When considering the relationship between European émigrés and American mass consumption, it is perhaps the cultural critique of the Frankfurt School scholars that most readily comes to mind. “The culture industry,” Theodor Adorno declared, “fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are more or less manufactured according to plan. … This is made possible by contemporary technical capabilities as well as by economic and administrative concentration. The culture industry intentionally integrates consumers from above.”1 While Adorno also gave more nuanced assessments of the consumer society he had experienced in American exile, it is his indictment of the passive consumption engineered by modern consumer capitalism for which he is most remembered and which publications of like-minded émigrés such as Herbert Marcuse elaborated further.2 Adorno, Marcuse, and his colleagues present us with an image of the European émigré at odds with mid-century consumerism and its manipulative capabilities in the United States.

This, however, is an incomplete picture. Other émigrés, as intellectual historian Daniel Horowitz has pointed out with regard to consumer researchers Ernest Dichter and George Katona, were among the most prominent cheerleaders of a new, and supposedly democratic, world of mass consumption.3 Furthermore, beyond the intellectual debates reverberating on both sides of the postwar Atlantic, a large number of European immigrants and émigrés contributed to the very rise of “consumer engineering” that the Frankfurt School critics attacked. They came to the United States with innovations in consumer psychology, in market research and marketing, as well as in industrial and product design, and they applied and furthered these innovations commercially and academically within the context of emerging professions and American corporations.

My current research project investigates the careers of European migrants who had come to the United States in the interwar period as

immigrants or as émigrés fleeing from National Socialism and who, in one way or another, played influential roles in postwar America’s “Golden Age” of mass consumption. Rather than providing a collective biography, their careers serve as a lens on the development of mass consumption — particularly consumer psychology, market research and product design, highlighting transatlantic differences as well as transfers and entanglements in the emergence of mid-twentieth-century mass consumer culture.

I. European Émigrés, Transnational Careers, and American “Consumer Engineering”

A diverse group of “consumer engineers” found their way across the Atlantic beginning in the interwar period and contributed in a variety of ways to the transformation and expansion of American consumer culture. This group includes leading representatives of American consumption research such as economic psychologist George Katona and the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld. The work of émigré psychologists such as Ernest Dichter became central to approaching consumer behavior in advertising and marketing. Designers such as Lucian Bernhard, Herbert Bayer and, most prominently, Raymond Loewy contributed to new trends in graphic and industrial design during the 1930s and 1940s. Their innovations and designs helped promote the ubiquity of the American consumption model in the postwar decades.

To study such European impulses for “consumer engineering” is not to deny the genuine “Americanness” of American consumer culture. It was after all the social, cultural, and economic context of the United States that allowed many of these émigrés and their ideas to succeed. It does, however, call for a more transnational understanding of modern mass consumer culture. For the purpose of my study, I use “consumer culture” in reference to an array of meanings with which commercially produced goods became invested. Cars, for example, became associated with “brand images” during the 1950s which spoke to the way this product became enmeshed in and signaled the preferences, tastes, and attitudes of their owners. While the meaning of goods, as much recent scholarship in consumption studies reminds us, is always negotiated between various actors, including producers and consumers, my work investigates primarily the producers, those that create, market, and advertise the goods. The rise of professional marketing meant that corporate production processes were increasingly geared towards understanding, anticipating, and
influencing the consumer. Imbuing goods with psychological meaning and understanding, the psychology of buying gained in importance to producers by the middle of the century.

The Depression had spawned a slew of efforts which Roy Sheldon and Egmont Arens termed “consumer engineering” in their influential 1932 publication by the same title. Consumer engineering, they explained “in its widest sense ... includes any plan which stimulates the consumption of goods.” More specifically, consumer engineering came to mean creating consumer demand through the appearance of innovation, such as modernist design forms, new color variations, the creation of new applications and the discovery of other ways of “making goods desirable.” In some ways their concept found its continuation after the war in what historian Thomas Hine has termed “populuxe design,” an eclectic design style marked by exaggerated expressions of affluence such as the notorious tail-fins for automobiles. Populuxe consciously sought to avoid market saturation and to engineer replacement demand. Consumer engineering further rested on the assumption that companies could create demand through “humaneering,” that is, by understanding the psychology and demographics of consumers. In their book, Sheldon and Arens repeatedly looked to European design and intellectual trends for inspiration.

Commercial design, marketing, and market research, as well as consumer psychology were areas in which European migrants came to play prominent roles. I argue that some concepts which came out of interwar Europe were especially amenable to efforts to create sustained demand for goods by changing design styles, to appeal to the “hidden motivations” of consumers, and to employ various means of “persuasion” in marketing. The success of “segmented marketing” in postwar America — the targeting of specific groups instead of a broad middle-market — rested in part on the groundwork of European immigrants, who could draw on their experience in analyzing and designing for milieu-specific consumer groups in interwar Europe. In postwar Europe, finally, many of these migrants were then instrumental in introducing, translating, and adapting what was now seen as American-style marketing and design. Rarely, however, did such exchanges amount to straight imports or one-to-one copies of the original from one society to another.

Instead, recent scholarship in transnational history has aimed to transcend “national” boxes and to question labels such as “American” or “European.” By focusing on the professional networks of actors and

---


5 Thomas Hine, Populuxe (New York, 1986).


exchanges beyond the level of the nation state and its governments, transnational history has not only attempted to challenge the national paradigm, but — more importantly — has heightened our sensibility for the global interconnectedness of historical developments. Few processes were as truly transnational as the spread of commercial consumer cultures. Studies focused on transfers, furthermore, have increasingly emphasized that such transnational exchanges are not a simple one-way street. Transfers of ideas and goods are as dependent on the context of the originating society as they are on that of the receiving one. In the transatlantic case, such an understanding of exchange not only challenges simplistic notions of “Americanization,” but also informs this study’s perspective on European “exports” to the United States: on both ends of the transatlantic exchange, processes of “adaptation” were central to the success of new ideas and approaches.

Migrants are a central group of agents in such transfer processes. The history of European migration to the United States has, in recent years, been informed by similar notions of reciprocity and hybridity. Newer studies tend to emphasize migration as a multi-faceted process which includes the context of the societies of origin, the frequently complex path of migration, communication with those who stay behind as well as periodic, temporary or permanent returns home. All these elements affect the experience of migration and are part of migration-based exchange processes. Millions of Europeans had migrated to the United States prior to the mid-twentieth century and many of them — as entrepreneurs, workers, retailers or consumers — played a role in the emergence of America’s mass consumer society. The time period between the 1920s and 1960s, however, is of special significance because of the high number of refugee professionals that found their way across the Atlantic. At a time when overall immigration was declining, these émigrés formed a highly educated, well-connected, and frequently quite successful group of new arrivals, which is estimated to have numbered at least 130,000 from German-speaking Europe alone. Numerous studies have looked at the experience of Jewish refugees and of artists, scientists, intellectuals and political exiles. Specialized studies have focused on the impact of émigrés in fields such as psychology, arts, architecture or economics. This literature provides evidence for the influence exerted by émigrés on American society. In contrast to the long prevailing notion of a “brain drain” from Europe to the United States, newer studies emphasize the complexity of transfer and adaptation.


12 See the ongoing GHI project Immigrant Entrepreneurship: The German-American Business Biography, 1720 to the Present (www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org).


processes. The professional success of émigrés and the reception of their ideas, for example, frequently depended on a number of factors, including their willingness to respond to the circumstances and needs of American society.

Beyond the significant number of émigré professionals, the mid-twentieth century was particularly fruitful for transatlantic exchanges in consumption-related disciplines for two further reasons. First, many of these refugees could draw upon insights and innovations from the vibrant commercial, artistic, and academic life of such interwar metropolitan centers as Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. While interwar European corporations had been slower to incorporate consumer research and design into their marketing efforts, the continent had still seen a great deal of development in this area. A growing number of market research firms began to pay attention to consumer markets, often in close cooperation with economists and social scientists at universities. Secondly, as a consequence of the Great Depression, American corporations and marketing professionals increasingly saw a need to stimulate and create demand, to understand the composition of markets and the motivations of consumers. At the same time, the expanding American state similarly set its sights on “the consumer,” who would become a central figure in demand-driven economic growth policies as well as wartime mobilization efforts. American consumer culture, as a result, changed during the 1930s and 1940s and this transformation provided an opening for European influences.

II. Consumer Research and Psychology: The Example of Paul Lazarsfeld and the “Vienna School”

Katona, for example, is tied closely to the rise of “behavioral economics” and the centrality of the consumer in the context of an emerging Keynesian growth strategy. Katona’s work built on interwar European experiences with inflation and depression as well as on social psychology research he did in Berlin. He became one of the premier consumer researchers of postwar America, and the consumer confidence measurements he pioneered in Michigan were reflective of the growing importance attached to understanding “the consumer” by social scientists and government administrators. Advertisers and corporations increasingly drew on scientific research to refine their market surveys, demographic analyses, and studies of psychological motivations of shopping. Such cross-overs between commercial and academic work were increasingly characteristic of the mid-twentieth century development of the marketing profession; it provided an opening for the transatlantic careers of several Europeans coming to the United States.

Few individuals impacted this trend as prominently as Austrian émigré Paul Lazarsfeld. Lazarsfeld and several of his fellow

George Katona instructing interviewers for the Survey of Consumers, circa 1947. The data from the survey was used to provide the first consumer sentiment measurements. Courtesy of the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. Reproduced by permission.


émigrés from Vienna helped to shape the world of mid-twentieth-century market research. In 1977, the *Journal of Advertising Research* included three émigrés in its list of the seven “founding fathers” of ad research, and several of the non-émigrés were also intimately tied to Lazarsfeld and his group. The so-called “Vienna School” of market research emerged from the *Wirtschaftspyschologische Forschungsstelle*, a social research institute associated with the University of Vienna, and, next to Lazarsfeld, it prominently included the sociologist Hans Zeisel and the motivation researchers Herta Herzog and Ernest Dichter. Some recent research has begun to acknowledge their transatlantic careers, but much of it has overemphasized the role of the colorful Ernest Dichter while the full breadth of the influence exerted by the Viennese group remains underappreciated.

The *Wirtschaftspyschologische Forschungsstelle* was affiliated with the University of Vienna’s Institute of Psychology and had been conceived in 1931 as an “Austrian institution for motivational research” to study markets and improve economic life. Lazarsfeld, who had come to psychology by way of a degree in mathematics, was the driving force behind the institute and its research. His interest in psychological motivations was coupled with a strong desire to innovate and improve nascent empirical survey methodology. The institute, which continued to exist until 1936 when it was shut down by the Austrian government for political reasons, engaged in a broad array of social scientific inquiry. Its most famous study was a comprehensive community study on the effects of unemployment on the workers of Marienthal. Funding, however, was always scarce, and it was a host of commercial market research studies that paid the bills of the *Forschungsstelle*.

The market studies were more than a source of revenue, though, as Lazarsfeld and his colleagues used them as practical fieldwork to

---


25 See “Verein Österreichische Wirtschaftspyschologische Forschungsstelle,” in PFLA, Box “Lazarsfeld Vienna Marktforschungsstelle.”

develop theories about “true” consumer motivations, “consumer biographies,” and the impact of advertising on decision making, as well as interview methodologies to uncover subconscious factors in decision making. Still, the reports produced by the Forschungsstelle were careful to give clear advice about potential commercial uses, suggesting advertising strategies and slogans. During the early 1930s, the Vienna institute established a European network with branches in Berlin, Budapest, Stuttgart, and Zurich. It conducted market surveys for companies ranging from “Bally” shoes and “Naermil” malt products to producers of electronic goods. The surveys paid close attention to differences in social class among consumers, and many open-ended questions aimed at the psychological factors involved in buying. One such report, for example, suggested the slogan “mein Kaffee” to advertise ready-made coffee to petite-bourgeois women who took pride and psychological ownership in preparing their own coffee. The institute thus very consciously wedded commercial and academic work, an approach that Lazarsfeld would apply several times over after he left for the United States.

Paul Lazarsfeld came to the United States in 1933 on a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. He had applied for the grant with the expressed purpose of studying American market research and survey techniques. Aside from academic curiosity, his trip was also motivated by an effort to interest American firms in retaining the services of the Wirtschaftspychologische Forschungsstelle to conduct market surveys for their products in Europe. As much as Lazarsfeld felt that he stood to gain from a trip to the United States, he was also soon convinced that he had much to share with Americans. He published articles based largely on his Austrian research in academic journals such as the Harvard Business Review and Market Research and prepared a book manuscript on psychology in marketing. Lazarsfeld’s work and appearance on the American scene was portrayed in a 1934 article in the trade publication Tide — The Newsmagazine for Advertising and Marketing. While he acknowledged that American corporations had been more open to psychological work, he later recalled this to have been “on a terribly unsophisticated level. So that … if a European really specialized in the work, he’d just run rings around them."

In his first years in the United States, Lazarsfeld succeeded in making numerous connections among academic and commercial consumer researchers. He met with General Electric marketing officials and was
in touch with General Foods about a large-scale food consumption study.\textsuperscript{34} In Pittsburgh, he worked with David Craig and his Research Bureau for Retail Training on a survey concerning rayon hosiery. In early 1935, Lazarsfeld proposed in a letter to establish this bureau to act as a “clearing house for methods of market analysis” in the U.S., much as the \textit{Wirtschaftspychologische Forschungsstelle} had for its European network.\textsuperscript{35} His continuing connection to Europe bolstered his American career as he used his European expertise with corporate contacts. His most successful early affiliation was with the Psychological Corporation, a New York based private market research company. In 1935 its managing director Paul Achilles wrote to Gallup and other corporate clients, recommending Lazarsfeld as the man to contact while he travelled Europe that summer: “His Bureau for Psychological Field Work will represent us on the continent.”\textsuperscript{36}

Ultimately, academia and not commercial research would remain Lazarsfeld’s primary field of activity, and he established his position by building up survey research institutes following the Vienna model.\textsuperscript{37} The first such institute was established at Newark University in 1936 as a center for empirical and psychological social research that also received much of its funding from commercial market studies.\textsuperscript{38} Even more successful was a second project that grew out of an interest among commercial American broadcasters in the audience research work of the Vienna institute.\textsuperscript{39} In 1937 Lazarsfeld teamed up with Hadley Cantril (Princeton) and Frank Stanton (CBS) to start the famous Radio Research Project, one of the first systematic efforts in audience surveys.\textsuperscript{40} Over the course of the late 1930s, Lazarsfeld managed to bring several key members of the Vienna institute to the United States. He used his connections to introduce Herta Herzog to American academia as a specialist on audience research. Her later work for the Radio Project included collaboration on an analysis of the “Invasion from Mars” panic following the 1938 radio broadcast of H.G. Wells’ \textit{War of the Worlds}.\textsuperscript{41} Hans Zeisel similarly joined the new American research project, and Ernest Dichter, who had been a student of Lazarsfeld’s in Vienna and worked for the \textit{Forschungsstelle} after he had left, also received his first introduction into the world of American market research through Lazarsfeld. In addition to his former Viennese colleagues, other émigrés also became involved with the Radio Project. The most well-known case is that of Theodor Adorno, who wrote on radio and music for the project until his theoretical style increasingly clashed with Lazarsfeld’s more empirical

\textsuperscript{34} Letter John Jenkins (General Electric) to Lazarsfeld, Sept. 10, 1934, PFLA Box “Biography 1933-46.”

\textsuperscript{35} Letter Lazarsfeld to Craig (U Pitt), Jan. 18, 1935, PFLA box “Biography 1933-46.”

\textsuperscript{36} Letter (Draft) Paul Achilles (Psychological Corporation) to “Chalkley, Gallup etc.,” c. 1935, in PFLA Box “Biography I.”


\textsuperscript{39} Letter GE Market Research Division to PFL, Jan 11, 1935, PFLA box “Biographie 1933-46.”

\textsuperscript{40} On the radio project, see Fleck, \textit{Transatlantische Bereicherungen}, ch. 5, and Thomas Wheatland, \textit{The Frankfurt School in Exile} (Minneapolis: 2009).

\textsuperscript{41} Hadley Cantril, \textit{The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic} (Princeton, 1940), published with assistance from Hazel Gaudet and Herta Herzog.
focus and the expectations of those funding the research. While both continued to share an interest in modern mass consumption and communication, their relationship remained somewhat distant, though largely friendly. Whereas Adorno and his Frankfurt colleagues never quite felt at home personally or academically in the United States, Lazarsfeld and his Viennese group transitioned across the Atlantic with much greater ease.

The radio project helped shape the beginnings of Lazarsfeld’s most lasting institutional achievement, the Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) at Columbia University. By the early 1940s, BASR became an institutional home for many of the Austrian émigrés. While the Bureau was set up as a center for sociological survey research, commercial contracts made up much of its work and revenue during the early years. Both émigrés and their American colleagues produced numerous studies for BASR: Ernst Dichter studied psychological programming, Herta Herzog surveyed daytime serial listeners and studied the effect of Kolynos Tooth powder commercials, while Lazarsfeld wrote on soap operas and produced studies for CBS. Marie Jahoda, who came to the United States from her earlier exile in Britain in 1946, and Hans Zeisel also produced BASR studies. Still building in part on the work done in Vienna over a decade earlier, the BASR prided itself in establishing and refining the methodology for panel studies and focused interviews, the type of psychologically informed qualitative market research which would be influential for decades to come.

By the late 1940s, the BASR and Lazarsfeld himself shifted their attention increasingly away from commercial market research. Instead, the more direct impact of the Vienna School on postwar mass-marketing came arguably through Ernest Dichter and Herta Herzog. Dichter left academia and established himself as a marketing guru after the war. After immigrating to the United States in 1937, he had initially conducted research for corporations such as Proctor & Gamble. In 1947, he established the independent Institute for Motivational Research. Dichter’s fame rests in part on the utilization of Freudian concepts as well as sexual allusions and desires in advertising. Along with Pierre Martineau, he is considered to be one of the pioneers of motivation research in the U.S., which became popular with advertisers during the 1950s. Rather than relying on empirical market research and polling, Dichter used in-depth interviews with smaller panels to uncover the hidden motivations of consumers — clearly building on some of the work he had done with the Forschungsstelle.
His work was central to establishing the notion of “brand image” in marketing and he helped inspire advertising campaigns like Exxon’s “Put a tiger in your tank” that aimed to associate that animal’s renown for strength and virility with the company’s fuel. His success and visibility made him a target for critics of postwar consumer culture. Thus Vance Packard attacked him in his 1957 exposé as one of the “hidden persuaders” manipulating consumers.\

Herta Herzog, while less publicly prominent than Dichter, also contributed to the 1950s rise of motivation research and played an influential role in bringing qualitative market research to Madison Avenue advertising firms. Herzog had been a prominent academic voice at the Forschungsstelle and upon arrival in America in 1935 she not only conducted audience research for the Radio Project and BASR but also built a career as a media and advertising expert. Herzog helped pioneer qualitative research methods such as panel studies and focus groups in marketing campaigns. She was keenly interested in the psychological attachments consumers developed to goods and the meanings they invested in them. During the 1950s and 1960s she held influential positions at McCann-Erickson, an advertising firm whose marketing department she and Hans Zeisel had joined in 1943. By the mid-1960s, Herzog had joined Jack Tinker Partners, a marketing think tank affiliated with McCann.

Hans Zeisel’s postwar career as a forensic sociologist at the University of Chicago took him furthest from marketing research. Nonetheless he stayed in close contact with Lazarsfeld and other members of the group, spoke at marketing conventions, and still in 1967 was a board member of the market research firm Marplan. Zeisel, in some ways, became the historiographer of the group, writing about the legacy of the Vienna research center. In doing so, he (and by consultation Lazarsfeld) was writing a counter-narrative to Dichter who — to position himself as an innovator — in interviews and his own publications reliably de-emphasized the role which psychology and the quest for hidden motivations had played in the work of the Wirtschaftspychologische Forschungsstelle.

Within the group of the “Vienna School” and within the market-research profession more generally, tensions prevailed at times between an academic self-understanding and the demands of commercial consulting work. Especially for the European émigrés with their backgrounds in European university training and, frequently, the social reform movements of the interwar era, pure commercial work

50 Zeisel, “Wiener Schule.”
often carried the stigma of a less reputable occupation. Dichter’s work received only limited recognition from his more academically-minded colleagues. Indeed, the more empirically inclined Zeisel and Lazarsfeld scoffed at Dichter’s liberal use of Freudian interpretations. Few attacked Dichter and his methodology more vigorously than Alfred Politz, another influential independent market researcher of the 1950s and 1960s.\(^52\) Politz, who had come out of interwar Berlin, was primarily concerned with improving empirical survey methodology. He determinedly fought for stringent academic standards in the commercial work of the emerging market research profession. Still, as discussed above, qualitative research and psychologically informed questions about consumer motivations had both always been prominent in the work of the Vienna group at large. Indeed, the very combination of empirical survey methods and psychological motivation research had been central to the Forschungsstelle and to its “successor” institutions from Newark to the BASR in the United States.

Across the board, the immigrants and émigrés discussed drew on various schools of psychology for their work, which represented a major European influence on the American marketing field and contributed to what marketing scholar Harold Kassarijian has called the postwar “cognitive revolution” in marketing studies.\(^53\) While behaviorism and stimulus-response models had long dominated American advertising psychology, the influx of European migrants helped popularize other approaches. Freudian psychoanalysis was most prominent in the work of Ernest Dichter and others working in motivation research. Social psychologists such as émigré Kurt Lewin gained in recognition. His work on field theory and group dynamics of persuasion influenced both Lazarsfeld and George Katona and foreshadowed direct-marketing approaches of the postwar years.\(^54\)

Another important group was the Gestalt psychologists, including Max Wertheimer and Kurt Koffka. After their emigration to the United States, their work was increasingly received by Americans and began to appear in studies on marketing and consumer psychology.\(^55\) Much of the work of the “hidden persuaders” of the 1950s and the interest in “humaneering” proposed by consumer engineering advocates thus employed methodologies developed in a transatlantic context.

### III. Product and Graphic Design: The Example of the “American Bauhaus”

Much like psychological market research, commercial design became an integral element of “consumer engineering.” The emergence

---


of industrial design as a profession during the 1930s has been portrayed as a peculiarly American phenomenon that gave rise to the colorful postwar world of modern consumer products.\footnote{On the emergence of industrial design in America, see Meikle, Twentieth-Century Limited.}

Yet European-born designers played a significant role in the professionalization process. French Art Deco, Bauhaus functionalism, and other stylistic developments had received considerable attention in the U.S. as early as the 1920s. Next to “streamlining” pioneer Otto Kuhler, influential design professional Peter Muller-Munk, and other immigrant designers, the stellar career of French-born industrial designer Raymond Loewy perhaps most readily illustrates the transatlantic connections that shaped the “golden age” of American commercial design.\footnote{On Loewy, see Joseph Lee and Earleen H. Cook, Raymond Fernand Loewy: Industrial Designer (Monticello, 1984; Angela Schönberger, et al., eds., Raymond Loewy: Pioneer of American Industrial Design (München, 1990).}

By contrast, the influence of the more radical European design traditions, including Bauhaus functionalism, on American commercial design has often been considered more marginal, and Bauhaus artists have been portrayed as aloof from the pragmatic demands of corporate America, ideologically incompatible or too theoretically minded.\footnote{See Meikle, Twentieth Century Limited and Harold van Doren, Industrial Design: A Practical Guide (New York, 1940). On the broader impact of the Bauhaus, see Margret Kentgens-Craig, The Bauhaus and America: First Contacts, 1919–1936 (Cambridge, 1999); Kathleen James, Bauhaus Culture: From Weimar to the Cold War (Minneapolis, 2006); Jill Pearlman, Inventing American Modernism: Joseph Hudnut, Walter Gropius, and the Bauhaus Legacy at Harvard (Charlottesville, 2007).}

Both historians of American design and contemporary design professionals have described the foray of Bauhaus design philosophy into the hard-nosed world of
American business as a venture doomed from the start. In his 1940 *Industrial Design: A Practical Guide*, Harold Doren wrote in reference to Walter Gropius, Joseph Albers, and other Bauhaus émigrés: “The Bauhaus approach is a philosophy of life as well as a method of design. It lacks, however, the realistic qualities that we Americans, rightly or wrongly, demand. Much of the writing of the group is vague to the point of complete unintelligibility … It will be difficult, I believe, to acclimatize the esoteric ideas of the Bauhaus in the factual atmosphere of American industry.” But were Bauhaus ideas and American business culture really so incompatible?

In 1937, Hungarian-born László Moholy-Nagy was asked by a group of Chicago business leaders to head a new design school in the Bauhaus tradition. The Chicago Association for Arts and Industries that extended the invitation represented a group of philanthropists and city businessmen and saw itself as a “liaison” between the manufacturer and design education, intent on promoting “good design in industry” in the Midwest. In the wake of the depression, American businesses had increasingly turned to product and graphic design to market their goods, and as design programs emerged all over the United States during the 1930s, Chicago did not want to lag behind. Since Chicago was home to the corporate offices of major corporations, several advertising agencies, and big department stores, the city’s business community hoped for tangible benefits from opening a cutting-edge design school in Chicago.

For this, they turned to Moholy-Nagy with his Bauhaus credentials. The design philosophy of the Bauhaus emphasized a new and holistic approach to art education that was indeed radical in the totality of its vision. Moholy-Nagy had been one of the leading theorists of that approach as author or co-author of many Bauhaus books that appeared during the interwar years. The Bauhaus stood for a comprehensive artistic and social vision, which did not mesh easily with business demands for quick sales and profitability. For all their radicalism, however, the Bauhaus designers were not as aloof from the commercial world as is often thought. Indeed, much of their work was geared towards designs suitable for commercial mass production. Students at the Bauhaus received schooling in consumer psychology and the psychological ramifications of design. They were similarly offered courses on the basic principles of business and marketing. Among other things, Moholy-Nagy did commercial design and advertising work in the European market during the early 1930s, for instance for Schott.


60 Doren, *Industrial Design*, p. 79.


63 “Aufzeichnung (Hans Riedel)” Bauhaus Archiv, Nachlass Johannes Jacobus v. Linden, Folder 10.
glassworks. After arriving in the United States, he quickly set out to draft a comprehensive program for the school and to recruit faculty from the United States and among former Bauhaus affiliates. In letters, his wife Sibyl encouraged him to specifically target middle-class Americans as students and to focus on design for commercial purposes.

One can easily tell two very different tales of this “New Bauhaus” and its successor organizations. One conforms to the view of the Bauhaus vision as incompatible with American business culture. The schools remained small, financially precarious, and continuously on the verge of closure. A second story, however, reveals an educational enterprise that, for all its problems, garnered a great deal of attention and support in the art and design world and had a perhaps surprising degree of successful interaction with corporate America.

Let me briefly tell the first story. After their initial honeymoon phase, relations between Moholy and the Association quickly soured. In part, this was due to a realization by the sponsors that the much desired Bauhaus education, with its emphasis on basic and abstract training, did not immediately yield concrete and practical results. At the same time, the Association ran into fundraising troubles. Many of its initial donors could not be tapped again, and new sponsors did not rush in to make up for this, especially under the economically depressed conditions of 1937/38. By the summer of 1938 the Association decided that the school would not remain open for a second year. Parting ways with the Association for Arts and Industries, Moholy-Nagy began a new venture in 1939, the School of Design, which in 1942 became the Institute of Design. While the Bauhaus name was officially dropped to signal a new beginning, the continuities in staff, program, and vision were substantial, and the phrase “American Bauhaus” remained in use. The school, however, continued to struggle financially until it finally merged with the Illinois Institute for Technology in 1949.

A second, more optimistic story can also be found in the records, which demonstrate successful interaction between the European
émigrés and corporate America. Key to this story was Walter Paepcke, president of the Container Corporation of America (CCA). Paepcke, a second-generation immigrant entrepreneur, had a longstanding interest in modern art, and his company built up a decidedly modernist design department in the 1930s. Bauhaus graphic designer Herbert Bayer would come to play a prominent role in corporate and advertising design for the company during the 1940s.66 As Moholy’s school was struggling, Paepcke helped to keep it afloat through several generous donations and vigorous fundraising efforts among his business connections. In May of 1940, for example, Paepcke sent out scores of invitations for a luncheon at the Chicago Raquet club, to consider how the School of Design can “best meet the industrial and business needs of Chicago.” The school, he explained to fellow industrialists, was unique in its methods and offered promising potential at a time when “Chicago is seeking new industries and new work for existing industries, [and] product design is of primary importance.”67 The event helped lay the groundwork for a network of support from companies such as Kraft Cheese, Rand McNally, Sears & Roebuck, and others who would regularly contribute to the school.

The school itself did its part to offer the Chicago community what it was expecting, tackling the problem of good design for mass production. The curriculum built on the Bauhaus model of basic and specialized workshops in product design, textiles, painting, sculpture, light, and display.68 Of most direct interest to its corporate sponsors were the night classes for working professionals. In his inaugural address, Moholy enthusiastically embraced the “splendid” “American” concept of the night class as a new way of combining leisure and professional advancement.69 By the early 1940s the school offered evening courses in display, in product design, and in advertising arts. The night classes were a success with employees of corporations such as Bell Telephone, Corning Glass, and Marshall Fields, who sponsored part of the tuition to help their employees gain additional expertise.70 The courses received positive reviews: the head of display at Marshall Fields, for example, lauded the program and the “European Workshop Method” to which it exposed his employees.71

By early 1945, Moholy reported with optimism about the school’s outreach in the commercial and artistic world.72 He had just given a talk at the J.W. Thompson advertising agency in New York and was preparing an exhibition display for the U.S. Gypsum Company. A special public-relations report detailed plans for a scholarship program.


67 Letter Walter Paepcke to Mr. J. Finlay, May 23, 1940, Institute of Design Collection, Box 2, Folder 36, UIC Daley Library (=IDC).

68 See class schedules in IIT Archives, Institute of Design Records, Box 1a.

69 S. Moholy-Nagy, moholy-nagy, p. 149.

70 See “Institute of Design — New Registrations (1945),” IDC Box 1, Folder 14.

71 Letter John Moss to W. Street, August 22, 1944, IDC Box 1, Folder 23.

72 On the subsequent discussion, see “Report on Public Relations Activities: Institute of Design”, Feb 6, 1945, IDC Box 1, Folder 19.
for Chicago high-school students funded by local corporations to enter the Institute of Design. At the same time, the school furthered its connections with other émigré designers by hosting talks by Gropius, Herbert Bayer, Siegfrid Giedion, as well as French graphic artist and ad designer Jean Carlu. On November 30, 1944, finally, the institute was featured on the local television station Balaban & Katz and the report surmised hopefully: “The future will produce other occasions of a similar nature, for the institute is ideal for televising.”

Press coverage highlighted the Bauhaus’ devotion to research in new designs for machine-produced goods, and the Chicago Sun informed its readers that “[t]oday the very fountain pen in your pocket can trace part of its design back through American studios like Norman Bel Geddes’ to abstract painters in pre-war Europe.” Indeed, between 1944 and 1946 Moholy worked regularly as a consultant to the Parker Pen Company, influencing the styling of its products and designing desk-sets. The St. Louis Star-Tribune went so far as to as to see in the Institute of Design a “blueprint for the postwar world,” quoting Moholy-Nagy as saying that “We must ‘streamline’ not only our automobiles, offices, factories, and homes, but ourselves as well.”

Moholy and the American Bauhaus were certainly contributing voices to the 1940s discussion on modern commercial design and consumer engineering in the United States.

Despite their various and continued interactions, some in the Chicago business community remained skeptical vis-à-vis the institute. A 1944 letter from the Chicago Association of Commerce, for example, listed “typical questions” they received about the school, including “is it ... the personal hobby of Mr. Paepcke?,” or does it represent “a particular sect of art?” Tensions existed between the school and commercial art directors as well. A 1946 letter from a General Outdoor Advertising Co. executive related to Paepcke the impressions of their national art director: Moholy, whom he called “the promoter,” had barely survived with his school by hustling companies for donations while his methods were “questionable.” None of the students, he alleged, had become “outstanding,” he himself had quit a course — “a complete flop!” — in “disgust,” and, finally, all professional art schools in Chicago, he intimated, were “against this promoter.”

The tension between commerce and art was by no means one-sided, however. Moholy and his staff retained an idealistic commitment to the Bauhaus vision of education and could at times be highly
dismainful of commercial work. In a 1945 letter to Herbert Bayer, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy vented her frustration with well-meaning advice from émigré friends such as Bayer and Giedion: “Not a single friend of the European Bauhaus group ... has found it worth his while to give up the flesh-pots of commercial New York for the hard work and financial risks of an experimental school.”79 Moholy and his faculty always remained slightly at odds with the commercial mainstream of the new industrial design profession.

Such tensions, however, were often fruitful for the professionalization of the field. In November of 1946, shortly before his death, Moholy-Nagy participated in a Museum of Modern Art conference, “Industrial Design: A New Profession.” The conference gathered leading figures of industrial design in America including Raymond Loewy, Egmont Arens, Walter Baermann, George Nelson, and Walter Teague. Discussions ranged from professional standards and ethics to principles of good design and the role of market surveys. Against too strong a market orientation and the overburdening streamlining trend, Moholy emphasized the creative role of the designer and the need for an artistic vision in order to move beyond the status quo. He and other émigrés like Bernard Rudofsky introduced a “European” perspective on “American” “artificial obsolescence” and advertised “novelty.” While some present vehemently disagreed with Moholy’s stance, he did provide a prominent voice in the American discussion about industrial design.80

Especially with regard to design education, members of the emerging profession deferred to Moholy-Nagy, who was introduced by Joseph Hudnut, Dean of Harvard’s School of Design, as “the most able and vigorous and successful pioneer in educational discipline ... We imitate him at Harvard and he is imitated over the world.”81 Moholy’s emphasis on the practical teaching of fundamentals and the abstract concepts of space, color, and material resonated with many of the assembled members of the profession. In 1955, his long-time colleague George Keck boasted about the educational achievements of the Institute of Design, whose alumni were “responsible for significant advances in industrial design” and whose “philosophy has penetrated the art education world to such an extent that there is today scarcely any art school of any stature in this country which has not adopted many of its principles.”82 Its champions certainly believed in the Bauhaus’s impact on American design. Gropius, in a 1950 speech, called the institution “the decisive link between the designer and industry in this country.”83
Historians of business and design such as Regina Blaszczyk have justly cautioned against overestimating the mass market influence of prominent designers while overlooking the legions of “fashion intermediaries,” the vast number of unknown design professionals in companies and ad agencies who were much more intimately tied to the production process and more responsive to consumer inputs. They, she and others would argue, were ultimately responsible for shaping postwar America’s world of consumer goods. Still, the Bauhaus émigrés, I contend, were an important part of the story of mid-century American consumer design in several ways. They helped shape the professional discourse during a formative period for American industrial design. As teachers in Chicago and elsewhere, they passed on their concepts and methodologies, adapted to an American context, to a new generation of American industrial designers. Their own commercial and experimental design work, finally, set standards that were received through exhibitions and trade-journals and reflected, if often in modified form, in the work of other professionals.

The oscillation between art and commerce exemplified by the American Bauhaus was generally characteristic of the broader group of immigrants and émigrés coming out of European traditions. In the field of graphic and advertising design, for example, Herbert Bayer played an important role through his work for advertising companies such as Dorland or the CCA. In his writings, Bayer consciously reflected on the new role of the artist in an age of mass consumption. Centered around the Black Mountain College, another group of experimental émigré artists including Josef Albers, Xanti Schawinsky and — by extension — Gyorgy Kepes gave new impulses for visual design. French artists such as A.M. Cassandre helped bring elements of the European poster-art tradition into American advertising, while Lucian Bernhard’s work popularized modernist fonts for commercial copy. European immigrants frequently filled the position of art directors

85 On the history of graphic design, see Steven Heller and Georgette Balance, eds., Graphic Design History (New York, 2001). For Germany, see Jeremy Aynsley, Graphic Design in Germany, 1890–1945 (Berkeley, 2000).
in American advertising agencies and companies; thus Leonard Lionni worked at N.W. Ayers and Bauhaus émigré Walter Allner at *Fortune* magazine. Immigrant entrepreneurs such as Hans Knoll and Walter Landor helped set new standards in American corporate design aesthetics. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, finally, played a vital role in connecting the artistic and commercial aspects of design, promoting the work of European modernists, and fostering a discussion about the future of the profession and “good design” between art and business.

**IV. Towards a Transatlantic Consumer Culture: Postwar Translations**

The careers of European immigrants and émigrés in mid-century America are only one side of a truly transatlantic story. Many of them returned to Europe in varying capacities after World War II and became active participants in a process that contemporaries and some later historians have discussed as the “Americanization” of postwar European consumer culture. Consumer history’s combination of economic and cultural aspects have made it a central area for scholarship on “Americanization,” understood as the transfer of American goods, consumption practices and patterns, and their local adaptation. Few studies have been as encompassing as Victoria de Grazia’s *Irresistible Empire*, but numerous studies have traced the cultural “Americanization” of Europe through film, music or advertising as well as the economic “Americanization” of the continent through policy transfers or the adaptation of new management or marketing strategies.

Highlighting the impact of émigré “consumer engineers” in the postwar transformation of European consumer society complicates this picture and poses the question of how unidirectional transatlantic flows truly were during the heyday of the American Century. With their considerable knowledge of both American and European markets, émigrés could frequently function as translators, adapting innovations now perceived as “American” to European settings. In some cases, the American government drew on their expertise in postwar reconstruction efforts. George Katona, for example, surveyed German opinion and consumer research for the American occupation administration. In other cases, marketing experts such as Ernest Dichter helped American corporations interested in gaining access to European markets. European professional institutions sought out

---


the émigrés as they transformed themselves, and universities called on them as teachers and guest lecturers. In various functions, they thus played central roles as transatlantic intermediaries. Especially in the field of consumer design, the work of the émigrés featured prominently in Cold War efforts to promote American consumer culture in Europe. Exhibitions of consumer design sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art, the Ford Foundation, and the American government included many European-born designers such as Eva Zeisel, wife of above-mentioned market researcher Hans Zeisel. Such efforts consciously drew a direct line between European design traditions of the interwar years and postwar consumer goods to appeal to European audiences. The work of the émigrés in the United States was invoked to legitimize transformations in Europe. 92

Yet, throughout the postwar era, European and American consumer culture continued to be discussed as counterparts. Critiques of American consumer culture as manipulative in its appeals and wasteful in its design often drew on the theoretical work of those European émigrés that engaged American commercial culture more critically. Frankfurt School critics such as Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse often attacked the very elements of “consumer engineering,” such as psychological marketing appeals, that their fellow émigrés had helped to introduce. With regard to design, the writings of Bernard Rudofsky and Siegfried Giedion are particularly critical of modern mass design trends. Both as celebrants of modern consumption and as critics, then, European immigrants and émigrés were crucial for the transatlantic debate at the time. 93 Their work and their writings contributed to the emergence of a truly transnational consumer culture that ultimately transcended the national or regional labels of “American” and “European.”

Jan Logemann is a Research Fellow at the GHI, where he directs the research group “Transatlantic Perspectives: Europe in the Eyes of European Immigrants to the United States.” This research is funded by a grant from the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF). Logemann is the author of Trams or Tailfins: Public and Private Prosperity in Postwar West Germany and the United States (University of Chicago Press, 2012) and editor of the volume The Development of Consumer Credit in Global Perspective (Palgrave, 2012). He has published on modern mass consumption in comparative perspective in Business History Review, the Journal of Social History, the Journal of Consumer Culture, and Entreprises et Histoire.

92 On transatlantic design in the context of Cold War competition see Greg Castillo, Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design (Minneapolis, 2010).
