



COCKTAIL
Culture

MUSEUM OF ART, RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN | 2011

COCKTAIL *Culture*

Ritual and Invention in American Fashion, 1920–1980

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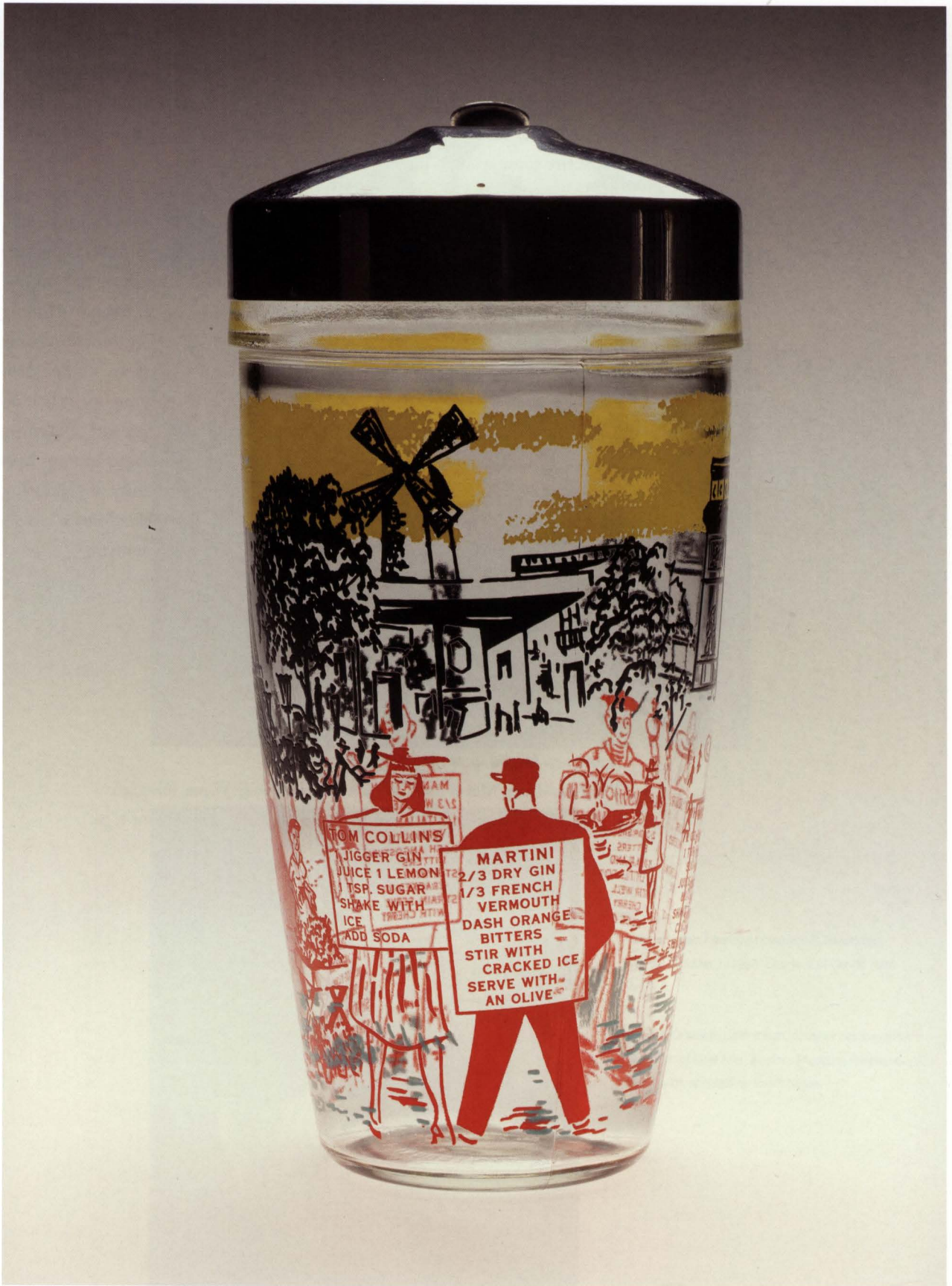


FIG. 44 Drink mixer with scenes of Paris, ca. 1958.
Courtesy of Megan DeSouza.

“The Happiest Party in Town”

Cocktail Accessories and American Culture, 1945–1965

KRISTINA WILSON

An advertisement for a popular line of glassware in 1951 proudly offered to customers a “‘Here’s How’ recipe booklet,” with the promise that it would “give you the secret ‘know hows’ of being a professional mixer and giving the happiest party in town” (Gay Fad 1951). With its bold claim, the ad offers us several insights on the postwar social landscape of the United States. In its reference to the “town,” it conjures up a picture of a community, perhaps a suburb, defined by such leisure-time activities as socializing and entertaining, where everyone knows each other; it also assumes that customers want to claim a level of competence and success in their home life, as they aspire to be “a professional mixer.” Finally, the competition implied by the superlative language (“the happiest party in town”) alludes to a possibly darker, stricter code of social conduct than is immediately evident in this sketch of convivial life in the suburbs.

Cocktails represent two apparently contradictory cultural forces: cocktails are, on one hand, usually associated with hospitality and entertaining, and so the cocktail party symbolizes sociable interactions; on the other hand, alcohol’s potential to lead to uninhibited behavior means that cocktails are also often seen as a vehicle for dismantling the respectable civilization of the cocktail party. Thus, a study of the culture of cocktails—the accessories used to serve and imbibe them and the social prescriptions that surround them—lets us see both how a society fashioned itself and how it envisioned its own disintegration. The cultural historian Warren Susman has written persuasively about the postwar period as one that was deeply divided between a sense of “triumph” and a “new self-consciousness of tragedy and sense of disappointment” (1989, 19). In this essay I propose that the culture of the cocktail is an eloquent symbol of Susman’s divided America. The glasses, shakers (fig. 44), ice buckets, and other accessories that enabled one to host a cocktail party in 1950s America represent the proud ownership of a new lifestyle of informal

abundance. At the same time, these objects give voice to lurking fears of violent social disarray that brewed in the shadows of the recent world war and the ever-present cold war.

THE 1920S AND 1930S: A PREHISTORY OF THE POSTWAR COCKTAIL PARTY

Although cocktails may be an eloquent angle for the study of postwar American life, their history in the preceding decades is no less rich. Cocktails acquired a particular association with socially rebellious behavior and modern culture in the 1920s. Prohibition, enacted by the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, went into effect in 1920. Illegal consumption of alcohol may have been limited originally to the smaller, youthful “flapper” cohort of society, but as F. Scott Fitzgerald commented in a retrospective essay of 1931, “By 1923 [the flappers’] elders, tired of watching the carnival with ill-conceived envy, had discovered that young liquor will take the place of young blood, and with a whoop the orgy began” (15). The consumption of alcohol, focused in speakeasies and private parties, by its very illegality acquired an aura of nihilistic rebelliousness during the decade. Because the taste of much illegally distilled alcohol was unpleasantly strong, the cocktail—alcohol mixed

FIG. 45 Gorham Manufacturing Company, Erik Magnussen, cocktail set, 1925–1929. Collection of the Newark Museum of Art, Purchase 1997 Louis Bamberger Bequest Fund and The Members’ Fund.



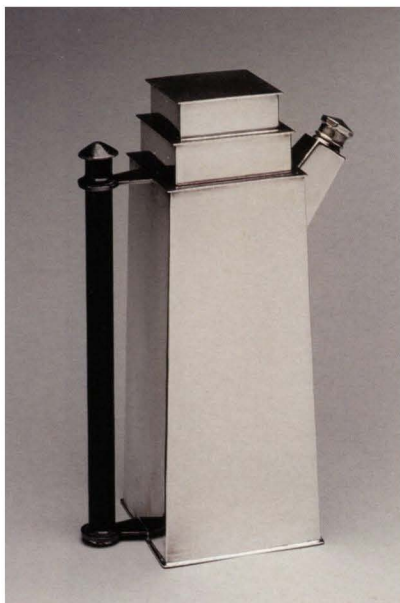


FIG. 46 Louis W. Rice, “Sky-scraper” cocktail shaker, 1928. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, John C. Waddell Collection, Promised Gift of John C. Waddell.

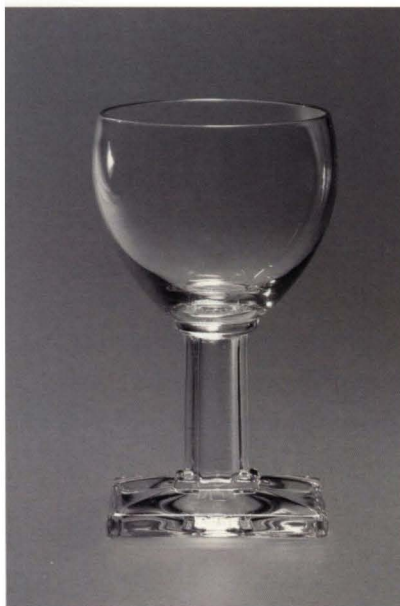


FIG. 47 Rodney C. Irwin, cocktail glass, “New Era” pattern, 1934. Yale University Art Gallery. Purchased with a gift from J. Davenport Wheeler, B.A.

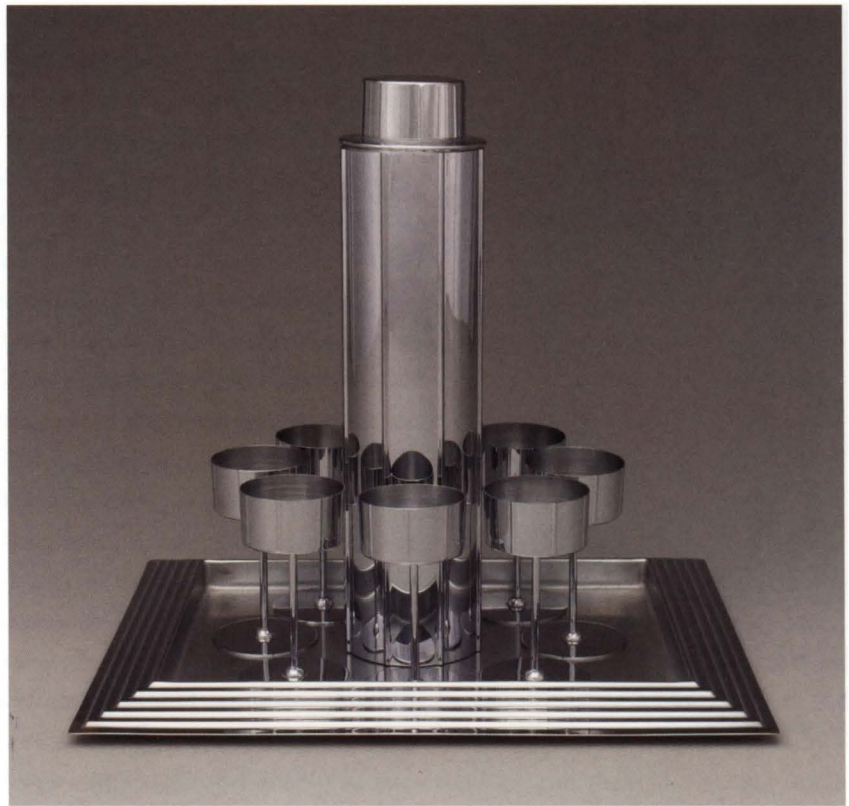
with a variety of pleasing juices to mask its flavor—became a particular symbol of this culture, which conducted itself parallel to law-abiding society. Perhaps just as important, the cocktail became uniquely associated with the self-conscious modernity of the decade. It was both the enabler and ultimately the icon of a new social code in which women had greater freedoms: the boyish flapper silhouette, the right to vote, and the practice of drinking and smoking with men without fear of losing a socially agreed-upon status of respectability.

Exuberant irreverence and self-conscious modernity influenced the style of many cocktail accessories made in the 1920s. Erik Magnussen’s cocktail set, manufactured by the Gorham Silver Company in 1928, uses a variety of angled contours to give it an explicitly modern form (fig. 45). The cocktail shaker, polished to a gleaming mirror-like shine, flares out from its angled foot to a sharply tapered shoulder and echoes the more dramatic flare of iconic shape of the martini glass. The glasses themselves are perched on bases of lightning-like zigzags, as if they (or their user) were so full of energy that they might just take off from the tabletop. The cacophony of angles and the field of continual, deceptive reflections link this object to cubism, easily the era’s most recognized form of modern art. Similarly, Louis Rice’s “Sky-scraper” cocktail shaker forges an association between drinking and America’s most modern building form (fig. 46). With its flat base and stepped-back top, the shaker mimics the type of building in which modern lives were carried out: an urban society, living and working in skyscrapers, escaped the commitments and traditions that defined an older era’s rural lifestyle. In drinking from a skyscraper cocktail shaker, these men and women were acting out their modern rebellion.

The repeal of Prohibition at the end of 1933 brought about a shift in America’s culture of drinking that was reflected in beverage accessories. The glasswares industry, struggling under the severe economic depression, seized upon Repeal as a merchandising opportunity. Manufacturers and retailers reasoned that after fourteen years of undercover drinking, consumers had forgotten the niceties of proper social drinking. They launched countless campaigns to “educate” the public about the appropriate glasses for different alcoholic beverages and accordingly expanded their lines to encompass a wide range of specialized glass forms (Wilson 2004, ch. 2). A subtext to this large-scale etiquette lesson was an attitude of disdain toward the “orgy” that was the popular image of the preceding decade. Fitzgerald himself voiced regret and disappointment from his early 1930s vantage point: “Now once more the belt is tight and we summon the proper expression of horror as we look back at our wasted youth” (1931, 22).

Rodney C. Irwin’s “New Era” line of glassware, manufactured by Heisey Glass Company, was introduced on the heels of Repeal and attempted to strike a consumer-pleasing balance between modernity and a classicizing propriety (fig. 47). The line consisted of several specialized glasses for wine, cordials, champagne, and cocktails. While the squared form of the base signifies

FIG. 48 Norman Bel Geddes, Manhattan cocktail service, 1934 or 1935. Yale University Art Gallery, Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.



modernity, the stems resemble classical columns with their symmetrical, vertically stepped design. The overall character of the glass is a much more muted ode to modern society than many 1920s designs: it offers itself as a refined, even understated, accessory for a “new era” of dignified socializing. Norman Bel Geddes’s Manhattan cocktail service also expresses this new era (fig. 48). While the shiny, chromed surface is attention-getting, the shaker’s form is remarkably streamlined: consisting of just the cylindrical body and the smaller cylindrical cap, it has no ornamentation. The cocktail glasses, perhaps cast on the same mold as the shaker cap, are perched on slender stems. These stems presume a careful user—a person who can drink with dignity and protect their fragile form through responsible behavior.

THE POSTWAR ERA: THE COCKTAIL CULTURE OF THE SUBURBS

In the later 1940s and 1950s, American popular culture was defined by the image of home life in the single-family suburban house. After a decade and a half of depression and war, during which the demand for new housing was relatively low, the U.S. housing market came under extreme pressure in the late 1940s with newly married World War II veterans looking for homes. The

year 1950 witnessed the beginning of massive suburban development across the country, with 2 million new homes built in that year alone; a total of 11 million would be built by the end of the decade (Wright 2008, 167). While some developers, for example, Levitt and Sons, created famous developments in Long Island, New York, and Pennsylvania, suburban developments throughout the United States shared many features. In order to build at an economically maximal pace, houses were usually based on a few stock patterns modified slightly in exterior trims and interior fittings. More or less explicit guidelines from developers shaped the profile of these communities: certain communities welcomed Protestants over Catholics or Jews; most discriminated against African Americans of any class; and many, by designing houses at set prices, segregated their buyers by income (Packard 1959, ch. 6). Suburbia therefore represented several conflicting trends. It signified the achievement of financial stability and respectability for many. In addition, it often represented independence from family and immigrant identities and the ability to make oneself over. Because the houses were all new, the communities, too, were new; the young couples and families living in these suburbs literally created community out of nothing but shared socioeconomic profiles and housing designs (May 2008, ch. 4). The suburbs opened up the possibility of less rigid and more casual socializing, with no historical precedents peering over the shoulders of young couples. Yet out of this vacuum of tradition arose an attitude of conformity and an embrace of materialism that many authors, writing from the confines of suburbia itself, critiqued in these years (Wilson 1955; Whyte 1956; Riesman 2001).

In the face of these significant changes to everyday home life, noted industrial designer Russel Wright and his wife, Mary, published a lifestyle manual, *Guide to Easier Living*, in 1950. The Wrights' book, modeled on the decorating and etiquette manuals that had proliferated in the interwar years, argued for a new approach to home life. Whereas the manuals from previous decades were often Emily Post-style updates of Victorian standards of household propriety and formality, an emphatic modernist respect for systems and efficiencies dominated the *Guide to Easier Living*. Mary and Russel attempted to crystallize new ideas about casual living by describing a household where the husband and wife plan together an evening of entertaining and where guests are quick to help: "The new-style guest . . . knows that using the right fork is less important than helping with the party" (167). They argued that the burden of the hostess and housewife could be further reduced by making good use of such new conveniences as paper plates and napkins or prepackaged and canned foods. Not only was the atmosphere of the Wrights' efficient household more casual than previous generations might have aspired to, but it emphasized to the hostess and host the possibility of well-deserved relaxation.

And yet beneath their exhortation "Now you can relax!" lay a set of stringent expectations and assumptions. They described the importance of

advance planning so that the “host and hostess don’t conflict embarrassingly about who’s to do what. So, for the sake of smoothness and efficiency, decide ahead of time who is to fill the plates, suggest second helpings, stack plates on the side table. . . . After a while you’ll both get so expert at this kind of teamwork that you’ll even learn to follow each other’s improvisations when things don’t go as planned—like practiced dance partners” (170, 173).

Despite the book’s practical advice, a current of anxiety was evident: the evening was understood as a performance (with one’s dance partner) where poor execution could lead to embarrassment. Even the act of asking guests for help was ultimately framed with a set of guidelines that would expose the improper hostess: “If you expect guests to help put things back in their proper places, *label* those places clearly. Don’t forget to disclose, by labeling, the location of your garbage disposal” (175). As the Wrights’ book offered a picture of what a democratized suburban community, freed from traditions to embrace a more casual lifestyle, might look like, it simultaneously revealed that such a community was far from reality. The reader of the Wrights’ book, the hostess of the 1950s cocktail party, labored to demonstrate how self-consciously casual she could be.

In the 1950s, drinking alcohol most often occurred in cocktail parties set in the new homes of suburbia. This illustrated a remarkable shift in the demographics of drinking: according to a survey conducted by a trade association for licensed beverages, until the end of World War II, only 35 percent of liquor in the United States was consumed at home, whereas 65 percent was consumed in bars and restaurants; by 1951, these percentages had more than reversed themselves, with only 30 percent of alcohol bought and consumed outside the home and 70 percent drunk at home (Browden 1951). Offering cocktails at one’s home epitomized the decade’s popular lifestyle image. The suburban cocktail party emphasized the nuclear family as the essential setting for all social interactions; in its flexible schedule, with guests dropping in and staying as long as they wished, it exemplified a more casual standard of entertaining and etiquette; and it presumed that a family was proud enough of its house to open it to others.

Russel Wright’s extremely popular American Modern dinnerware had been introduced in 1937 and might be understood as the designer’s first successful attempt to make tools that would facilitate his ideal, more casual lifestyle (fig. 49). By 1951, he was able to introduce a line of glass and barware, manufactured by Morgantown Glassware Guild, that complemented the dinnerware (fig. 50). Marketed as the American Modern line, these glasses encourage a modern, Wrightian style of living. The glasses share with the dinnerware an overall aesthetic of simple, biomorphic curves—the contour from the base through the stem and up into the cup is a seamless line—and there is no ornament to detract from the perception of the object as an organic whole unto itself. Such radically simplified curved forms were called “coupe”

FIG. 49 Russel Wright, American Modern tableware, 1937. Gift of Mr. Robert Mehlman.



FIG. 50 Russel Wright, American Modern glassware, 1951. Gift of James Brayton Hall and Mark Hambleton Stevens in honor of Ellen Fitzgibbon Hall, RISD 1945 Apparel.



in the trade, referring to the compact, streamlined, sporty car type (and distinguished from shapes like “square” or “traditional”) (“Survey” 1951). The designation “coupe” indicates that such forms were perceived as casual, and these glasses ably embody casual living: the lack of ornament frees them from both historical reference and etiquette hierarchies, and the rounded forms have a playful air, seemingly alluding to balloons or balls. American Modern glassware was initially offered in four colors—coral, sea foam, chartreuse, and charcoal—in addition to clear crystal (Kerr 2002, 222). The colors were intended to be mixed and to harmonize with the dinnerware palette, and in

this the glasses further demonstrate casual living. Rather than dictating a table replete with identical matched items, the Wrights encouraged variety: with their tables set in several contrasting colors, they transformed an aesthetic that once might have been considered yard-sale jumble into the epitome of cool, self-confident, casual entertaining. And yet American Modern glassware was offered in a range of specialized forms—pilsners; old-fashioned; cocktail, wine, and cordial glasses—revealing that even in casual living, etiquette demanded that each drink have its proper glass shape.

A particularly popular trend in 1950s suburbia was the “do-it-yourself” approach to household repairs and hobbies. Indeed, as magazines reminded readers throughout the decade, the ideal suburban home was more affordable if one attempted to “Do It Yourself: A willingness to do some of the work yourself; painting (interior and exterior), floor laying and a bit of carpentry will pay off handsomely on the price tag of your house” (“How to Build” 1957, 25). If, as *American Magazine* announced in 1956, “it’s American to do it yourself,” it was also particularly masculine (Ostrow 1956, 69). Men were encouraged to participate in home life (typically considered the woman’s sphere) through practical projects in their hobby workshops and recreation with their children (“Today’s Father” 1952, 112). If the common theme in these responsibilities is action and creativity—as opposed to the female responsibilities of cleaning and cooking daily meals, which are maintenance-level work and possess a kind of invisibility—then it is perhaps unsurprising that mixing drinks was considered a masculine task in the 1950s (“Showers” 1954, 188). As the trade publication *Crockery and Glass Journal* advised retailers in 1951, “push bar goods as men’s gifts” (“How Bar Glass” 1951, 36). In mixing drinks for his wife and guests, a man could create something that others would enjoy as recreation. Separated from the kitchen, the bar usually stood in the dining or living room as a stage where he could demonstrate his hospitality and his public leadership of the family. Emblematic of the man’s role in 1950s cocktail culture are the numerous cocktail shakers with drink recipes printed on them (see fig. 44, p. 68). These objects advertise their owner’s willingness to “do it himself,” but they also heighten the stakes for a successful drink: if a cocktail poured from such a shaker proves to be distasteful, then the host’s incompetence is highlighted.

At a 1950s cocktail party, imported barwares from Scandinavia were also popular. One example of the successful merchandising of Scandinavian products was the American tableware company Dansk, founded in 1953 by American businessman Ted Nierenberg (McLendon 2001). Dansk’s original products were designed largely by Jens Quistgaard, a Danish designer, and fabricated at various factories throughout Europe. One of Quistgaard’s early iconic designs is a tall, teak, covered ice bucket (fig. 51). Its subtly rounded sides and scalloped rim share an organic simplicity with Wright’s coupe forms. At the same time, its lack of ornament and unusually large size (it stands fifteen and a half inches tall) give it a monumentality that contrasts with the



FIG. 51 Jens Quistgaard for Dansk International Designs, Ltd., Denmark, ice bucket, 1960. Gift of Hannah Myers.

playfulness of curved glasses and plates; like a totemic object, this bucket could preside over a bar, no matter how cluttered or busy, with an air of serenity that borders on sternness.

The appeal of such objects as Quistgaard's ice bucket was part of a broader postwar taste for modernist Scandinavian furnishings: the furniture designs of Finn Juhl and Hans Wegner, for example, grew in popularity throughout the 1950s. Yet the interest in international modernism itself was multifaceted and might be understood not only as a mark of cosmopolitanism among suburban homeowners but also a symptom of particular postwar political concerns. As Greg Castillo has documented, throughout the 1950s the United States mounted a variety of propagandistic exhibitions in Europe that took as their target audience the emergent communist societies of the Eastern bloc (2010). In these exhibitions, modernist furniture was consistently presented as the prop that enabled a Western, capitalist lifestyle of abundant consumer choices, personal and political freedom, and material plenty. The objects in these shows were sourced from both U.S. companies, such as Knoll and Herman Miller, and a variety of Western European manufacturers, ranging from the Scandinavian countries to Italy. Thus, while the exhibitions were authored by the American government and had an explicit American identity, they also painted a larger picture of an Atlantic world united by capitalist democracies and modernist clean lines. The residents of 1950s suburbia may have known little of these governmental activities, but it would be a mistake to presume that the general taste for modernism and the openness to imported goods in the American home was not influenced in some way by cold war politics. Elaine Tyler May's influential history of 1950s home life argues that the pride in home ownership and the obsession with the nuclear family that characterized the decade was in fact shaped by the stresses of the cold war. For the men and women starting families in the shadow of communist fears, the nuclear family provided comfort and protection and also a way to demonstrate one's commitment to capitalist ideals: in suburbia, one could act out the consumer choices and lifestyle of plenty that made the United States superior to the Soviet Union. The association of modernism with the Western bloc and capitalism may have made its way into private American homes through magazine articles and furniture advertisements that equated modernist styles with a lifestyle of "versatility" and "freedom" (Heywood Wakefield 1954; Kent Coffey 1955; Kofod-Larsen 1954; "Three Houses" 1954).

Against this backdrop, Quistgaard's ice bucket reveals additional tensions in the 1950s cocktail party. Its graceful, simple form represents the sophisticated, modernist tastes of its owner, but in its severity it represents the pressures exerted on the suburban home: the hostess who sets her cocktail bar with this bucket and the host who amiably mixes professional-quality drinks with ice from it bear the responsibility of not only keeping up with the Joneses but also maintaining the lifestyles of the free world. Indeed, given the variety of pressures, both social and geopolitical, under which the 1950s cocktail party

labored, it is not surprising that a variety of dark, surreal, or defiantly sardonic qualities begin to emerge in a closer scrutiny of 1950s cocktail culture. In fiction from the period, the cocktail and the cocktail party are often described as a force that runs parallel to the structures of proper suburban society, embodying its freedoms but also throwing into stark relief its limitations. In the opening of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, the protagonist fixes martinis for himself and his wife as they contemplate children with chicken pox, broken appliances, and cracks in the walls of their house. It is an act of sustenance and protection, an assertion of what they do have in the face of what they lack—yet drinking more martinis until they fall asleep is the only way to escape the pressures of sick children and an inadequate house. In John Cheever's short stories, the cocktail party is frequently the setting where surreal truths—the things that everyone knows but cannot be discussed—are exposed. In "Goodbye, My Brother," the family cocktail hour is an opportunity to demonstrate an edifice of family unity, yet disagreements about how to order drinks expose the impossibly large fissures that ultimately lead to acts of violence. The protagonist of "The Chaste Clarissa" pursues the title (married) character; at the height of his ultimately unsuccessful wooing, he attends a cocktail party where another married woman offers herself to him. He, of course, declines: to be given the socially unacceptable thing he wants without the risk of punishment or failure seems unattractive.

Qualities of surreality and deception appear in many cocktail accessory designs from the 1950s. In the line of glassware called "Aqua Ripple," manufactured c. 1955 by Libbey Glass Company, the circles of ripples create an optical effect of undulating glass; the external contours of the tumblers, however, are completely straight (fig. 52). To see and to hold these glasses is to experience two contradictory sensations, and as one contemplates the split between the haptic and the optic, one is forced to question which senses can be trusted. Even the playful forms of Wright's American Modern glasswares assume a surreal quality through the lens of Cheever or Wilson: allusions to balloons and balls might provide a pleasant escape of childhood reverie to the adult user, but the user might also ask why children's toys are equated with alcoholic beverage containers. Wright's Eclipse glassware, manufactured by Bartlett-Collins Glass Company beginning in 1957, asks similar questions (fig. 53). His decorative design of ascending patterns of bubbles, in a variety of colors and shiny gold, alludes again to balloons. Here the glass itself is not the balloon, but it provides the three-dimensional depth of vision to see a cluster of balloons convincingly floating through the air and up into the sky. Is childhood the place of freedom to which alcohol aspires? If it is, the impossibility of reaching it eloquently reflects the inadequacies of the martini.

Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, manufacturers also created barwares decorated with a variety of humorous cartoons. Although such objects did not meet the taste standards of modernists like the Wrights (who warned

FIG. 52 Libbey Glass, Inc., "Aqua Ripple" pattern, ca. 1955. Toledo Museum of Art, Gift of Libbey, Inc.



FIG. 53 Russel Wright, "Eclipse" glassware, 1957. Gift of Jan Howard and Dennis Teepe.

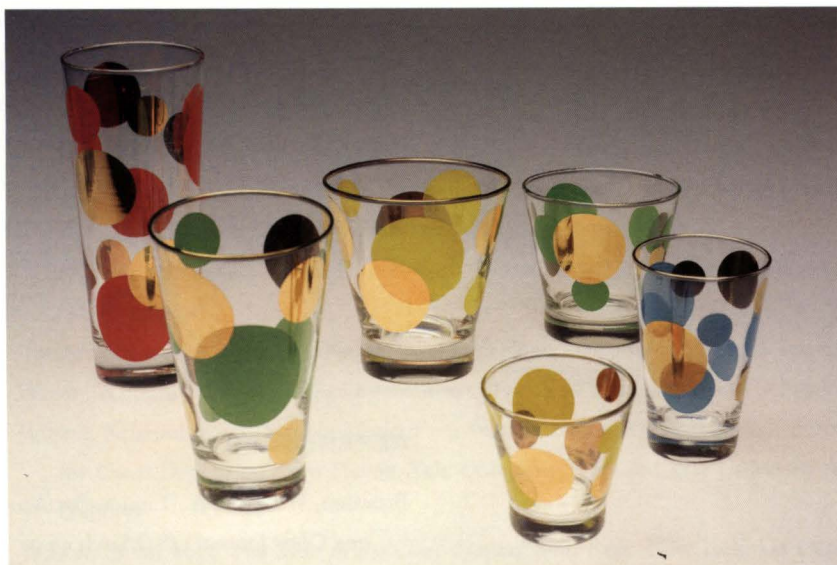


FIG. 54 William Steig, drinking glasses, 1960s. Gift of Walter Feldman.



readers to beware of “gag appeal, or you’ll end up with a mess of pornographic bottoms-up glasses” [1950, 185]), they clearly found an audience among the houses of suburbia. Perhaps their humor was appealing for the distraction it offered, encouraging guests to joke about the objects in their hands rather than pay attention to the immense pressures all around them. But just as the best humor is often predicated on a dark edge, so too these glasses ask dark questions. What is the relationship between the pot-bellied slob on the side of Walter Steig’s tumblers and the man who holds the tumbler (fig. 54)? How does the tone of the declaration “People Are No Good” change as the glass is emptied of its cocktail? Like the characters in Cheever’s stories, these objects manage to express the impossible pressures of suburbia while remaining properly mute.

If the suburban landscape of the 1950s was simultaneously an Edenic garden and a deeply troubling box hedge maze, the accessories used to serve alcohol in its homes express its complexity with powerful concision. Unlike the exuberant adolescence of 1920s cocktail culture, or the earnest aspiration to mature drinking habits evident in the 1930s, the cocktail culture of the later 1940s and 1950s embodied enormous ambivalence. Both sheltered by and trapped within the suburban home, the cocktail party was the place where hosts and guests could pose as free adults, even as they insistently pointed to the rules that circumscribed their world.

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