the conversion of Pyrex-brand glassware from a high-class product to a mass-market product. In the 1920s, Corning had experienced considerable administrative and technological change, as new top executives placed a greater emphasis on R&D, aggressively licensed their Pyrex patents to domestic and foreign glassworks, entered a joint venture for developing high-temperature refractories, and abandoned semi-automatic equipment for continuous-flow machines. These developments, combined with consumer surveys by the J. Walter Thompson Company and the anticipated expiration of their borosilicate baking-ware patents in 1936, led Corning executives to formulate a comprehensive approach to consumer markets that fused technical innovation, quantitative research, industrial design, public relations, and home economics. The objective of the new Pyrex policy was to lower the product's retail price, while improving its appearance, utility, and durability. Maltby brought the woman's perspective to the design and development table, drawing on knowledge about consumer desires gleaned from letters, market surveys, and feedback from home economists in other organizations as she worked alongside factory designers and salesmen to adapt baking ware to continuous-flow production. Again and again, Corning's home economists pressed managers for changes to the Pyrex line, making suggestions for petite cake dishes that could sit side-by-side in small depression-era ovens and for colored bowls ornamented in hues described in a *McCall's* home-furnishings survey. In the long run, the very specific, practical suggestions of Corning's home economists, who were experts in imagining consumers, contributed to big changes in the look and performance of the firm's household glassware [2j, 4].

None of this is to suggest that Maltby was solely responsible for orchestrating changes in Corning's consumer product lines, for that was not so. Like Churchill before her, Maltby was one component in Corning's customer-oriented package, and these fashion mediators' careers are lenses for understanding the process of imagining consumers. Corning's product developers ultimately took their cues from consumers, for railroad engineers and homemakers possessed distinctive notions about safety, color, durability, and price that shaped their visions of the perfect product. As corporate liaisons in the marketplace, Churchill and Maltby understood that the key to successful design, development, and innovation rested in reading, decoding, and responding to their customers, who ultimately dictated the final form of the product. Indeed, the consumer was in charge, and Corning's managers would have been foolish to think and act otherwise.

Powerful and persistent paradigms in the history of business, technology, and culture have discouraged scholars from developing holistic perspectives on relationships among consumer demand, managerial choice, and technological change in the nation's home-furnishings industries. On its most basic level, this dissertation constitutes the first national, comparative analysis of the modern American pottery and glass industries, engaging the rich case method of business history to examine corporate strategy and technical change in five little-studied firms. On another level, this study of industries principally dominated by craft and batch production also contributes to the growing body of literature in business and technological history that considers alternatives to the models of big business and mass production [15, 16]. In the early-twentieth century, pottery and glassworks managers never hesitated to reach into the grab bag of production styles to pull out whatever methods suited particular manufacturing challenges. Managers at Homer Laughlin developed a flexible mass production system to make enormous quantities of stylish dinnerware [2e, 3], while executives at Corning engaged continuous-flow

and batch-production methods in tandem as they made a full spectrum of glass products, including bulb envelopes, signal lenses, baking ware, and art ware [2h-j]. In the home-furnishings business, design resilience clearly went hand-in-hand with flexibility on the shop floor.

But the real significance of this dissertation rests in its demonstration of consumer agency in the design, development, and innovation process. As such, this work challenges cultural studies of consumerism that often assert manipulation, domination, and deception on the part of retailers and manufacturers [e.g., 6, 12, 13, 14]. Rooted in social criticism, these works are frequently shaped by authors' antimaterialism, rather than by comprehensive research in company papers. In contrast, this dissertation has drawn extensively on firm-specific primary sources (and other materials) to examine an array of corporate actors, from small entrepreneurs to top managers, as they labored to create novel, saleable products. Situated in manufacturing firms, this study nonetheless often looks beyond those institutions' boundaries to examine fashion intermediaries at work in the broader culture. The key missing links in the bifurcated historiographical landscape of production and consumption, these go-betweens were responsible for dissecting the quartet of fashion, style, taste, and competition that fused to constitute demand, the amorphous thing that required constant watching and unpacking. Managers who simply ignored fashion signals and tried to shape consumer preference, like Kohler executives in the interwar years, clearly failed. Other tastemakers, like Corning managers who directed luxury glass production in the company's Steuben division, chose to sacrifice profits for prestige [2i]. At the companies in this study, successful product developers always took their cues from the marketplace, for their livelihoods and their firms' competitiveness depended on understanding and responding to consumer desires. These business men and women knew that customers voted with their purses, shaping the look of ubiquitous, ordinary artifacts – china and glassware – which they used to make common houses into comfortable homes. The empirical evidence in this study clearly supports the position that the consumer, and not the manufacturer or retailer, was in charge of the marketplace in the modern home-furnishings trade.

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