Coronet
Endless Variety in Stories and Pictures
June, 1948

GODDESSES IN GIRDLES

The Story of the Model Business



American advertising struck pay dirt when it discovered the super salesgirls whose irresistible allure will sell anything from a bar of soap to a seagoing yacht

by Robert Sellmer

A SECTION OF MIDTOWN New York not more than twenty blocks long and five blocks wide holds in its stony bosom 1,000 of the most photogenic and graceful girls in America, plus 500 of the most temperamental photographers in the world. These 1,500 specialists devote themselves with grim intensity to a singular task—selling the products of American industry by appealing with terrible skill to all our softest and most basic emotional needs.

The importance of the role played by these glittering cogs in our economy was stressed by John McPartland when he discussed modern advertising in his recent best-seller.* "Always," he says, "there was the secret whisper of sex. For women it was, 'Be lovely, be loved, don't grow old, be exciting, be dangerous, be loved!' For men it was, 'Be successful, make everybody know that you're successful—how can you get women if you don't look successful?'

"This was done in color by the best artists money could buy; it was worded by poets and by cynics; it

*Sex in Our Changing World, published at $2.75 by Rinehart & Company, Inc., New York, N. Y.; condensed in Coronet, August, 1947.

OldMagazineArticles.com

was a parade of breast and leg, of the smiles of women and the eyes of men. It was sleek, shining, new, expensive, rare, mellow, lovely, priceless, exciting and exclusive—and it could all be yours!"

These "smiles of women" are turned on with mechanical regularity and heart-warming effect by the thousand young ladies, some of whom are paid $35 an hour for their ability. The "best artists money can buy" are the temperamental photographers, some of whom get $1,000 for a single shot of a lovely girl making ardent love to a refrigerator. Without them, advertising might be very dull indeed. With them, it is able to commercialize our tender yearnings in a manner no less efficient and spectacular than that in which a massive dam channels the turbulent forces of a roaring river.

Now that the modeling business has become a well-organized $15,000,000-a-year industry, it is increasingly hard to remember that it owes its very existence to anything as primitive and frivolous as emotion. It is also hard to see a direct connection between a well-photographed sweater and the corresponding curves of a sales chart. Yet the very fact that the top models command such respectable sums for their services shows that they wield a power over our wills and wants that strikes hard and deep. Anyone doubting the effectiveness of these lissome lasses as super salesgirls need only talk to the officials of a large New York brewery.

These gentlemen, after depending for years on goats, stalwart steelworkers, and large elderly gentlemen as advertising themes, switched about nine years ago to a straightforward, unabashed use of pretty girls as the keynote of all sales efforts. If this had been done by a company producing lipstick, bathing suits or historical novels, the switch would not have been even faintly startling. But as beer had always seemed so far removed from sex, many an advertising man shook his head over the innovation.

Nevertheless, the tremendous

OldMagazineArticles.com

force latent in the haunting faces and sinuous bodies of America's models proved its strength: Rheingold Beer, by displaying the vivid loveliness of each year's "Miss Rheingold" in magazine, newspaper, billboard and subway space, has stepped up from fifth to first in the sale of packaged beers in Metropolitan New York in the brief time that it has relied on beauty rather than brawn as a beer-buying lure, to relieve the drabness of our surroundings. When the housewife in Iowa and the waitress in Texas and the farm girl in Wisconsin have this stimulating example set before them day after day, it is inevitable that some of this sparkle of sexual magnetism will blossom in every corner of the land. No single example is needed to prove the magic of this transmutation: the homes and streets and stores of America glimmer with a million verifications.

And yet, the average model would be flattered, amused and perhaps insulted if she were told that her chief function in life was to seduce, with flagrant femininity, reluctant dollars in tight-buttoned pockets, and that her greatest attribute was her ability to teach glamour to her less-fortunate sisters. "Why, it's very simple," one of them said recently, in all seriousness, when asked why she thought an hour of her time before the camera was worth $25. "People just like to look at pictures of pretty girls."

Perhaps models might be more aware of the implications of their profession if the excitement of their own lives were not in inverse proportion to that which they arouse. Half of New York's models are married, and half of these already have one or more children. Meanwhile, the unmarried ones are so bent on proving that models are nice girls that they live in great commercial convents called Hotels for Women, protest loudly that they abhor night clubs, and have at their fingertips the world's most comprehensive set of excuses for saying good night at elevator doors.

There are, naturally, notorious exceptions to this rule, but these are

OldMagazineArticles.com

mostly hearty girls for whom modeling is too strenuous, and who find that a career of steady partying is more fun, less work and better pay. The real models lead absurdly austere lives, because they are constantly worrying about circles under their eyes, 9:30 A.M. appointments, and their reputations. As a result they have a lot less plain, uninhibited fun than do career girls in other fields, but unless they are out-and-out failures they seldom quit modeling until senile decay forces them into retirement around the age of 30.

"Even those of us who are married," one ancient veteran of 25 remarked, "or who have gone on to better jobs, still like to come back and have a crack at modeling every now and then. In the first place, it's good to be the center of attraction in a studio again, but most of all you get such a kick out of seeing yourself in the papers and magazines once more."

Models are also willing to put up with the petty tyrannies of their profession because they look upon it only as a step on the road to less demanding and more exciting fields. Some of them want to use their experience and contacts to step into jobs in fashion and advertising. Most of them, however, have a goal which they are loath to discuss, but which embittered photographers have all figured out.

"There are three reasons why girls take up modeling," one of the more gentle camera artists insists. "First, they hope that the bare fact of being a model will lead to a wealthy marriage; second, they hope modeling will give them the publicity that will lead to a wealthy marriage; third, they hope to make enough money and dress well until they can make a wealthy marriage."

If he is correct, the girls are pretty much on the right track. Models are used so consistently to convey the idea of sexual attractiveness that a certain amount of this aura naturally carries over into their private lives. All this free advertising means that the model who sets her sights for an Argentine

OldMagazineArticles.com

meat millionaire or the latest café-society playboy has a better-than-average chance of bringing down her quarry. Yet her profession is afflicted with a rash of paradoxes: success is only the beginning of her troubles.

If she is to maintain a good weekly average of assignments, a model must keep her name and face constantly in the minds of possible clients by being seen and talked about in all the right places. At the same time she must at every hour of the day appear fresh, clear-eyed and glowing. She is also expected to trudge from office to studio to office, keeping up contacts with advertising men, photographers and fashion editors, only to discover that if her face becomes too familiar, they will not use her because they are afraid the public is tired of seeing her.

Even the seasons gang up to plague her, for fashions work on a very contrary schedule. In the dead of winter she is hauled to a snowless patch in the park to pose bleakly in a skimpy bathing suit for a summer catalogue. And on the hottest August day she will stand in an airless studio under blazing lights, modeling fur coats for the fall magazines. Fussy photographers will scream at her for being five minutes late, then keep her in one pose until she drops.

Even the impressive-looking fees lose a little of their bloom if examined closely. A successful model has heavy expenses that take a healthy bite of her income. She has to spend $300 to $500 a year on hair and make-up, and another $500 on taxis because she can't risk getting mussed up in a subway or bus. But far and away the greatest expense is her wardrobe.

It is a popular superstition that models get all the latest creations for a few dollars, if not for free, but actually, the majority spend a good $1,200 a year on clothes. Even when modeling a specific dress, the model usually is expected to furnish all the accessories; and sometimes she is required to turn up in

OldMagazineArticles.com

whatever costume suits the client's fancy. This means ski suits, riding habits, evening clothes, bathing suits or blue jeans—and they all must be perfectly in style and up to the minute.

One model, who began her career with the clothes she stood in, spent $3,000 dressing herself her first year, only to run head-on into the New Look and find that her entire collection was barely worth the postage to send it to Europe's needy.



ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SIDE, only patient, persevering girls can stand the sheer strain that goes into the taking of an advertising photograph. When an important picture is being shot, a studio is usually stuffed to bursting with all sorts of geniuses, and it is the model who bears the brunt of the impact.

If she comes to the studio with her hair up, the photographer is sure to want it down; if her dress sticks out in the rear, there will be somebody from the agency to pull it and stuff it full of tissue paper until it sticks out in front. A friend of the client's who has owned a Leica for two years will be full of ideas about how she should hold her hands, while a make-up man will wear the skin off her face trying to fulfill everybody's notions on just how she should look.

After all those present have had a chance to prove that they are earning their salaries, the model will look about the way she did when she came in, the actual picture will be taken in a matter of minutes, and she will be free to scurry frantically to her next appointment or to grab a lettuce-and-tomato-on-whole-wheat at the nearest drugstore.

Somehow, out of this combination of madness and drudgery, come pictures so infinitely disturbing and exciting that the model must be credited as being one of

OldMagazineArticles.com

the most effective weapons known in the war being constantly waged on the sales resistance of a sex-conscious public.

Oddly enough, this type of warfare is relatively new. Though models were used by photographers as far back as 1858, and appeared in ads as soon as the half-tone engraving was invented in 1878, they remained a decorous and inconsequential adjunct of advertising until the middle 1920s.

The great assault on what were then our more sacred emotions was given its first big impetus when a mail-order house, preparing a spring catalogue, was hit by an artists' strike. Harassed company officials rounded up office help, called theatrical agencies, and somehow managed to garner enough personable women to illustrate the catalogue with photographs.

When customers approved mightily, several eyes were opened to the financial possibilities of furnishing models to advertisers. More significantly, it convinced advertisers that a close tie-up between their product and a good-looking girl was a potent sales weapon. Soon a young actor named John Robert Powers was furnishing photographers with the names of beautiful young ladies available for advertising purposes.

"The girls we used then, though," an old-time model agency man recalls, "weren't the type we've got now. They were mostly small-time actresses, night-club dancers, out-of-work chorus girls and the like. Strangely, the guy who changed it all was Hitler.

"Up to 1933, advertising photography was pretty standardized, but around that time a lot of refugee photographers fled to this country. They got the fashion-magazine editors all excited with trick lighting and arty angles. What's more important, they insisted on using the tall, bony, aristocratic type of model that is still a magazine favorite. Before we knew it, the chorus girl was out."

Other factors soon started work-

OldMagazineArticles.com

ing. The sudden growth of magazines for teen-agers created a demand for young, healthy, natural-looking models. Advertisers began to ask for girls who, while remaining tantalizing, looked enough like ordinary women so that the American housewife could identify herself with the model. Out of this came what is called the "well-scrubbed American look," which glows alike from magazine cover and washing-machine ad.

First to take advantage of this shift was a shrewd young man of Irish descent named Harry Conover, himself a former Powers model. By ardently promoting the fresh, casual, college-girl type, he has in eight short years made his agency the largest in the country, handling models whose fees total some $2,000,000 a year.

As part of his burning faith in freshness he discarded the term "model" and called his charges "Cover Girls"—on the questionable assumption that all of them appeared on magazine covers. Now he is tired of this; if you engage a Conover model today you get a "Conover Career Girl," so called in the pious belief that modeling should be only a steppingstone to better things.

THE MODEL AGENCY is itself a wondrous institution. The New York state law looks upon it as an employment agency, constantly finding jobs for girls who are hired and fired several times a day. It regards itself as a sort of fond parent, protecting and educating its flock of helpless girls, and only incidentally remembering to collect ten per cent of their fees.

Actually it is first and foremost a clearing house, finding the right girl for the right client, taking assignments and arranging schedules for the girls, keeping track of their whereabouts at any given time, and serving as a billing and bill-collecting service. It gives advice on clothes and make-up, helps arrange and maintain contacts, and promotes the institution of modeling with all its might.

OldMagazineArticles.com

MODELS

The same legal fiction that makes a model agency an employment agency makes the models employees of photographers, rather than independent contractors. This turns bookkeeping into a madhouse, as withholding taxes and social security have to be calculated each time a girl poses. As a result, a busy model at the end of the year has a stack of forms that nearly crowds her wardrobe from the closet.

Partly for this reason, the connection between model and agency has until recently been a tenuous one. Now, Conover has introduced a lengthy contract in which the model appoints him as her agent for every possible activity in which she might take part. In return, the agency promises to cancel the contract if it does not provide her with a specified minimum of fees.

This impressive document is an overdue recognition of the fact that a model's ability to arouse our tenderest passions is a valuable commercial asset. Yet this is not the only way in which tribute is paid. An eavesdropper in some of our largest corporations would be intrigued at the seriousness with which highly paid executives discuss the exact amount of clothing to be worn by models in their next advertising campaign.

One end of the sleek conference table, presided over by an advertising account executive, is decorated with pictures of models in a dozen different degrees of dress and undress. There are fresh, robust, rosy girls; gaunt, limp, aristocratic girls; blondes, brunettes and redheads, eager smiles and seductive glances. Thousands of dollars' worth of executives' time will be spent in thrashing out exactly which type has exactly the right fascination to transmute a subconscious yearning into a practical desire to buy goods.

BECAUSE OF THE GROWING importance attached to modeling, more and more girls try to crash the field; nearly 4,000 come to New York every year to try their luck. Ten per cent of them make the grade, and they owe their success

OldMagazineArticles.com

to two factors—the photogenic features and poise they were born with, and a bottomless well of persistence. With amazingly few exceptions, they all get started in exactly the same fashion—by making the ceaseless, daily rounds of photographers and model agencies until their natural attributes finally catch somebody's eye.

Two or three weeks of trying will not tell the story. Three to six months is the length of time veteran models and agency people advise girls to keep making the rounds before they follow the example of other discouraged aspirants and wind up as dancing teachers and secretaries, or go back home to Indiana.

Most of these girls come to New York with their eyes open to the odds against them. Some, however, have been victimized by dubious "model schools" and by deceptive correspondence courses. These doubtful enterprises will take hundreds of dollars from a girl who obviously couldn't model strait jackets; give her some phony but impressive instructions; and then send her on to Manhattan equipped with nothing but a glowing promise, a useless diploma and all the makings of a badly broken heart.

There are, of course, legitimate schools which, in order to retain their state licenses, must place a certain percentage of graduates in adequate jobs. But it should be noted that they place nearly all their girls as "live" models with dress manufacturers and wholesalers. This is a perfectly honest and important sector of the modeling industry, employing nearly 8,000 girls in New York alone, but it pays a straight salary of $50 to $60 a week, and is *not* what the pretty high-school graduate from Iowa was dreaming of when her friends told her that she would make a perfect model.

In recent years the legitimate schools have been struck by a curious fact. Thousands of girls are taking courses in modeling who have no intention of ever becoming

OldMagazineArticles.com

models. They are taking the courses for a reason they vaguely call "self-improvement"—which is another way of saying that they feel that if they learn to walk and dress and make up like models, they will have learned the secret of enchantment that is the heart of a model's power. No greater or more touching tribute to the influence of the model on the American woman could be imagined, or even asked.

The exalted niche occupied by the model has another, and typically American, significance, according to a photographer who came here from Europe before the war. "Class distinctions abroad," he says, "are still so rigid that a beautifully dressed, glamorous woman seems so unobtainable to the average man that a picture of her has only academic interest. But the American way of life is such that every man here believes he is capable of winning any woman, no matter how glamorous she may be.

"In Europe, advertisers use pretty girls but only the way you did 40 years ago—for decoration. Here you sell auto tires with pictures of goddesses, and it works because you really don't think that goddesses are beyond your reach."

There is something equally American in the way these goddesses are subdivided into groups of specialists. There are girls with very ordinary faces and figures (and one with crippled legs)—whose hands are so lovely that they are photographed again and again, flaunting nail polish, fondling gloves and caressing furs. There are three models in New York with legs so luscious that they split between them nearly all the shoe and stocking clients in the country. And there are too-short or too-thin girls whose heads and faces are so perfectly proportioned that they make a good living modeling nothing but hats.

But the happiest specialists are those of the small, determined group who concentrate on "objectionables." The ordinary model, who tends to be overcautious, oversensitive and slightly overrefined,

OldMagazineArticles.com

pales at the thought of posing for deodorants, depilatories and other reminders of human frailty; refuses to be photographed in girdles; and would prefer death to being displayed in a magazine waving one dainty leg from the depths of a bubble bath. (This, mind you, is the same girl who will all but break her neck to get a beach picture of herself, clad in two wet handkerchiefs, onto a magazine cover.)

Taking full advantage of this bias, a band of more realistic girls devotes itself to supplying the steady market in "objectionables." They have a big, profitable field all to themselves, make excellent money and insist that they suffer none of the ill effects which other models fear will pursue them if their friends see them portrayed as victims of halitosis.

But whether she is posing discreetly nude for a water-softener or flagrantly dressed for a soft drink, the American photographic model is essentially a girl who thinks she is pretty lucky to be doing what she is doing, and is grateful that she was born with those little extras of bone and flesh and poise that mean the difference between success and failure in the tough career she has chosen for herself.

Her dream picture of Heaven bears a suspicious resemblance to the covér of *Life*, but she is level-headed enough so that, when her modeling days are over, and if she isn't married, she has made use of her invaluable opportunity to land a good job in some related field.

It hasn't really been the round of rosy fun she pictured when she set out for New York. But there have been compensations. Models are extremely well-paid, avidly sought after by all manner of eligible males, and showered with gratifying publicity. They justify these compensations by working hard, by putting up with innumerable petty irritations and by sacrificing a great deal of personal freedom.

What is infinitely more important to the country at large, they justify their good fortune by setting

OldMagazineArticles.com

standards for appearance, charm and captivating exuberance that have raised the level of feminine enchantment. All over America, women wear their clothes with a more unself-conscious flair, walk with a bit more poise and sit with a shade more grace, because the models have set an insistent example.

Instinctively, America's women have adopted the subtle little tricks of sexual attraction that have become a science in the model industry; and thus life has become just that much more exciting for their dates and their husbands. For instilling this excitement, the models deserve our thanks—as do the businessmen who belatedly discovered that sex is a supersalesman.

OldMagazineArticles.com