Western Living Sunset Style in the 1920s and 1930s: The Middlebrow, the Civilized, and the Modern

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In the 1920s and 1930s, Sunset Magazine created images of the West and westerners that exerted considerable social power. By imbuing depictions of the civilized and the modern with prescriptions about social order, this middlebrow lifestyle magazine offered the white middle-class components for fashioning a collective identity that reinforced their regional dominance.

En los años veinte y treinta, Sunset Magazine creó imágenes del Oeste y su gente que llegaron a tener un poder social importante. Por llenar sus descripciones de lo civilizado y lo moderno con recetas sobre el orden social, esta revista de la clase media ofreció a sus lectores blancos los componentes para construir una identidad colectiva que fortaleció su dominio regional.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Sunset Magazine emerged as a regionally significant middlebrow journal. Its experts—engaged in the middlebrow mission of educating its readership in good taste in literature, art, design, and architecture—exported trends from the preserve of high culture and fitted them to a broadened audience and new domestic spaces. More often than not, acquiring good taste in the terms laid down by Sunset meant being able to deftly maneuver through the modern world of consumer goods to purchase the right books, hue of paint, curtains, dining-room set, or home. Much more was at stake, however, than simply the selection of the correct rug that coordinated with the correct sofa in a way that properly brought together a harmony of line, form, color, and texture in both interior and exterior design. In Sunset, the middlebrow mission also mobilized the interrelated discourses of civilization and modernity and the particular configurations of race, class, gender, and social order that those terms implied. Through their didactic efforts, Sunset’s editors and experts contributed to the development of ideas about what constituted civilized,

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modern western living and who constituted a civilized, modern westerner. At a time of accelerated white migration to the Pacific Slope and Southwest, Sunset produced a vision of western living that simultaneously defined whites’ place in the region and offered components that could be used to fashion a collective identity for white, middle-class westerners that was both distinctively western but also recognizably within the American mainstream. Reading Sunset magazines from the 1920s and 1930s facilitates an exploration of middlebrow culture on the familiar terrain of literature as well as the less well-traveled terrain of the domestic space of the modern home. It reveals a compelling story of how visions of social order and aesthetic sensibility constructed and reinforced one another in the early-twentieth-century American West.

The first three decades following World War I saw the proliferation of an unprecedented range of activities directed toward making various forms of high culture available to a broader audience. The Book-of-the-Month Club, university extension programs, radio programs that aired literary criticism, affordable collections of “Great Books” and encyclopedias, the production of outlines that broke complex works into easily digestible bites of knowledge, and book review sections in newspapers all came into being during this time. Correspondence courses, night schools, women’s study clubs, the lecture circuit, and public libraries were reinvigorated by a new interest in what was initially given the innocuous and generally positive label of “voluntary education.” Books like The Meaning of a Liberal Education—published in 1927 and reviewed in Sunset’s pages—probed and praised this “growing interest of the people in education as a gospel of self-improvement and social salvation.”

By 1933, in an essay for the Saturday Review, Margaret Widdemer—mobilizing a term first used by Van Wyck Brooks in the early years of the twentieth century—had identified the consumers of these novel kinds of cultural products as “middlebrow.” According to her definition, the middlebrow consisted of the “men and women, fairly civilized, fairly literate, who support the critics and lecturers and publishers by purchasing their wares.” Situated between the “tabloid addict class” and the “tiny group of intellectuals,” in Widdemer’s schema the middlebrow stood simply for “the majority reader.” Middlebrow defenders applauded its popularizing and democratizing tendencies. They appreciated the careful intervention of critics as guides not only to steer the average American in the direction of the best in arts and letters but also to explain the ways in which such products should be understood. Yet not everyone sawmiddlebrow culture as such a positive development. A bevy of critics derided the products of middlebrow culture on both aesthetic and economic grounds. They situated middlebrow culture in the vanguard of a rapidly advancing “bastardization of taste.”


in light of what they saw as the often diluted quality of its products and because of its connection to a market-driven, mass consumer culture.3

Sunset, however, aligned itself firmly within the camp of the middlebrow defenders because it was, in the 1920s and 1930s, a middlebrow journal. Like the Book-of-the-Month Club, through its reviews of recent literary works and its fiction and verse offerings, Sunset carefully advised its readers about what was worth reading and what was good writing. Its sections, features, and special issues about interior decoration, architectural planning, and exterior construction of homes in the West sought to educate readers in the basic concepts of art and architecture and to guide them in fashioning an appropriately tasteful and modern domestic space for western living. In good middlebrow form, Sunset employed a coterie of experts—literary critics, interior decorators, and architects—to aid its readers in the selection of products that would best suit them and convey the desired image of tasteful, artistic modernity to others. Sunset’s editors also encouraged readers to write to the magazine for advice and ran a regular column, “Sunset Home Consultation Service,” that featured expert answers to readers’ questions.

Sunset’s influence even extended beyond the scope of the printed page. In 1926, readers could tune-in to radio broadcasts of Sunset’s “Book Chats” on Monday evenings. In 1933, they could visit the Sunset Home Institute’s Charm House, located on the third floor of San Francisco’s grand department store, The Emporium, and view models of modern, tastefully decorated homes. Similar hands-on advice could be received at the model home at Barker Brothers in Los Angeles and at H. C. Capwell Company in Oakland. Not only could visitors examine the contents of Sunset-style western homes, they could also attend the monthly lectures given by Sunset’s editors and contributors. Edgar Harrison Wileman, Sunset’s interior decorating editor, in addition to presenting lectures at each of these sites, also offered “short practical lecture courses (both day and evening classes) in interior decoration . . . in connection with the extension division of the University of California” that “stressed color and design in the home; selection of home furnishings; [and the] correct arrangement of furniture.”4

By the 1920s, Sunset had been an established periodical for just over twenty years. Launched by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1898, Sunset had initially been designed to publicize and promote the West to eastern tourists and businessmen.5 By


1912, its ownership and emphasis had shifted and under the direction of Woodhead, Field, and Company, Sunset began to follow the model of popular national periodicals like Harper’s and the Atlantic Monthly. Enhanced literary offerings, as well as articles addressing political and social issues in the Progressive spirit, graced the magazine’s pages and it became increasingly directed toward westerners—with regular sections, for example, on “Western Homes and Gardens” and “Interesting Westerners”—although it continued to see itself as a national publication. In 1923, it added the subtitle, The West’s Great National Magazine.6 Its February 1926 issue bore this mantle and was also the magazine’s yearly special “Western Homes Number.” As evidenced by its cover, it featured F. Roney Weir’s short story, “The Saving House,” an announcement proclaiming “Cash prizes for the best western home designs!” and an article on “Divorce and the American Home” by California journalist and regular Sunset contributor Gladys Johnson. Maurice Logan, noted California painter, committed modernist, and member of the Fauvist influenced Society of Six, created the cover’s art. (See Figure 1.) In 1928, the Lane Publishing Company purchased Sunset, and under Laurence W. Lane’s direction, the magazine’s emphasis on literature, social issues, and politics gave way more fully to an emphasis on homes, their construction and decoration, family life, gardens, travel, and food in the West, particularly the Pacific and southwestern regions.7 Its May 1933 cover carried a proud statement of the magazine’s financial success and popularity despite the hard economic times: “In the Pacific West—SUNSET has more subscribers than all national home and garden magazines combined.” According to Proctor Mellquist, Sunset’s editor in 1973, “It was the conviction of L.W. Lane, Sr. that life in the West was different enough from the rest of the nation to justify and sustain a magazine designed to serve Western differences.” The magazine’s numerous readers, it would seem, agreed.9

“‘And so you are trying to improve the Indians,’ said Jane, peering at me over her glasses in the manner of one looking at a person who has mistakenly espoused a hopeless cause. No need to say she was horrified to find that I had broken away from everything natural and normal, and was earning my living by being a Home Demonstration Agent on an Indian Reservation!” So began Freda Sperling’s article, “Better Homes among the Klamath Indians” featured in Sunset’s June 1930 issue. In it,

8 Sunset (May 1933). While data on exactly how many or what kind of Americans regularly read Sunset during these years is not readily available, according to Kevin Starr, “the 1930s witnessed the emergence of Sunset [as] one of the most successful regional lifestyle magazines in the country.” Starr, The Dream Endures: California Enters the 1940s (New York, 1997), 6. The front cover of the January 1934 issue read: “This Issue Goes to More Than 200,000 Western Homes.”
Figure 1. Cover of Sunset’s February 1926 “Western Homes Number.” Illustration courtesy of Sunset Magazine.
Freda told her friend Jane—a kind of skeptical everywoman, “bent on asking just the same questions that everyone else asks”—of her work among the “Indian Homemakers” at the Klamath Indian Reservation in Oregon. Right off the bat, Freda corrected a few of Jane’s misperceptions about Indians. She assured her of the Indians’ ability to communicate in English and assuaged Jane’s fears that Freda might be “stabbed in the back or scalped any time.” “These Indians are all civilized,” she explained. “To be sure, I have heard that some of the older men had a record for killing white men in their young days, but now they are very peaceful.”

Yet while Freda emphasized that the Klamath Indians had been “civilized” to the point where they could communicate in the dominant culture’s language and were no longer violent towards whites, she also made sure that her readers understood that, in other respects—“homemaking and home improvement” in particular—the Indians remained evolutionarily retarded and required the aid of the Indian Service to raise them from barbarism to civilization. Freda’s efforts to remedy this situation revolved around forming women’s clubs on the reservation, one of which featured “a skit on dishwashing and a carbohydrate game”, staging meat-canning and salad-making demonstrations, helping with the selection of furniture and draperies for homes, urging residents to better manicure their yards and to plant lawns, working to involve girls in the “modern Indian 4-H club”, and advising families on how to properly integrate modern appliances such as washing machines and radios into their homes. Without proper guidance and uplift, Freda’s article implied, the Klamath Indians would fail to get civilized modernity quite right. She explicitly illustrated this point with a picture of a cottage that an “Indian family built without any advice.” “It is very attractive and nicely arranged,” her caption explained, “but it has no closets in the bedrooms!”

(See Figure 2.)

Like many reformers of her time, Freda’s sympathy for the Indians’ plight, her desire to help, and her sincere appreciation of aspects of Indian culture existed within a framework of widely held societal beliefs in the superiority of white civilization. Roughly coterminous with Sunset’s beginnings, the late-nineteenth-century’s variant of the discourse of civilization emerged as an explicitly racial concept that drew upon popularized Darwinism to assert white, especially Anglo-Saxon, supremacy. Adherents posited that human races moved up an evolutionary scale from savagery through barbarism to a state of advanced civilization. Yet since it was believed that only the white races had evolved to the civilized stage, civilization was often spoken of as if it were a racial trait possessed only by middle class and elite whites. By the

11 Ibid.
early decades of the twentieth century, the beliefs about white superiority at the core of the civilization discourse fused with emerging concepts of “the modern.” In Sunset, claiming a modern self was inextricably tied to claiming whiteness as an identity. Just as the civilized white was defined against the non-white savage, the white modern was juxtaposed with the non-white primitive as well as the old-fashioned. Freda’s emphasis on the lack of civilization among the Klamath Indians and their fumbling attempts to adopt some of the trappings of modernity, despite her earnest intentions, thus ultimately worked to draw cultural boundaries and elucidate race-based differences. Her article fit perfectly with the component of Sunset’s middlebrow mission that involved its representation of people of color in the West in ways that functioned to separate and distinguish them from whites, in the process presenting uncivilized “others” for whites to define themselves against.

As Freda Sperling’s story attests, Sunset not only served western differences in a regional sense, as its editors had hoped, it also defined social differences within the West, especially those rooted in race and ethnicity. One of the reasons why the emergence of middlebrow culture was so threatening to the gatekeepers of high culture was that it had the potential, through the market driven, yet democratizing, impulse of mass culture, to present a challenge to understandings of supposedly natural, biologically-based class and racial differences by making a commodified variant of good taste

Figure 2. Modern home on the Klamath Indian Reservation built by Indians without white supervision. Since they built it without closets, Sunset used it as an example of how, despite their best efforts, without proper guidance Indians continually fell short in accurately recreating the trappings of civilized modernity. “Better Homes Among the Klamath Indians,” Sunset (June 1930): 18. Photo courtesy of Sunset Magazine.
widely available through purchase. By displaying a particular kind of taste, one also
displayed the status that inhered in the level of civilization that such taste represented
and accessed, theoretically at least, the social power that came with the deployment of
that cultural capital. Yet middlebrow cultural products could just as effectively work
to solidify difference and hierarchy. Although initially targeted to a national middle-
class audience, Sunset increasingly became oriented towards the white middle class
of the American West and it was this West that Sunset represented in its pages. The
homeowner, the decorator, the architect, and the reader were all implicitly represented
as white in the text and literally as white in illustrations. Mexican Americans, Native
Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans might make appearances in
special feature stories or as “Interesting Westerners,” but they stood outside the normative
constructions of both American-ness and western-ness that Sunset prescribed.
While images of people of color in Sunset’s pages told white westerners who they were
not, representations of civilized, modern westerners in the magazine’s pages presented
white readers with images of people they could identify with and a lifestyle they might
aspire to obtain. In Sunset, throughout its various incarnations, civilizing the West
meant prescribing particular aesthetic standards designed to highlight certain social
features of western living and downplay and contain others.

One of the reasons for the appeal of Sunset’s representation of a West ordered
according to the racial hierarchies dictated by the intertwined discourses of civilization
and modernity was that it assuaged the social anxieties of white westerners—both
long-time residents and the many newcomers arriving at this time from areas like the
Midwest. The West outside the pages of Sunset was a richly diverse and complex place.
As a region, it was built on conquest, populated by significant numbers of Asian and
Latino immigrants as well as African Americans, haunted by the remaining members
of decimated Native American populations, and regularly the target of new groups of
Euro-American migrants. During the 1920s and 1930s, this diversity was the source
of heightened anxiety—exacerbated by war-related fears—that expressed itself in in-
creased nativism and racism. Since Sunset existed in a reciprocal relationship with the
real West, the well-ordered West it created can be seen as a response to these tensions.
The National Origins Act, passed in 1924, mandated new restrictions on immigration
that conveyed a decided preference for northern and western Europeans—effectively
halting immigration from Asia, a matter of particular significance for the Pacific Coast,
by adding Japanese immigrants to the already excluded Chinese. A related product of
this overall climate was the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, whose message of nativism

13 For the politics of taste, see Norbert Elias, The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and
Psychogenetic Investigations, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford, ENG, 1994) and Pierre Bourdieu,
Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA,
1984).

14 Such newcomers helped boost the population of greater Los Angeles by a million and a
half between 1920 and 1930. See Starr, Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920s
(New York, 1990), 211.
and hate had considerable appeal among ordinary people in the West, as chapters in Denver, Salt Lake City, El Paso, Anaheim, and Eugene attest. Mexican Americans, although spared from immigration restriction in the 1920s, faced forced repatriation in the 1930s. Moreover, communities throughout the region practiced discriminatory housing practices such as red-lining and restrictive covenants to keep people of color from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods so that the fantasy prescribed in Sunset of a homogenous West could be realized to a limited extent through residential segregation.¹⁵

However, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have astutely pointed out, “what is socially peripheral is . . . frequently symbolically central.” One of the ways Sunset worked to construct a collective sense of white western-ness was by delineating how the otherness of people of color in the West could be safely incorporated and appropriated through the purchase of goods such as Navajo rugs, Oriental ornaments, and Spanish-style architecture and furnishings.¹⁶ Sunset’s advocacy of the use of Chinese wares in interior decoration provides a prime example of the appropriation of the consumable aspects of the culture of a group that occupied the lowest rung on the racial ladder in many parts of the Pacific West. Edgar Harrison Wileman, “Los Angeles Authority on Home Furnishings,” advised readers that Chinese art was particularly adaptable and could be used “in any home, large or small.” “For finer homes,” he explained, “many beautiful and costly articles are available, such as antique porcelain, jade and crystal figures, intricate ivories and semi-precious stones.”¹⁷ In a similar vein, although Native Americans themselves had been forcibly removed to reservations, Lillian Ferguson saw fit to suggest appropriating Indian home-making practices, intimating to her readers that “home-makers in the desert Southwest . . . [had] recaptured an idea which . . . was sent winging through space by some beauty-loving Indian home-maker centuries ago.” In a passage notable for its language of appropriation and the presentation of mythology as history, she continued:

When, after the rainy season had passed, that ancient home-maker tossed her blankets out upon the wall to dry in the desert sun, she doubtless discovered, as the dump heavy folds settled in colorful array against the

¹⁵ For evidence of the social climate of the American West in 1920s and 1930s, see Richard White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A New History of the American West (Norman, 1991), 423–95.


earth-colored surface, that there is nothing quite so fetching as a gay Indian serape hung against a plastered mud wall. Her white sister, having recaptured the idea, is now using it over and over again in an interesting number of ways with ever increasing attractiveness.\textsuperscript{18}

The related styles of Mission and Spanish Colonial were given particular prominence in both \textit{Sunset} magazine and the architecture of the Pacific Slope and Southwest.\textsuperscript{19} These styles were not only thought to be especially appropriate to warm climates, but also especially fitting in regions that had Spanish colonial histories. This was despite the fact that in California, for example, where entire communities were designed in these styles in the 1920s and 1930s, the few original missions offered little in architectural instruction. Rather than reflecting the state's actual history, in California, Mission and Spanish Colonial styles created what David Gebhard has called a “mythical architectural past” that echoed an equally mythical social history.\textsuperscript{20} Mainstream histories of the region represented conquest as an act of generosity, if not heroism, in which civilized Anglos lifted the allegedly lazy, tribal, yet colorful Californios out of the semi-barbaric state in which they had languished. Throughout the Pacific Slope and Southwest, while white westerners embraced “Spanish” styles in everything from architecture to civic celebrations, they generally ignored the actual history of Mexican Americans. As Carey McWilliams, who coined the term “Fantasy Heritage” to describe this state of affairs that “permeated the social and cultural life of the borderlands,” pointed out in 1948, “None of this would really matter except that the churches in Los Angeles hold fiestas rather than bazaars and that Mexicans are still not accepted as a part of the community.”\textsuperscript{21}

Visions of civilization and modernity were also operative in \textit{Sunset}’s literary recommendations. \textit{Sunset}’s book review sections carefully advised readers about what was worth reading and buying from among selected new publications. “When a book

\textsuperscript{18} Lillian Ferguson, “Native American Murals: Their Decorative Value on Walls of Desert Homes,” \textit{Sunset} (November 1928): 50.


\textsuperscript{21} McWilliams, \textit{North From Mexico}, 36.
is reviewed in *Sunset Magazine,*” readers were told, “it means that we editors have placed on it our thumb prints of approval.” Such books, although available at libraries and bookstores, could also “be ordered through *Sunset* Book Department at the prices quoted.” If *Sunset* readers actually read the recommended books, the majority of their reading material would have centered on works with western themes. At the prompting of a letter from a reader, Joseph Henry Jackson devoted the entire April 1923 “Book Corner” to works on the West. By 1930, A. Marshall Harbinson, *Sunset’s* book review editor at that time, began featuring reviews solely of “books written by westerners or about the West.” Even if *Sunset* readers merely read the reviews, they would have been regularly inundated with ideas about the contemporary West and especially about the historic “wild” West of the nineteenth century. Renditions of this aspect of the past could easily figure into the construction of a particular sense of regional identity for white westerners since the vast majority of the historical themes covered centered around the Euro-Americans who began peopling the West en masse in the 1840s and 1850s. Moreover, while the version of western history offered in *Sunset’s* book reviews was, on the surface, everything that civilization was not—rough, untamed, and wild—beneath the surface and between the lines, much was being said that was absolutely about civilization and the ideas about race and gender that term implied. After all, part of the story of the “wild” West has always been its giving way to a civilized, modern social order.22

The primary subjects of the brand of western history presented and glorified by *Sunset Magazine* were hardy pioneers, noble cowboys, outlaws, gamblers, miners, stagecoach drivers, and railroad tycoons. These stock-in-trade figures provided the “action, thrills, sportsmanship, and historical significance” as well as the “heroic adventure” for which works reviewed in *Sunset* were praised. Of concern to the reviewers, however, was not simply that a story was enthralling, but also that it conveyed a certain amount of authenticity. The story contained in Frank J. Taylor’s *Pathfinders,* for example, was described as “a record of historical adventure told in such a way as to present a true and living picture.” Similarly, Joseph Henry Jackson enthused that an especially valuable feature of Gordon Young’s *Days of ’49* was his appendix, in which he “[set] down the authorities that he consulted: The historians, diarists, memoir-writers of that early day who helped him weave the rich tapestry of historical background against which his story is told.” Jackson was also not shy about taking on a book when it did not meet his standards for historical accuracy. He slammed Blaise Cendrar’s *Sutter’s Gold,* reporting that although it was “a dramatic and forceful thing, it had nothing much to do with history.” *Sunset’s* Westerns needed to convey the “real” West since the representations

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of the West contained in the books reviewed in its pages needed to be strong enough for white westerners to build a collective identity upon.23

The books reviewed in Sunset that were not about Euro-Americans in the West still worked to reinforce a collective sense of white, regional identity by reinforcing notions of racial difference. For example, Louise Jordan Miln’s book, Ruben and Ivy Sen, was described “as an appealing a story you’ve ever read, irrespective of how you feel about Orient-Occident marriages.” In his review of Takashi Ohta’s and Margaret Sperry’s The Golden Wind, a story about “a Japanese youth of a prominent family who is banished from the empire and takes refuge in China,” A. Marshall Harbinson blithely noted that this might not sound like “an intriguing theme for a novel”—especially “to typical westerners and particularly Californians.” “To be sure,” he added, “we have all laughed over the accounts of Japanese school boys that have found their way into periodicals, and have gnashed our teeth at the villains, but bona fide Japanese heroes have left us cold.” Yet, in this case, he explained “the adventures of the little brown hero . . . held us enthralled.” Joseph Henry Jackson deployed similarly derogatory language when he described the subject of Jeff Poindexter’s Colored as a “southern darky in New York.” Reviews like these not only betrayed the racial arrogance of whites, but also their racial anxiety. For example, a brief, three-line review of a book by I. A. R. Wuille called Black Harvest summed up the plot and the reviewer’s sentiments: “The next war. A fantastically plausible story of a defeated nation’s revenge and a negro superman who is to lead his African brethren under the German banner. Of course, the thing doesn’t quite come off, which is some satisfaction!”24

Reviews of books about Native Americans were more contradictory in the ways they treated their subject, indicative of the paradoxical attitudes Euro-Americans have had about indigenous people since earliest contact. In the 1920s and 1930s, with many


Native Americans ensconced on reservations and faring the worse for it, some Euro-Americans re-activated a vision, buried since the early-nineteenth century, of Indians as noble, endangered beings worthy of admiration and in need of protection. Part of this image’s resurgence was related to the onslaught of modernity and the anxiety that accompanied the increasingly automated and bureaucratic world. This would not be the first or last time Native Americans served as a convenient screen for Euro-Americans to project longings for a purer, more natural, less civilized existence.

In this spirit, in the early twenties, Sunset’s contributors aired and debated various Indian policies. John Collier—an activist for Pueblo land rights in the 1920s who in the 1930s, as commissioner of Indian Affairs, worked to put an end to forced assimilation through the Indian Reorganization Act—even penned a number of articles. Yet even in its most sympathetic treatments, Sunset represented Native Americans as passive and acted upon—as a problem to be solved, not as architects of their own futures. This stance was evident in Joseph Henry Jackson’s 1926 review of Zane Grey’s *Vanishing American*. Jackson identified the book as both “a readable yarn and a propaganda novel . . . written with full intent to focus for his thousands of readers . . . the picture of the American Indian—‘moving on, diminishing, fading, vanishing–vanishing!’” He continued with tempered acceptance of the book’s agenda, which also bespoke the potential political power of the middlebrow: “The Indian is with us yet. . . . And he is not getting a square deal—far from it. But there’s a difference between political repetition of the Indian’s grievance . . . and the simple method of putting the question before some hundreds of thousands of American fiction readers through the medium of the popular novel.” The difference, according to Jackson was that, “Mr. Grey’s way of doing the trick is likely to be several thousand per cent more effective . . . if his book might only turn out to be the ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ of the American Indian.”

Yet at the exact same time Native Americans were being romanticized, often patronized, and sometimes defended by white Americans, they could still be held up as the inferior, savage foil to superior, civilized whites. In reviewing Leo Crane’s *Enchanted Desert*, Jackson praised the way this “Indian agent” had captured the “mysterious rites” and the “simple psychology” of the Hopis and Navajos. Offering a hint at his readers’ attitudes, he also admonished them not to “dismiss the volume with half a glance as ‘another one of those Indian books.’” When A. Marshall Harbinson came across Frank Linderman’s book, *American*, he admitted to his readers that “somehow or other the title . . . did not particularly interest me.” Possibly this was because Harbinson could not fathom why an autobiography of Chief Plenty-Coups would be given such a title.


26 Grey is reviewed in Jackson, “Book Corner,” 47.
“Soon,” however, Harbinson knew that the book would “carry the thumb print of [his] approval.” Clearly this was because Linderman’s book—at least as it was interpreted by Harbinson—presented a view of Native Americans that, despite the title, constructed them in a way that left them outside of the circle of American-ness. Linderman, having lived in “a cabin in the woods at Goose Bay on the shores of Flathead Lake, Montana, where he had been intimately associated with the Crow Indians and other Indian tribes of that section” was able to induce Chief Plenty-Coups to tell him the story of his life. “And what a story it is,” Harbinson intimated to his readers, “War whoops, arrows singing through the air, naked Indians creeping toward their enemies, scalpings, hand-to-hand encounters, fights to the death.” Harbinson lauded Linderman’s work for its authenticity and for the way it provided the reader with “a peep into the Indian mind.” Yet given the above description and the overall tone of the review, readers were encouraged to embrace its veracity based on something besides the actual quality of an ethnography that sought to capture what Linderman believed to be a disappearing way of life. In his review, Harbinson continually tapped into prevailing beliefs about Indians that simultaneously romanticized them and cast them as savage and inferior. This was especially evident, for example, in the way Harbinson related and emphasized the method Linderman used to extract his story. As he explained, “Mr. Linderman does not take a maudlin, be-kind-to-dumb-animals attitude toward Indians; he does not set out to make a hero of the Indian nor to make a villain of him; he merely sets down with intelligent interpolations an account, given by his friend Plenty-Coups in sign language.”

In 1926, Sunset’s editors told their readers: “We want to make the magazine even more representative of the West—the up-to-date modern West, the West of today. . . . We must always represent the West; that’s what we’re here for.” Throughout the 1920s and 1930s “modern” was one of Sunset’s buzzwords. The flip-side of Sunset’s images of non-white westerners in ways that highlighted their difference from whites was its mobilization of the modern as a key component of its construction of a positive image of and for white westerners. While the terms “modern,” “modernity,” and “modernism” have long been used differently in various contexts and disciplines—as part of its middlebrow mission, Sunset deployed its own variant of the discourse of modernity in four interrelated ways. Taken together, Sunset’s version of the modern was domesticated spatially as well as ideologically. Located in the domestic space of the home, instead of advocating radical social transformation, Sunset’s modernity was a powerful yet conservative force. This component of Sunset’s middlebrow mission involved representing an image of white western-ness expressed through the modern self, articulated in the modern home, through the consumption of goods produced in the modern fashion.

27 Crane is reviewed in Joseph Henry Jackson, “The Book Corner,” Sunset (March 1925): 50 and Linderman is reviewed in Harbinson, “Western Bookshelf” (July 1930): 43.

First, as we’ve seen, the ideas and practices that constituted “the modern” in the 1920s and 1930s resonated with beliefs about race, class, and gender that often had much the same ring as those that constituted “the civilized” around the turn of the century. Second, Sunset used “modern” to designate the style of the 1920s and 1930s, which demanded simplicity and harmony of line and form in contrast to the cluttered, old-fashioned Victorian aesthetic. Here Sunset’s embrace of the modern often championed stylistic concepts drawn from the realm of high art reformulated for middlebrow consumption. Sunset had little directly to do with the advocacy of the work of modern artists, architects, or designers. Sunset’s experts, in fact, counseled westerners not to be too artistically modern, since they generally labeled anything smacking of modern art as extreme, but still just modernistic enough to be in step with the times. Relatedly, a third way Sunset used “modern” was to designate that which was “up-to-date.” This kind of usage referred to contemporary circumstances—as in “modern life”—often represented in positive terms as increasingly mass-produced, efficient, and scientific. It also implied a penchant for newness that was generally translated into needs for consumer goods. As Edgar Harrison Wileman, Sunset’s interior decorating editor, advised: “Just as we change our automobile every few years, so should we change the old style sofa and out-of-date furnishings, so that we may show ourselves mentally alert and keenly alive to the psychological effect of modern equipment.” This attitude was closely tied to the fourth way that Sunset utilized “the modern”—to articulate a vision of progress made manifest through the consumption of modern things. Since industrial capitalism signified increased civilization, consumer goods—evidence of systems of mass production—were likewise viewed as a progressive force. Modern things, in Sunset’s schema, helped to create and articulate the modern self—the apex of human progress in the world—through a process of commodity-centered self-realization.

The home was at the nexus of Sunset’s mobilization of the modern and the civilized. In the 1920s and 1930s, the home emerged as an important register of the shift from a culture of character, which emphasized issues of morality, the virtues of self-control, and a uniform, fixed standard of conduct to a modern culture of personality that was more concerned with emotional temperament, the techniques of self-expression, individual idiosyncrasies, and personal needs. This shift in the concept of the “modal self” has been identified, by Warren Susman and Karen Halttunen, as “essential to the

transformation of a producer-oriented society which rested on the virtues of self-denial, into a mass consumer society, with its new reliance on demands for self-fulfillment.” In Sunset, this move in the direction of the modern, modal self was expressed through domestic designs that emphasized simplicity, efficiency, and personality and that derided the formal stuffiness of the Victorian parlor but celebrated the living room and the novel relations among family, self, and society that it expressed.31

Yet while Sunset served as a vehicle for articulating a vision of self and society during this time of transition, its conceptualization of the modern was not the only available option. In 1932, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held the Modern Architecture International Exhibition and that same year published a catalog to record the exhibit and its contributors. The catalog closed with an essay by urbanist and architectural critic, Lewis Mumford, simply titled, “Housing,” that set about leveling a scathing critique of typical American homes. Mumford’s vision of the modern was everything that Sunset’s was not, and Sunset embodied everything that Mumford reviled. Despite their differences, however, both Sunset and Lewis Mumford employed a relatively similar language of art and design. Both also saw the design of housing as crucial to the processes of civilizing and modernizing and thus tied to politically charged visions of the proper social order.32

Lewis Mumford’s ideas about what constituted livable, affordable, and aesthetically pleasing housing were tied to the social vision he saw promoted by modern architecture. Modern architecture, he believed, provided a vehicle that would enable Americans to transcend the unhealthy fetish of individual home ownership and step into “the new physical and communal environment that modern life demands.” Modern housing along the lines of J. J. P. Oud’s work in Rotterdam, Sunnyside Gardens in Long Island City, New York, or the planned town of Radburn, New Jersey, not only integrated “the land itself, with human beings, and their needs” and thus laid the ground work for new communities containing healthful doses of sunlight and air, efficient design, large living rooms, room for outdoor recreation, privacy, and basic hygiene, but also avoided what Mumford termed “the fake romanticism of the American suburb.” Mumford was particularly concerned about the fact that as mass produced housing increased, the availability of affordable housing had decreased for the majority of Americans. Part of the problem, as he identified it, was that Americans had “treated the house as an abstract symbol of safety, patriotism, citizenship, [and] family stability . . . and


32 Lewis Mumford, “Housing,” in Modern Architects exhibit catalog by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. et al. (New York, 1932), 179–89.
failed to deal with the house frankly as primarily a place to live in.” He contended that “modern architecture, with its strong lines, its disdain for the ‘quaint’ and the ‘pretty’ . . . is not a poor substitute for our abandoned heaven of the individual romantic house, built according to the heart’s desire; on the contrary, it is far superior.” A crucial point for Mumford was that in modern architecture, “the unit is no longer the individual house but the community.”

Sunset agreed with Lewis Mumford about the need to construct homes that were light, airy, spacious, and hygienic and provided space for outdoor activities, privacy, and sociability. Sunset defined “a home, in the best sense of the word; [as] not a show place but one where the daily art of living is carried on and where friends like to linger.” Privacy though, in Sunset’s schema, was not the need Mumford referred to for private bedrooms and baths (a given) so much as it was a concern for clearly demarcated space that made one house and its yards separate from the others around it. “Our modern trend of thought,” wrote Ralph Cornell, one of Sunset’s landscape architects, “says that the home grounds should be secluded and planned for the special use of the owner instead of the passing public.” In 1924, when Sunset published a series of articles on the cooperative Rio del Llano Colony fifty miles from Los Angeles, the magazine’s editors cast the “universal longings” that provided its impetus in distinctly anti-modern terms. “At one time or another all of us have grown tired of the strife, the strain, the uncertainty involved in the job of making a living under the strenuous modern competitive conditions,” they explained. “We’ve longed for a different order of existence, for more leisure, less strain, hurry, bustle and throat-cutting.” While the editors did not necessarily advocate cooperative living, they did note that it offered “one way of escape” from modern pressures. Yet this attitude was very different from Mumford’s; he envisioned cooperative living as a way of both reconfiguring and embracing modern life. Sunset was also only concerned with affordable housing in a very narrow sense—affordable for the middle class—and, with the exception of the articles on Llano, not at all concerned with any kind of new, planned community beyond that of the traditional suburb. Instead, it extolled the virtues of

33 Ibid., 183–9, quotes, in order given, on 184, 189, 188, 183.
34 Ibid., 184, 186.
the privately owned, single-family dwelling—whether villas, cottages, bungalows, or ranch homes—designed and planned for the nuclear family. For example, an article subtitled “A Plea for Playgrounds” did not campaign for more public playgrounds but more private, backyard ones.

The suburban architecture boom that occurred nationally between 1890 and 1930 and nearly doubled home ownership in many communities was, in many ways, on Sunset’s side. In 1923, permits for new construction in the Los Angeles area totaled $185 million—a record-breaking figure that was not surpassed until 1945. The very act of building suburbs reinforced, promoted, and made possible, for some, the American dream—actively advocated in Sunset—of individual ownership of single-family dwellings. The ready-cut housing industry saw in the simplicity of modern architecture’s new minimalist aesthetic the same sort of efficiency and cost effectiveness that Mumford had recognized, despite the fact that the communities these builders designed served very different social purposes. Their subsequent modified appropriation resulted in house plans that were simple in form and compact in layout—decidedly modern in contrast to Victorian alternatives—and were exactly the types of homes that so frequently appeared in Sunset’s pages.

Not surprisingly, Sunset gave considerable attention to designing modern, single family homes with an eye to the most efficient uses of space. Such a house was described in Sunset as “one of a number of inexpensive houses shown recently in a small homes exhibition that won many favorable comment.” It was of a “very simple design” that followed “no recognized tradition.” Its floor plan consisted of “a living-room, dining-room, two bedrooms, kitchen, breakfast room, bathroom, and back porch.” The result was extremely simple: a cube with a roof coming to a point on top, two windows on each side, back and front windows showing a door placed


40 Starr, Material Dreams, 211–2.


Figure 3. 1926 advertisement publicizing Sunset's "Western Home Design Contest." This quintessentially middlebrow enterprise sponsored yearly from 1926–1928 encouraged amateurs to design the floor plan for a small single-family home. Sunset (April 1926): 33. Illustration courtesy of Sunset Magazine.
between. It was composed of “face brick painted white, shingle roof, and woodwork painted green.”43 Sunset’s April 1937 article, “Homebuilding,” featured the floor plan of Mr. and Mrs. Traverse Clements of Los Gatos, designed by the architect Michael Goodman. Its “noteworthy features” included “compact room arrangement,” “charm at low cost,” and “everywhere a modern feeling.”44 Sunset’s “Western Home Design Contest,” a quintessentially middlebrow enterprise that was open to amateurs only, required that participants design the floor plan for a small, single-family home. The contest was quite popular—it attracted over one hundred entries in 1926—and was held for three years, 1926–1928. Entry regulations stipulated the following requirements: “The house is to contain five rooms, and is to cost not over $7500, exclusive of land, walks and gardens.”45 (See Figure 3.)

Sunset was as concerned with the design and decor of domestic interiors as with the architecture of domestic exteriors and floor plans. Just as Sunset’s support of architectural plans of single-family homes reinforced a social order in the American West built upon private property and the nuclear family, its prescriptions in the arena of domestic interiors delineated specific ideas about the interior lives of nuclear family members—the husbands, wives, and children of middle-class whites in the 1920s and 1930s. In Sunset, modern domestic spaces implied certain domestic arrangements. During these years, there were significant alterations underway in ideas and practices regarding the home, family, and marriage that had important societal ramifications, especially for the white middle class. Families were becoming smaller—a change was particularly noticeable among the middle classes—who were likely to limit their families to one to three children and adhere to a more affectionate, child-centered model of family relations. Also, as the family’s primary economic activity became consumption rather than production, many of the social and educational functions of the family were absorbed by various external agencies and institutions. Ideas about the institution of marriage were also shifting from the Victorian ideal of marriage as a social duty to a companionate ideal in which marriage became increasingly associated with personal fulfillment. With these new developments came new kinds of emotional demands on

marriage and the family. For some these changed expectations were a positive force; for others they contributed to the period's rising rate of divorce.\footnote{See Elaine Tyler May, \textit{Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America} (Chicago, 1980).}

\textit{Sunset} embodied these modern ideals as well as many of the tensions they generated. It also helped its readers mediate the demands of this new relational ground. For part of 1929, \textit{Sunset} announced its expertise in these matters by adopting the subheading \textit{The Western Magazine for Western Families}. In an editorial that same year, it simultaneously extolled the virtues of women as homemakers, companionate marriage, the child-centered affectionate family, and hinted at concerns about divorce. “Every child has a father as well as a mother,” the piece informed, “and every household that can be called a successful home has a husband and wife working together at the job of homemaking.” The editorial then went on to celebrate the desegregation of household tasks. “Rare is the man who does not go with his wife to help select the new rug or davenport; who does not on occasion tuck the youngsters into bed. . . . Just as rare is the wife of today who cannot manage a furnace and a car with dexterity equal to [her husband’s] own.” “Remember,” \textit{Sunset} cautioned, “that newspapers make headlines of the failures, never of the successes along this line.” This article was...
accompanied by an illustration of a white man and woman, ostensibly husband and wife, posed as a united couple sitting on a sofa in a modern, middle-class living room while a young boy plays contentedly on the floor. The husband's arm is wrapped affectionately around the wife's shoulders and the wife, holding what looks like a copy of Sunset in her hand, gazes lovingly at the child. According to Sunset, this represented the model western family at the height of domestic bliss.47 (See Figure 4.)

Although Sunset espoused a companionate ideal in which husbands helped their wives select home furnishings, it nevertheless fortified the idea that a woman's place was in the home by directing its articles about interior design and decoration primarily to the western housewife.48 By the 1920s, housework was far less arduous than it had been for earlier generations of women. Even with fewer servants or none at all, technological developments such as electricity and central heating, as well as appliances like irons, toasters, washers, and sewing machines eased numerous domestic tasks. Despite the fact that housework was easier, however, it was not necessarily less time-consuming. With new technologies and appliances came dramatically heightened standards of cleanliness and, with the help of magazines like Sunset and various experts in the domestic arts, the elevation of homemaking to a glamorous, modern, even scientific profession. Through their careers as housewives, modern women were expected to nurture their families and secure their self-worth. That they were also designated as the primary consumers in the family unit was a fact not lost on Sunset's editors or advertisers.49

Through a characteristically middlebrow mobilization of the language and concepts of art, Sunset's frequently-male experts helped their female readers, in their roles as housewives and consumers, navigate the slippery slope of personal decorating to give successful expression to the modern, civilized western self through domestic consumables. The sure-fire way to success required the possession of a plan. Without one, Edgar Harrison Wileman warned, the result would undoubtedly be “a terrible 'hit and miss' effect” in which there was “no relationship between one article and the other either in color, style, texture, or scale, so that the whole house has no continuity of idea whatsoever.”50 Not just any plan would do, however. The proper plan required a certain amount of education in some basic artistic principles. While successful home furnishing and decoration did not require “the highly specialized training in design demanded of the architect” it did require “taste, energy, and knowledge.” Devising

50 Wileman, “Common Errors,” 27.
a plan that would result in “the necessary harmony between the architecture of the house and its applied decorations; for suave relations in style and color among rooms . . . and for the beauty of each room and of the house as a whole” the decorator/housewife needed to learn “three aspects of decorative practice . . . very imperfectly understood by most women.” As outlined by Bernard C. Jakway, and found reiterated again and again throughout the pages of *Sunset*, these were: “the emotional or expressive side of interior decoration; . . . the nature, or rather the conditions of beauty; and the . . . road to real economy in expenditures.” “Everything used in furnishing a house,” Jakway told his readers, again combining the language of art with that of the modern self and personal decorating, “is resolvable into its elements of color, form and texture; and colors, forms, and textures affect the emotional states of all normal people in pretty much the same way.”  

Interior decoration was serious business in *Sunset* because it had serious social implications. As readily as *Sunset* solidified and celebrated the housewife’s role, it equated being remiss in one’s housewifely duties with being a bad wife and mother—a failing with dire consequences. It had the potential to result in “matrimonial failure,” “misfit children,” and wandering husbands, thus threatening the foundation of social order—the white middle-class nuclear family—in the American West. In fact, Mary McDuffie Hampton placed the blame for the “degeneracy of the modern generation” squarely on the parents’ choice of furniture. She wrote:

> Everything and everybody from preachers to cigarettes have been blamed for the theoretical degeneracy of the modern generation. Without entering into argument as to whether or not this generation itself is any worse than any other older generation’s younger one, I do feel that many things such as genuine happiness of a deep but simpler sort have become an illusion rather than a reality to too many youngsters. But I have something new to blame this time, and this is their parents’ choice of furniture!  

In a new twist on nature versus nurture, Hampton argued that the mode of interior decoration was causally related to the kind of family life in the home. She contended that old-fashioned nineteenth-century-style home décor—personified in the home of Mrs. Staid—resulted in spaces that were formal and cluttered rather than comfortable and livable. This, in turn, led to sad children who took up social activities outside the home. For them, the home was not a place they could be proud of, that they wanted to bring friends, or one that offered space that facilitated recreation or

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family togetherness. The exact opposite was true of modern home-decor and child-rearing practices—expressed in the home of Mrs. Livewell—that took into account the developing style-consciousness of modern adolescents. Hampton defined a home appointed in a more modern fashion as a place where “frequently there are people within, particularly on week-ends, and there is then much laughter, and perhaps dancing.” If music were played, one might even hear some jazz. Similarly, just as the responsibility for functional families and well-adjusted children was laid at the feet of the modern housewife, so was the happiness of the man of the house. If a home was too fussy, formal, and generally uncomfortable for evenings of reading and smoking, the housewife was warned that her husband might well prefer the “gentlemen’s club” to the familial hearth.53

In charting a way for white, middle-class westerners to define themselves, Sunset typically mobilized and reinforced national trends in modern family life, gender relations, community formation, and social ordering in general. That white westerners were represented as almost identical to other white Americans in these arenas rather than as glaringly regionally distinctive during this period is not really surprising. Speaking of the 1930s, and applicable to the later twenties as well, Warren Susman has shown that it was during these years that the phrases an “American Way of Life” and “The American Dream” came into common usage—both representative of nationally unifying visions in times where participation and belonging took on great importance. This was accompanied by “a redefinition of the promise of American life,” which foregrounded “cultural visions: questions of life-style, patterns of belief and conduct, special values and attitudes that constitute the characteristics of a special people.” This was the very stuff of which Sunset was made. The matter at hand was how to define America as a culture and to generate a meaningful way of life from an industrial society. While this idea of an “American Way of Life” could be critical of industrial society, it could also reinforce conformity and promote exclusionary practices. The narrowness of Sunset’s vision of what and whom constituted a westerner, and for that matter an American, during these years, was, in part, the result of precisely such practices. Likewise, the shift to the culture of personality, while holding out the promise for increased tolerance to individuality, could just as readily be translated into a middlebrow mantra of conformist self-improvement: “Make people like you; fit in; develop habits and skills that interest and serve other people.” Such a stance allowed little room for difference or diversity.54

During the 1920s and 1930s, Sunset’s goal was to correctly influence the built and domestic environments, as well as the mindset, of white, middle-class westerners by prescribing a potent depiction of a particularly ordered West. Through its espousal of the consumption of literature, home furnishings, architectural styles, and other

54 Susman, Culture As History, 150–83, quotes on 154, 155, 165.
modern commodities, *Sunset* advocated a social vision that constituted particular things and people as both American and distinctively western. The civilized, modern westerner presented in *Sunset* was white, middle class, heterosexual, and enamored of a romanticized, aggrandized, and racialized version of the conquest of the West. This westerner most often lived in a suburban neighborhood, in a home containing the nuclear family and patriarchal gender relations, in an artificially homogenous West. In *Sunset’s* West, people of color were conveniently marginalized, but the representations of their cultures offered the potential for uniquely western decorating motifs and provided whites with the material for constructing identity-bolstering social foils. Yet while western living *Sunset* style was a deeply exclusionary and mythical construction, the white cultural dominance promoted in *Sunset* reinforced the very real social and political control middle class and elite whites exercised in the American West. Seen in this light, although *Sunset’s* stances might not be unusual for their time, it would be dangerous to dismiss them as simply relics of a particular historical moment. For far too long—owing perhaps to a combination of both the magazine’s ubiquity and belovedness in the West—the power this cultural form wielded through the social relations it naturalized has gone largely unscrutinized. But it is *Sunset’s* very centrality to western living—evident by its presence in kitchens and on coffee tables across the region for generations to this day—that makes it essential to grapple with how the aesthetics it prescribed existed in interaction with the West from which it was produced and in which it was consumed.

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