

## HOME DESIGN

**TUPPERWARE: THE PROMISE OF PLASTIC IN 1950s AMERICA / Alison J. Clarke. -Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, October 1999.--251 p. :ill.-ISBN 1-56098-827-4 (cl.,alk.paper): \$24.95**

In *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastics in 1950s America*, Alison Clarke has combined the fields of gender studies and social history to provide the reader with a fascinating snapshot of life in post- World War II America. Inventor Earl Tupper developed a collection of food storage and serving containers that, despite their marriage of high design and practicality, did not successfully infiltrate the American retail market. Tupper possessed the inventor's vision but lacked the ability to package his product for his "Tupperization" of America. This changed in 1951 when Tupper hired Brownie Wise, a single mother from Detroit, to handle the distribution and promotion of Tupperware. Her promotion of the home party sales plan over traditional retail distribution and flamboyant promotions was the undoubted reason for the tripling of the company's profits in 1954 to twenty-five million dollars. Unfortunately her flamboyance and self-promotion were the cause of a rift with the reclusive Tupper that ultimately lead to her dismissal in 1959.

Clarke's well-researched book is illustrated with advertising and promotional images documenting the dramatic rise in the sales of Tupperware in the U.S. and abroad, as well as photographs of the enthusiastic Wise in action. While replete with extensive notes and a quite useful index, the book lacks a bibliography. Clarke writes in a slightly dry academic style yet includes numerous lively passages and quotes from Tupper, Wise and others that make the text eminently readable. It carefully chronicles the evolution of the role of women during the period and the influence that Wise had in changing the perception of gender in the workplace while maintaining her own personal form of femininity. Clarke also examines the history of direct sales and its impact on Tupperware's financial success. The pivotal role Brownie Wise played in the marketing of Tupperware, her influence on product decisions, and the beginning of self-empowerment of women is well-presented.

The social and financial impact of the Tupperware party is also examined. Direct sales not only provided extra income for housewives, who operated on a part-time basis, but had the potential to become a serious full-time career. Women who might be more or less house-bound with child rearing and household duties could use the home party as a means to sustain or encourage social ties and at the same time foster a sense of independence and achievement. Ultimately, the home party began the process of individuation that was bolstered by the power of positive thinking espoused by Brownie Wise and made popular by Norman Vincent Peale. Wise, who was the first woman to appear on the cover of *Business Week* as the leader of a multi-million dollar corporation was quoted "If we build the people, they'll build the business."

What the book lacks, and what might make it a somewhat marginal choice for many art libraries, is any in-depth discussion of Tupper's design process and the participation of any collaborators. The development of Tupper's seal with its classic "burp" is discussed,

but no mention of other designers, or how design decisions were made are presented. Emphasis is placed on the modernity of the design (beautifully illustrated by a photograph of Tupperware included in a 1956 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art), but questions about how the design was achieved remain unanswered. These are minor issues that may affect the selection of the book for some art libraries. Clarke presents an intriguing topic in a fascinating manner that makes this book a good addition to a general art or design library.

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