

**AT THE DRESSING TABLE:
THE SEAT OF MODERN FEMININITY**

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Preface

I am frequently asked why I chose to write about the dressing table, a piece of furniture few people own or even have the space for these days. After spending so much time researching an iconic object from an iconic period, I think that, at last, I clearly understand why.

My interest initially started while I watched the *Mystery* series on Sunday nights. Miss Marple sits at her dressing table with the memories of her lost soldier from World War I. Later, in this particular episode, another woman is shown sitting at her dressing table—all frills and perfume bottles. I asked myself, “Whatever happened to the dressing table?” In a class shortly after that episode, we saw an image of Le Corbusier’s boudoir at the *Villa Savoye*, which contains such an extreme minimalist version of a dressing table that I could not believe that all designs were from relatively the same period. The twenties and thirties were so culturally tumultuous, especially for women, that I was becoming more curious what choices the average woman really had.

As I started researching the topic I realized that it encompassed ornamentation, femininity, and how design interacts with these issues. The dressing table was no longer just another pretty piece of furniture! In fact, as I spoke to people about it I recognized how memory-laden it is. A woman I met on the train to New York mentioned that her mother did not have one, (her parents had been communists), but her mother-in-law did, it was draped in fabric with the triptych mirror, perfume bottles, and yes, she held her private letters and mementoes in the drawers. Another had memories of being scolded for opening the drawers and putting on her mother’s make-up. Yet, somewhere along the line

women have stopped using dressing tables: or if they have them, they are more shrines to some idea of femininity or to a memory than functional.

We identify ourselves so closely with objects, not only for how they present us to the world, but for what they hold within. The dressing table touches upon all these areas—identity, presentation, and function, yet little research has looked at the dressing table. I hope that with this research some insight will be gained and interest garnered in a very gendered object, one that can assist historians in understanding the role of women, design and the everyday.

I am indebted to my two advisors, Hazel Clark, PhD, and Cheryl Buckley, PhD, for their support, time, advice, and insight. As well Stephen Van Dyk, Chief Librarian, and the library staff, Elizabeth Broman and Jennifer Cohlman, at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Library for their assistance in what sometimes seemed like an endless task. Also, Katherine Chabla the Yale Furniture Study for her help and time with the Yale files and accessing the Rohde vanity set, and Audrey Malchowsky at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum for her assistance with the Osborn Dressing Table and bench. And a special thank you to Jo Buchanan for her editing insights over the past three years.

Introduction

While modernism has traditionally been studied as a masculine concept this research will investigate how femininity in modernism was represented through visual and material culture within the home. Stylistic choices in the home and how women were living their increasingly public lives are closely aligned. Using the dressing table as the focal point for a discussion of modernism, my hypothesis is that the dressing table is not only a gendered object, but also the distillation of a historically gendered space, the boudoir, where one aspect of modernity is contested, that of ornament versus function. This research will investigate how women were shaped by modernity, through the choices available to them as they can be investigated at the seat of their femininity, the dressing table.

In the period between World War I and World War II (1927-1937) American society was undergoing enormous change. I chose this particular period because design influences could be followed from the 1925 Paris Exhibition through the economic impact of the Great Depression, but not yet feel the ramifications of World War II. Prior to the Great Depression, and after the influential International Exhibition of Paris in 1925, the United States saw the effects of World War I on its society. By this time American society had settled into the after-effects of the women's movement, World War I, and the Prohibition. The nineteen thirties revealed how America would grapple with the impact of the Depression, including the need for escapism through film-going, and a parallel and remarkable growth in technology. The influx of foreign influence on design would leave its impression on America, which would reinterpret these foreign ideals in a way that is unique to a country that would be on the rise. The period just prior to World

War II when defense needs would supercede all other production, especially that of design. Marked in particular by modernity, a key characteristic of this period, was the changing roles of women and the emergence of modernism in architecture and design.

The study of the dressing table during this period both as a gendered object and as material culture has not been touched upon in design history. While work has been written about the topic in general in both *The Gendered Object* and *Wild Things*, the focus on the dressing table, femininity, and modernism in a historical context of early twentieth-century America has not occurred. In *The Gendered Object*, a collection of essays edited by Pat Kirkham, she asks how the interaction between objects and people not only created the “biographies” of the owners, but how “the appropriateness of an object for its user – what makes it male or female ...creates cultural constructions of femininity.”¹ The concepts of femininity assigned to the dressing table may very well be why it has been left behind in design history, certainly in the history of the decorative arts, for as Judy Attfield mentions in *Wild Things*, “Its neglect in the context of modernist interpretations of the history of design that classify it as trivial can be explained by the automatic link its association with the feminine makes with the private, the frivolous, the decorative and with popular taste.”² This stereotyping of an object is a result of a historic precedent that the designer determines the sole signification to an object. As Cheryl Buckley states, “design is a process of representation. Designs, as cultural products, have meaning encoded in them which are decoded by producers, advertisers, and consumers according to their own cultural codes.”³ Only by looking at an object from the

¹ Preface to *The Gendered Object* (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1996).

² Judy Attfield, “Containment: The Ecology of Personal Possessions,” in *Wild Things* (New York; Berg, 2000), 161.

³ Cheryl Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy,” in *Design Discourse*, ed. Victor Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 258.

various vantage points can we fully understand its meaning and impact over time. In this thesis, the dressing table, having been labeled 'feminine' (which is so frequently dismissed in the decorative arts) will be examined as an object with a specific role in women's lives.

To best understand how the dressing table developed, a history of its evolution, via the boudoir, will be undertaken. The dressing table, specifically as a piece of furniture, has largely been overlooked within design history. It was originally part of a grouping of furniture found in a boudoir, a female gendered space in the eighteenth-century. It eventually evolved into more of a workspace, but the name and imagery of the boudoir has not lost its earlier erotic connotations of a meeting place for illicit affairs. By the twentieth-century, the boudoir was a room found only in the homes of the very wealthy, but the dressing table had become a commonplace and even expected part of a bedroom set for both girls and women of all social strata. In its early incarnation it was the setting for aristocratic portraiture, then used to create an image of oneself; later it would be described as a "portrait" interior. But the dressing table also became the site of contention on both a larger social scale and more on a more personal and private level. The discord between adornment and appropriate behavior was focused on the use of make-up and the public persona of a woman. The issue of "false adornment"⁴ was not modern, and certainly in conflict with traditional views of women. Earlier ideas of women hiding their true selves through the use of makeup, or of being impure (i.e. "fallen" or a prostitute) were not easily shaken from cultural consciousness regardless of how culture was changing.

⁴ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1998), 26-31, 53-60, 182.

With the premise that to be feminine is to ornament, this research assesses how the design world, specifically that framed by modernism, acknowledged this piece of furniture specifically designed for the act of ornamentation. Also this thesis explores how women approached modernity through the use and popularity of the dressing table, the choices of dressing tables commercially available, and the outlets for purchasing. This thesis will ask: who or what were the forces shaping the tastes of women during a period of great socio-cultural change; what role did the dressing table play in the development of the image of femininity; and who was guiding women through the process of self-identification during a period of their increasingly public roles?

Specifically focusing on the period of 1927-1937 this research will review the role of modernity and modernism in the evolution of the dressing table. The increase in technology and the emergence of a consumer culture would impact how the dressing table was designed, who designed it and how consumers were able to access it. In addition to a review of the foreign influences on American design, the relationship between museums and the retail world will bring to light how manufacturers could be swayed in interpreting it.

Lastly, beyond the theoretical, is how the average, middle-class consumer would learn about the various styles of dressing tables and the significance behind them. While, as mentioned, little has been written about the dressing table in design history, it has been represented in visual culture, especially in print and film. A review of literature, films and art, will bring to light contemporary representations of the dressing table. It will include an overview of furniture trade journals, bringing to light how the United States furniture industry was marketing its lines with a focus on the industry's promotion of the

two prominent styles of the time, modernism and historic revival. Decorating guidebooks, popular women's magazines and film (the media most available to women) will be consulted as the means by which women accessed information about design. Included will be the impact of the role of-make-up, it will be examined as a lynchpin both to the act of adornment and the specific site of adornment, the dressing table.

The codification of space, object, and person are linked via the language used and the context in which they are located. Frequently fashion, women, and traditional ideas of "femininity" created polarizing objectification. Just as both a space could not be simultaneously decorated and "light," a woman could not be morally upright if she were too "ornamented." In middle-class America in the 1920s and 1930s, the same language and judgment were used, and rules and guidelines were being created to steer the new society in the appropriate direction, whether it was the body or the home. It can be argued that the dressing table as the place where both fashion, face and furniture design meet, became the center of this conflict.

Two case studies will be used as examples of modernist interpretation of the dressing table. The first is a "vanity" designed by Gilbert Rohde for the Herman Miller Company in 1933 in the Yale University Art Gallery collection (1999.125.1.1.-. 2). It illustrates of how the furniture industry applied modernism in a commercial form during a period of historic revivalism, but at the same time, explored new definitions of femininity. The second dressing table and bench, in the Cooper-Hewitt collection (1929, 1969-97-7-a-b), reflects the influence of French design on American "Art Moderne" and how retail stores were marketing the modern style to consumers.

The focus of modernism in art and design history is commonly on male architects and the “high art” of the period. This research will bring to the forefront how women responded to modernism not simply as consumers, but as consumers with definite focus on the feminine act of adornment. How the furniture and design industry responded to their needs, or guided them through the search for a modern identity will shed new light on the everyday “modern” world between the wars. The traditional ideas of femininity: frills, ornament, and “stuff” provide the appropriate tension for this discussion and in doing so, the dressing table becomes the axis of modernity and femininity, and emerges from the shadows of design history.

Chapter I
History of the Dressing Table

For many women today the dressing table is a shrine to the past, when women had time to sit down and apply make-up and be glamorous. It is often memory-laden, and filled with ideas of what it means to be feminine. Few women today actually own a dressing table, and it is rarely sold as part of a bedroom suite.⁹ However, as a piece of furniture it has its own history as a form of bureau, decidedly linked to the space where it was located and its use by its owner. Cultural variations, social status, and mobility as well as its relation to the female form are a part of its rarely discussed history. The dressing table's form is so closely influenced by its rich contextual and cultural past it creates a unique role in defining femininity.

The dressing table, as we know it today, was part of the furnishing of a European woman's boudoir in the eighteenth century. The boudoir first came into existence in the eighteenth-century as an anteroom to a woman's bedroom that was part of a wealthy woman's chambers. It was a space where a woman could retreat, adorn, and develop more intimate relations in a non-public space. Michel Delon in *L'Invention du Boudoir* notes the changes in definition of the boudoir over the eighteenth-century, from, "a small room where one could retire to be alone" but to a place "where one went to pout uninterrupted when in a bad mood."¹⁰ The word boudoir comes from the French word *Bouder* – to sulk or pout, and Delon notes that the dictionary goes on to describe sulking as a childish behavior. It is not only in the name that the space, and also the women who use it, become infantilized and objectified; a space of self-reflection becomes one of passivity and selfishness. It is not until the nineteenth century that the boudoir is

⁹ There has been a recent surge in popularity with an appearance in the Spring 2006 Ikea catalog, and being sold in a few sets at Bob's Discount Furniture, a large chain store.

¹⁰ Michel Delon, *L'Invention du Boudoir* (Cadeilhan, France: Zulma, 1999), 12.

described as being “luxurious and feminine,” “a room elegantly decorated particularly for the use of women.”¹¹ In all cases Delon mentions that the lexicographers have chosen to ignore what is commonly believed in French culture about boudoirs – they are the centers for sexual trysts and love affairs.¹²

These descriptions are found not just in literature and various love poems,¹³ but also in architecture and architectural literature. The actual structure of the space would frequently be unusual and make use of smaller scale, more delicate furniture. A great deal of literature tells of secret passageways and entrances, adding to the mystique of a woman’s private space, the boudoir. One renowned example is the 1752 erotic novella *La Petite Maison* by Jean-Francois Bastide, we have reference to the boudoir, “The walls are entirely lined with looking-glass, and the joins between them have been hidden by false tree trunks, with carefully arranged branches and leaves, ...the effect is that of a natural arbor, light without the help of art. The alcove containing the *ottomane*, a sort of daybed which stands on a floor of patterned rosewood marquetry, is decorated with green and gold trimmings and cushions of different sizes...color has been applied by Dandrillon in such a way as to exhale the perfume of violets, jasmine and roses.”¹⁴ Here we see an early interpretation of the illusion of femininity, nature, and all of the senses.

Delon also makes a case that the boudoir finds its origins in the Renaissance *studiolo*, which later becomes the 18th century *cabinet*. Much like the *studiolo* the boudoir is a private space for reflection, but also focused on women’s activities. It is on a

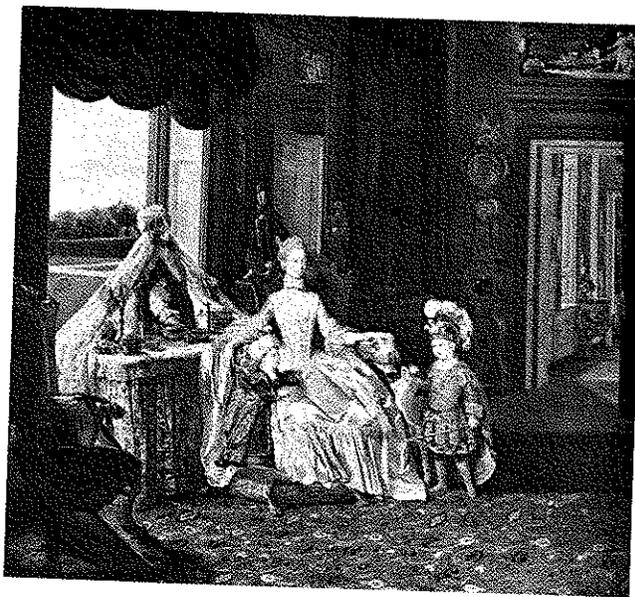
¹¹ Delon, *L’Invention*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Delon gives exhaustive examples throughout his book of references to boudoirs in poems and novels.

¹⁴ Jean Francois Bastide, *The Little House: An Architectural Seduction*. 1789 Translated and introduction by Rodolphe El-khoury. (New York:Princeton Architectural Press,1996),76.

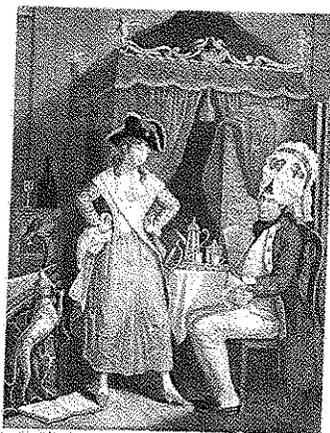
smaller scale than the *studiolo* but also filled with rare and precious objects.¹⁵ Decorative themes harkening back to Venus and Apollo were common, as found in the *studiolo*. Here, acts which required a degree of privacy could be performed, including a woman's toilette. Strengthening Delon's theory of the boudoir/cabinet/*studiolo* parallel is the use of the boudoir in portraiture. Women of the aristocracy, both in France and England, were frequently featured in their boudoirs for portraits, specifically, at their dressing tables. **(image 1)** It is a specific space that identified the owner/user at their most reflective and intimate. While men have posed by their mementos of erudition and worldliness, for women chose to be memorialized at their dressing tables, a marker of their femininity and identity.



1) Portrait of Queen Charlotte, 1764, Johann Zoffany
A Social History of Furniture from BC 1300 – AD 1960

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

While the French have a copious literature on the boudoir, it is the British who have numerous extant prints. These support that while the definition of a boudoir may have been a “small room for reflection,” cultural knowledge had developed a far different reputation for it. The dressing table takes a central place in these images supporting the idea of the vanity of women as one image of the boudoir and the other, not very solitary uses of the boudoir; affairs, and illicit (or not) social encounters. The ultimate feminine space where a woman should be allowed to be herself, becomes a center of judgment by the observer, or outsider, usually male, as evidenced by the other figures in the image, or by its makers. The perceived silliness of women and their dress and rituals, as well as the erotic implications of the boudoir in scenes of infidelity, is propagated through public images in prints and illustrations. (images 2 a, b, c)



2) a. *A Morning Frolic*, 1780, John Collet
Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University



b. *The Utility of Cork Rumps*, 1777
Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University



c. *A Hint to Ye Husbands...1777*
Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

While eighteenth century America may have been lacking in aristocracy and boudoirs, it was not lacking in dressing tables. Gerald Ward states in *American Case Furniture* that what is “often known today as a lowboy, this form was referred to in period documents as a dressing table, a chamber table, or simple as a table.” Usually they are made as part of a suite with a highboy.¹⁶ Ward also mentions that in seventeenth and eighteenth century European prints dressing tables are often depicted covered in fabric, with a mirror, candlesticks and toilette sets. He does not state if this is how they were used by Americans, but American dressing tables usually had one to five drawers. However, perhaps due to less space availability, furniture often could function as different pieces – in fact, Ward believes the dressing table demonstrates this – “it signifies by its very name the overlapping functions that furniture fulfills.”¹⁷ One piece labeled a bureau table (1957.37 Mabel Brady Garvan Collection Yale University Art Gallery) **(image 3)** has a kneehole area. It is attributed to John Townsend of Newport (1732-1809). With reference to its popularity Ward states, “A most intriguing aspect of Newport bureau tables is their radiation of a powerful sensuality. Made to be used primarily by women, they are designed as metaphors of the female form. The two large, projecting shells, each with a central areole, and the lower recessed cavity containing the cupboard can be seen (on the level of association) as a mirror of the form of their principal users. It is doubtful if Townsend and other makers had this allegorical

¹⁶ Gerald Ward, *American Case Furniture* (New Haven: Yale, 1988), 195.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

dimension of the object in mind, of course although the eighteenth century was permeated with an earthy and frank attitude toward sexual matters.”¹⁸

There is little question of European influence on American design, but one can question if did it go beyond design to cultural ramifications of its form, use, and popularity. America’s puritanical history may not have upheld these “mirroring forms.”

3) Bureau Table, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery, (1957.37)



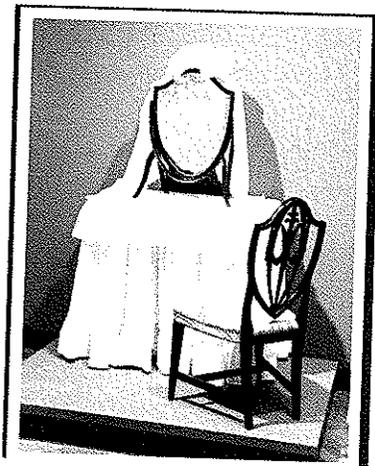
Additionally, while dressing tables in Europe were being covered in fabric (much like women) we do not know for certain if they were in America. However, in the 1990 exhibition *Looking Glasses*, curator David Barquist did display a mirror on top of a fabric-covered table. **(image 4)** By the nineteenth-century the looking-glass was also moving off the table and onto the wall as noted by “Eliza Leslie, in *The House Book, or, A Manual of Domestic Economy*, would pronounce that the ‘small movable looking glasses, standing on feet, are much out of favour for dressing tables, as they scarcely show more than your head, and are easily upset.’ Rather, she continued: ‘It is now

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

customary to fix a large glass upon the wall at the back of the table or bureau; suspending it by a double ribbon to strong hook, and making the string long enough to allow the glass to incline considerably forward, so as to give the persons that look into it a better view of their figures.’¹⁹

4) Interpretation, Swinging Glass (1930.2576) Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, YUAG.

“Looking Glasses in America, 1725-1850” Exhibition, 1 February –22 March 1992, Yale University Art Gallery.



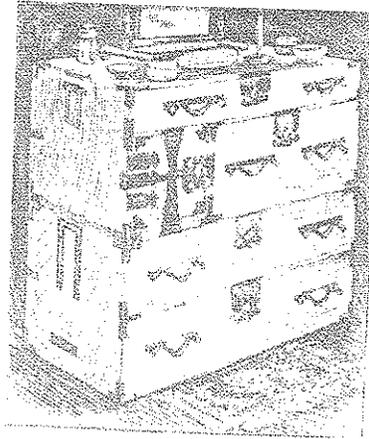
The gendering of the boudoir is most evident in the larger homes of the wealthy. During the nineteenth century the specialization and classification of space is best described in Robert Kerr’s *The Gentleman’s House: or How to Plan English Residences* (1871)²⁰ where of the 27 rooms described only three were depicted as “feminine,” the drawing room, the breakfast room, and the boudoir (the only one strictly off-limits to men unless specifically invited); six were for men. But for the middle classes the boudoir was moving about (which would be significant in the importance of the dressing table), being referred to as part of, or occasionally, separate from, the bedroom – a bower, boudoir or

¹⁹ Eliza Leslie, *The House Book, or, A Manual of Domestic Economy* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1840), 300, quoted in Elisabeth Donaghy Garrett, “Looking Glasses in America 1700-1850,” *American Tables and Looking Glasses*, David Barquist. (Yale University Art Gallery, 1992), 30.

²⁰ It is relevant to review what was happening in both Europe and in America as American design was strongly influenced by European ideas.

sitting room. It could have an air of exoticism to it with Japanese or Indian inspired pieces. **(image 5)** According to Lady Barker, author of the *Bedroom and Boudoir* section of the 1878 decorating guide *Art at Home*, it was the “toilet” that was “the most interesting spot in the room to its fair owner.” Reference was also made to the dresser set, or the “paraphernalia’ of odds and ends which the law generously recognizes as the sole and individual property of even a married woman.”²¹ In terms of separation of space, “all bathing arrangements would be better in a separate room, but if this should be impossible, then they should be behind a screen.” Space as a sanctuary, a tool of privacy, for acts of ritual, could be created through the decorative arts if not architecturally.

**5) Lady Barker’s version of a Japanese inspired Chest/Dressing Table
“The Bedroom and Boudoir,” *Art at Home Series***



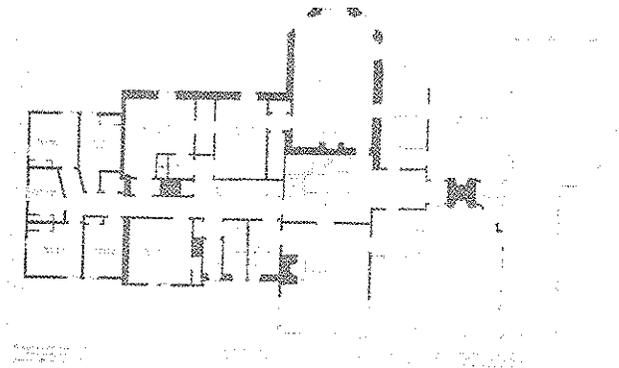
In 1897 American author and socialite Edith Wharton and architect Ogden Carter collaborated to write *The Decoration of Houses* with a focus on reason and harmony and understanding of the classics. In *The Decoration of Houses* they delve into the history of the space and the social function. According to Wharton the boudoir is a spin-off of the dual functions of a ceremonial bedroom, which evolved into the “with-drawing room” a

²¹ Lady Barker, “The Bedroom and Boudoir,” *Art at Home Series*, (London: Macmillan & Co., 1878), 70-72.

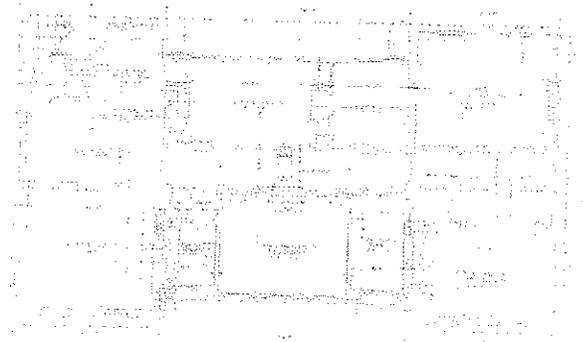
space for women to gather. The original bedroom was often divided by a screen, columns, or hangings, and it eventually divided into a separate boudoir. We see the evolution of public and private space paralleling a woman's dual roles. However, by 1897, when they had written *The Decoration of Houses*, the purpose of the boudoir was much more businesslike. Here a woman interviewed servants and managed the household; indeed Wharton likens it to a husband's den or library. As seen in the floorplans of two of her own homes the boudoir and dressing room were evolving. **(images 6)** In her guidebook she mentions that appropriate furniture for the boudoir includes: a writing table, *lit de repos*, and one or two comfortable armchairs. The dressing room should contain: a washstand, clothes press, cheval glass, chiffonier and toilet table. Edith Wharton's lifestyle and philosophy had little concern with the middle class, but she was not always agreed with even by her peers. She believed that the French had the ideal floor plan of a whole suite of rooms, which American architects were not proponents of, and most Americans (including the wealthy) had one large room that opened off a hallway.

6) Edith Wharton Floor Plans, *Edith Wharton: A House Full of Rooms*

a) Land's End, 1890



b) The Mount, 1901



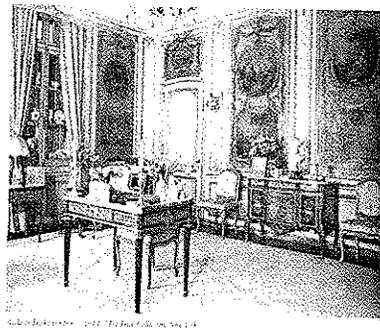
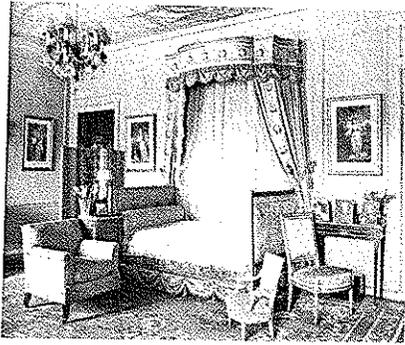
Interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe's twentieth-century treatment of the boudoir and placement of the dressing table sets the example of how the dressing table would be referenced in the future, specifically referencing the suite of rooms at the Frick Mansion decorated in New York City. Color, mood, and classical connotations of femininity were of the utmost importance. Using these as parallel markers to personal identity and dress, "she transferred these ideas directly to the interior which provided in her eyes, a second expressive container, after dress for the body...the idea of interior acting as a setting for the personality of its female inhabitant."²² Adelaide Frick's bedroom had a neoclassical Italian parcel gilt single bed, upholstered and draped with a graphic blue and cream silk woven with sunflowers. The spaces she decorated were steeped in historicism through de Wolfe's criteria of decorating: each had a fireplace, a chaise lounge, a dressing table, a mirror, good lighting, a bedside table, and connecting bathrooms were color-coordinated to the rooms they served. Most interesting for this study is de Wolfe's moving of the

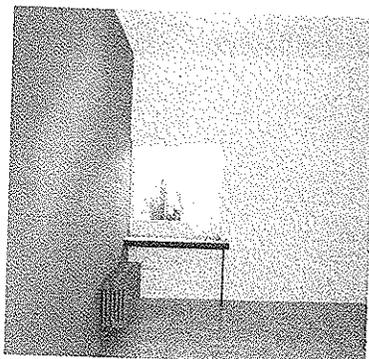
²² Penny Sparke "Elsie de Wolfe and her female clients, 1905-15: Gender, Class and the Professional Interior Decorator," *Women's Places: Architecture and Design 1860-1960*, eds. Brenda Martin, Penny Sparke (London: Routledge, 2003), 50. All references regarding the de Wolfe interiors are from this essay.

dressing table out of the boudoir, and even bedroom, and into the bathroom (**image 7**).

Unlike Wharton however, de Wolfe's greatest concern was the feel of the room, less than the structure or the arrangement of space; acknowledging the woman was the important factor of the décor.

7) Frick Bedroom/Boudoir/Bathroom
Elsie de Wolfe: Birth of Modern Interior Decoration.





8) *Villa Savoye Boudoir, Le Corbusier, La Villa Savoye*

But then came modernism, and in the form of what is called the *International Style* we see Le Corbusier's *Villa Savoye* turn the boudoir from luxury into asceticism, and the dressing table from sumptuousness and even mere functionalism to basic form. (image 8) Again, this is a weekend home built for wealthy clients who could afford the space and the novelty of new ideas. But what was Le Corbusier saying in his breaking down of this seat of femininity to the most basic of forms? Perhaps it is, as Nigel Whiteley states in his essay on gender and modernism, that, "Direct discussion about gender was minimal in modernist design discourse, but the implication was that 'the modern individual' was beyond significant gender differentiation in design needs."²³ While Le Corbusier was a known chauvinist whose arrogance is well recorded, this could be seen as his interpretation of the modern woman's needs being met by modern design. Perhaps his rational design, lacking in excess ornamentation, would allow his client to busy herself with her life, while not foregoing her opportunity to look modern. For the standardization

²³ Nigel Whiteley, "Whitewash, Ripolin, Shop-girls, and Matiere: Modernist Design and Gender," *Modernism, Gender and Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach*. ed. by Lisa Rado (London: Garland Publishing, 1997), 200.

and “machine-type” of modernism would free women from the frivolity and burden of superfluous design, much like the new female fashions he so admired.

‘To follow fashion, with its movement-restricting layers of clothing, would have been to deny themselves the experience of modernity: ‘To carry out the daily *construction* of a ‘toilette’, hairdo, boots, buttoning a dress, they would not have had time to sleep. So women cut their hair and their skirts and their sleeves. They went off bareheaded, arms. Naked, legs free. And get dressed in five minutes...The courage, the liveliness, the spirit of invention with which women have operate in the revolution in clothing are a miracle of modern times.’²⁴

In effect, Le Corbusier was arguing that women were redesigning themselves and reconstructing their identity in keeping with modern conditions and a modern aesthetic.²⁵ This does not necessarily mean that he interpreted her needs successfully-whether his admiration and their needs were one and the same Le Corbusier did not ignore their need for ornamentation, it just would not be done in a traditional manner.

Le Corbusier’s deconstruction of gender is seen here in the boudoir of the *Villa Savoye*. In the name of modernism he has stripped a form of nearly all its function. The dressing table is placed in a corner in front of a partially blocked window. To use the dressing table one would have to sit near a radiator, to apply make-up with uneven lighting (some plant blockage, known light direction, and if it is southern light it would be extremely harsh) and very little room for a mirror to be placed on the surface. There are no drawers for storage of stockings, gloves, hair needs, etc. The walls are painted a bright blue that would cast a strange tone on most people’s skin color. Lastly, the heat and light would have wreaked havoc on perfumes and make-up. The purpose of the dressing table had been lost all its meaning had changed, it was merely a nod toward the modern woman. Deconstruction had in fact become effacement. “For modernists such as

²⁴ Le Corbusier, *Precisions*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) (1930), 106-107. quoted in *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 209, 210.

Le Corbusier, women may have been inferior but they could play a productive and creative part in modern life-so long as they turned their backs on the habits and fashions associated with the decorative arts and etiquette, and embraced the ethos and aesthetic of modernity.”²⁶ But this theory was just that-theory. The dressing table has not been a theory but a reality in the lives of women for over 300 years.

This idea of the personality and interior being parallel was further expressed into the twentieth century in Emily Post’s classic treatise on home decorating in 1930, *The Personality of a House*. Post equates the beauty of a home with its personality, the emotional quotient of charm, an aspect that overrides any architectural principles. “The test of its personality is not determined-yes or no-by the question of architectural correctness, but by the question of whether it has the qualities that enchant.”²⁷ While, unlike Wharton and Cogden, she states there are no “architectural” principles to espouse, nor formal historicism such as de Wolfe, Post then contradicts herself by stating they “must follow certain definite and immutable laws of form, proportion and—most important of all—suitability to situation and to purpose.”²⁸ Post goes into further detail by clearly defining that “A boudoir, by the way, is *not* a bedroom, a bathroom, or a dressing-room, but a small private sitting-room on a bedroom floor.”²⁹ This comes under a chapter entitled “How to Use Color Charts” in the section subtitled, “A Boudoir for an Exotic Beauty.” She later notes that in a modern apartment that the French period is most appropriate for the boudoir or bedroom.³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., 209.

²⁷ Emily Post, *The Personality of A House*, (New York; Funk and Wagnalls, 1930), 1.

²⁸ Post, *Personality*, 2.

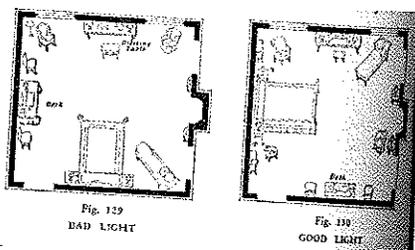
²⁹ Ibid., 187.

³⁰ Ibid., 233.

In *The Personality of A House* the dressing table is delegated to the dressing room, which has its own subsection of “A Dressing-Room Bathroom of Unlimited Extravagance.” Both the dressing room and boudoir are described as “portrait interiors,” furthering the concept of the interior as a reflection of the owner. She describes in great detail the standards for an ideal dressing table including the lighting possibilities, (overhead being the best), placement, (in front of a window), structure and accessories. (image 9) She does allow for simplification, depending upon the situation.

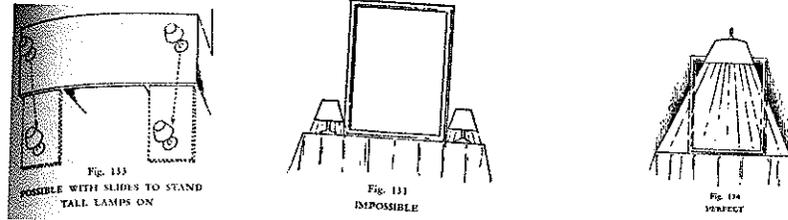
Post notes that the dressing table has a place in a variety of rooms in a home depending upon its size including a visitors’ dressing-room, the bedroom, and a guest room. She does concede that it is possible to have a bath-dressing room while mentioning her own personal distaste. “The bath-dressing rooms that one sees advertised are in a few instances beautiful; but many of them suggest perfume-makers’ display-rooms, or beauty-parlors...Such rooms are far from appealing to the woman who really knows much about luxury.”³¹ In order for it to work the space would have to be quite large to accommodate dressing space, privacy, and room for one’s personal maid to serve you. Again, she asks, “What is your idea of luxury?”³² (image 10)

9) Placement & Lighting, *The Personality of a House*



³¹ Ibid., 382.

³² Ibid., 383.



10) Emily Post Plan for Bath-Dressing-Room, *The Personality of a House*

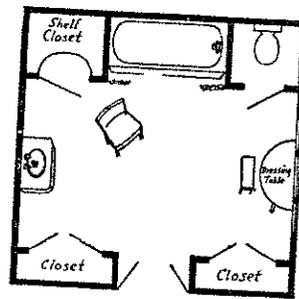
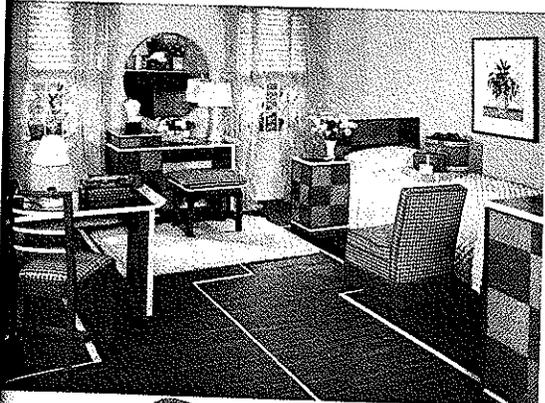


Fig. 135
PLAN FOR BATH-DRESSING-ROOM

While ideas of luxury may not have translated into physical space for most women during the Depression, they were able to hold on to it via the dressing table. This is seen in the frequency of dressing tables sold as part of bedroom suites, as seen in advertisements and catalogs. (image 11 a, b) Newspaper articles regularly featured the dressing table as part of the home. (image 12) From *Vogue* magazine's column on the latest make-up styles entitled "At the Vanity" to the *Sears* catalog, the dressing table was a fact of life for women, whether the space for it was large or small, in the bedroom, dressing-room or boudoir. From skyscraper modern styles, to chintz covered kidney-shaped tables, the array of dressing tables women were accessing was dizzying in their variety. (image 13) This then begs the question who was designing these tables and how were they being marketed to women?

The dressing table would move through history, from the looking glass that was placed on a table top, to a bureau that could be moved from room to room depending upon one's social class and the amount of space you had available. All of this paralleled the movement of the boudoir, a gendered space where women could retreat, out have affairs, conduct business, or dress, all according to the culture and time. The dressing table followed the boudoir through the centuries and outlasted it. Sometimes it was in the boudoir, sometimes it was moved to the dressing room, occasionally it was moved to the bathroom, in the end it is a remnant of this gendered memory that has remained.

11) a. Magazine Advertisement, *The American Home*, October 1934



GIFT

FOR THE MODERN GIRL

who wants a modern room to call her very own

Are you tired of the...
 An interesting...
 These are...
 Armstrong's Linoleum Floors...
 FOR EVERY ROOM IN THE HOUSE

ARMSTRONG'S LINOLEUM FLOORS

EMERALD • EMBOSSED • JASPER • PRINTED • ARMSTRONG'S QUAKER BRICK • ARMSTRONG'S LINOWALL

NEW EMBOSSED LINOLEUM

Now showing at Local Stores

Have you seen...
 This new...
 Armstrong's Linoleum...
 Armstrong's Linoleum...
 Armstrong's Linoleum...
 Armstrong's Linoleum...

11) b. Newspaper Advertisement, *New York Times*, July 14, 1925.

**The Summer Sale
of Flint's Fine Furniture
is in full swing**



The dining room sets in picture windows in a grand room of the Flint's building at 2026 West 46th St. The display of the sets is complete. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry.

**All bedroom, dining room
and upholstered groups
less by 10% to 30%**

Here are new forms of the finest furniture—every piece the handiwork of a furniture specialist and every item of discount value but a dependable specialist could offer you. We can hardly do justice to the sale in this space. But these five examples will give you a slight idea of the attractive values available. A visit to the sale will confirm them and show you hundreds of other values that exceed these.



Three sets of bedroom sets to be placed with the sets in the sale. They are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry.



Another example of a dining room set in picture windows in a grand room of the Flint's building at 2026 West 46th St. The display of the sets is complete. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry.



Another example of a bedroom set in picture windows in a grand room of the Flint's building at 2026 West 46th St. The display of the sets is complete. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry. The sets are made of mahogany, oak, or cherry.



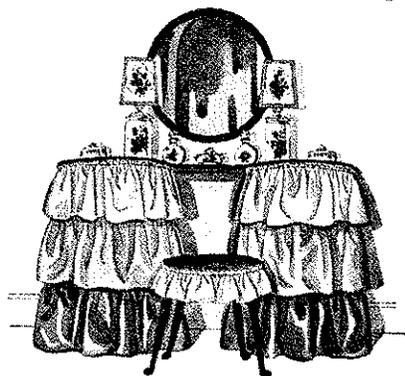
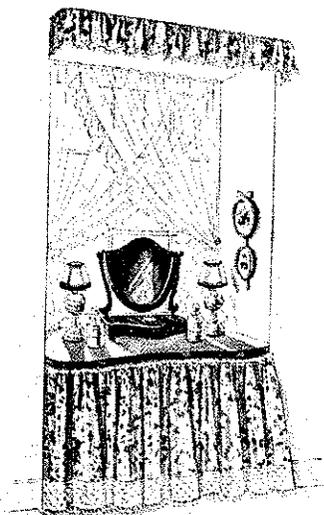
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FLINT & HORNER CO., INC.
2026 West 46th St., New York
Corner 46th and 7th Aves.

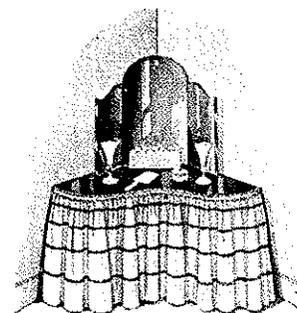
13) Array of Styles, *Better Homes & Garden*, December, 1932

Dressing-Table Ideas

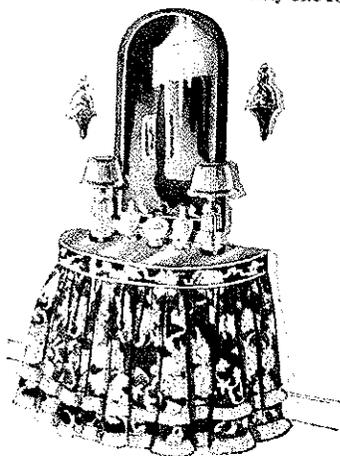
Right: This table is suitable in an Early American bedroom. Use glazed or unglazed chintz with attractive ball fringe



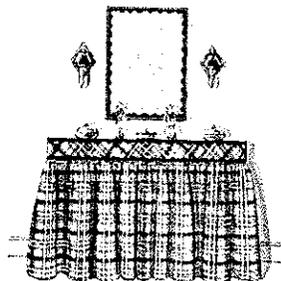
Here is a triple-tier dressing-table effect you can make with shaded ruffles of taffeta, organdie or glazed chintz of only one color



Peach-color bands are held together with rickrack braid in blue or green. Black paint is under the table glass



Above: We have used a ready-made dressing-table skirt available with floral pattern on dark brown, tan, gold, or green. Right: A dressing table for an Early American or Provincial room can be made with a sun-fast plaid in turquoise and orange



Chapter II
Modernity & Modernism

The relevance of the dressing table to modernity and modernism derives from the dressing table's function of ornamentation, and its part in the evolving role of women, which speaks to the very nature of modernity-change. Ornamentation, its role being at the core of modernism, is at the heart of the function of the dressing table. What makes modernity unique is that to define it is to accept the evolutionary nature of progress. It requires an openness to the contradictions and interpretations which make it the challenge it is to understand it. The period of 1927-1937 in America encapsulates all these complexities as well as taking on a particular role in the development of modernism in the international design world.

The twentieth-century concept of modernity is linked between the rise in technology and the emerging consumer culture. Modernity is the result of the changes brought about by science, technology, and socio-political events, specifically in this particular period the after effects of World War I, including the impact of the division of labor in production methods, women's right to vote and the Depression. These changes create a tension and anxiety that require a response in order to both comprehend the changes and create order out of them. Marshall Berman notes that modernity is linked to Marx's idea that contradiction is the nature of the bourgeoisie needs in production and consumption,³³ which eventually creates the link between mass production and design that modernism leads to in the United States. Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans have argued a more specific definition of modernity as the development of consumer culture,

³³ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into the Air* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 21.

most specifically the effects of the relationship between production and consumption,³⁴ and the increasing division of modern life.³⁵ Consumerism works hand in hand with the concept of designing one's life, hence identity through one's home, and the dressing table becomes a site of modern consumption. But to be modern is to respond to changes within the norms (both traditional and developing) of the contemporary culture. Consumerism, specifically the consumption of modern design would be one way of alleviating the tension which gives way to these contradictions.

"Modernism," as noted by Christopher Wilk, "was not conceived as a style but a loose collection of ideas. It was a term that covered a range of movements and styles in many countries ... All of these sites were stages for an espousal of the new and, often, an equally vociferous rejection of history and tradition; an almost messianic belief in the power and potential of the machine and industrial technology; a rejection of applied ornament and decoration; an embrace of abstraction; and a belief in the unity of all the arts."³⁶ It is also important to note that while European beliefs linked to modernism were decidedly of a political nature it was its shift in the 1930s to the United States (due to the political exodus of European designers to America) that, "Modernism was gradually stripped of its hitherto left-wing political associations and embraced by capitalism as an aid to selling."³⁷

³⁴ Introduction to *Fashion and Modernity*, eds. Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 1. More specifically stated: modernity as the development of consumer culture in the wake of eighteenth and nineteenth century industrialization. Like fashion its effects are intimately concerned with the relationship between the two processes of production and consumption.

³⁵ The crux of modernity is change, and the positive and negative effects and responses to change regardless of the period in discussion; primarily though enlightenment and industrialization brought on the conditions of what we consider to be modernity today.

³⁶ Christopher Wilk, *Modernism: Designing a New World* exh. cat. (London: V&A, 2006), 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 376.

Rising consumerism and the economics of more women working gave more women a new public role, one where looking-at objects and others-was a primary past-time whether one chose to do it or not. “Modern men and women must become the subjects as well as the objects of modernization; they must learn to change the world that is changing them, and to make it their own.”³⁸ This went hand in hand with the rise in technology, consumption and mass production. The masses now had more money (more people worked) to buy more goods (increased production) in more places (increase in consumerism). This tension created three needs relevant to this study: the development of modern, mass produced design, a need for refuge from the new, more public life, a private space in the home; and for women, a place to manage change privately.

In the United States, modernism, as the design arm of modernity, is historically related to architecture. It first became widely known through the *International Style* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Phillip Johnson. But in fact furniture had long been a part its development, as witnessed by the Bauhaus success of Marcel Breuer’s metal tubular chair. For designers, and avant-garde consumers, “Much of the interest in furniture design in the 1920s arose from the ‘discovery’ of tubular steel as a material suitable for furniture, and out of whose use resulted a new set of forms in keeping with the modernist machine aesthetic.”³⁹ America in particular fell in love with the “machine aesthetic,” it meshed well with the Fordist system of manufacturing, as it signified progress, technology, and mass production. “Design was inextricably bound up with commodity production, which in turn was the driving force behind the creation of wealth. It was reasoned, therefore, that it had the

³⁸ Marshall Berman, “Why Modernism Still Matters,” *Modernity and Identity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 33.

³⁹ Whitely, *Gender, Modernism*, 212.

potential to transform the economic and social conditions of the masses.”⁴⁰ Wealth, change and design could become a solution for a country going through a depression and in desperate need of a solution. “Design therefore could function as a ‘great improver’, a sophisticated kind of mental therapy which could change the mood and outlook of a population. It followed, then, that once introduced to the right kind of design in the right conditions, the masses would come to accept it as being the only viable way of making things. One would not need many styles of methodologies if one had a single correct one.”⁴¹ But the machine aesthetic was competing with other design styles that had been catching the public’s eye via furniture, architecture, new appliances, and fashion.

In the 1925 French *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* (International Exhibition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts) the world saw what would become known as the “*moderne*” style (later labeled Art Deco). The exotic woods, fine detailing and curvilinear forms spoke of laborious workmanship and high prices; clearly this was not the furniture the masses could afford. Le Corbusier exhibited his *L’Esprit Nouveau* house there, the antithesis of the *moderne*-geometric forms and light were part of his ethos. Though it would be several years before he believed that furniture would be worthy of his efforts-and then it was a “machine-type” and “tool” an extension of the body. In the Netherlands, Gerrit Reitveld was also working in simple forms and bold colors, and spaces that worked with light and openness. The German movement, the Bauhaus, was moving in much the same direction with education as a guiding force behind its organization. It had grown out of the *Deutsche Werkbund* which had wished to create a collaboration with art and industry, the

⁴⁰ Paul Greenhalgh, *Modernism in Design* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13,14.

first inklings of industrial design. The all encompassing approach of the Bauhaus toward design was not merely about the function or look but the social impact, was telling of the political approach that Europeans had toward modern design. "The modernist's mission in design was to produce artifacts fit for the age of social, cultural and material progress."⁴² There was a strong undertow of social principles to European modernism, it could be a force of change in society. How one lives was closely linked to changing our lives and modern design was at the heart of it.

For American modernists, the influence was more economic than of a socio-political nature. The possibilities of standardized "type" design had great possibilities for less expensive mass production. Less ornamentation, cleaner geometric lines meant less labor-intensive forms. But American modern had European beginnings. In the early twentieth century American manufacturers had been relying on European artistic talent and ideas. In 1910 the Metropolitan Museum of Art had started study rooms giving manufacturers an opportunity to study from its collection, then with the onset of World War I the flow of objects from Europe came to a standstill, and the study rooms became of more use to the manufacturers. In 1917 the museum began a series of exhibitions focusing on good design by manufacturers. By 1922 they were purchasing and exhibiting "modern" European designs and in 1924 a major shift was made when designs entered did not have to be museum inspired, but they did have to be designed and made in the United States in the previous year (this did not exclude them from being revival pieces though) and be in stock.⁴³

⁴² Whitely, *Gender, Modernism*, 200.

⁴³ Christine Wallace Laidlaw, "The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Modern Design, 1917-1929," in *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, vol. 8 (Spring, 1988), 88-103. All information in this paragraph pertaining to the Met is from this article. It is noted that the original idea for these "industrial art" exhibitions were from the curator of the

This was not enough however, to promote new American design, for when the United States was invited to participate in the seminal international exposition in Paris in 1925 Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover declined the invitation by saying that American had nothing modern to show.⁴⁴ One delegate, William Millington, the General Manager and Designer of Furniture Shops in Grand Rapids noted, "The reaction to the exhibition was almost universally the same among the delegates. At first we could not see any beauty in it but gradually, after being a carefully shown around by guides chosen by the French government who were experts in their lines, some of us begin to see the possibilities of developing something from this style which would be appropriate to living condition in America."⁴⁵

It was also the Metropolitan Museum of Art again that helped to promote design through its role in the department store "exhibitions" with President Robert W. DeForest chairing of Macy's first "Exposition of Art in Trade" in 1927.⁴⁶ This was followed by other expositions and other department stores such as Lord & Taylor's and Wanamaker's. These displays of both American and European designs were overwhelmingly popular and key to the dissemination of the idea of "modern" design. "More than 5,000 persons visit the Wanamaker exhibit of modern furniture, on the fifth floor of the store building. The exhibition, expressive in its many phases of modern life, is made to fit every practical requirement of the home of today."⁴⁷ "One of the first gestures toward

Newark Museum, John Cotton Dana, but were originally scoffed at by the then administration of the Met as too commercial.

⁴⁴ Karen Davies, *At Home in Manhattan* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1983), 11,14. Rosenthal and Ratzka, *Modern Applied Art* 174. Davies also mentions that he was overlooking architectural contributions and just focusing on mainstream decorative design.

⁴⁵ William Millington, "The Trend of Design and Color," *Furniture World*, (Nov 22, 1928), 7. General Manager and Designer, Furniture Shops, Grand Rapids, MI.

⁴⁶ Robert W. DeForest to Edwin R. Dirbrell, New York, 31 March 1927 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives) quoted by Marilyn F. Friedman in *Selling Good Design* (New York:Rizzoli, 2003),18.

⁴⁷ "Modern Furniture at Wanamaker's," *Furniture World* (September 6,1928), 31.

modernism which really seems to mean anything in its relation to home furnishing of today has recently been made through the furniture department and decorating staff of R.H. Macy and Co. Inc. of New York, where modern merchandise has actually been installed as a part of the furniture selling activities, and is being offered commercially.”⁴⁸

This was vital to the understanding of what modern is and what it could be and challenged perceptions of it being foreign, elitist, and only available to the wealthy.

The idea of modern furniture being foreign or different was of great concern to the general public. Even the terminology was confusing. Modernistic, *moderne*, modern, zig-zag modern, cubistic, avant-garde- all of these words were used interchangeably to describe the modern furniture that the public was beginning to see. *Moderne* would frequently refer to French inspired pieces, cubistic and avant-garde to those clearly showing the influence of the art movements of the day. Modern, modernistic, classical modern were all variations of terminology used for contemporary, non-traditional furniture.⁴⁹ “The present conception of many in the decorative trade regarding art modern is a riot of color with planes, cubes and angles grouped together rather confusedly. Our earliest impressions in this country of this new mode were gained through the cubistic painting which caused such heated controversy a decade or more ago. Then followed the impressions of the first two modernistic expositions in Paris, with the extreme lines, colors and finishes of the furniture.”⁵⁰ There were concerns of it being “bizarre” as one writer mentioned, “America is a little of this, a little of that and a little of everything”—including the present craze for the weird and angular in

⁴⁸“ Commercializing Art Moderne Furniture: Macy’s Merchandising Plan is Practical and Successful,” *Good Furniture Magazine* (Jan 1928), 29-30.

⁴⁹ Helen Gardner, “The Modern Period,” in *American Manufactured Furniture*, zone 3 book *Furniture Dealer’s Reference Book, 1928-1929* reprinted as *American manufactured Furniture* (Atglen, PA; Schiffer, 1996), 61.

⁵⁰ Edward Thorne, “Interiors for Present-Day Living Conditions: the Reasons for the Art Modern Vogue,” *Good Furniture* (May 1928), 229.

decoration.”⁵¹ The department stores and small furniture shops were offering semi-custom made options, and would recreate (i.e. copy) pictures of pieces that customers brought in.⁵² Customers were being given options as to how “modern” their furniture could be. Department stores were softening the impact of modern for its clientele through options and good merchandising. “Macy’s has frankly commercialized this modern art, but based upon the sounds of foundations-consumer demand. One misses the freakish and bizarre from the Macy scheme of things. Practical, livable, comfortable rooms, done in the modern manner for modern people, offer suggestion for the fitting of the apartment of house of moderate dimensions. A hard-headed practicality pervades the whole showing.”⁵³

This “hard-headed” practicality was most likely part of the appeal of the burgeoning “machine aesthetic” of which America was becoming enamored. The gleaming metal parts, clean streamlined look were stepping away from the sharp skyscraper look commonly seen in office buildings and furniture. It also helped ease the way of chrome, metal and glass into home furnishings without being cold or hard. It fit into both homes and businesses as a sign of technology and progress.⁵⁴ “Designers, responding to the allure of speed, began to apply streamlining to all sorts of objects-not only to locomotives, where it made sense, but to vacuum cleaners, where it did not.”⁵⁵

(image 14) Progress and a new vision were what America was looking for as the

⁵¹ Kay Norton, “A Little American Home of Good Taste,” *The American Home* (December 1928), 216.

⁵² See Osborn case study p 86.

⁵³ “Commercializing Art Moderne Furniture: Macy’s Merchandising Plan is Practical and Successful,” *Good Furniture Magazine*, (January 1928), 29-30.

⁵⁴ In homes the technology was mostly found in the kitchen and in appliances, radios were encased in wood “case furniture” until Bakelite and plastics became popular.

⁵⁵ J. Stewart Johnson, *American Modern: 1925-1940; Design For a New Age* (New York: Abrams, 2000), 28.

Depression kept moving forward, and the streamlined machine aesthetic of modern design fed that dream.

14) Streamlined Designs, *American Modern*

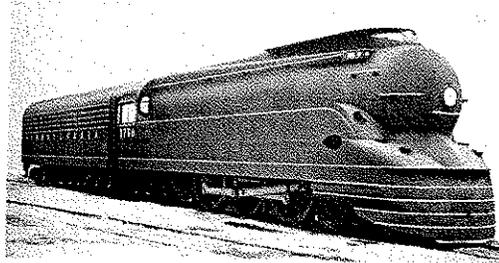


Fig. 20 Locomotive designed by Paulding Lewis for the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1936. Its smooth body made it the most aerodynamic locomotive ever built, and the sleek design reflected the modernist aesthetic of the time.

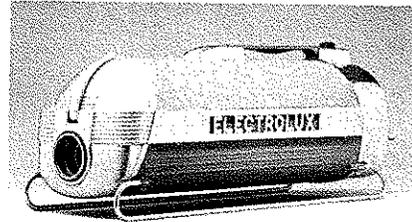


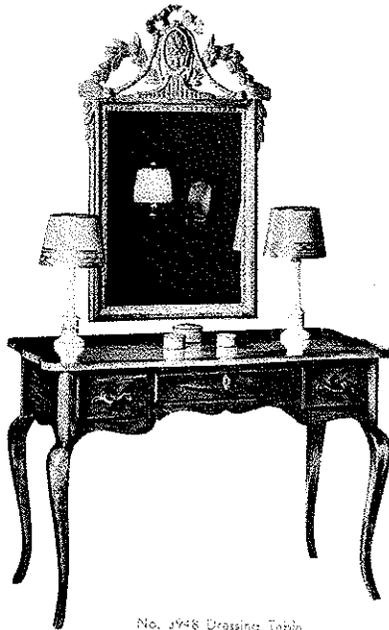
Fig. 21 Hoover's 1937 'E-Z-Clean' vacuum cleaner. Although it was made of metal, its rounded form and sleek design reflected the modernist aesthetic of the time.

Modernism was just one of many styles available in the American market. One of the most popular decorative movements of the early twentieth century was the colonial revival which was propelled forward by tastemaker, Wallace Nutting. He published books on American antiques and manufactured his own line of furniture. His promotion of the American heritage ideal rode on the heels of the opening of Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, and the period room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The upheaval of World War I and the shock of the destruction led to a romanticized need for the past, as well as a lack of imported goods. Nutting said it most aptly, "We want what our own ancestors made and used. It enriches life, and gives us the aroma of a past which is most delightful in retrospect, whatever may have been its strenuous reality. That which has been handled and used by six, seven or eight generations of our ancestors, is in a manner sacred, so that we avoid any financial appraisal of it. We think of it in terms of affection.

The great war has stimulated our attention to it and enhanced our regard for it.”⁵⁶ It was this type of romanticism of the past and need to create a comforting past that helped build the popularity of the revivals, even more so than the European revivals which furniture makers had been so fond of. In fact colonial revival styles became so popular that, “because of this growing popularity, Baker Furniture produced three lines of American Reproduction furniture in the 1920s: a line of colonial furniture introduced in 1922; a Duncan Phyfe suite in 1923; and a line of Pilgrim dining room furniture in 1926.”⁵⁷

(image 15)

In addition to the colonial revival, and all the variations on modern, is a little studied style sometimes referred to as Depression-era furniture. **(image 16)** It was



No. 2948 Dressing Table
Adapted from an imported French high table
now in the Baker Collection. Length 30 1/2
Top 21 1/2. Height 29

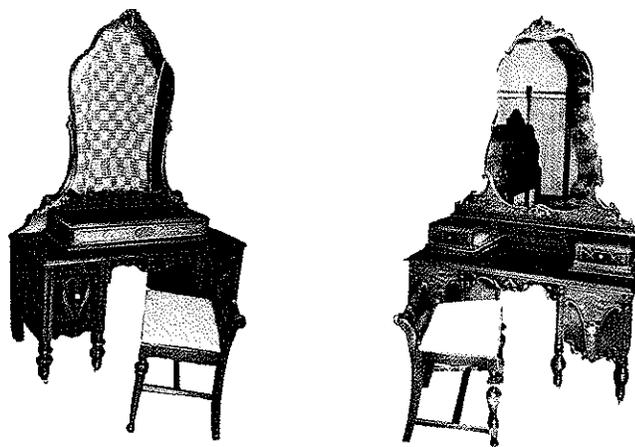
15) Baker Line of Reproduction Furniture

*Fine Furniture Reproductions: 18th Century Revivals of the 1930s and 1940s
From Baker Furniture.*

⁵⁶ Wallace Nutting, Introduction to *Furniture of the Pilgrim Century: 1620-1720* vol. 1. (1925)

⁵⁷ Introduction to *Fine Furniture Reproductions: 18th Century Revivals of the 1930s and 1940s from Baker Furniture*, (Atglen Publishing, PA: Schiffer, 1996) Baker Furniture is still a leading furniture manufacturer.

16) Depression Era Furniture, *Furniture of the Depression Era*



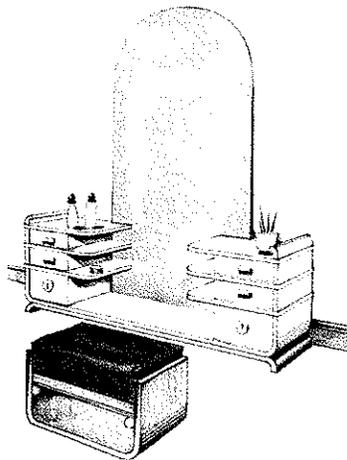
frequently made with a walnut veneer, and came in a whole range of furniture styles hybrids – Tudor, Victorian and modern. It is these pieces that are so often found at flea markets, and antique stores today more so than the ultra-modern skyscraper styles of museum collections. (images 17 a, b) While the skyscraper modern may have been an extreme statement of modern style the majority of consumers were looking for a style that was neither jarring nor too “old-fashioned.” The comfort found in the past would not be easily given up, nor was the desire for something new to be easily pushed aside. “Tradition is too strong an actuating force to expect people all at once to completely drop the old in favor of the new, despite their constant clamor for something new and different. Consequently, the public will visualize the modernistic design trend in relation to the historic.”⁵⁸ It would be a matter of time and effort before modern would

⁵⁸ Editorial, *Good Furniture Magazine* (June 1928), 279.

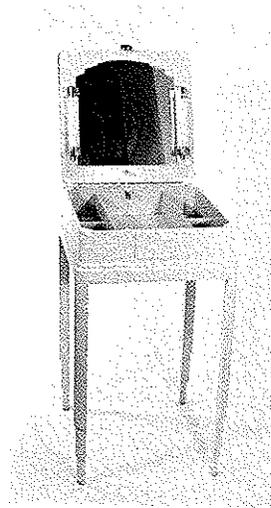
become the norm, and the setting in which it was placed not have to be seen as traditional.

17) A. Frankl, b. Lurelle Guild Designs

Frankl, *Modern American Design*



PAUL F. FRANKL
Dressing table in natural maple, varnished.



Lurelle Guild vanity table
Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum Collection
Gift of Karen Davidov and Henry Myerberg (1997-117-1)

Ornament

There are a number of factors which differentiate these varying styles, but the great divide between modernism and traditional design is ornament. Ornament, has been a discordant theme in design, but became even more so in the early twentieth century. In the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art *The International Style* exhibition the authors, Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Phillip Johnson, lay out the defining principles of modernism. The lack of ornament is key to creating the modern life. Their third (of three)

principles is “the avoidance of applied decoration.”⁵⁹ It is not only the decline of the quality of ornament which is problematic, but by limiting the quantity one creates a purer form.⁶⁰ Purity, form, morality, and femininity would often be linked in the defining of ornament and the defining of femininity in design.

Traditionally two designers have led the way in defining the role of ornament in modernism. Adolf Loos, an “early modernist” eroticized ornamentation and denigrated women’s fashion. Loos states, “The urge to ornament one’s face and everything within reach is the start of plastic art. All art is erotic.”⁶¹ “For Loos, ornament is the mark of servitude. The woman uses ornament to make the man a slave to his own pathological sexuality precisely because she is herself a slave. Crime is explicitly sexual, or rather, is sexuality itself.”⁶² He extends this analogy to fashion in, “A lady’s ball gown, intended only for one night, will change its form more quickly than a desk. But woe if a desk has to be changed as quickly as a ball gown because the old form has become intolerable; in that case the money spent on the desk will have been lost.”⁶³ The consumer of fashion is frivolous and criminal not only for debasing form with ornament, (simultaneously creating a problem for men) but economically bad for people by causing them to spend money uselessly. Women, the focus of his sexual interests, and purveyors of fashion, hence ornamentation, are at the focal point of all that is “criminal;” and in being seen thus women are not given a positive role in the modern world as defined by Loos.

Le Corbusier, on the other hand, liked women’s fashion, in part because it revealed them in his “gaze.” Ornament in fashion is less a crime not only because he sees

⁵⁹ Henry Russell Hitchcock and Phillip Johnson, *The International Style* (New York: Norton, 1966), 69.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶¹ Isabelle Frank, ed., *The Theory of Decorative Art* (New Haven; Yale University, 2000), 284.

⁶² Wigley, “White Out,” 189.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 292.

fashion as a non-art, rather because it allows women to be in his 'gaze.' Women's fashion does allow them to be modern but remain a "non-art," valid only in regard to his subjectivity: "And she is beautiful; she seduces us with the charm of her graces of which the designers have admitted taking advantage. The courage, the liveliness, the spirit of invention with which woman has revolutionized her dress are a miracle of modern times ... [but for menswear] The dominant sign is no longer ostrich feathers in the hat, it is in the gaze. That's enough."⁶⁴ He also states, "Decoration: baubles, charming entertainment for a savage."⁶⁵ Indeed, he denigrates women with the very tools of fashion that control his gaze and admiration (i.e. subjugation) by stating that decoration is fine for the "savage" i.e. women, but for men it is out of fashion; controlling the view is enough.⁶⁶ Le Corbusier goes so far as to malign the arena of the shop-girl, one of the few places/positions available to women for work. "The pretty little shepherdess shop-girl in her flowery cretonne dress, as fresh as spring, seems, in a bazaar such as this, like a sickening apparition from the show-cases of the costume department in the ethnographic museum."⁶⁷ It is acceptable for her to be pretty (ornamented) but only if the setting is appropriately unornamented. Modernism was not leaving women much room for being feminine and modern.

The conflict of the rights and wrongs of ornamentation and the role of women as the purveyors of ornament revolved around fashion, and fashion (specifically make-up) as the realm primarily of women needed a place to happen; the place being the dressing

⁶⁴ Le Corbusier. *Precisions*, 106-107, as quoted in Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism," *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 127.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁶⁶ It is contradictory where he mentions that women are ahead of men, by revealing themselves through fashion—for men of course—but he negates their modernity by noting that men's fashion puts men in the controlling position of gazing. Like Loos he acknowledges that he is at the mercy of women's beauty (hence adornment) but really that adornment is only for his pleasure and the real pursuits are in the "gazing," thus negating any role in modernity he might have given women.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

table. It was all that was left of the private boudoir for the middle class American woman. Especially during the Depression there was little room for privacy and reflection, it would have to take place at the dressing table. As design historian Judy Attfield aptly notes, “the dressing table and its accoutrements is an intriguing item of domestic furniture because although at one time unisex and positioned within the dressing room as an informal space for receiving guests, it is now one of the only purely feminine pieces of furniture still to be found in the modern home located in the bedroom, the most private inner sanctum of the house and the room conventionally characterized as the woman’s domain. It is the site for ‘making up,’ part of the ritual associated with getting ready in private to go out in public, still referred today by some women as ‘putting my face on’.”⁶⁸ Make-up was quickly becoming the new focal point of morality for women. Much like modern furniture was showing its true form, would modern women be without artifice?

A more public life was calling for a more public and continual representation of oneself—there was little reprieve from being “modern,” a publicly active and visible person. Women worked, were consumers, mothers, were being educated, and all roles called for public appearances. Make-up was the progressive technology of the new modern performing women and the dressing table was her place to become that woman. “That making up was preparation for women’s legitimate public performances...implies a degree of agency, self-creation, and pleasure in self-representation.”⁶⁹ In taking control of their appearance, and the space to create that image, the redefining (and re-

⁶⁸ Attfield, *Wild Things*, 159.

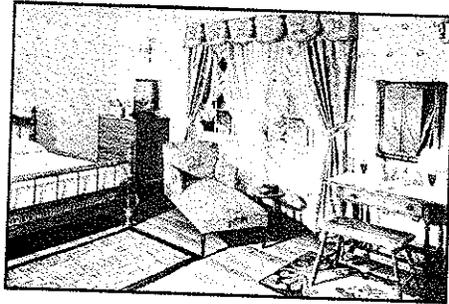
⁶⁹ Kathy Peiss, “Making Up Making Over,” *The Sex of Things*. Ed. Victoria de Grazia with Ellen Furlough, (Univ. of California Press: Berkeley, 1996), 322.

presentation) of femininity was underway. How in control of those options were women? Who had been defining what was feminine?

To describe a space, an object, or a person as a type speaks of the culture of the narrator. When one defines any of the above with certain terminology it loses its freedom, it becomes confined to the connotations of history. Ornament, as we have seen has been victim to this, space and objects follow not far behind. Historically ornament has been labeled as superficial, superfluous, excessive, and untrue, while form is a rational and logical basis for building. "Decoration was identified traditionally with the 'feminine' in architectural theory, and from the mid 1920s, the sheer limitation, concentration and the ultimate rejection of applied decoration were cardinal principles of the new architecture."⁷⁰ Historically domestic spaces had been given assigned genders based upon their use. Objects often found within these spaces then fall victim to the same hysteria of classification. While form, to some extent has always followed function, it is the restriction of form to historical connotations that becomes the problem. The categorization of any object allows us to control its growth, stop it from a free fall chaos of abandon without history or logic to contain our understanding of it. This labeling, so often gendered, creates a binary and limiting system of looking at design and creating new forms – of space, objects or selves. When women use ornament, the act of adornment, to re-form their identities, they do so at the risk of being over feminine. But after World War I women's lives were turned upside down. Cheryl Buckley states that, "femininity came under intense scrutiny between the wars. On the one hand, it signified a peaceful, alternative way forward following the ultimate masculine folly of war. On the

⁷⁰ Walker, Lynne, "Architecture and Reputation: Eileen Gray, gender and Modernism," in *Women's Places: Architecture and Design 1860-1960*, edited by Brenda Martin and Penny Sparke, (New York; Routledge, 2003), 95.

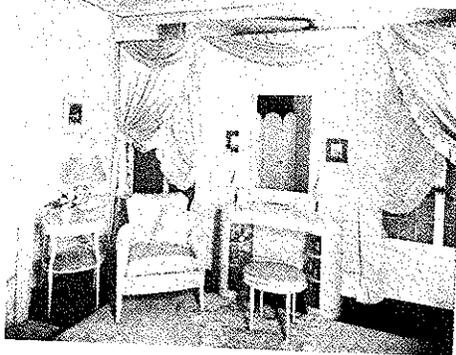
other hand, discussions around femininity raised anxieties about women's roles as wives and mothers, and the price to be paid for their economic and personal independence, as well as foregrounding a host of issues about women's sexuality identity and their relationships with men and with each other."⁷¹ These issues were surfacing through fashion and the home. For the ability to design one's identity-both body and domestic was a way to face the world, controlling it. New ideas of what it meant to be feminine were constantly being assessed as we see in the variety of dressing table styles available to women. (image 18) 18) Various ideas promoted to women:



At moderate cost a chaise covered chaise longue can be added to a bedroom not only giving comfort but also in its appearance.

Better Homes & Gardens: My Home Guide

FROM CINCINNATI



Better Homes & Gardens, December, 1934

⁷¹ Cheryl Buckley, *Fashioning the Feminine* (London:IB Tauris 2002), 84. While this research is based in the U.K., I believe the same issues and concerns were relevant in the US, having similar impact at the same time.

Are you modern, traditional, or somewhere in between? How much could you afford to spend, at which stores could you shop? If the nature of ornament, as designer Kent Bloomer believes is, “to articulate a realm of the imagination,”⁷² Buckley supports this with, “Fashioning the female body involved women in the process of ‘re-imagining’ themselves, and how they were also ‘imagined’ by others.”⁷³ Ornament is neither superficial, superfluous or external to the form but at the very core of design, whether it is the space, object, or person. Fashion, make-up and the dressing table were the place where it all converges. New styles or ornamentation allowed women to take the remnants of a traditional space in its final form, the dressing table, and bring it beyond the realm of gendered design, yet still function in the role of redefining gender.

Modernism may have been defined by historians in a binary and gendered way of male/female, emotional/rational; but modernity with its consumerist strength turned it into an opportunity for women to play an active role in the redesigning of their lives. The dressing table as the center of this becomes a centerpiece of modern design in a modern life.

⁷² Kent Bloomer, *The Nature of Ornament* (New York: WW Norton, 2000),9.

⁷³ Buckley, *Fashioning*, 85.

Chapter III

Accessing the Dressing Table

The progress and technology of twentieth-century were creating a limitlessness sense of modernity and new opportunities, and with it came a struggle to define the new design world. Women, much like modernism, were defining themselves as well. The tension created by change at work, home, and society was not to be ignored. "What really differentiates the lady of the '30s from her big sister of the '20s is not whether she drinks or pets, ...but her growing ability to face reality is a change that reflects a new attitude toward life brought about-yes, you have it-by the depression."⁷⁴ In the struggle to find their place in the world women were looking in new directions-public ones. This public world of movies, magazines and "advisors," from retailers to columnists, was giving women new opportunities to change and challenge themselves.

Femininity, the quality, of looking, or behaving in ways conventionally thought to be appropriate for a woman or girl,⁷⁵ is often a topic of contention when a society is changing. In the 1920s not only were hemlines changing but women were working, becoming educated and being confronted with a greater variety of options for what a woman could be. This continued into the 1930s with the Depression giving women even more economic responsibility for families. The increasing technology had brought science into the home-from child rearing to hygiene women were "managing" home with time-management skills and psychology. Servants were becoming a less frequent part of the domestic front for a growing majority of the middle class American population. A result of these changes meant new roles and new definitions of what it meant to be a woman. Women were freer to have more public lives, but had more roles to fulfill. The qualities of looking or behaving more freely, even as a more public figure required a new

⁷⁴ Helen Appleton Read, "A New Lady, A New Face, Emerges," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 3 July 1932, 7.

⁷⁵ Dictionary, MS Office Word for OS X, version 10.3.9.

femininity, but the role of adornment, would come into question. Modernism was (attempting to) eliminate ornament out of the design spectrum, but how would this affect femininity in design? If ornamentation was a quality of behavior of women, how were women to be modern?

“Grace of line, rhythm, purity of modeling of face and form-these ageless characteristics find their reflection in modern beauty.”⁷⁶ In Frances Daré’s publication, *Lovely Ladies: The Art of Being a Woman*, modern beauty, modern femininity, and related feminine qualities, were described as part of being a modern woman. Enhancement through personal development and adornment were expected. Make-up, however must not have a “savage conception of it” which could lead to a “grotesque effect.”⁷⁷ Daré goes on to mention that the modern woman is “in a center of civilization where refinements of adornment are a prerequisite of good taste, and where the garish make-up repels and revolts rather than attracts.”⁷⁸ To be feminine was no less principled than in modern design. “There was at one time the woman who, in an attitude of defiance, adopted a masculine attitude in her manner and gestures and, worst of all, in her clothing. But this type of woman is rapidly disappearing.”⁷⁹ The thirties were ushering in a less boyish cut figure-not necessarily more traditional-but a new form of feminine. “The days of mad scrambling from one style to another, when women tolerated freakish clothing that had no regard to beauty and harmony, have passed. Those grotesque styles were a product of the restlessness of women and their need of activity which was suppressed in every other line. With the increasing freedom allowed woman for self-

⁷⁶ *Vogue’s Book of Beauty*, (Condé Nast; New York, 1933), 5.

⁷⁷ Daré Frances, *Lovely Ladies: The Art of Being a Woman*, (Garden City, NY; Doubleday, Doran, 1929)2: 323. Daré goes on to mention that culture, breeding, refinement, intelligence, and a host of other qualities (p 324).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

expression and mental development , clothing is assuming an entirely different aspect, and this in spite of strong efforts on the part of those who are making their living in the so-called style industry.⁸⁰

Make-Up

The “style industry” was influencing women with the acceptance and use of make-up by all women, not just prostitutes and actresses. Max Factor cosmetics, one of the first mass produced lines, started as a product for film and quickly made its way to the retail shelves. The look of the “modern woman” was decidedly youthful, and with a now competitive work force women had to look good to get ahead. The look of youth and freshness could, of course, be enhanced or manipulated with cosmetics. The quick rise and link between youth, beauty, and make-up can be seen in “a 1931 study of college women similarly reported that over 85 percent wore rouge, lipstick, face powder and nail polish, and spent about twelve to thirteen dollars a year on these items.”⁸¹ The 1933 *Vogue Book of Beauty* reinforces the concept of make-up being young and fun by stating, “A dose of new beauty acts just like a cocktail, breaking down inhibition and putting new fun in life.”⁸² Society was changing, and women’s ways were changing with it.

Women and make-up now had acceptance, and opportunities to be acquired and worn. It was in these small purchases that women were able to not only make a purchasing decision, but able to decide how they wanted to look even through the Depression. It is at this point that we see how modernity impacted design. Women

⁸⁰ Ibid, 464.

⁸¹ Peiss, *Hope*, 4.

⁸² *Vogue’s Beauty*, 86.

originally performed their toilette at their dressing table in their boudoir. By the early twentieth century the boudoir had disappeared from the middle-class woman's home, and the center of her toilette was now the dressing table. In 1933 the editors of *Vogue* insist that, "A good fifteen minutes is what you must allow at your dressing-table, and never will a quarter of an hour be better spent than in making yourself dazzling for parties. You have so much more fun yourself. This allows for a smooth foundation, putting on cream rouge, powder, lipstick, mascara, eye shadow, and one of the flattering lotions that 'finish' your neck and arms and back."⁸³ Clearly a young woman had much 'dressing' of her face to do for a night out, and with it came a broader spectrum of products and socializing aspects.

Since the popularity of the short haircuts of the 1920s, the *marcel* and permanent wave, more women had been heading out into the world to have their cut, no longer having their hair simply "dressed" in the privacy of their own homes. This parlayed into the popularity of beauty spas by women such as Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubenstein. The beauty salon where a woman would go for her hair, skin and nail care was becoming more common. It would be owned and run by a woman, employ women (usually of a lower economic class) and frequented by women of a higher social class.⁸⁴ Modernity had its female center at the beauty salon where competition and consumption for the latest trends in employment, social standing and beauty were converging.⁸⁵ One of the most well known salon owners was Helena Rubenstein who was an art collector herself. Her salon in Chicago became known amongst designers for its modern leanings, "Because

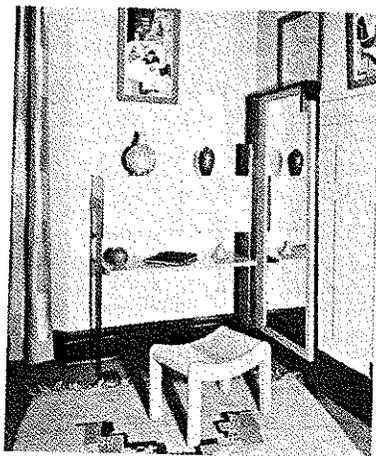
⁸³ *Vogue's Beauty*, 78.

⁸⁴ Middle class women would frequent a hair salon, but wealthy women went to spas.

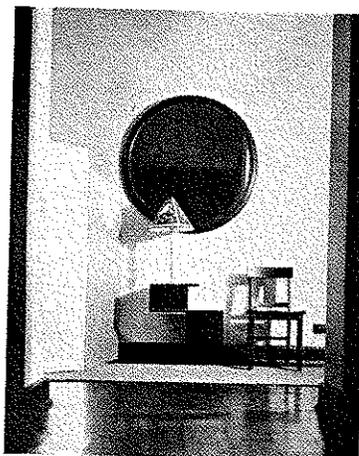
⁸⁵ Many movies of the period took place or had scenes which took place at a beauty salon where secrets were unknowingly revealed.

women of wealth so seldom take the time to visit museums and galleries of art Madame Rubinstein believes that many of them do not learn to appreciate the beauty of the significant new art achievement. It seems somehow to be especially fitting that beauty concerns take the lead in adapting the ultra modern to their interiors. An old building of Georgian type architecture was considerably remodeled for this salon, and it eventually achieved the simple, severe effects of the modern tendency.”⁸⁶ (image 19) The business of adornment and the adornment of a business, the Rubenstein spa, were meeting at the urging of a female business owner. The ultimate feminine space, the beauty salon was becoming modern. Femininity did not have to be owned by tradition and the past, but by the present and the future as defined by artists, designers, and women alike; and it was happening within their own “female” space.

19) Helena Rubenstein’s building interior, *Good Furniture Magazine*, May 1928



6. A MANICURE TABLE IN THE LOUNGE



7. A GROUPING IN BED AT THE HEAD OF THE STAIRWAY

⁸⁶ “A Beauty Salon in Art Moderne,” *Good Furniture Magazine* (May 1928), 242.

Magazines & Decorating Manuals

The concept of the interior space reflecting the personality, especially a woman's was not at new one. In the nineteenth century the codification of space, function and its interior decoration took gendering to new heights where rooms had "personalities" and functioned much like women's fashions. In describing the nineteenth century drawing room (coded female) historian Juliet Kinchin notes that, "the objectification of womanhood was complete, the furnishings being seen as a seamless extension of a woman's character and appearance-'a sort of garment of her outermost soul,' wrote Frances Power Cobbe in 1866,' harmonized with all her nature as her robe and the flower in her hair are harmonised with her bodily beauty.'"⁸⁷ This concept had continued into the twentieth century, where the cross over of fashion and home as social status markers was further promoted by Elsie de Wolfe, who "transferred these ideas directly to the interior which provided in her eyes, a second expressive container, after dress for the body. .. the idea of interior acting as a setting for the personality of its female inhabitant."⁸⁸ Personal space for the average woman was dwindling, but it did not mean that the space could not reflect her personality, as was being espoused by designers of the day. As Frank Alva Parsons mentions in *Interior Decoration*, "The house is but the externalized man."⁸⁹ Emily Post even entitled her decorating manual *The Personality of A House*.

The most personal of space within the house for a woman was the dressing table. Here a woman was creating her public face in a moment of private reflection. As will be

⁸⁷ Juliet Kinchin, "Interiors: Nineteenth-Century Essays on the 'Masculine' and the 'Feminine' Room," in *The Gendered Object*, ed. Pat Kirkham, (Leicester: Manchester University Press, 1996),18.

⁸⁸ Penny Sparke, "Elsie De Wolfe Women's Spaces" in *Women's Places*, 50.

⁸⁹ Frank Alva Parsons, *Interior Decoration: Its Principles and Practice* (New York: Doubleday, 1923), vii.

seen magazines, decorating manual publishers (magazine publishers frequently published books as well) and furniture manufacturers, regardless of their principles of ornament in design, had no concerns about selling women a place to ornament themselves. “A dressing table is a very intimate appointment, and its character and accessories may reflect the personality of the owner quite as clearly as the mirror reveals her appearance.”⁹⁰ Sophisticated, chaste, and trim or pert, your dressing table fit your personality as it did your bedroom. Tradition, of the eighteenth-century French variety, was usually the norm, as stated in *American Home* magazine, “Few decorative styles possess more feminine appeal than does that of Louis XVI, for it was a period when women inspired, directed, and dominated the fashions.” Author William Criger even gave it a feminist tone, “Indeed were it not for the requirements of the court, the style might have come down to us named for its first lady, Marie Antoinette.”⁹¹

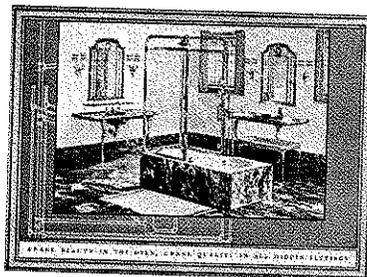
Regardless of what ‘personality’ a woman chose for her dressing table, she was sure to have one. In the November 1928 issue of *American Home* Marjorie Lawrence writes of her experience of furnishing an apartment on a budget. “Then I made a list of the furniture which I knew I should need. The Bedroom would require two beds, a chest, a bureau or dressing table, a boudoir chair, a night table, some small rugs and curtains.” After some thought of her lifestyle she opted for the dressing table, “I needed a more accessible place for my toilet articles, gloves and stockings and other small belongings. I felt that a dressing table would suit my purpose and also add to the appearance of the room. I was fortunate in discovering one of a kidney shape, draped in chintz at \$33.75. It

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Reilly, “Is Your Dressing Table As Flattering As Your Evening Gown,” *Modern Priscilla*, April 1930, 26.

⁹¹ William Criger “Beauty in a French Bedroom: Louis XVI, a Delightfully Feminine Style” *American Home*, September 1934, 219.

contained both drawers and shelves, disguised by its ruffled skirts.”⁹² Frequently articles showed a variety of options for dressing tables, whether for master, girl’s or guests bedrooms. Advertisements also showed dressing tables, even those in bathrooms; flooring companies were the most progressive in their interior design. (image 20) The dressing table was also a popular site for selling stockings, which is where they were commonly stored. (image 21) *Vogue* had a regular column entitled, “At the Vanity” featuring the latest make-up and dressing table objects women could purchase. The dressing table was common parlance whether traditional or modern in style.

20) Flooring & Bath advertisements, *Flapper Furniture and Interiors of the 1920s.*

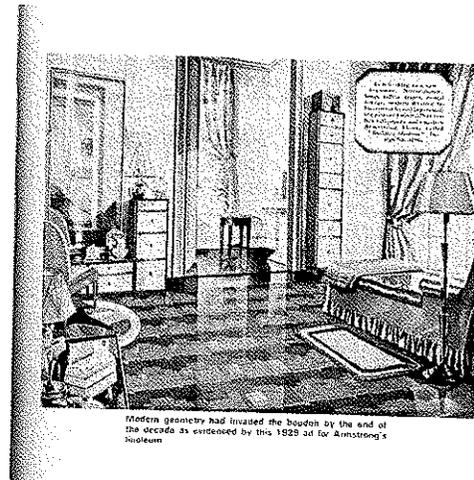


CRANE

GENERAL OFFICE, 2800 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, N.Y.

CRANE FLOORING COMPANY

CRANE FLOORING COMPANY



Modern geometry had invaded the bedroom by the end of the decade as evidenced by this 1920s set for Armstrong's Museum

⁹² Marjorie Lawrence, “\$700 for Three Rooms and a Bath,” *The American Home*, November 1928, 115-116, 180. She actually spent more on the beveled triptych mirror, \$34.50, “It cheered her up.”

21) Stocking Advertisement, *Ladies Home Journal*, September 1927

Even after many washings
the same rich colors — the same deep sheen!

That's because Real Silk Gold Button Brand Hosiery is made only of 100% pure, FRESH silk... selected more than 24 days from Filatures to Foot.

When you buy a pair of stockings, you are buying a pair of shoes. The more you know about the quality of the silk, the more you will appreciate the value of the stockings. The more you know about the quality of the silk, the more you will appreciate the value of the stockings.

To be sure, all new silk hosiery looks very much alike. But after you have worn it, you will know the difference. It's when you notice the difference.

The Beauty of FRESH Silk is Lasting.

Real Silk Gold Button Brand Hosiery, we'll find, retains its natural beauty and coloring. Even after many washings in soap, hot suds and alkali, it remains soft and smooth. And it's easy to care for.

For Real Silk Hosiery possess the great advantage of being made only of 100% pure, FRESH silk. Less than a month after the silk is taken from the cocoon in the hills of Japan, you see the result of its ripening.

The very texture of the silk has an inherent beauty on its face and color of the hosiery, for FRESH silk preserves the colors naturally and deep, rich sheen that you see in the original form. Its beauty is assured and permanent.

OUR MOTHERS MIGHTY CARE TAKES THIS

Here Real Silk is washed in a special method, of many machines there would be no way to ensure the texture of the silk to the hosiery you buy. But, as you know, Real Silk requires very little care and makes no special demands.

Real Silk Hosiery is made in a special way. It is made in a special way. It is made in a special way. It is made in a special way.

It takes your order. The hosiery is shipped to you home. It comes that great smile—the largest of their kind in the world. All in between says the thousands. The silk is given no chance to age. The hosiery is FRESH, new-made and unshaded when you see it.

If you have not yet given the Real Silk Representative who sells regularly in your vicinity an opportunity to present the remarkable and washable service he offers, you'll find it a mighty good investment to let him have a few minutes of your time and the sale.

Real Silk Hosiery, Made in America, Inc., U.S.A.
Philadelphia, Pa.
1234 Market Street
Philadelphia, Pa.



REAL SILK
Gold Button Brand
HOSIERY
FOR LADIES AND GENTLEMEN



While magazines were a popular forum for discussing home furnishings, the 1920s and 30s saw a number of interior decorating books being published by individuals and magazines. The tone went anywhere from a familiar chatty voice to the more dictatorial. All, regardless of the tone, were concerned with good taste. For Emily Post, “suitability is always a keynote of good taste.”⁹³ Specifically, “good taste might properly be defined as nice perception of the standards of suitability, form, proportion, scale and color, and the harmonious relation of each to the other.”⁹⁴ The publishers of *Modern Priscilla* magazine decorating guidebook, *Modern Priscilla Home Furnishing Book* were also concerned with good taste, but were certain that it did not have to coincide with a big budget. “The first essential in the correct choice and the use of home

⁹³ Post, *Personality*, 51.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 302.

furnishing is good taste; the second is good taste; and the third is good taste. Not a fat purse, but good taste.”⁹⁵ For both good taste was a matter of education, not simply instinct. “But good taste is never a natural endowment, -it is always acquired. Taste is the result of training.”⁹⁶ (Hence, the market for such books.) Emily Post states it best when she mentions all of the societal shifts that were placing good taste at risk: “It is sometimes argued that taste is merely a standard established by the opinion of the majority, which is much the same as assuming that the manners of the majority are, *ipso facto*, correct! Consider the uncouth millions pouring yearly into this great melting-pot, our United States. Imagine the manners and tastes of the majority, and consider what the charm of living would be, should the majority be the criterion of culture.”⁹⁷ Without such guidebooks to help mold the masses taste in the proper direction there would not only be a lack of knowledge of good taste, but about a general knowledge of style.

Suitability to style would be a marker of good taste. Period styles, deriving from the climate, needs and resources of a locality and time that have stood the test of time,⁹⁸ would often require to be fitted to more modern needs. How one chose and placed a dressing table was essential to the appropriateness of the overall design. A “colonial” bedroom would require a maple lowboy. **(image 22)** A modern room with colonial atmosphere would have two points of interest: the dressing table, placed between the windows with the large plain mirror above it, and the more important fireplace.⁹⁹ An eighteenth-century French bedroom would require a more ornate look, **(image 23)** and the “modern” home something more austere, yet revealing of modern technology.

⁹⁵ *Modern Priscilla Home Furnishing Book* (The Priscilla Publishing Co.; Boston, 1925),1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹⁷ Post, *Personality*, 303.

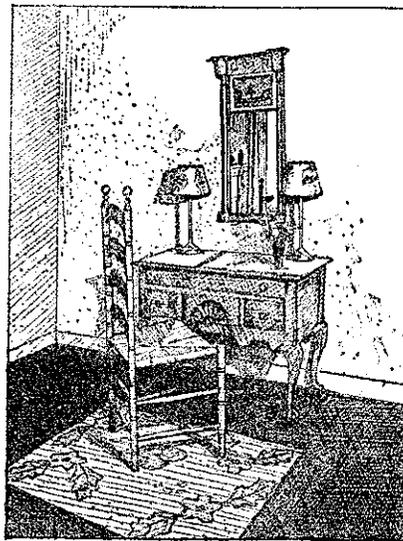
⁹⁸ Post, *Personality*, 202.

⁹⁹ Christine Holbrook, ed., *My Better Homes and Garden Guide*, (Des Moines, IA; Meredith Publishing, 1933),118.

(image 24). For the do-it-your-selver *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine recommended, “If you would modernize your rooms this spring, do not overlook the value of a touch of silver effect, which is such a good idea to not be taken from modern decoration. You can obtain this effect by applying aluminum paint to any metal and it is most useful as an undercoat on wood, for it retards warping and checking.”¹⁰⁰

Contemporary issues of the mobility of modern life were also part of design concerns. The *My Better Homes and Garden Home Guide* suggested that bedrooms had become the second living rooms for the privacy they offered.¹⁰¹ “ Built-in equipment, if it is the result of careful thought on the part of the house holder, accomplishes a double purpose. It adds materially to ease in caring for the house while at the same time it

22) “Colonial” Maple Lowboy, *How To Be Your Own Decorator*

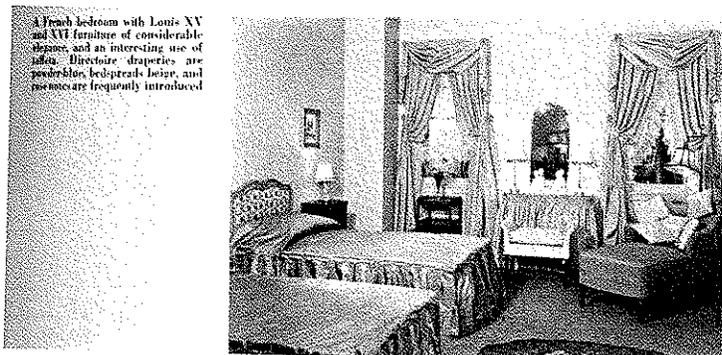


A copy of an antique maple low-boy makes a most delightful and spacious dressing-table for an early American room.

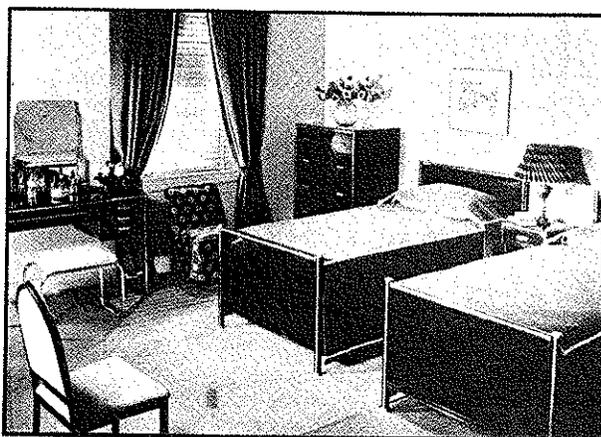
¹⁰⁰ Christine Holbrook “When A Woman Shops” *Better Homes & Gardens*, March 1932, 48.

¹⁰¹ Holbrook, *My Better Homes*, 81.

23) The "French" Bedroom , *Good Furniture Magazine*, January 1930



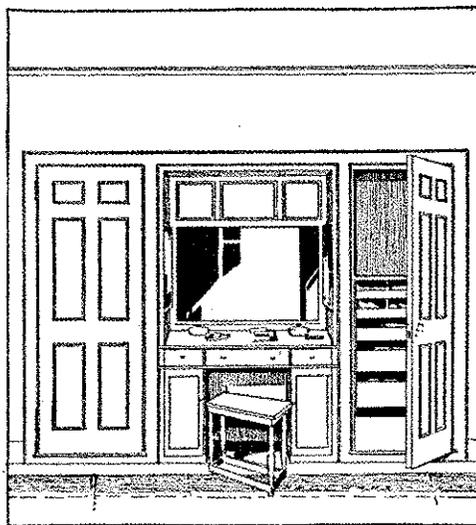
24) Modern Design Dressing Table, *Better Homes & Garden: My Home Guide*



increases the sale value of the property because such added features make a strong appeal to possible purchasers...A built-in dressing table is an economical feature for the

bedroom, and can be made very attractive by adding a mirror above. It should extend to the floor on both side of the mirror with ample room for drawers. No woman can have too much of this kind of space-saving equipment.¹⁰² (Image 25) The majority of the plans (and images) recommended that the dressing table be placed between two windows so as to make best use of the light. (see image 9) They were also recommended to come with a small shelf underneath for placing slippers or shoes.¹⁰³ Function, use, design, and style set against the standard of good taste were to represent a woman's personality as she sat down to put on her make-up. Since make-up was now both appropriate and in good taste (hopefully) it was becoming the ritual associated with excitement and glamour in a woman's life.

25) The Built-In Dressing Table, *Modern Priscilla Home Furnishing Book*



For the new home, or in remodeling the old, install one of these practical built-in dressing tables, with closets and drawers of various sizes. No woman can have too much of this kind of space-saving equipment.

¹⁰² *Modern Priscilla Book*, 306.

¹⁰³ Koues, *How to Be Your Own Decorator*, 259.

Movies

The popularity of movies helped to associate the ideals of glamour with make-up, promoting the need for the dressing table. “Without the invention of the moving picture the revolution in the use of cosmetics would have proceeded at a very much slower pace.”¹⁰⁴ The trade journal *Toilet Requisite* confirms the importance of the movies by featuring the popular movie magazines (*Modern Screen*, *Photoplay*) as a successful advertising campaign to promote cosmetics. **(image 26)** Movie stars were used to promote cosmetics and skin care lines, but it was their popularity that promoted the idea of spectacle and theater, the public persona, something which women were starting to have more often. It was not uncommon to see Jean Harlow’s face gracing the pages of magazines. Being on display was a tool of glamour, and applying make-up brought the everyday woman some glamour into her life. “Indeed, cosmetics ads endlessly reminded women that they were on display, especially conspicuous in a world peopled by spectators and voyeurs. Mirrors, movie cameras and spectators placed in the ads underscored the idea that the eye constantly appraised women’s appearance. **(image 27)** Women were thus urged to transform the spectacle of themselves into self-conscious performances.”¹⁰⁵ Society was telling women that to be on display was part of being a woman, and adornment was no longer a practice to be embarrassed by. *Vogue* went so far as to pronounce that, “These days showmanship is everything.”¹⁰⁶ The place for the spectacle and showmanship to begin was at the dressing table. Glamour and the glamorous lifestyle was something to be achieved not only for the modern woman, but

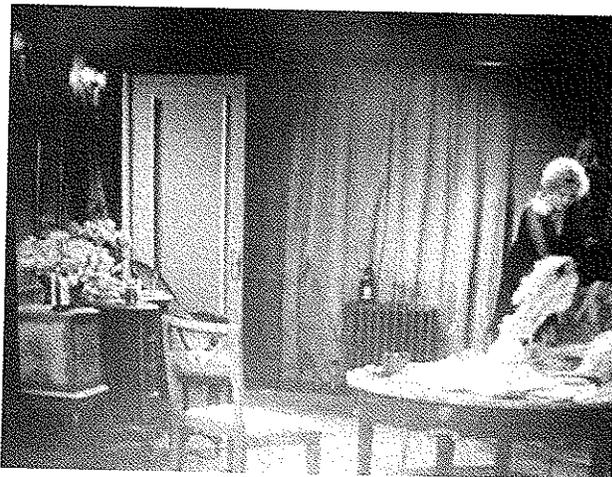
¹⁰⁴ Williams, *Powder and Paint*, 135.

¹⁰⁵ Peiss, *Hope*, 142.

¹⁰⁶ *Vogue’s Beauty*, 10.

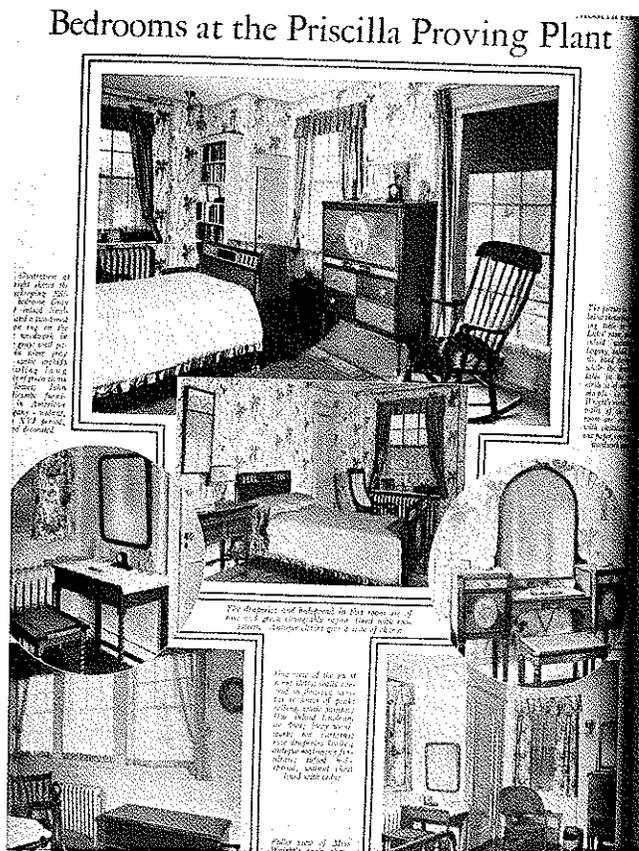
In the 1928 silent movie, *The Battle of the Sexes*, a young woman overhears that the man next to her in the barbershop is very wealthy, and plots to have an affair with him and bribe him. Even though he has a loving wife and family he falls in love with her. Eventually he leaves his family, but his young daughter confronts her, with the denouement taking place in the girlfriend's bedroom, fully furnished with a chaise lounge and dressing table. This dressing table (**image 28**) is best described as "Depression-era" painted wood with a central mirror, flanked by side drawers, there is no central table top, the center is recessed. This would be a fairly common style found advertised in the late 1920s as seen in this column in *Modern Priscilla* (September 1927) and an image from the movie.¹⁰⁷ (**image 29**)

28) *Battle of the Sexes*, 1928



¹⁰⁷ It is interesting to note that *Modern Priscilla* was a very middle class magazine, clearly the girlfriend was working her way up the social ladder. As well in all, but one of the films the women boudoir dolls, in their rooms. Lanky, gaudily dressed dolls that were placed on the furniture-not as playthings but as decorative items. They were never found in modern settings.

29) *Modern Priscilla*, September 1927



Jean Harlow, as Lilly, also known as “Red” in the “talkie” *Redheaded Woman* (1932) we see the meteoric rise of a woman literally sleeping her way from a midwestern town, Redwood, to a New York penthouse, then on to Paris. Physically getting into her conquest’s home was not only a literal goal, but to have the largest home was also essential. She goes to the beauty salon of her friend Sally (who rises with her, but works her way up in the world) and has the following conversation:

Sally: You got all the furniture you need?

Lilly "Red": Well, nearly, I still have a few Louis Quinze tables to get and a couple of Jacobean bedsteads and an English highboy.

Sally: A what?

Red: A highboy.

Sally: Say, I thought you were going to be on the level now that you're married!

Red: Oh Sally, A highboy's an antique bureau.

Sally: Irene's [Red's husband's ex-wife who lives across the street] going to do her house modernistic.

Red: She is? Oh well, I've got modernistic touches just strewn all over my place.

Specifically we see her dressing table as modern. **(image 30)** It is set in to a space (almost built-in) draped in fabric from the ceiling, and around the table, and set with simple curved, chrome table lamps. There is nothing frilly about the setting with its clean lines, It is also the scene where her husband, who knows she has cheated on her, tells her to go to New York, a modern, independent woman; no longer confined to small town Redwood, but part of the metropolis.

30) *Red Headed Woman* Dressing Table



In the 1933 film *Babyface*, Barbara Stanwyck works her way from a speakeasy saloon in Pittsburgh where her father is willing to prostitute her, to penthouses in New

York and Paris. Her role as a “kept woman” leads to a murder scene in her bedroom with her “sugar daddy” shot to death in front of her dressing table, draped in fabric with a mirror that is carved and heavily ornamented. By 1936 Myrna Loy’s, Nora, in *After the Thin Man* was a less salacious character and did not have to “rise” to modernism, or even being a good woman, i.e. a good display of femininity. Her dressing table had no fabric, clean straight lines, and an unornamented circular mirror and crystal lamps. **(image 31)** Even the supporting character, her cousin Selma, who was being labeled insane, and lived in the Victorian home of her domineering and patrician mother had a “modern” dressing table with Asian influences. **(image 32)** Her private space was pure, clean, and modern, thoroughly different than the earlier generation. For both Selma and Nora the bedroom was a place of respite, not drama. There they found some repose and sense of self, not violence or dishonesty. They both came from wealthy families with no need to “rise” to become “modern.”

31) *After the Thin Man* – Nora’s Dressing Table/Bedroom



32) *After the Thin Man* - Selma’s Dressing Table/Bedroom



Not only was the dressing table a code of femininity in film, but it was a code of being a “good” woman or a “bad” woman. While any woman could have a dressing table, it took a woman of style, a modern woman, to have a clean, “modernistic” dressing table. “Modern design was the province of newly acquired affluence the inevitable setting-in penthouses, executive offices, or night clubs –for well-to-do characters, or characters in disguise aspiring to that state. For these fortunate few, modern design and technology were a boon, the means by which they were freed to pursue worldly pleasure. On the other hand, many films of the period responded to the public’s uneasiness with modernism by making it a metaphor for new and thus possibly threatening, currents in contemporary life. These ranged from the boudoirs of the emasculating ‘new woman.’¹⁰⁸ So much could happen at the dressing table, from the most obvious and simple application of make-up to seduction and the making-over to a new life. It is not surprising that women, and the furniture and design industry were looking at the movies as both inspiration and resource for the selling of the idea of the modern woman and her dressing table.

RETAIL

According to retailers of the period, the difference in merchandising was not the merchant but the customer, “the radio, the telephone, the railroads, the automobile, the aeroplane, the independence of women, educational advantages and whatnot-have changed this woman. ...she knows what she wants and expects. The average consumer of today wants fashion rightness, correctness, beauty, utility and price withal.”¹⁰⁹ But did the consumer know what was modern? Were they buying a trend or out of a real

¹⁰⁸ Donald Albrecht, *Designing Dreams* (Santa Monica, CA; Hennessey & Ingalls, 2000), 109.

¹⁰⁹ Irwin D. Wolf, “Style Organization From the Executive’s Viewpoint” in *How the Retailer Merchandises Present Day Fashion, Style and Art* (New York; American Management Association, 1929), 2.

knowledge and value of the design? The question of it being just a fashion or a style was one that manufacturers had to contend with for economic reasons. To invest in a fashion could be economically unwise, especially for large or expensive items, but a style might be long lasting. "The stylist goes to the museum and the consumers go to the movies. Both are influenced to appreciate art and beauty to about the same extent. Another sense of responsibility toward the consumer on the part of the department store, the manufacturer, the advertising groups, the magazine editors, and so on."¹¹⁰ These concerns make the links between museums, retailers and department stores completely realistic. It was a struggle to educate the public on matters of good taste, to define modernism in a period of great change, and to try to understand this new style with all of its variations. It needed comprehension in order to be sold; if the manufacturers and designers could not understand it, the consumer would never purchase it.

The love of historicism and period styles had been the bread and butter of the furniture manufacturers, but since the 1925 Paris Exposition there had been a clamoring for change-from designers, and with the onset of new technology. "The furniture business would be in a sorry condition if all we could do were to make copies of the 15th, 16th, 17th and 19th centuries, and not make any contribution to the civilization of the 20th century. It must be remembered that our furniture, just as our painting, literature, science and mechanics, is a concrete expression of our own day."¹¹¹ Because America was not making "modern" furniture it did not participate in the Paris exposition, but the works which were being exhibited around the country in Museums, were promoting French "moderne" style. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was also continuing its series of

¹¹⁰ E. Grosvenor Plowman, "The Point of View of the Consumer" in *How the Retailer Merchandises Present Day Fashion, Style and Art* (New York; American Management Association, 1929), 16.

¹¹¹ William Millington, "The Trend of Design and Color" *Furniture World*, (22 November 1928), 267.

American Industrial Art exhibitions; in 1929 the committee included architect Eliel Saarinen, associated with Cranbrook Academy and Ely J. Kahn, architect who had designed a recent exhibition at Lord & Taylor's, and Eugene Schoen, architect and decorator who was involved with the Art in Industry Exposition of R.H. Macy and Company.¹¹² The dissemination of style was a networking effort to serve a multitude of masters.

From the designer's perspective it was the government's lack of support that was impacting the overall attitude toward true modern design. Gilbert Rohde believed that the difference between classical modern (concerned with decoration) and technical modern (concerned with function, fabrication and material) meant something larger for the manufacturer – money. “Aside from the obvious reason that it required less mental effort, this can be explained entirely on grounds of class consciousness. By the dictum of pecuniary respectability, technical modern has lost caste because some manufacturers of low priced furniture are making it.” Since classical modern had the connotation of having some form of history behind it, it was modern with a historic (i.e. class) value to it. Rohde believed that European design was more successful because manufacturers had the support of their governments in promoting all lines of design-high, mid-level and “low.” Modern design was intelligent design and had inherent social and economic benefits which, if governments supported manufacturers, they could then promote to the consumer.¹¹³

¹¹² *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 23 (July, 1928), 174.

¹¹³ Gilbert Rohde “World's Fair Furniture Designers Discuss Modern Movement” in *Furniture Manufacturer*, (September 1933), 16, from the Cooper Hewitt Rohde Collection Archives. All references to Rohde in this paragraph are from this article.

These concerns were on a much grander scale, the consumer was thinking on a more day-to-day level. How do you afford a modern piece, and have it fit in with an entire house (or apartment) of furniture? It was rare that anyone would purchase all of their furniture at one time especially during the Depression. Lilly in *Redheaded Woman* said she, “had modernistic pieces strewn all about.” Consumers might have purchased suites of furniture but modern pieces were more easily introduced in a limited number. Modernism as a design style was contentious. On the hand, there were those that believed that, “Right now in women’s apparel and in home furnishings...the fashion is very definitely for a complete harmonious ensemble.”¹¹⁴ And that, “This is an age of utility and the article of furniture that you buy must be utilitarian. It mustn’t have any gimcracks, carvings or things of that kind, because a woman doesn’t have time to keep it dusted and fresh.”¹¹⁵ And, “60 per cent of the merchandise sold in one department (I am familiar with) is of modernistic design.”¹¹⁶ However, this was countered by Irwin Wolf of Kaufmann Department Stores, “If it is for feminine use, make it feminine. Women will not buy these massive, depressed German, Austrian types of furniture, that are borne down to the ground and for feminine use. It might do for the living room but I cannot imagine a woman using in her boudoir this depressed type of furniture taken from the style of German buildings of today.”¹¹⁷ According to Mr. Wolf very little had changed since the nineteenth-century, a woman’s boudoir (clearly he was not aware that few women had them anymore) should be light and delicate, yet the living room, still traditionally codified as feminine, he would allow as being able to be not only “heavier”

¹¹⁴ Plowman, *Point of View*, 18.

¹¹⁵ Paul Nystrom, “Discussion” in *How the Retailer Merchandises Present Day Fashion, Style and Art* (New York; American Management Association, 1929), 24.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22. Comment by Chairman Fairclough in the panel discussion segment of the conference.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24. Comment by Irwin Wolf of Kaufmann Department Stores.

but “foreign.” With conflicting ideas of both modern and feminine the dressing table, like women, had a challenging role to carve out.

Interpreting the Dressing Table

The translation of a mere table into a symbol of modern femininity would be represented by its form, decoration, and marketing. It was traditionally draped in fabric: chintz, rayon voile, or taffeta. Much like a woman’s skirt it covered the legs of the table, but the skirting was draped similar to that of a window treatment. The kidney shaped table was the most common, often with drawers which would be hidden underneath the skirting. It could be pleated, layered or ruffled. The table top surface was usually recommended to be glass for easy clean-up. “It adds a feminine touch, it gives a distinct note of color, and takes away from the severity of the wood pieces.”¹¹⁸

Women’s and girls’ rooms would be “charming, fresh and dainty.”¹¹⁹ According to Helen Koues, author of *On Decorating the House* (of the Good Housekeeping Studio) a dressing table with a mirror was sure to “delight any girl.”¹²⁰ Emily Post lists that a boudoir would be for an “exotic beauty,” someone “sophisticated.” She goes so far as to say, “In choosing her own most becoming background, the woman of taste is merely a stage director who skillfully presents herself.”¹²¹ Men on the other hand should have nothing that looks breakable, light covering in texture or color-“all things that go to the making of feminine rooms.”¹²² Referencing the modern look, plainness and severity are fine for men, but modern for women is more difficult, as it “must be contrived with a

¹¹⁸ Christine Holbrook, editor. *My Better Homes & Gardens Home Guide*, (Des Moines, IA; Meredith Publishing, 1933), 302.

¹¹⁹ *Modern Priscilla Book*, 178-179.

¹²⁰ Helen Koues, *On Decorating the House* (New York; Tudor Publishing, 1928), 258.

¹²¹ Post, *Personality*, 200.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 403.

light and skilful touch.”¹²³ The one dressing table Post did see was “made of a semicircular console table of wood and steel, with a mirror top, and set against a screen made of three leaves of steel-bound mirror.”¹²⁴ While modern in materials it still had a traditional form and was ornamented with a traditionally female motif of nature. It seems to be impossible for even a woman to redefine femininity in a non-traditional way.

To be modern, whether as a female or in furniture, in form or function, was a contradictory and complex act. Messages were mixed, for to demonstrate being modern was both pure, and a matter of wealth, something to aspire to; yet the path was often a messy one. The complexities of modernity were causing uncertainties and anxieties, but also excitement about the future. Manufacturers did not want to invest, designers were sure that the times and technology were changing, and women as consumers were having to navigate it all. Unsure how to define these new ways, were they truly styles, with principles and lasting values or were they just trendy fads, sure to fall to the wayside in a matter of time? Advice was given and images abounded of what was appropriate, suitable, and above all in “good taste.” The domestic front, specifically the bedroom, was changing, feeling the impact of external forces. How much control a woman had over her most personal of spaces, the dressing table, was a matter of economics, social status and personal taste. What was appropriate, feminine, and available was being dictated by all the forces around her. The following two case studies will demonstrate how both designers, manufacturers and retailers were managing the complexities of the consumer market and technology with the principles of good design. As a consumer a woman had a myriad of choices, and principles were deciphered through the multitude of messages

¹²³ Ibid., 510.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 512.

from the manufacturers and retailers. What was good or bad was often being balanced by economics, social forces and a woman's idea of herself through these modern filters.