

'Woman' images diverse

By PATRICIA BEACH SMITH

The ideal woman. She's someone men search for. She's someone women aspire to be. "Right? Wrong?"

Exploring the possible answers to the above are two books recently compiled and edited by two distinctly different, yet perhaps ideal (in their own ways) women.

Both use artists' rather than themselves to illustrate their personal philosophies about the ideals of womanhood. The books evolved from the authors' personal art collections.

"Myth America" by Carol Wald is a cogent study of woman as she appeared on trade cards and advertisements from 1865 to 1945.

"Mother and Child" by Mary Lawrence is a romantic study of woman, as mother, with child.

Ms. Wald's book is questioning the ideal, while Ms. Lawrence's merely presents it to be further adored.

"But I don't think the book is saccharine," Ms. Lawrence said between autographs. True, the images of mother and child are hardly attackable, without possi-

ble and dangerous reproach and they are inherently beautiful.

So are, however, the lovelies who fill Ms. Wald's scathing book, sending the vibes of ideal woman to all who use Pearline Soap.

The difference is that the ideals in Ms. Wald's book are virtually unattainable and were, as she implies, mythical.

Ms. Lawrence's images are universal, real and precious. The author is a woman who has lived a rather privileged life as wife of a motion picture writer, director and producer. She is an art historian, mother of three and has three grandchildren.

As such she has time, money, entrée and seemingly all the social amenities. She has been able to travel extensively and become friends with world famous personalities.

Thankfully, she shares many of these experiences and friends with readers of her book. It is a compilation of 100 works of art by international artists from all eras.

She explained, during a personal appearance at the Jacobson's stores, that she contacted 106 of her friends and asked them to

comment on one of the reproductions of art.

Among the contributors are Jean Renoir commenting on his father's painting "La Maternité: The Duchess of Alba" discussing Goya's "The Family of Charles IV" and J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. discussing Gerard David's "Rest on the Flight into Egypt."

Ms. Lawrence's book is admirable in a realistic way. While it doesn't explain that a second after this idyllic sculpture, painting or photograph was completed the child might have broken into a screaming fit, or that mother may have had a headache, it does depict real moments that might indeed have been real.

Of the 100 artists represented in Mrs. Lawrence's book, only 19 of them are anonymous. By comparison, nearly all the artists whose work is incorporated into "Myth America" are anonymous.

"They are the nameless artists whose shaped the way we think about ourselves," Ms. Wald said. "Doing the book made me more aware of how rigid we've been in our thinking about what women are. These advertisements perpetuated notions which for the most part are untrue."

They showed the "Working Girl" sitting on the boss' lap asking, "How would you like my job?" or the servant girl speaking in a denigrating dialect.

Gloria Steinem said of the book, "The images here will make you laugh. That is, after you stop crying. Because the truth is that nothing much has changed since 1945 except the packaging."

The book's images come from Ms. Wald's personal collection of trade cards and other mass-produced printed material.

"This is American folk art. I think we should wipe out the term commercial art. We've overlooked the importance of mass-produced art. Just because the work was done for commercial reasons and reproduced by the thousands or millions doesn't make it less art than an original oil painting," Ms. Wald said.

The items are arranged in collage form on every page, arranged with appropriate verbal descriptions of the "ideal" woman, either written by feminist Judith Pachtou or other writers.

For instance, "O Woman, you are not merely the handwork of God, but also of men; these are ever endowing you with beauty from their own hearts. You are one-half woman and one-half dream."

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).

"Art always was meant for the people. We've gone through a very possessive era where people held original art as more precious than mass-produced works. I never believe something that is reproduced. I don't think art should be mysterious. I resent the secret language of artists. I find it hard to remain a purist today; to have an elitist attitude toward art," Ms. Wald said.

"We artists are communicators first and what we say should be easily understood," she explained.

"All the collages come from printed material. I want to put back into print, recycle, that which was originally reproduced art. It is a part of our reproductive society."

"This type of art is not secretive. Everyone can understand it."

Her book, however, can be understood at different levels. She said she gave a lecture about her collection and the book to a New York audience and found many persons regarded the material as nostalgic particles they found "cute."



CAROL WALD

"I know the beauty of these pieces and wanted to make a narrative of these inherently nostalgic items," Ms. Wald said.

She said men, too, have been stereotyped. To express her feelings, she's currently working on a sequel to "Myth America" called "American Male."

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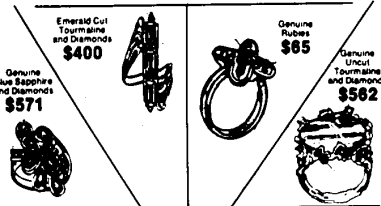
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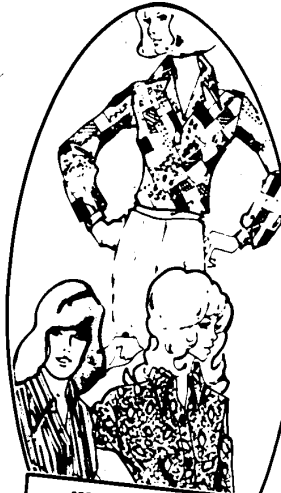
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