

Neve, Monica: *Sold! Advertising and the Bourgeois Female Consumer in Munich, 1900-1914*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2010. ISBN: 978-3-515-09343-9; 224 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Pamela Swett, Department of History, McMaster University

Monica Neve's study of the construction of the female consumer in early twentieth century Munich comes at a time, as the author explains, in which mass consumption has come to be seen as „all encompassing“ and in need of scaling back to avoid the potentially detrimental effects many suspect it is having on Western societies. Neve seeks the origins of this tidal wave. More specifically she wants to know why „women are traditionally associated with the activity of shopping“ (p. 11). While one can imagine a variety of directions to take in answering this question, Neve turns to the work of advertisers as those who constructed an image of the female consumer as the „arbiter of cultural and aesthetic norms and ideals“ (p. 12). At the same time, she hopes to present her female consumers as active individuals who had some agency in this process and who perhaps benefited in some ways from the privileges and duties that the title 'consumer' conferred upon them. Her selection of four corporate archives for her main primary sources – the glove manufacturer Roeckl, garment producer Loden-Frey, and two Munich department stores Kaufhaus Oberpollinger and Warenhaus Hermann Tietz – leads to a successful analysis of the construction of the female consumer. However, these sources provide less useful material for Neve's discussion of the possibilities (or not) of female empowerment and pleasure through consumption.

The book is organized around six chapters, but it is best understood in two parts. The first half of the book consists of a presentation of the theoretical framework she employs and offers a broad discussion of consumer society at the turn of the century. Her description of the various theories of consumer behaviour, in particular, is well done and serves as a useful primer for anyone considering these topics for the first time. When it comes to her understanding of the role played by consump-

tion in society, she relies on the work of Jean Baudrillard. Neve maintains that an individual's identity is „fluid and multiple“ and that consumption is a „fundamental factor in the confirmation, shift, and exploration of identities“ (p. 48). In other words, there is at least some freedom embedded in consumer choice. The remaining chapters in the first half of *Sold!* provide an overview of the emergence of department stores, early advertising, the advent of women in new urban commercial spaces, the science of selling circa 1900, and more, to set the stage for the second half of the book. As Neve explains, the historical construction of the female consumer grew out of both social practices and the work of marketers and retailers to build and maintain consumer interest. Representations of women in advertisements of this era combined positive connotations of women as experts and carriers of information about appropriate consumption. These positive images, however, were mixed with negative assumptions about women's capacity for impulsive and irresponsible shopping (p. 98). Neve's synthesis in the first half of the book is clear and concise, though some may find it frustrating to wait 100 pages for her corporate case studies.

Neve begins the second half of the book with two seemingly different Munich manufacturer/retailers: the family-owned glove firm Roeckl and the coat and sportswear enterprise, Loden-Frey. The advertisements for Roeckl typically involve upper-class women, sometimes in historical dress. The female subjects are depicted in private spaces admiring or selecting their elegant gloves. Since most of the consumers targeted by these ads would have been bourgeois women whose days were filled by chores for her family and social duties, this image of idle luxury was one that reminded them that „the *impression* of a leisured lifestyle was, indeed, integral to her position in the social hierarchy“ (p. 113). Loden-Frey offered a different picture of bourgeois femininity. Gone are the ball gowns and historical costumes in favor of women who are active and practical. Although the target audience also aspired to some leisure pursuits, for the Loden-wearing woman the events were outdoor adventures with the family. She was the practical wife

---

who managed the budget through sensible choices to keep her family active and healthy with the help of these warm and water-proof garments.

The book's other two case studies follow the advertisements of Tietz and Oberpollinger department stores in Munich. Both stores attracted a diverse clientele, and both addressed the desire to be budget-conscious by offering discounted goods and special sales days, while also encouraging the purchase of luxury goods for pleasure alone. While it was believed that bourgeois women enjoyed fashion and shopping, it was only acceptable as long as they upheld certain standards of taste appropriate to their class. While bourgeois women were thought to have expert knowledge in discerning 'good taste', Neve points out that the department stores offered an „impressive range of advice“ about how to make the right purchases (p. 153), which raises the issue of who had the power to establish these standards of taste. The department stores also made use of different types of advertisements in comparison to the specialty retailers discussed earlier. For Tietz and Oberpollinger long price-packed lists of various items were common as well as large spreads discussing upcoming events in the store's calendar. Instead of the high-art poster-style chosen by Roeckl or the practical text and image combination of Loden-Frey, the department stores chose to highlight the extensive choice in terms of prices and goods and also the experience of shopping at the department stores with their many special events.

In her conclusion Neve argues that shopping should be seen as work and pleasure for these bourgeois women. Depending on the financial means of the consumer, one element might play a more significant role in her experience than the other. Although that seems a reliable conclusion, the proof remains somewhat elusive. The work side of the equation is clear. Women had more choices to make and more complex social norms for good taste to satisfy in terms of their family's appearance and their home decor. However, while it was certainly in the best interest of retailers and advertisers to portray shopping as pleasurable, beyond ads that show happy consumers, much of the evidence that women found it to

be so comes from the negative descriptions by men of women as overcome with excitement and joy, swooning in front of the lavish displays, or sneaking extra purchases above and beyond their means. It may very well be that shopping „provided a level of enjoyment intrinsic to the activity itself“ (p. 200), but it is a very difficult thing to demonstrate with much certainty, particularly when relying on advertisements and other writings by retailers and marketers as evidence.

This book does a good job of showing how companies at the start of the twentieth century addressed female consumers and how shopping became an essential duty and right of the bourgeois woman. It is beautifully illustrated with color and black and white images. The prose is clear and concise. *Sold!* should be of interest to all those working on gender history, consumption, advertising, and Munich.

HistLit 2011-3-144 / Pamela Swett über Neve, Monica: *Sold! Advertising and the Bourgeois Female Consumer in Munich, 1900-1914*. Stuttgart 2010, in: H-Soz-Kult 08.09.2011.