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From the "ornamental and evanescent" to "good, useful things": Redesigning the Gift in Progressive America[1]

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This article examines the transformation of American gift giving in the early twentieth century, using prescriptive and trade literature, as well as individual stories. This transformation occurred within the context of the transition from a Victorian to a modernist ethos and from a production to a consumption orientation. Changes in gift-giving practices were shaped by Progressive Era hygiene and home economics reformers and by aesthetic movements such as Arts and Crafts and interior decoration. Gift reformers divorced the gift from the Victorian ideal of ornamental and sentimental items, asserting that a gift's beauty lay in its functionality. This transformation fostered a second shift in the ideology of the gift. Rather than the giver's knowledge of and sentiment toward the recipient determining gift selection, the recipient's needs and desires increasingly dictated the choice. The gift thereby became more consumer-oriented. This change paved the way for the gift registry, which provided a commercial forum where prospective gift recipients could list their preferences.

In 1901, Samantha Allen described the weddings of her two nieces for *Ladies' Home Journal* readers. She began by contrasting her husband's niece, the "affected and genteel" Ethelinda, with her own niece, the "gentle, and honest, and sincere" Mary. The fiancés were a similar study in opposites. Ethelinda's Lancelot was a grocery clerk who pomaded his hair and mustache and dressed in "flashy jewelry" and "cheap black, showy goods made up dretful stylish," whereas Mary's Ralph was a "good, plain carpenter." Allen next

[1]The author would like to thank Bill Graebner, Dorothy Ross, and the anonymous readers for the journal for their helpful critiques of various drafts of this article. Early versions of this work were presented at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women in 2002 and the American Historical Association in 2003. The author thanks those who participated in those sessions for their comments, particularly Elizabeth Pleck and Jennifer Scanlon.

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assessed the marriage ceremonies and future homes of each couple. She condemned Ethelinda's wedding, held in the crowded parlor of her mother's home, as "cheap but showy," whereas she approved of Mary's simpler ceremony in her mother's front yard. She praised the "pretty home" built by Ralph for his bride and frowned on the other couple's plans to live in a boarding house because "it is so much more stylish to board."[2]

Allen wrote at some length about the presents displayed at each wedding. Ethelinda's gifts were "numerous, but ornamental and evanescent, made mostly of gilt paper and cheap ribbin." Set among these, Allen's gift of a tablecloth "looked like a serviceable exotic and a stranger in a strange land." She reported that the bridegroom had already mortgaged "the only useful present they had," which was "a cow an old aunt had gin him" to pay for a honeymoon. She drew a stark contrast between Ethelinda's gifts and the "good, useful things" that Mary received, which would "help a young couple to comfort and happiness in their own home." These included "napkins and towels, some solid silver, a pretty set of china, and some pieces of good, solid furniture . . . a good clock, some handsome lamps, . . . [and] a lot of bed linen and coverings." Here Allen placed her "good linen tablecloth down on top of four other ones where it looked contented."[3]

Allen's account was typical of contemporary *Journal* articles that grounded advice in personal experience. Samantha Allen, however, was a fictional character, whose adventures and homespun philosophy filled the novels and tales published by humorist Marietta Holley under the pen name of "Josiah Allen's Wife." Holley's biographer argues that Holley's work melded three literary traditions—rustic humor, domestic fiction, and local color. (Holley and Samantha hailed from rural northern New York.) To this mix the *Ladies' Home Journal* piece added a dash of prescriptive literature.[4] Holley used Allen's rural persona to critique contemporary culture and to suggest to the *Journal*'s readers more appropriate behavior and values.

Upon first reading, Holley's tale evokes the nineteenth-century domestic literature that advocated sincerity in manner, dress, and way of life as the quintessential indicator of middle-class status. She idealizes the small-town life embraced by Mary and Ralph and disparages Ethelinda's aspirations to urban sophistication. Her critique of boarding clearly draws on Victorian

[2]Josiah Allen's Wife, "The Two Weddin's on Ensuin' Days," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Feb. 1901, 12.
[3]Ibid.
[4]Kate H. Winter, *Marietta Holley: Life with "Josiah Allen's Wife"* (Syracuse, NY, 1984), 8.

literature that attacked boarding women as selfish, luxury-loving, and too lazy to keep house like proper wives.[5]

Still, a closer reading suggests the piece is very much of its time in other respects. Holley describes Ethelinda's mother's parlor as dark and suffocating, cluttered with such late Victorian trinkets as paper flowers, lambrequins, gilt vases, chromolithographs framed "with acorns and different seeds," and "a hair wreath made from the heads of the different relations." In contrast, she commends Mary and Ralph's home with its "natural wood," oak dining table, and "open windows lettin' in the sweet air and sunshine, but no flies, for good wire screens was on all the windows and doors."[6] This approval drew on the contemporary aesthetic and hygienic critiques of late Victorian clutter.[7]

Allen's comparison of the wedding presents suggests another departure from late Victorian culture. Like her girlhood home, Ethelinda's gifts suffered from an excess of ornament and a lack of functionality. In contrast, Mary's presents consisted of practical items that would help her create a comfortable home. Ethelinda's gifts, however, were more characteristic of late nineteenth-century presents. Etiquette manuals recommended as wedding gifts "*objets d'art* and delightful *bric-à-brac*." They advised that the kind of useful gifts Mary received "may not be given by those who are outside of the family circle." One manual explained that the "present of usefulness may be sent only by those who have a right to comprehend the needs of the newly wedded."[8] Holley's endorsement of useful wedding presents thus challenged much contemporary gift advice and suggested a new philosophy of giving.

[5]Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT, 1982); Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, 2007), 117–19.

[6]Josiah Allen's Wife, "The Two Weddin's."

[7]See, for instance, Bradley C. Brooks, "Clarity, Contrast, and Simplicity: Changes in American Interiors, 1880–1930" in *The Arts and the American Home, 1880–1930*, eds. Jessica H. Foy and Karal Ann Marling (Knoxville, TN, 1994), 14–43; Karen Halttunen, "From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality" in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and the Display of Goods in America, 1880–1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York, 1989), 157–89; Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 157–61; Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery, 1850–1930* (Rochester, NY, 1988).

[8]Florence Howe Hall, *Social Customs* (Boston, 1887), 166; *Social Etiquette of New York*, new and enlarged ed. (New York, 1883), 143. On the proscription against useful gifts, also see *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries* (np, [1893?]), 21, Matrimony, folder 1, box 1, Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

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This bit of domestic humor illuminates a transformative moment in American domestic gift giving. Holley's tale contained elements of two distinct yet related critiques of gift practices at the turn of the century. Her dismissal of Ethelinda's gifts as "ornamental and evanescent" reflected an aesthetic critique grounded in the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement, which rejected Victorian ideas of design and decoration. Coupled with her rejection of the cluttered parlor, it also typified a pragmatic critique that emerged from the efforts of home economists and hygiene reformers to rationalize and sanitize domestic life. The aesthetic and pragmatic critiques dovetailed to produce a substantial redefinition of the American gift in the early twentieth century, articulated in Holley's praise for Mary's useful presents. The redesigned gift's beauty lay in its functionalism and design simplicity, not in its ornamentation or even its sentiment.

Both aesthetic and pragmatic gift critics embraced the contemporary philosophy of simple living, which historian David Shi has defined as a cluster of values that included "discriminating consumption, uncluttered living, personal contentment, [and] aesthetic simplicity (including an emphasis on handicrafts)." Although simple living might seem antithetical to the emergent consumer culture, adherents paradoxically promoted new consumer goods to achieve simplicity. The paradox is partly explained by the fact that many simplicity advocates ran or wrote for magazines that increasingly depended on consumer advertising for survival. Gustav Stickley's *Craftsman* campaigned for simple living and hawked goods produced in his Craftsman Workshops. Shi identifies Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, as "the most persistent voice promoting simple living" at the same time his magazine became a leader in advertising dollars.[9] Merchants and manufacturers supported the movement by offering new gift items and cloaking old ones in the new language of simplicity and pragmatism.

Although there is a substantial literature on the transformation of the American home and domesticity at the turn of the century, little attention has been paid to the simultaneous and related transformation of domestic gift giving.[10]

[9]David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York, 1985), 175–76, 181. On the connections between magazines and consumption, see Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings:* The Ladies' Home Journal, *Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York, 1995); Ellen Gruber Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (New York, 1996).

[10]On the transformation of the home, refer to note 6 above. Gift giving has a rich literature in the social sciences. Whereas anthropologists have concentrated on the gift-based economies of non-market societies, sociologists have contended that the gift is just as central to contemporary market societies but constitutes a social rather than an economic system. Researchers of consumer behavior

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Scholars of modern gift giving have tended to view it statically; however, the marked shift in gift advice and philosophy at the turn of the century suggests the dynamism of the gift system and the ways in which social, cultural, and economic currents influenced it.[11] This article seeks to historicize American gift giving by examining this transformation of gifts and gift advice associated with rites of passage—such as weddings and births—and what David Cheal has called rites of progression—annual occasions including birthdays, Christmas, and anniversaries.[12] It scrutinizes the gift criticism and advice provided in prescriptive literature, as well as the ways businesses responded to these. The article also considers how the transformation fostered in prescriptive and promotional literature influenced those who exchanged presents.[13]

have investigated the rationales behind modern giving and gift choices. Key works include Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (1923; New York, 1990); C. A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (London, 1982); Jacques T. Godbout, with Alain Caillé, *The World of the Gift*, trans. Donald Winkler (Montreal, 1998); Aafke E. Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (Cambridge, 2005); Aafke E. Komter, ed., *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam, 1996); Mark Osteen, ed., *The Question of the Gift: Essays across Disciplines* (London, 2002); Katherine Rupp, *Gift-Giving in Japan: Cash, Connections, Cosmologies* (Stanford, CA, 2003); David Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (London, 1988); Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York, 1983); Barry Schwartz, "The Social Psychology of the Gift," *American Journal of Sociology* 73 (July 1967): 1–11; Cele Otnes and Richard F. Beltramini, eds., *Gift Giving: A Research Anthology* (Bowling Green, OH, 1996).

[11]There are few historical studies of modern gift giving. William Waits examined the evolution of Christmas gifts in *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving* (New York, 1993). Leigh Eric Schmidt touches on gift giving in *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, 1995). In addition, Viviana A. Zelizer considered the changing acceptance of money as a gift in *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, and Other Currencies* (Princeton, 1997), 71–118. Natalie Zemon Davis demonstrated that gift exchange persisted as a cultural system alongside the emerging system of commodity transaction in early modern France; Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison, WI, 2000). Anthropologist James Carrier has provided the fullest examination of how the rise of industrial capitalism and its commodity relations affected gift exchange. See James G. Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* (New York, 1995); Carrier, "Gifts in a World of Commodities: The Ideology of the Perfect Gift in American Society," *Social Analysis* 29 (1990): 19–37.

[12]Cheal, *Gift Economy*, 148–49. I have used the terms "gift" and "present" interchangeably and synonymously, as my sources generally do. Carrier draws a distinction between presents, which are presented ceremoniously, and the broader gifts, which he defines to include "all things transacted as part of social, as distinct from more purely monetary, relations"; Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities*, 18. By this definition, I am concerned with presents particularly. In contemporary usage, "gift" is the broader term, encompassing charitable and philanthropic donations as well as intimate exchanges, whereas "present" generally refers only to the latter. Dictionaries, however, suggest the two terms appeared around the same time and are synonyms. See, for instance, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, http://dictionary.oed.com.

[13]Peter Stearns and Jan Lewis have cautioned historians on the need to "distinguish between prescription and description" but also noted that "the two are always held in tension." Although its

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The State of Giving, c. 1900

The custom of gift giving for Christmas and weddings was well established among Americans by the turn of the twentieth century, and birthdays, wedding anniversaries, graduations, and births were also becoming gift occasions. Whereas in non-market societies gift exchange served as a socio-economic system for the transfer of wealth and status, its function was less clear in market-based societies. Scholars have suggested that gift exchange in such societies constitutes a social system for the transfer of affection and the establishment and maintenance of social ties.[14] Certainly gift advisors and philosophers in nineteenth-century America believed so, and they sought to differentiate gifts from the commodity transactions of the marketplace by creating an ideology of the ideal gift. In an 1843 essay, philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson had asserted that "rings and other jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts," claiming that "it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something, which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith's." Emerson instead declared that "the only gift is a portion of thyself," suggesting the handcrafted present as the ideal.[15]

However, the line between gift and commodity was not so easily drawn. It was no coincidence that the late nineteenth-century surge in present making paralleled the emergence of the commercial-industrial economy, which generated a growing number of consumer goods. Indeed, Emerson's very disparagement of purchased presents suggests that there was already a thriving trade in these by the 1840s. Consumer goods became the material accoutrements of the domesticity that characterized the new white middle class spawned by the economic transformation. The domestic ideal produced what Elizabeth Pleck has called "the sentimental occasion," which both created and reinforced family memories. The exchange of presents on such occasions became a way to symbolize the ties of affection that bound family and friends.[16]

proscriptions may be more revelatory of actual behavior than its prescriptions, such literature provides insight into the concerns of its predominantly bourgeois authors. Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, eds., *An Emotional History of the United States* (New York, 1998), 2. On this issue, also see John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York, 1990), 5; Sarah A. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 5.

[14]See, for instance, Cheal, *Gift Economy*, 14–19; Godbout, *World of the Gift*, 7, 20; Komter, *The Gift*, 3.

[15]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts" in *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3: *Essays: Second Series* (1844; Cambridge, MA, 1983), 94; Carrier, "Gifts in a World of Commodities," 25.

[16]Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 1,10–20. A key work on the relationship between the market and the middle class is Elizabeth White Nelson, *Market Sentiments: Middle-Class Market Culture in*

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Domestic gift giving thus became a cultural ritual for expressing social ties and affirming middle-class family values. The etiquette manuals and magazines that taught the middle class how to be middle class provided gift advice and helped to naturalize the custom. Writers in magazines as different as the *Ladies' Repository* and the *Nation* agreed that the "universal custom of giving presents on commemorative occasions" was "inevitable and necessary," as well as "a pleasant and easy way of expressing one's feelings."[17]

Like other domestic work, the main labor of selecting and giving these gifts fell on the shoulders of women. Women had primary responsibility for maintaining the emotional bonds that held the family together, and gift exchange played an important role in this effort. Contemporary studies reveal that women are both the primary givers and recipients of presents other than romantic gifts, and sources from the turn of the century reinforce this conclusion, despite some evidence of joint gift purchases by husbands and wives.[18] Women not only bore the brunt of the work associated with gift giving, they also made up the majority of those who dispensed gift advice across the range of prescriptive literature. Such guidance appeared predominantly in etiquette and domestic manuals, and housekeeping and shelter magazines, all of which targeted an overwhelmingly female readership. Women thus played a key role in the transformation of gift giving, as givers and recipients, advisers and advisees. Considering their experience in both the home and the world of women's work, it is not at all surprising that women such as Marietta Holley came to embrace utility in gifts.

Americans at the turn of the century encountered gift advice in a bewildering variety of places and from prescriptive writers, reformers, interior decorators, and businesses. In addition to the sources above, gift advice could be found in newspapers and in magazines aimed at children, men, and a general audience; in interior decoration and design manuals; and in advertisements, catalogues, pamphlets, and the displays in jewelry and department stores, as well

Nineteenth-Century America (Washington, 2004). Also see John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (New York, 1996), 79, 100–104. Penne Restad argues that "gifts became the fabric of relationships" in "The Burden of Ritual: Alexander Graham Bell's Critique of Christmas-Giving, 1893" in *Ritual Economies*, Working Papers in the Humanities 13, ed. Lorenzo Buj (Windsor, Ont., 2004), 31–32. On the development of birthday celebrations, see Howard P. Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton, 1989), 126–32.

[17]"Festivals and Presents," *Ladies' Repository*, Jan. 1871, 45–46; "Presents," *Nation*, Dec. 21, 1865, 783.

[18]On women's role in gift giving, see Cheal, *Gift Economy*, 175–83; Komter, *Social Solidarity*, 81–97.

as new emporiums dubbed gift shops. The gift advice of the late nineteenth century still hewed to the Emersonian ideal. In addition to defining the gift as non-commercial and handcrafted, Emerson had proclaimed "the fitness of beautiful, not useful things for gifts."[19]

This vision of the gift as beautiful, sentimental, and ornamental corresponded to the Victorian design aesthetic, which held that one's home revealed one's character. Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe emphasized "the important subject of *beauty* in reference to the decoration of houses" in their 1869 manual, *The American Woman's Home*. They recommended furnishing the parlor with pillows, lambrequins, pictures, engravings, and plaster casts of statues "selected with discrimination and taste."[20] By the late nineteenth century, the Victorian parlor and home stood as temples to decorative excess.

Gift advisers recommended beautiful and ornamental gifts to fill the home. The *Ladies' Home Journal* suggested as Christmas gifts for a woman "a bit of bric-a-brac," picture frames made of "leather, porcelain, embroidered linen and soft-hued velvets with designs worked in gold thread, spangles and mock jewels," or "a sofa-pillow, even though . . . there seems to be no room for another." Etiquette writer Mary Elizabeth Sherwood noted "the predominance of silver-ware" among bridal gifts in 1897, citing such decorative items as "apostle-spoons [bearing images of the twelve Christian apostles], and little silver canoes."[21]

An 1893 dialogue in the *New York Times* reinforced the rule of useless but beautiful gifts. The man admits giving a bad present of a "beautiful high silver comb" to a woman who wore her hair short. The woman, positioned as a gift expert because of her gender, responds that in fact he had "caught the true spirit of a wedding gift—something choice of its kind and something to have a permanent value, even if intermittent use." The woman understands that the true work of the gift is sentimental; the man looks at it only with a pragmatic eye, deeming a gift that cannot be used a bad gift.

[19]This was because gifts based on need violated the recipient's independence. Emerson, "Gifts," 95. On Emerson and the ideology of the perfect gift, see Carrier, "Gifts in a World of Commodities," 21.
[20]Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (1869; New York, 1971), 84, 86–87, 91, 94. Also Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 25, 32, 35–36; Halttunen, "Parlor to Living Room," 159–65; Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 13–56.
[21]Mrs. Burton Kingsland, "Suggestions for Christmas Gifts: What to Buy and How to Make," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1895, 29; Mary Elizabeth Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages* (1897; New York, 1975), 117–19.

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Figure 1. Highly ornamental items such as souvenir spoons and silver-plated crumb trays were popular for Christmas giving in the late nineteenth century. Mahler Bros. advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1892, 34.

This dialogue anticipated O. Henry's "Gift of the Magi," perhaps the most well-known expression of the sentimental ideal of the gift. In the tale a young husband and wife sell their most prized possessions (his watch, her hair) to purchase the beautiful and useful gift desired by the other (tortoise-shell combs, a platinum watch chain). Their sacrifices render the beautiful gifts useless, but this is the point of the story.[22] The very uselessness of their presents (and their sacrifices to purchase them) encapsulated the nineteenth-century ideal of the gift.

Albany society bride Huybertie "Bertie" Pruyn Hamlin's wedding presents reflected this ideal. They included dozens of silver, cut glass, and china items and an assortment of decorative items and jewelry. Among the gifts from her mother was the "real gold 23 carat tea-set" that her father had commissioned for her parents' tenth anniversary. Hamlin noted that her mother

[22]"The Ethics of Wedding Gifts," *New York Times*, May 28, 1893; O. Henry, "The Gift of the Magi" in *The Four Million* (New York, 1903), 16–25. On O. Henry and the ideology of the perfect gift, see Russell W. Belk, "The Perfect Gift" in *Gift Giving*, eds. Otnes and Beltramini, 59–84.

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had used this spectacular example of conspicuous consumption but once.[23] Although their gifts were less extravagant, middle-class Americans adhered to the ornamental standard as well. For her 1883 wedding in Georgia, for instance, Elizabeth Johnson Harris, an African American woman, received a parlor lamp, "gilded cups and saucers," and a "feathered satin fan" from her white friends, and china vases, silver teaspoons, and gold bracelets from her black friends.[24]

Despite the idealization of handcrafted presents, these examples indicate that domestic gifts had already become enmeshed in the developing economy of consumer goods. In his recent history of greeting cards, Barry Shank maintains that although the market and consumer economy structured the expression of feelings and emotions, the reverse was also true.[25] As Americans increasingly expressed affection through gift exchange, the market responded with a growing array of commodities that might be transformed into presents. Shops that sold jewelry, silver, novelties, and ornamental goods marketed these items to gift givers through catalogs, advertisements, and displays. Trade journals encouraged merchants to build arrays of potential gifts to tempt and direct their customers.

By the turn of the century, Christmas and wedding presents were well on their way to becoming linchpins of the retail economy. Christmas advertising and promotions began in November, and merchants celebrated June as the month of wedding business. A jewelry trade journal claimed that wedding gifts had become an almost $9-million business by the early twentieth century.[26] Advice literature as well pointed to the proliferation of gift giving in the late nineteenth century. In 1898 *Ladies' Home Journal* offered suggestions for Christmas presents for family members ranging from babies to grandparents, as well as household servants, the mailman, the laundress, invalids, and poor families. By 1903 the list of prospective recipients had expanded to

[23]"Bertie Pruyn Wedding Presents," folder 4, box 33, Huybertie Pruyn Hamlin Papers, Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, NY; Huybertie Pruyn Hamlin, "The Coming Out Years and through Our Wedding Trip, 1891–1898," typescript, 1932, 165–67, folder 2, box 41, Hamlin Papers.

[24]Elizabeth Johnson Harris, "Life Story, 1867–1923," 74–75, Digital Scriptorium, Special Collections Library, Duke University, http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/harris/.

[25]Barry Shank, *A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture* (New York, 2004), 3–8. On the interplay between consumer demand and business efforts to shape it, see Regina Lee Blaszczyk's study of the crockery and glass industry, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore, 2000).

[26]Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 148; Vicki Howard, *Brides, Inc.: American Weddings and the Business of Tradition* (Philadelphia, 2006), 32.

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incorporate the family doctor and minister, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, and "friends and acquaintances." When Bertie Hamlin's mother married in 1865, she had received eighty gifts; in contrast, Hamlin's gift list in 1898 covered more than twenty pages and some 400 presents.[27]

This increase in gifting provoked alarm among a growing number of commentators by the turn of the century. They charged that the gift system placed undue financial burdens on both givers and receivers. Edward Bok worried in 1894 that young couples were "start[ing] their married lives with obligations in the way of presents imposed upon them" and claimed that many couples resorted to selling their presents to raise funds. Such criticism was not limited to the white middle class. *Colored American Magazine* rebuked young black men who "strive to imitate the wealthy white young men in giving presents to young women, presents for which they too frequently pay for [*sic*] on installment plan." It also condemned the women who "encourage their lovers to make lavish presents."[28]

These critics viewed the gift problem as one of excessive consumption spurred by greed for material goods, which led to debt and, in their more lurid imaginings, financial ruin. They reminded their readers that happiness did not come from consumption and cautioned them to live simply and give within their means. This prescription, however, was at odds with the rising consumer culture that supported the magazines for which they wrote. Susan Matt has identified a shift in the way prescriptive literature depicted envy, from a moralizing disapproval in the late nineteenth century to a morally neutral endorsement of envy's power to stimulate success in the early twentieth century.[29] A similar change may be seen in the discourse on American gifting practices in this time period. Critics moved away from a moralistic approach to one focused on the quality and use value of gifts. They fashioned a new ideal of the gift that was based in simplicity and handicraft, but within a framework of consumption.

The Aesthetic Critique

An aesthetic critique of gift giving emerged from the American Arts and Crafts movement and was reinforced by the embryonic profession of interior

[27]*Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1898, 28, and Dec. 1903, 47; Wedding of Anna Parker to John Pruyn, Sept. 7, 1865, clipping, folder 3, box 5, Hamlin Papers; "Pruyn Wedding Presents."
[28]"At Home with the Editor," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1894, 16; "Expensive Presents," *Colored American Magazine*, Dec. 1907, 415.
[29]Susan J. Matt, *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890–1930* (Philadelphia, 2003), 1–3.

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decoration. This critique concentrated on the intrinsic qualities of the gifts themselves rather than on the motives or morals of the givers and receivers. It opposed the over-ornamentation of Victorian presents and called for simplicity and functionalism instead. It also promoted a return to handcrafted presents but favored the products of skilled artisans and artists over home handiwork.

The Arts and Crafts movement responded to mass production by advocating a return to handicraft and design simplicity, particularly in the realms of architecture, home furnishings, and the decorative arts. The movement's goals included the liberation of both workers and consumers from "the tyranny of mass production." Eileen Boris points out, however, that the American movement focused more on improving consumer taste than on social reform. The House Beautiful and Aesthetic movements introduced the designs of William Morris to wealthy Americans in the 1870s and 1880s. The high point of the U.S. movement came between 1896 and 1915, however, when thousands of Arts and Crafts societies were organized and the movement became, as Boris asserts, "the style for and of the middle class."[30]

The changing design sensibility influenced gift giving as well as home décor. Amid the ornamental jardinières and bonbon spoons recorded in Frances Wells Shaw's wedding gift book, for instance, one finds a Rookwood vase. Maria L. Nichols' Rookwood was the most famous of the art potteries established by American Arts and Crafts adherents. Women who could not afford such products could take classes in china painting and produce gifts such as the "parlor lamp with red roses painted on its big china globe" that Grace Snyder received. Bertie Hamlin's presents included "a hand-painted tea-pot" presented by members of her embroidery class. Not everyone embraced the new aesthetic, however. Despite the impeccable Arts and Crafts lineage of the Tiffany vases she also received, Hamlin disparaged these as "the most terrible and horrible vases . . . twisted into all kinds of impossible shapes and of lurid colours."[31]

[30]Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia, 1986), xiv, 28, 32–44, 55–59, 80.

[31]"Wedding Presents of F. L. Wells," folder 3, box 1, Shaw-Wells Families Papers, Chicago Historical Society; Boris, *Art and Labor*, 101–02, 143–46; Grace Snyder, *No Time on My Hands*, as told to Nellie Snyder Yost (1963; reprint, Lincoln, NE, 1986), 317; Hamlin, "Coming Out Years," 167–167a. On the china painting fad, see Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (London, 1991), 159; Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers*, 68–74.

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Practitioners of the emergent profession of interior decoration reinforced the Arts and Crafts crusade against Victorian décor but focused more on its embrace of clean design than handicraft. In his 1881 treatise, *The House Beautiful*, Clarence Cook criticized "the habit of over-ornamenting everything" and ignoring "the beauty of simplicity in form." This hit squarely at the heart of the Victorian decorative aesthetic, which favored the display of myriad ornamental and sentimental items. Cook noted that Americans received so many gifts that "our homes are overrun with things, encumbered with useless ugliness." He asserted that "after a year's display where they can catch the giver's eye on reception days and 'calls,'" even wedding gifts should be "stowed away" in a closet or drawer.[32]

Cook drew on Morris's maxim, "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful." The reigning principles of early interior decoration echoed the Arts and Crafts ethos of simplicity and its equation of beauty with utility. Decorators counseled their readers to rid their homes of anything that did not meet this standard, regardless of its sentimental value. Like Cook, they extended this prohibition to presents. Avowing that "ornaments for the sake of ornaments are generally horrid things," Lillie Hamilton French advised readers to rid their homes of such "ugly and superfluous" things, even if they came "as Christmas presents, [or] as tokens of devoted attachment from friends." In a blow at Victorian sensibilities, she claimed, "Sentiment hampers us in our effort to attain true excellence in decoration" and warned readers not to be influenced by the "injured feelings of our dear ones."[33] Interior decorators thus suggested that sentiment in giving, just as in home décor, should be subordinated to good taste.

A short story in the *Craftsman* reinforced this message and demonstrated the affinities between Arts and Crafts adherents and interior decorators. Mary Penfield and her husband Paul receive as a wedding present from her wealthy aunt "a huge, massive, insolent sideboard, . . . *completely covered with red, immorally red, plush!*" This monstrosity clashes with the mahogany table and Chippendale chairs Mary had inherited from her mother. Mary considers the sideboard "a sin" but of the aesthetic rather than the moral variety: "Every aesthetic fiber in her cried out against it." Afraid to anger her aunt, Mary

[32]Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables, Stools and Candlesticks* (New York, 1881), 59, 146, 156, 283–84.

[33]Boris, *Art and Labor*, 55; Lillie Hamilton French, *Homes and Their Decoration* (New York, 1903), 43, 427. Also see Hazel H. Adler, *The New Interior: Modern Decorations for the Modern Home* (New York, 1916), 38.

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lives with the sideboard, which takes its toll. She becomes nervous, she avoids having people over, and she quarrels with her husband, who shares her dislike of the sideboard but in typical male fashion thinks she is being silly. At the end of her rope, Mary finally attacks the plush with a carving knife and burns the sideboard in a burst of maniacal glee. Ironically, Mary subsequently finds that her aunt has had an identical sideboard made for herself. Mary confesses her actions and apologizes in an aesthetic way, declaring, "I'm sorry our tastes are different in sideboards." Although her aunt calls her a fool, she later sends Mary her "lovely old Chippendale sideboard," which fits right into Mary's décor.[34]

This story neatly lays out the Arts and Crafts revulsion for Victorian design and its reverence for handcrafted furnishings, whether heirlooms or modern. Although the plush sideboard is not inherently useless, its design and perceived ugliness render it thus. The story thus suggests, consonant with interior decorating principles, that personal taste and desire should shape one's home décor. This represented a decisive shift from the Victorian belief that home decoration reflected character.

Magazines such as *House Beautiful* and the *Craftsman*, as well as the *Ladies' Home Journal*, popularized this new design ethos and applied it to gift giving.[35] Taking a leaf from decorating manuals, Helen Jay advised the *Journal*'s readers, "The gift which harmonizes with its future surroundings . . . is the one which is most valued." In the *Craftsman* Mary Augusta Mullikin described the problems bad gifts caused: "Opening some package we exclaim: 'Wasn't it sweet for her to remember us?' Presently we ask: 'What shall we do with it?' and the most courageous suggests: 'Can't some accident happen to it?'" In a passage that Bertie Hamlin would surely have relished, Mullikin proposed, "If you come into possession of a vase, for instance, caught in the plight of ugliness, why not treat it with the same courageous kindness you would a sick dog—put it out of its misery!"[36]

These articles counseled that the proper gift must conform to Arts and Crafts principles—it must combine beauty and utility. Ideally, it should also incorporate someone's handicraft. In *House Beautiful* Elizabeth Emery proclaimed that a Christmas present should be "good in design and color, strong, serviceable, possibly the only one of the kind in existence, and hand-

[34]Emery Pottle, "The Wedding Gift: A Story," *Craftsman*, June 1908, 289–300.

[35]Boris, *Art and Labor*, 80; Cumming and Kaplan, *Arts and Crafts*, 144–45.

[36]Helen Jay, "Common Sense in Christmas Gifts," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1890, 9; Mary Augusta Mullikin, "Precious Things," *Craftsman*, Oct. 1904, 67.

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made." Handmade did not necessarily mean crafted by the giver, however. Emery declared that modern givers "no longer waste precious time and eyesight in making something that in the end seldom expressed anything but love." Rather than such clumsy efforts, she asserted, "We go to the craftworker—the man or woman who has learned the craft . . . and whose smallest bit of work is art as well as craft." She encouraged readers to visit the shops and studios "open to the shopping public" before Christmas, and she provided specific gift suggestions and shop locations.[37]

Emery implied that commercially available Arts and Crafts goods were superior to gifts crafted by the giver. The movement that revered handicraft thus reinforced the trend toward purchased presents by enthusiastically promoting consumption of the fruits of practitioners' labors. Elaine Boris has argued that one of the movement's key goals was to reeducate the consumer, even suggesting that for some societies the salesroom rather than the workshop was the most characteristic space.[38] The *Craftsman* combined advocacy and commerce by providing readers with a buying guide to handcrafted presents that combined beauty and functionality. It carried pages of advertisements for gifts such as "hand-wrought andirons," "hand-woven rugs," and "hand wrought solid gold jewelry." The Forest Craft Guild proclaimed in one advertisement that its "wrought metal and leather—jewelry—calendars—cards—and bayberry candles" would "eliminate the 'bric a brac' quality" of Christmas gifts.[39]

The not-so-secret drawback of the Arts and Crafts movement, however, was that most consumers could not afford to buy handcrafted objects produced in small studios. Tiffany lamps and Rookwood vases became the province of wealthy collectors and brides such as Hamlin and Shaw. One way the movement overcame this difficulty was by promoting do-it-yourself crafts. The *Craftsman* and *Popular Mechanics* carried advertisements for Christmas gifts such as tools and workbenches for the home craftsman. *Ladies' Home Journal* featured gifts that individuals could make for Christmas, such as a clock, a child's chair, a crumb tray, and a letter opener. A 1911 article suggested another way out of the dilemma of expensive handicraft, advising readers that inexpensive handcrafted Christmas gifts such as baskets, jade

[37]Elizabeth Emery, "What to Give: A Few Christmas Suggestions," *House Beautiful*, Dec. 1904, 24, Arts and Crafts Society, http://www.arts-crafts.com/archive/xmas.

[38]Boris, *Art and Labor*, xiv, 44.

[39]Bayley advertisement, *Craftsman*, Dec. 1905, x; Old Colony advertisement, *Craftsman*, Dec. 1906, xxiii; Heintz advertisement, *Craftsman*, Dec. 1908, xxxiii; Forest Craft Guild advertisement, *Craftsman*, Dec. 1912, 9a.

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and ivory jewelry, and Meerschaum pipes could be found at their local "Oriental goods" importer.[40]

Practitioners also resolved this difficulty with an apparent contradiction, by manufacturing such products as Rookwood pottery and Tiffany glass. Stickley's own Craftsman Workshops combined the latest technology and factory production with hand finishing of products.[41] Along with other factory-produced gift items, the *Craftsman* promoted the products created at its workshops. One advertisement promised to send a catalogue of furnishings made in the workshops, including light fixtures, furniture, rugs, and baskets, to those "looking for suggestions for Christmas gifts."[42] This emphasis on household items as gifts fulfilled the Arts and Crafts dictum of functional beauty, and it was reinforced by critics who decried the uselessness of many presents.

The Pragmatic Critique

The simplicity and utility advocated by the Arts and Crafts movement and interior decorators permeated much of middle-class culture by the early twentieth century, and the aesthetic critique of gift giving fell on many receptive ears. These principles particularly resonated with home economists and hygiene reformers, who merged the new aesthetic principles with their progressive goals of efficiency and health to produce what might be called the pragmatic critique of gift giving. Critical focus turned in particular toward the gift's uselessness, which had been a key characteristic of the Victorian ideal. A new term—useful—crept into the gift literature as a positive rather than censorious modifier.

As Megan J. Elias has pointed out, home economists adhered to the Arts and Crafts aesthetic of beauty residing in utility, and they incorporated courses in interior decoration in their college programs. Self-trained household efficiency expert Christine Frederick declared, "One of the greatest of American failings is to purchase too many 'things' which are often neither truly beautiful or useful." Frederick did time-motion studies showing that products such as Hoosier Cabinets would make the home more efficient, and magazines advertised these systems as ideal Christmas gifts for wives.

[40]Cumming and Kaplan, *Arts and Crafts*, 167–68; Shi, *Simple Life*, 192; Wivanco advertisement, *Craftsman*, Dec. 1905, xxvii; Goodell-Pratt and Brown & Sharpe advertisements, *Popular Mechanics*, Dec. 1915, 111, 146; "Home-Made Arts-and-Crafts Christmas Gifts," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1905, 27; "Christmas Present Problem," *Craftsman*, Dec. 1911, 330–32.
[41]Boris, *Art and Labor*, 74, 140–46, 152; Cumming and Kaplan, *Arts and Crafts*, 141–42, 166–68, 176–78.
[42]Craftsman advertisements, *Craftsman*, Dec. 1912, 24a, 52a.

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Figure 2. Promotions such as this for the Hoosier cabinet illustrate the influence of home economists on gift-giving conventions. The ad also suggests that practical gifts could be quite expensive. Hoosier Kitchen Cabinet advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1913, 45.

In one advertisement a woman testified that the Christmas her husband gave her a Hoosier Cabinet was "the best Christmas I ever had."[43]

[43]Megan J. Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia, 2008), 36, 39–40, 84; Christine Frederick, *Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home* (Chicago, 1920), 31–37, 399; Hoosier Cabinet advertisement, *Craftsman*, December 1911, 22a. On Frederick's promotion of new household goods, see Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 61–76; Janice Williams

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Home economists advised that efficiency required ridding the home of useless and dust-catching bric-a-brac. Such efficiency had become more necessary as the supply of domestic servants dwindled and as more middle-class women worked outside the home, whether as reformers or in new professions such as home economics. The simple design aesthetic was reinforced by hygiene reformers, who saw dust and dirt as carriers of germs and advocated freeing the home from dust catchers such as carpeting, upholstered furniture, and knickknacks.[44] As designers made clear, it did not matter whether these items were gifts; they had to go.

Like their aesthetic counterparts, pragmatic critics equated beauty with utility and simplicity. They decried the superfluity of the customary ornamental gifts. A 1906 piece in *Outlook* called for reform of the wedding gift system that led to such absurdities as the middle-class bride who received "twenty-seven cut-glass bowls . . . and other equally useless things," for which she and her husband had to purchase a special display cabinet rather than necessary furniture. Frances Wells Shaw received four sugar sifters and five silver bon-bon dishes, and Bertie Hamlin declared that she got "so many tea strainers that it looked like a sale of them."[45]

Even more than the duplication, critics targeted the uselessness of popular wedding gifts. One adviser deplored "the showy trifles with which the unfortunate couple are saddled apparently for life." She proposed that "saucepans and kettles with indestructible bottoms" would be much more useful and welcomed. Hilda Richmond similarly derided the typical wedding presents of "cold-meat forks and useless vases and impossible pictures," as well as "small silver instruments that none of us knows what to call till we sneak them to the jeweler." She noted that "the anguish in the heart of the bride is the same whether the array of useless stuff is hidden from friends or laid out in full sight."[46]

Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens, GA, 2003), 59–85, 121–35.

[44]On the development of home economics in this period, see Elias, *Stir It Up*, esp. 18–61. On hygiene reform, see Tomes, *Gospel of Germs*, 158–61. On the declining number of servants in the early twentieth century, see Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, 1982), 167–73. In her 1912 study of American women, Mary Roberts Coolidge asserted that the "'strictly domestic' woman is a rapidly vanishing type, eliminated by world-changes in social and industrial conditions"; Coolidge, *Why Women Are So* (1912; New York, 1972), 85–86. Home economists believed that rationalizing housekeeping would enable women to devote more time to more important things, whether their families, their careers, or reform and philanthropy.

[45]"The Spectator," *Outlook*, Feb. 17, 1906, 349; "Wedding Presents of F. L. Wells"; Hamlin, "Coming Out Years," 167.

[46]Mrs. Burton Harrison, "The Small Courtesies of Social Life," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Mar. 1895, 10; Hilda Richmond, "Golden Rule Wedding Gifts," *Ladies' Home Journal*, June 1906, 44.

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In a *Harper's Bazaar* article, Maud Howe contrasted the ornamental gift ideal with more pragmatic approaches to Christmas giving. An elderly widow shows Howe her "present-closet" filled with poetry books, prints, and other gifts, which Howe dismisses as "flotsam and jetsam . . . knickknacks and bric-a-brac." She maintains that she would prefer something "useful" such as a "box of rubber bands" or "one of those delightful wooden-backed nail-brushes with black bristles." The widow replies that Christmas presents "should not be utilitarian," but her son takes an even more pragmatic view. Asserting that "as a proposition in economics, the giving of Christmas presents is indefensible," he complains, "I spend a sum every year in buying gifts for my friends which is equaled approximately by the sum my friends spend on me. I never receive the presents I myself would have chosen; my friends are probably no more fortunate." He claims that his money would be better spent on buying the things he knows he wants.[47]

Howe's dialogue suggested two pragmatic solutions to the problem of useless gifts. The widow's son took the most utilitarian position that individuals should simply buy themselves the presents that they want. Few critics were ready to go this far in stripping the sentimentality from the gift, but some did advocate a drastic reduction in giving. One commentator suggested sending out a note at Thanksgiving, proclaiming, "If you give me anything for Christmas, all is forever over between us." Edward Bok rather unrealistically predicted that "the omission of all but family presents from weddings will soon become the rule."[48] Most critics, however, sought only to reform giving by transforming the typical present from the ornamental items favored by the widow to the functional things advocated by Howe.

SPUG's Effort to Reform Giving

The single most sustained pragmatic effort to address the gift problem came from a short-lived reform organization called the Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving (SPUG). SPUG was a quintessentially progressive alliance of well-to-do and working-class women. It was an offshoot of the Vacation Savings Fund, founded by members of the National Civic Federation's Women's Department to enable working-class women in New York to save money for vacations. At a November 1912 meeting these women pointed out that workplace Christmas gifts posed an obstacle to that goal, as they felt coerced to contribute substantial sums for presents for their supervisors. The women and their wealthy allies formed SPUG to fight this practice.

[47] Maud Howe, "The Giving of Christmas Gifts," *Harper's Bazaar*, Jan. 1910, 58.

[48] Anne Warner, "On the Abuse and the Perfection of Present-Giving," *Outlook*, Aug. 6, 1910, 788; "At Home with the Editor," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1894, 16.

Members pledged to tell those collecting for such gifts, "I am a Spug. I don't believe in giving useless Christmas gifts."[49]

The organization received heavy exposure in the press, due in part to its name and novelty, but also because of the social prominence of its leaders. These included Anne Morgan, daughter of the financier, Eleanor Belmont, a popular actress married to a prominent financier, and Elisabeth Marbury, a theatrical agent and Broadway producer. Former president Theodore Roosevelt soon became the first male Spug.[50] Morgan explained to the *New York Times* that "the custom of giving expensive Christmas presents to the heads of departments has laid an intolerable burden upon the shoulders of employees." These employees "felt it essential to their chances of promotion, and, often, to the security of the places they already occupied" to participate in this "graft." Belmont claimed that workers making only eight to ten dollars a week spent up to fifty dollars a year on such gifts.[51]

Although the organization's founding purpose was to end this holiday exploitation of low-paid workers, the reformers had broader goals. It was not just the coercive gifts to supervisors that SPUG attacked, but the "growing custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas." Belmont suggested that this custom had "drifted to the level of the common swap, utterly devoid of the faintest trace of sentiment or meaning." SPUG sought to eliminate such perfunctory exchange and to restrict Christmas gifting to "the expression of our genuine affections," or what one supporter called "real gift-feeling." Morgan assured Americans that the organization did not oppose presents to family members, "nor any other gifts that come from the heart."[52]

SPUG gained adherents across the country during its heyday in 1912 and 1913. Women in Philadelphia, Washington, and Fort Worth, Texas created branches in 1913. President Woodrow Wilson's wife Ellen and daughter

[49]*New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1912.

[50]*New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1912. Biographical information from Eleanor Robson Belmont, *The Fabric of Memory* (New York, 1957), 78, 115–16, 266–69; Benjamin R. Foster, "Morgan, Anne Tracy," and James Ross Moore, "Marbury, Elisabeth," both in American National Biography Online, http://www.anb.org. On the Women's Department, see Christopher J. Cyphers, *The National Civic Federation and the Making of a New Liberalism, 1900–1915* (Westport, CT, 2002), 69–90. On the Vacation Savings Fund and similar organizations, see Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York, 1999), 188–94.

[51]Edward Marshall, "Working Girls Bear Brunt of Wasteful Holiday Giving," *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1912; "Worse Than Useless Giving," *Outlook*, Dec. 21, 1912, 833.

[52]*New York Times*, Nov. 3, 12, 1913; Eleanor Robson Belmont, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Times*, Nov. 21, 1913; Marshall, "Working Girls," *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1912; also, *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 1912.

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Margaret were among the Washington leaders. The *New York Times* praised SPUG as "a movement to restore sanity to Christmas," comparing it favorably to the contemporary "Safe and Sane" Fourth of July and New Year's Eve movements.[53]

However, the organization also drew less positive press coverage. Dean Collins, a columnist for the Portland *Oregonian*, was particularly vicious. In one of several attacks on SPUG and useful giving, he announced that "in accordance with the demand of the Spug for only inexpensive, useful and much-needed gifts, I hereby recommend for all Spugs on Christmas day, a present of a brace of kicks, to be delivered by the thickest-booted mailman in the service." Like Collins, critics painted a popular picture of the Spug as a sort of Scrooge who assaulted the Christmas spirit. One editor quipped that "a 'Spug' and his money are never parted." A *Philadelphia Inquirer* story in the form of a Christmas letter between friends included the sardonic postscript, "Are you a horrid 'Spug?' I hope not, for I bought you a present!"[54]

Stung by such criticism, Eleanor Belmont announced in 1913 that the organization was changing its name to the Society for the Promotion of Useful Giving. She avowed that SPUG had no plans "to interfere with or limit the purchase of Christmas presents," although she allowed that it might "bring about a few changes in the kind of presents sold to anxious buyers as useful Christmas gifts." She suggested, for instance, that if one's friend needed stockings, they would make a useful and appropriate present.[55] By its focus on useful presents of affection, SPUG thus staked out a position that seemed to combine the widow's sentiment with Howe's call for useful presents.[56]

Redesigning the Gift

Although SPUG was short-lived, the promotion of useful giving was not. Margaret Woodrow Wilson called in 1913 for "a plan of useful Christmas

[53]*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Nov. 22, 1913; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 7, 1913; *Aberdeen (South Dakota) Daily News*, Dec. 15, 1913, all available http://infoweb.newsbank.com. *Washington Post*, Dec. 3, 1913; *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1913.

[54]Dean Collins, "Gleams Through the Mist," *(Portland) Oregonian*, Dec. 21, 1913; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 20, 1913 and Dec. 28, 1913, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.

[55]*New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1912, Nov. 12, 1913.

[56]Despite its renown, SPUG was short-lived. Its members turned their attention to war relief work in 1914, and the society seems to have disappeared after 1915, although the federal government resurrected it during World War I to promote Liberty Bonds and war savings certificates as Christmas gifts. On SPUG during World War I, see *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1914, Dec. 23, 1917; *Wilkes Barre (PA) Times*, Nov. 3, 1917, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.

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giving" that might, she claimed, "alter the Christmas spirit all over this mighty and prosperous land." SPUG's advocacy of useful presents put it in step with other pragmatic critics, who sought not to end giving but to change its direction. Together, pragmatic and aesthetic critics created a new paradigm of the gift that emphasized utility. Carolyn Crane suggested the tenets of this model that year in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, explaining that many of the baby gifts she received "had the true requisites of real gifts: they were beautiful, useful, and had an individuality that always suggested the giver."[57] Like SPUG, gift reformers embraced the modernist equation of beauty and utility while retaining the gift's affective value.

Wedding advice demonstrated most dramatically the shift from what former president Grover Cleveland denounced as the "merely ornamental" to the "homely" and practical gift. Gift advisers endorsed Cleveland's advocacy of wedding presents like "the chest of drawers, the dining-table, the comfortables and quilts, the crockery and furniture, and the other articles useful in home-building which our grandmothers gave our mothers on their wedding days."[58]

Anna Leonard had wondered in 1899 why "china is not more often given for wedding presents." By the 1910s it had taken a prominent place among pragmatic recommendations for household gifts. Hilda Richmond counseled *Ladies' Home Journal* readers that "fine linens, solid silver, well-bound books, fine china" were appropriate wedding gifts. The new shelter magazines that promoted the modern aesthetic of interior decorators added to the chorus of useful gift advice. *House Beautiful* avowed that "silver, china and linen are three staple household lines of which no bride ever has too much."[59]

American wedding gifts began to show evidence of this shift by the early twentieth century. Mary Asia Hilf, a Russian Jewish immigrant, recalled that her wedding presents included "fine table linens, beautiful dishes, and lovely silverware." Along with such Arts and Crafts stalwarts as Rookwood and Tiffany vases and a "hand-painted chocolate pot," Louise Schoenberger Conway received practical percolators, library scissors, book racks, and a casserole dish for her 1908 wedding. She received some

[57] *New York Times*, Dec. 18, 1913; Carolyn Crane, "Some Gifts They Gave My Baby," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Nov. 1913, 67.

[58] Grover Cleveland, "The Honest American Marriage," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Oct. 1906, 7.

[59] *New York Times*, July 2, 1899; Richmond, "Golden Rule"; "Sensible Wedding Gifts," *House Beautiful*, July 1912, 43.

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duplicate gifts—three percolators and a coffee pot, for instance—and she amassed as much silver and glass as earlier brides, but more of these seemed practical rather than purely ornamental. And there was nary a bonbon dish to be found among her 170 wedding presents.[60]

The *Jewish Child* suggested that useful gifts were not limited to those for housekeeping in a 1915 story promoting self sacrifice, thrift, and Jewish gift giving. Young Esther goes to a store selling Jewish goods to pick out a bar mitzvah present for her brother. Over a period of months she painstakingly saves the 98 cents needed to purchase him a *Machzor*, the high holidays prayer book, which becomes his most treasured gift.[61]

Advisers recommended a new practicality in Christmas giving as well. Although the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1900 claimed that women disliked presents of home furnishings, the *Ladies' Home Journal* got around this by creating a new category of "Family Cooperative Gifts to the House." Suggestions under this heading in 1905 included a water filter, bathroom fixtures, and a kitchen cabinet. Not coincidentally, Hoosier Manufacturing trumpeted its kitchen cabinet as "the Housekeeper's Best Christmas gift" in an advertisement on the same page. The gift suggestions for "Wife or Mother" blended personal items such as clothing and purses with household goods such as a "set of baking dishes" and "linen luncheon sets." Another article recommended a "nursery chair" with drawers and an attached bathing bowl as an "especially useful present for a prospective mother." The magazine's 1909 list featured useful gifts such as umbrellas, electric irons, and a gas range. *Popular Mechanics*, a publication targeting men and boys, carried an article on Christmas toys in 1910 that highlighted educational toys, the child's equivalent of useful gifts. These included a model of Robert Peary's ship to the North Pole, a submarine, German-made cork building blocks and engineering sets, and model planes. Although this article, unlike those in women's magazines, was devoid of advice and merely delineated the popular toys of the year, its placement in the Christmas issue made the message to prospective givers clear.[62]

[60]Mary Asia Hilf, *No Time for Tears*, as told to Barbara Bourns (New York, 1964), 135; Louise Schoenberger Conway, Wedding Present List, 1908, doc. 493, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library, Winterthur, DE.

[61]Judith Ish-Kishor, "Saving Up," *Jewish Child*, Oct. 8, 1915, 1–2.

[62]Kate Masterson, "Man and His Christmas Shopping," *Saturday Evening Post*, Dec. 8, 1900; "What Shall I Give for Christmas?" *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1905, 42; "Suggestions for Christmas Presents for Mother and Child," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1905, 28; "What to Give for Christmas," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1909, 92; E. E. North, "The First Aviation Christmas," *Popular Mechanics*, Dec. 1910, 771–76.

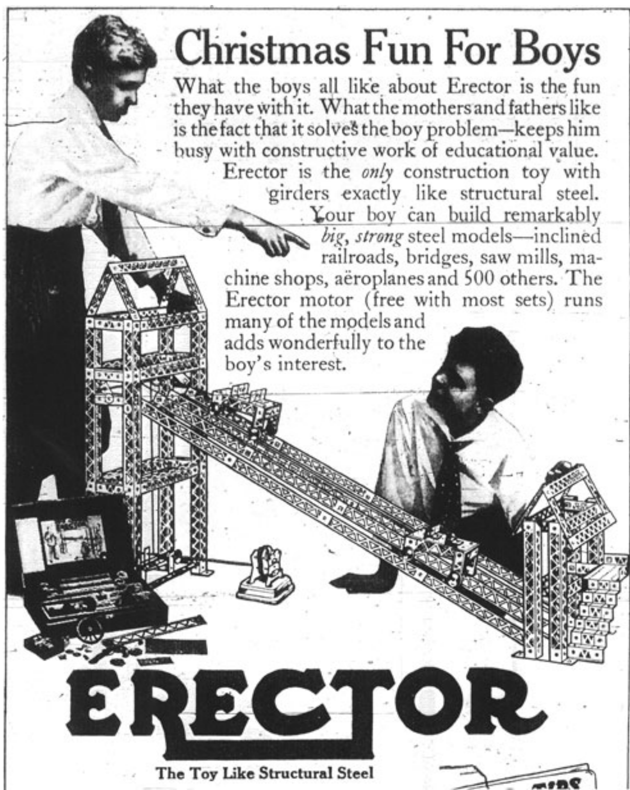

Figure 3. Educational toys were the equivalent of useful gifts for children. Erector sets promised to engage boys in "constructive work of educational value." Erector set advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1915, 64.

Christmas givers took some heed of this pragmatic advice. Bertie Hamlin described the silk stockings and socks her daughter gave her and her husband in 1919 as "most useful presents and much appreciated." A *Good Housekeeping* reader reported that her six-year-old son had received the useful Christmas gift of a "homemade desk" stocked with paper, pencils, crayons, scissors, and other supplies. Another wrote that she gave her young daughter a "box of red and blue-bordered children's handkerchiefs" for "*her use only*." This gift reflected both hygiene concerns and the contemporary view of children as distinct individuals, a notion embraced by businesses that began to market such products for little consumers.[63]

[63]Huybertie Hamlin, Diary, p. 193, folder 3, box 41, Hamlin Papers; "Discoveries," *Good Housekeeping*, Dec. 1909, 753–54. On the development of the child consumer, see, for instance,

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Magnolia Le Guin's experience suggests that changing ideas about gifts and children penetrated beyond the urban middle class. This rural Georgia housewife and mother of eight noted in her diary how much she savored her subscription to *Ladies' Home Journal*, one of the key purveyors of gift advice. She carefully recorded her children's Christmas gifts, a mixture of toys and practical items. In 1905, for instance, she gave her young sons gloves, tablets, and pencils, along with fruit and candy. She gave her two-year-old daughter a doll, although the girl had wanted Santa Claus to bring her a "tiny hammer." Her husband gave Le Guin the rocking chair she wanted. Another year one of her young sons "cried because Santa Claus didn't bring him a doll." The Le Guin Christmas presents also demonstrated the growing emphasis on the recipient's desires in selecting gifts. Her husband fulfilled Le Guin's desire for the rocker, and they tried to satisfy their children's wishes. She reported that she made her son a rag doll, and that her husband had searched unsuccessfully for a hammer for her daughter.[64]

If these experiences were typical, Americans gave increasingly fewer handcrafted presents; LeGuin's rag doll stands out as an exception. Another rural mother, Grace Snyder, ordered her children's Christmas presents from Montgomery Ward's in 1914, taking advantage of the new parcel post service. Mabel Hubbard Bell, in an 1893 letter to her husband, Alexander Graham Bell, had claimed that a handmade present was no gift at all if the recipient had no use for it: "If Papa needs an inkstand badly why must I make him a book-mark which he doesn't need when I can buy the inkstand?" She asked, "What is more like love than to seek . . . what the loved one needs and desire to satisfy that need?"[65]

Pragmatic advisers advocated homemade gifts only if they met this test of need and utility. Carolyn Crane, for instance, praised the "stocking forms of graduated sizes which [her nephew] had laboriously and carefully whittled," a toy chest "designed and made" by another nephew, a crib quilt "patiently and lovingly pieced" together by a "dear old great-aunt," a "creeping-rug" made by the child's grandmother, and, most beloved of all, an old shawl given by the baby's great-grandmother, who "had wrapped all her babies in

Daniel Thomas Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer* (Durham, NC, 2004).

[64]Charles A. Le Guin, ed., *A Home-Concealed Woman: The Diaries of Magnolia Wynn Le Guin, 1901–1913* (Athens, GA, 1990), 64 192, 195.

[65]Snyder, *No Time*, 441; Mabel Hubbard Bell to Alexander Graham Bell, Dec. 10, 1893, quoted in Restad, "Burden of Ritual," 27–28.

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its warm folds."[66] Each of these gifts clearly combined function, beauty, and sentiment. Advisers and individuals increasingly rejected even handcrafted gifts that did not.

Ida Dudley Dale's diary gives a picture of the type of handmade gifts Americans still exchanged. She recorded in 1914 that her grandmother gave her "the daintiest little apron, embroidered in pink roses" for her birthday, and a friend sent "white cuffs embroidered in navy blue with a dash of red."[67] Dale clearly treasured these gifts, which combined use, beauty, and sentiment. Dale herself, however, purchased most of the presents she gave as an adult, whether by inclination or because of her duties as a local historian and genealogist in Staten Island.

Like Dale, many American women had less time to make gifts or lacked the skill and desire to do so. One adviser noted that "to-day many women are too busy to do embroidery and knitting." In such cases, they might give the illusion of a handcrafted gift by purchasing items made by other hands. A 1912 article in the *Woman's Home Companion* described a gift shop established by a widow, who asked her friends "to contribute something embroidered for her to sell on a fifteen per cent commission." She displayed the table runners and sofa pillows thus acquired in such a way that "except that each article had a little white ticket upon it, it looked like a genuine home." This had the dual (and practical) effect of providing income for women's handicrafts and the shop's owner. Another article claimed that such stores offered "an avenue of recognition to the skill of many an invalid, handy with her fingers, but unable to make a necessary living."[68]

Etiquette books and magazines also introduced the bridal shower as a new gift occasion that combined handicraft and pragmatism. *American Hebrew* reported that the "custom is growing in popularity because it is so practical." The shower both "provides the bride-to-be with useful articles . . . which come in very handy when she goes into housekeeping" and "enables those friends who cannot afford more expensive gifts to donate their inexpensive item towards a big and useful whole." Women's magazines promoted this invented tradition by providing ideas for showers. In the *Ladies' Home*

[66]Crane, "Some Gifts."

[67]Diary of Ida Dudley Dale, Sept. 24, 1914, MS 27, folder 3.6, box 3, Ida Dudley Dale Collection, Staten Island Historical Society.

[68]Tante, "What Would *You* Do?" *Delineator*, Sept. 1915, 23; Estelle Lambert Matteson, "The 'Many Happy Returns' Shop," *Woman's Home Companion*, Oct. 1912, 28; Lillian M. Osgood, "Gift Shops," *House Beautiful*, Dec. 1912, 21.

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Journal, for instance, Mary McKim Marriott reported on a variety of practical showers, such as one in which each guest made a pair of curtains and another where the gifts were kitchen utensils. Perhaps the ultimate in pragmatism was the "housecleaning shower" thrown by "business girls whose tired eyes and fagged condition after hours prohibited hand-made gifts." Instead they gave cleaning supplies such as "a bottle of ammonia, sand soap, scouring soap, mop, tin pail, dust cloths, . . . a scrubbing-brush, brooms."[69]

Showers also helped to prevent the inefficient duplication of gifts, since the hostess coordinated the present giving. When Irene Sweeney received an invitation to a shower for Mae Miller in 1918, for instance, the hostesses specified that it was a linen shower.[70] When givers failed to follow such instructions or gave unwanted presents, prescriptive writers, echoing the decorators who advised their readers to get rid of ornamental items, began to suggest that recipients had no obligation to keep those gifts.

Extreme Pragmatism: Regifting and Monetary Presents

Although Eliza Leslie had advised in 1859 that "it is mean and dishonourable to give away a present," such strictures gave way under the onslaught of ornamental and duplicate gifts. By 1898, the *New York Times* quoted a bridesmaid who pragmatically suggested not engraving silver gifts so that duplicates "could always be exchanged for other things." Gift writers also began to suggest that regifting such duplicates might be acceptable. The *Times* reported that a 1903 bride despaired at her gift givers' lack of originality but reasoned that at least "she would have wedding presents to give other people for the rest of her life."[71]

A *Delineator* advice columnist in 1915 provided a pragmatic rationale for regifting as a multipurpose solution to bad gifting, household clutter, and the financial strains of gift obligations. Tante related the story of a young bride who found herself enmeshed in an endless cycle of gifting. "When we got married we got heaps of things" the bride began. When the best man and a bridesmaid subsequently married, "we had to give each of them a present corresponding with those they had given us." The growing web of family connections entailed new gifts. She explained that her "sister-in-law

[69]"For the June Bride," *American Hebrew*, May 28, 1915, 90; Mary McKim Marriott, "When Girls Entertain at 'Showers,'" *Ladies' Home Journal*, Feb. 1911, 66. The first mention of showers I could find was in Kingsland, *Book of Weddings*, 138–39.

[70]Shower invitation to Irene Sweeney, 1918, in author's possession.

[71][Eliza] Leslie, *Miss Leslie's Behaviour Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* (1859; New York, 1972), 174; *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 1898, Feb. 8, 1903.

has a new baby, and John says that she will expect a really grand present—no crocheted socks or homemade blanket." Christmas loomed on the horizon, "and now I have two families to give to instead of one, and all my regular friends besides . . . . I can see ourselves getting into debt before we know it," she concluded in despair.[72]

The young bride confessed that for the two weddings, she had given "something that was given us at our own wedding." Tante endorsed this regifting and told the bride to systematize it by setting up a "give-away box" containing "the duplicates and other gifts you do not care to keep." When the bride worried that her stash of wedding gifts would quickly run out, Tante replied that she could annually add the Christmas and birthday gifts she did not want. The reader had by this point perhaps begun to consider how this solution might look to others, a concern voiced in the bride's worry that "it seems ungracious to give away things which people have given you, especially if they have made them for you." Tante, however, echoed interior decorators and home economists in dismissing this moral objection. Modern women simply did not have enough storage space for all those presents and were "too 'efficient' to clutter up [their] homes with useless trifles." Besides, she reasoned, "when a gift has been given and lovingly accepted, and enjoyed for a while, I think it is all right to give it to somebody else."[73]

Tante went far beyond the mere issue of duplicate gifts. She indicated that it was even acceptable to give away handcrafted presents, the epitome of the nineteenth-century ideal. Like Elizabeth Emery, she suggested that amateur handicrafts did not always fit the demands of either useful beauty or craftsmanship. Tante's advice also reflected a growing emphasis on the recipient's needs and desires. The discerning of these became another hallmark of the good gift, redefining the way the gift expressed the bond between giver and recipient.[74]

Ascertaining what the recipient needed was not necessarily a simple task and could cause anxiety. Tante's story hinted at a solution, however, by implying that newlyweds often lacked cash. Another sign of the turn to useful presents and the focus on the recipient's desires was the increasing acceptability of monetary gifts. In her 1902 book on wedding etiquette, Florence

[72]Tante, "What Would *You* Do?"
[73]Ibid.
[74]This shift to the recipient's desires challenges Barry Schwartz's argument that "the presentation of a gift is an imposition of identity," suggesting the conflicts that often arise between giver and recipient; Schwartz, "Social Psychology of the Gift," 1.

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Kingsland asserted that "the most welcome present comes in the form of a check with which to supply what others have failed to give," although she noted that only immediate family and close relatives could make such gifts. "Money is undoubtedly the most useful Christmas gift," the *Ladies' Home Journal* opined in 1912. Other articles suggested monetary gifts were also suitable for friends, and for birthdays and anniversaries as well as Christmas and weddings. A Jewish children's magazine presented a story in which a boy receives from his father a birthday gift of an iron safe, to which his aunts and uncles contribute birthday coins.[75]

The gift lists of three brides suggest a gradual evolution in the acceptance of such presents. Frances Wells Shaw did not list any monetary gifts in 1893, but Bertie Hamlin recorded gifts of money or gold from her brother, her sister, and an uncle in 1898. By 1908, Louise Conway listed six checks in amounts ranging from twenty to five hundred dollars, as well as a ten-dollar gold piece. There is no evidence to suggest that recipients did not treasure monetary gifts as much as others. Conway, for instance, carefully noted what she had purchased with each check, probably so that she might relate that information in her thank-you notes.[76]

Other occasions saw gifts of money as well. Not surprisingly, such presents were common from parents to children. Ida Dudley Dale recorded in her diary that her father gave her ice skates and money for Christmas when she was eleven and "a crisp $5.00 bill" for her eighteenth birthday in 1902. In 1906 she debated whether to "invest the birthday money which I received from Mother and Grandma" in a bust of Washington Irving, suggesting that recipients of monetary gifts took delight in planning how to spend them. In 1910 she recorded that her mother left "a check under my plate."[77]

Sociological studies of the period suggest that immigrants brought their own traditions of monetary gifting to America. One study asserted that

[75]Kingsland, *Book of Weddings*, 136; "New Ways to Give Christmas Money," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1912, 70; Ida Bunce Sammis, "Ways of Giving Money," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1905, 24; Emanuel Gamoran, "The Little Safe," *Jewish Child*, Oct. 19, 1917, 4. On monetary gifts, see Zelizer, *Social Meaning of Money*, 71–118. On the anxiety of givers, see Waits, *Modern Christmas*, 34–42.

[76]"Wedding Presents of F. L. Wells"; "Pruyn Wedding Presents"; Conway, Wedding Present List.

[77]Dale Diary, Dec. 25, 1895, folder 1.1, box 1; Sept. 25, 1902, folder 1.4, box 1; Sept. 25, 1906, folder 2.4, box 2; Sept. 25, 1910, folder 3.1, box 3, all from Dale Collection. In a sad postscript to her eighteenth birthday entry, Dale noted that she had spent the money on flowers for her father's funeral after his sudden death shortly after her birthday.

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immigrants viewed gifts pragmatically as a way to help a couple set up housekeeping or care for a new baby and thus welcomed financial gifts. In their classic study of Polish immigrants, William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki claimed that Poles favored gifts of money, and the autobiography they commissioned from immigrant Wladek Wizniewski suggested that this tradition continued in America. Wizniewski reported that he and his wife collected just $25 at their Chicago wedding, noting with disgust, "Six families gave not a cent, nor any gift either." He was happier with the proceeds from the birth of his son. He and his wife received $56 cash and a baptismal dress "worth at least $4," which allowed them to pay the midwife and the grocer, buy a cradle, and save $20.[78]

Wary of the baldness of monetary gifts, some advisers suggested a host of creative presentations, from hiding coins in a calendar to baking gingerbread birds with gold pieces for eyes. One woman purchased a box of bonbons for the birthday of a friend who needed money. Removing one piece of candy, she used its foil to wrap "a crisp new bill," thereby disguising it as just another bonbon. Another woman sent to the mint for new coins, which she hid in crepe paper "flowers" and hung on a miniature Christmas tree for a needy relative.[79]

Businesses and Practical Giving

Banks sought to profit from the rise in monetary gifts by suggesting to men that such gifts might teach lessons of thrift to their wives and children. An Oregon bank in 1912 recommended that men give their wives "a couple of hundred dollars as a Christmas gift" to start accounts, explaining that the wives would thereby "learn better business methods and save money and time." Another bank proposed that parents guarantee their children "A Safe and Sane Xmas" by putting a pass book in their stockings.[80]

While gift advisers developed methods of transforming money into a gift, department stores and specialty retailers created the gift certificate for those who could not bring themselves to give cash outright. As early as

[78]Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, *New Homes for Old* (1921; New Brunswick, NJ, 2001), 102–05; William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 2nd ed. (1927; New York, 1958) 1:177; [Wladek Wiszniewski], "Life-Record of an Immigrant" in *Polish Peasant*, eds. Thomas and Znaniecki, 2:2220, 2225.
[79]Lou Eleanor Colby, "When You Send Christmas Money," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1909, 37; "New Ways to Give"; Sammis, "Ways of Giving"; "Discoveries," 754–55. On disguising monetary gifts, see Zelizer, *Meaning of Money*, 105–06, 108–09.
[80]Portland Trust advertisement, *(Portland) Oregonian*, Dec. 20, 1912; United States National Bank advertisement, *(Portland) Oregonian*, Dec. 20, 1914; both http://infoweb.newsbank.com.

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1900 a Kansas City department store offered a gift certificate "for the convenience of patrons who wish to present a holiday gift and have not the time to make the selection." Regal Shoes in Philadelphia claimed its certificate "eliminates all the uncertainty that generally asserts itself in making a present"; the recipient "picks out his own present and everyone is pleased." The gift certificate thus represented another innovation supporting not only pragmatic giving but the new emphasis on the recipient's needs.[81]

Certificates also relieved the giver's anxiety about determining those needs. They cleverly transformed cash into a present and offered a convenient gift solution for those who had little time to shop or did not know the recipient well. A Kansas City store, for example, advertised its certificates "to the busy man who has no time to make gift selections." They proved initially popular with retailers who carried such useful presents as clothing and shoes, which were difficult to select for another because of taste and sizing. By the 1910s, however, the range of certificate issuers had expanded well beyond this. Givers could buy gift certificates for bifocals, phonograph records, and even orchestra and theater tickets.[82]

As the rise of gift certificates suggests, businesses by the early twentieth century viewed gift givers as a reliable market to exploit and expand. A 1900 advertisement in the *Crockery and Glass Journal* asserted that the popularity of June weddings provided an opportunity to china and glass merchants, "coming as it does at a time of year that used to be considered dull, and transforming it into a season of hustling activity." The *Jewelers' Circular* noted that graduations and confirmations also contributed to making June "one very good month for trade." Trade journals published sample advertisements as well as strategies for enhancing gift sales. One jeweler, for instance, wrote that he used window displays to offer gift suggestions, claiming that customers purchased "the identical goods displayed . . . following out the ideas already put into their brain from my window."[83]

[81]Emery, Bird, Thayer & Co. advertisement, *Kansas City Star*, Dec. 15, 1900; Regal advertisement, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 22, 1903; both http://infoweb.newsbank.com.

[82]Woolf Brothers advertisement, *Kansas City Star*, Dec. 16, 1912; Ha'tom's Optical Parlor advertisement, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Dec. 3, 1916; Sampson Music Co. advertisement, *(Boise) Idaho Statesman*, Nov. 30, 1918; *(Portland) Oregonian*, Dec. 11, 1921; Lyric Theatre advertisement, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 21, 1922; all http://infoweb.newsbank.com.

[83]Advertisement for Bravo and Dotter, *Crockery and Glass Journal* 51 (Apr. 26, 1900): 10; "Advertising for Weddings and Graduations," *Jewelers' Circular* 50 (Apr. 26, 1905): 79; "A 'Best Girl' Window Display," *Jewelers' Circular* 50 (May 10, 1905): 81. Also see Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers*, 47–51.

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Although the rejection of ornamental gifts threatened the manufacturers and sellers of such items, it also produced new opportunities. In response to the pragmatic turn, businesses recast formerly ornamental goods as useful and promoted new items as gifts. *Jewelers' Circular* recommended that merchants advertise to middle-class customers by emphasizing that their gifts were "useful, not simply ornamental," implying that the useful gift was a particularly middle-class predilection.[84] In addition to point-of-sale promotions, manufacturers and retailers alike placed increasing numbers of gift advertisements. Newspapers grew thick with local retailers' advertisements in December, and the Christmas advertising sections of the *Craftsman, Popular Mechanics, Good Housekeeping*, and *Harper's Bazaar* could run to almost two hundred pages. Housekeeping and shelter magazines also featured dozens of advertisements for wedding gifts in spring issues.[85]

These advertisements touted everything from flashlights and Thermos bottles to diamonds and furs as useful presents. They suggested tools and workbenches as sensible gifts for men and boys. They promoted Erector sets and blocks as educational presents for children and pushed bicycles as "practical, body-building, muscle-making" Christmas gifts. Clothing retailers also recommended their wares to those seeking useful presents. A Duluth store warned, "Buy the boy no senseless toy—a useful Columbia article [it suggested gloves, caps, and overcoats] looks as fine and lasts much longer." Thermos claimed its bottles made useful gifts for "every member of the family, everyone on the list of friendship," and Eveready called its lights "beautiful even as a piece of fine jewelry and more useful than any other Christmas remembrance." Westinghouse even advertised its utility motor as "A Splendid [Christmas] Gift for Man, Woman or Boy."[86]

Useful gifts for women tended toward household items, although merchants in Portland, Oregon advertised both furs and diamonds as practical gifts. Wiss suggested its sewing shears made an "ideal gift combining utility, beauty and permanence," and Martex recommended that Spugs buy its "Special

[84]"Live Wire June Wedding Advertisements," *Jewelers' Circular* 60 (June 8, 1910): 128.
[85]On advertising in magazines and ensuing debates, see Garvey, *Adman in Parlor*, 171; Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 30–32.
[86]"Yankee" Tools and Grand Rapids Hand Screw advertisements, *Popular Mechanics*, Dec. 1910, 123–24; A.C. Gilbert, Anchor Blocks, and Indian Bicycle advertisements, *Popular Science Monthly*, Dec. 1917, 121, 123, 115; Columbia advertisement, *Duluth News Tribune*, Dec. 22, 1908, http://infoweb.newsbank.com; Thermos advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1915, 79; Eveready advertisement, *Good Housekeeping*, Dec. 1916, 171; Westinghouse advertisement, *Popular Mechanics*, Dec. 1910, 110. For a contemporary advocacy of utility motors, Frederick, *Household Engineering*, 393–95.

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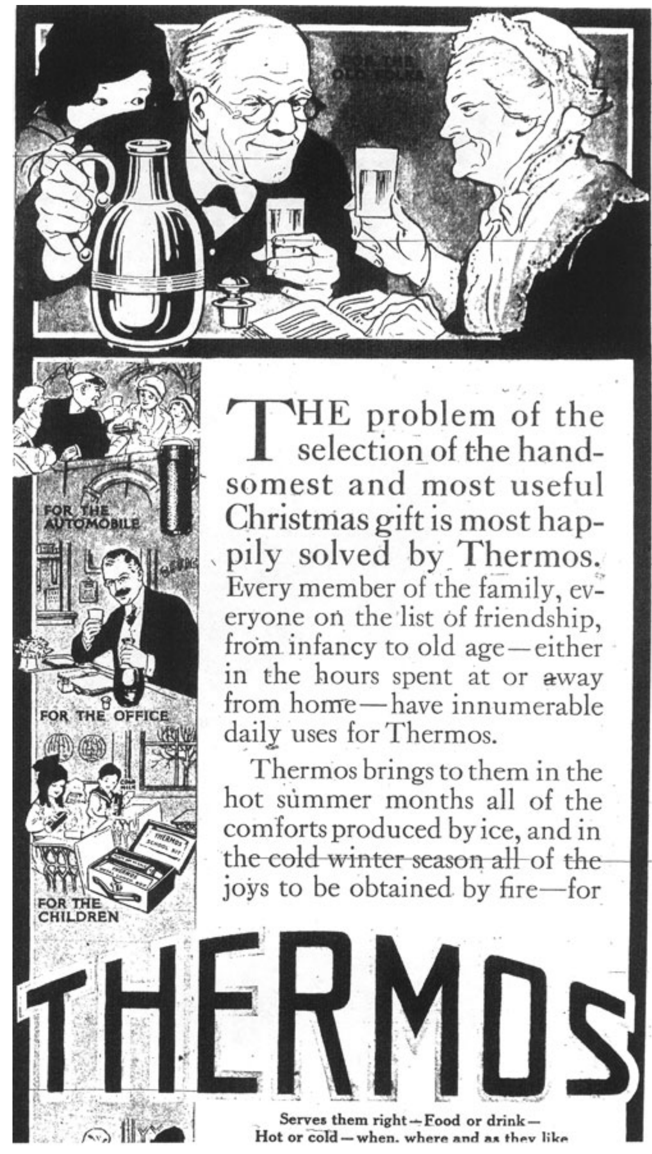

Figure 4. Businesses advertised even mundane items, such as thermoses, as appropriately pragmatic Christmas presents. Thermos advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1915, 79.

Christmas Set" of towels, which combined "sterling utility with artistic beauty." Homer Laughlin China similarly caught the spirit of pragmatism. "Bridal presents, beautiful and useless, were once the rule," an advertisement commented, but "now, costly bric-a-brac is being discarded for things at once

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beautiful and useful." The company suggested its china made the perfect gift. It was not only "beautiful, serviceable and inexpensive," but it would also "be of daily service to them [the newlyweds] for years."[87]

Businesses pounced on SPUG as another marketing tool to add to their Christmas arsenal. Barely a month after the organization's creation, a Kentucky furniture store suggested that consumers join the Spugs and "specialize by presenting useful gifts" such as carpets, bookcases, desks, dressers, and clocks. Dozens of merchants used SPUG to promote useful gifts from shoes and clothing to home furnishings and beyond. The menswear trade even built its 1913 advertising campaign around the organization, advising men that the president, senators, "everybody from workman to captain of industry is a 'Spug' or wants to be."[88]

Advertisers also adopted the language of hygiene reformers and home economists. "Give your wife a Hoosier Cabinet" for Christmas, advised one, and "save miles of steps for her tired feet." Pyrex touted the "greater efficiency" of its glass bakeware, which made it the "ideal gift for every home." Businesses echoed home economists in promoting the new vacuum cleaners as time- and labor-saving gifts for housewives, but they also emphasized their role in sanitizing the home. Hoover proclaimed that its suction sweeper "cleans *thoroughly*," and Duntley promised its sweeper brought "freedom from dust danger."[89]

Like vacuum cleaners, other new electrical goods received increasing promotion as useful gifts for the efficient homemaker. It became less expensive to wire homes for electricity after 1910, and electric companies joined retailers and manufacturers in selling new appliances to promote power consumption. Consumer spending on such items skyrocketed in the 1910s.[90] In

[87]Emporium and Aronson's advertisements, (*Portland) Oregonian*, Dec. 13, 1914, http://infoweb.newsbank.com; Wiss advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1905, 53; Martex advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1915, 79; Homer Laughlin advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, June 1913, 54.

[88]E. L. March advertisement, *Lexington Herald*, Dec. 19, 1912, http://infoweb.newsbank.com. On the menswear campaign, see, for instance, Palace Clothing Co. advertisement, *Kansas City Star*, Dec. 12, 1913; Washer Brothers advertisement, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Dec. 14, 1913; Sam'l Rosenblatt & Co. advertisement, *(Portland) Oregonian*, Dec. 14, 1913; all http://infoweb.newsbank.com.

[89]Hoosier Cabinet advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1912, 51; Pyrex advertisement, *Good Housekeeping*, Dec. 1916, 161; Hoover advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1909, 49; Duntley advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1913, 62. For contemporary views of the efficiency and cleaning power of vacuum cleaners, Frederick, *Household Engineering*, 156–64.

[90]Frederick, *Household Engineering*, 127–29, 393–94; Thomas J. Schlereth, "Conduits and Conduct: Home Utilities in Victorian America, 1876–1915" in *American Home Life, 1880–*

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Figure 5. Homer Laughlin suggested its china made a "beautiful and useful" wedding present, unlike the "bric-á-brac" popular in the late 1800s. Homer Laughlin advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, June 1913, 54.

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Figure 6. Martex jumped on the Spug bandwagon to promote its bath towels. Martex advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1915, 79.

addition to vacuums, electrical gifts included percolators, irons, toasters, grills, and even washing machines. A Pennsylvania hardware store promoted these as gifts desired by "the modern housewife" who used electricity to make her home more efficient. The Western Electric Company noted "the growing trend toward sane and practical giving" in recommending an electric washer or an intercom system that would "save useless stair-climbing." Hotpoint recommended electrical appliances for both Christmas and wedding presents, claiming that they "did away entirely with all of the dirt, trouble and delays of other fuels." Such gifts, the company asserted, provided that "rare combination—giftiness and usefulness."[91]

A 1919 Hotpoint advertisement observed that "it is now the accepted practice to give work-a-day gifts."[92] Whether a household or personal item, whether purchased or handcrafted, the odds were great that a present in the 1910s was a useful item. Prescriptive writers, interior decorators, Arts and Crafts adherents, home economists, and purveyors of consumer goods had entered into a tacit collaboration that ensured the ascendance of such presents. They had rejected the Victorian gift ideal of ornamental beauty, replacing it with one built on the emergent modernist aesthetic of beauty inhering in function and simplicity.

Just as Americans did not abandon their overstuffed parlors immediately on the advice of interior decorators, so their gifting practices did not shift overnight from the sentimental to the pragmatic. The occasional voice still rang out in support of the useless gift. Catherine Groth, for example, avowed in 1909 that Christmas gifts ought to be "something superfluous."[93] Dissenters had become the exception, however, as Americans heeded the prescriptive writers and businesses that spread the new mantra of useful gifts. The redesign of the American gift in the Progressive Era was a lasting one, not a mere fashion trend. Although decorative gifts never went completely out of style,

1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services, eds. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (Knoxville, TN, 1992), 233; Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "Coal Stoves and Clean Sinks: Housework between 1890 and 1930" in *American Home Life*, 211–12; Stanley Lebergott, *Consumer Expenditures: New Measures and Old Motives* (Princeton, 1996); *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millenial ed., tables Cd26, Cd32, http://hsus.cambridge.org/.

[91]White Hardware advertisement, *Wilkes Barre Times*, Dec. 15, 1916, http://infoweb.newsbank.com; Western Electric and Hotpoint advertisements, *Saturday Evening Post*, Nov. 29, 1913, 40, 30–31; Hotpoint advertisements, *Ladies' Home Journal*, June 1919, 78, Dec. 1915, 77.

[92]Hotpoint advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, June 1919, 78.

[93]Catherine D. Groth, "The Giving of Christmas Presents," *Harper's Weekly*, Dec. 25, 1909, 29.

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the ideal of the purely ornamental (or useless) present did not make a comeback. The emphasis on pragmatism in gifting has continued to the present day, particularly for wedding and baby presents.

The redesigned gift displayed a definite consumerist orientation. It was no longer an extension of the giver but a testament to her ability to discern what the recipient most desired. Florida Pier suggested that the common disconnect between recipients' desires and the gifts they received could be resolved if givers would only "ask just what the prospective recipient would like." Advertisers, not surprisingly, encouraged this. "Ask for This Christmas Gift," Bissell exhorted women, because "he'll never, never think of it," according to another vacuum advertisement. Lionel told boys, "Ask Dad for this Train."[94]

Warren Susman identified a shifting emphasis in American culture from character in the nineteenth century to personality in the twentieth century, and gift literature reveals evidence of this change.[95] If Victorians selected gifts that showed the recipient's character, modern givers sought presents that suited the recipient's personality. Rather than the giver's knowledge of and sentiment toward the recipient determining gift selection, the recipient's needs and desires increasingly dictated the choice. Recipients, in effect, began to choose their own gifts just as they selected other consumer goods. This change was most clearly evident in the growth of monetary gifts and in merchants' creation of the gift certificate.

The shift to recipient-directed giving also bore the mark of interior decorators, who stressed that modern homes should reflect the residents' personalities. If one had to give a wedding gift, one needed instruction as to what would fit in with the recipient's home décor. Showers were one method of directing givers, because the hostess was privy to the bride's wishes and could convey these to her guests. A 1915 short story hinted at an even more efficient system when a wedding guest consulted her local jeweler to see what gifts had already been purchased. This reflected a concerted campaign by the jewelry industry to orchestrate wedding gift sales to fatten

[94]Bissell advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1915, 60; Eden advertisement, *Good Housekeeping*, Dec. 1916, 133; Lionel advertisement, *Popular Mechanics*, Dec. 1915, 161; Florida Pier, "The Gentler View: The Philosophy of Presents," *Harper's Weekly*, Nov. 19, 1910, 21.

[95]Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984), 271–85. Karen Halttunen discusses the influence of this shift on home décor in "Parlor to Living Room."

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their coffers. That same year *Jeweler's Circular* suggested that jewelers peruse engagement notices and contact prospective brides to "get a list of the members of both families, . . . the friends, . . . and especially everyone who will be called upon for a gift." They should then send personal letters inviting guests to purchase their gifts at the jeweler's establishment.[96]

The records kept by jewelers and other dealers in wedding gifts became the first primitive gift registries. Still, if the registry itself was the brainchild of merchants, it stemmed just as surely from the aesthetic and pragmatic critics who advocated useful giving. The registry, which listed the bride's preferences, was the ultimate functional gift system. Moreover, it decisively shifted gift selection to the recipient and theoretically did away with the problem of duplicate presents and those that did not suit the recipient's home décor.

The pragmatic redesign did nothing to stem the tide of gifts, which continued to grow exponentially. *Ladies' Home Journal*'s annual list of suggested Christmas gifts and recipients grew rather than shrank over this period, for instance. However, most reformers never really wished to end the gift system rooted in consumer capitalism and middle-class domesticity. Rather, they sought to redirect and organize it, to make it more efficient while retaining its emphasis on the maintenance of the bonds of family and friendship. In this they succeeded to a great extent. Their reforms also paved the way for the subsequent development of the gift registry, gift shops, gift advisors, and an entire gift industry in the 1920s and 1930s. Over the course of the twentieth century, prescriptive writers who dispensed gift advice would increasingly work in tandem with the gift industry to organize, direct, and promote gift giving for an ever-multiplying number of sentimental occasions.

[96]Caroline Klingensmith Gardner, "Real Ibsen Ware," *Woman's Home Companion*, June 1915, 5; "June—The Month of Brides and Girl Grads," *Jewelers' Circular* 70 (May 26, 1915): 111.

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