

The Art of Mass Photography and the Halftone Revolution

In bringing the photographic image to the printed page, halftone technology thoroughly revolutionized the art of newspaper and magazine design. Advertisers especially appreciated the newfound freedom and expressiveness that halftone brought to commercial art. Between 1895 and 1910, in the pages of leading trade journals like *Printers Ink*, *Profitable Advertising*, and the *Process Year Book*, advertisers, illustrators and commercial photographers of every persuasion discussed the wide-ranging aesthetic possibilities and social implications of this new form of mass communication.

From the perspective of the advertiser, the most exciting thing about halftone was its realism. A far more convincing medium of visual representation than wood engraving, halftone photography gave advertisers the power to communicate more directly and more forcefully with their audience. Advertisers understood, however, that the realism of photography was an illusion. Indeed, many advertisers expressed the view that the realism of a photographic image could be dramatically enhanced through judicious, artistic retouching of the halftone plate. In addition, halftone also made it possible for advertisers to combine different kinds of media -- photography, painting, drawing, and typography-- into a single, unified, multimedia composition.

The great range and flexibility of halftone page design inspired a renaissance in commercial art theory. Older trade journals like the *Inland Printer* and *Printer's Ink* had been following the development of photomechanical technology since the early 1880s, and the newer journals like *Profitable Advertising*, which started up in 1890, paid especially close attention to progress in this field. In 1894, *Penrose's Annual Review of the Graphic Arts: Process Year Book*, which devoted considerable serious attention to the subject of halftone's commercial applications, entered into publication. In 1897, *Profitable Advertising* began featuring a new monthly department entitled "Illustrated Advertising," where pioneering commercial photographers like Oscar Binner, J. Ellsworth Gross, and Ernest Elmo Calkins (who coined the term "consumer engineering") first gave theoretical form to the social, psychological, and aesthetic principles of the new advertising art.

The significance of halftone, most contemporaries believed, was not simply that it had brought the photograph to the printed page. More importantly, halftone had wedded commerce and culture. With halftone, photographers had become able to harness the full social force of industrial production in the execution and dissemination of their art.

Critics of culture and society viewed this new "art for industry's sake" as a mixed blessing. Some believed that halftone was a curse, that the mechanical proliferation of art through halftone had cheapened the people's aesthetic sensibilities and had led to the rise of a great culture of mediocrity and superficiality. Others, however, viewed halftone as a blessing and believed that photomechanical technology would democratize the domain of high culture by liberating the great artistic works of the Western tradition from the walls and cloisters of palaces, museums, and galleries. For better or worse, there could be no question that the halftone revolution was a cultural transformation of immense historical proportions.

Realism, Montage and Photo-Retouching: The Principles of Halftone Page Design

"Pictures make an appeal universal and irresistible," wrote Henry Lewis Johnson in *Printer's Ink* in 1892, explaining to advertisers why they should apply the new technology of halftone photography to their art. [Henry Lewis Johnson, "Half-Tone Engravings: Their Use in Advertisements," *Printer's Ink*, v.6, n.6, February 10, 1892, pp.179-181.] "Of course the ideal in all painting and illustration is to approach as near possible to the form and color of the original. In this point lies the principal advantages of this process." Of all the kinds of images that could be reproduced in the medium of ink on paper, halftones were seen as the most realistic.

"A half-tone engraving of a portrait or a view is the closest possible reproduction which can be made, being in the greater part a mechanical reproduction. Hence the same interest of accuracy of reproduction attaches itself to the illustration used in an advertisement." [Johnson, "Half-Tone Engravings: Their Use in Advertisements," pp.179-181.]

Johnson believed that halftone's visually mimetic qualities promised a wide variety of commercial and educational applications ranging from the documentation of evidence to the reproduction of art:

Supposing an insurance company wishes to enforce the fact of the great destruction due to some boiler explosion or accident. If this is made in a wood engraving, various points can be exaggerated, according to the engraver's will, but the half-tone reproduction carries its own evidence of the absolute accuracy of the scene, as any changes in the original photograph can at once be detected, even by a casual observer. Another point in favor of halftone engraving is that....[f]igure work and society sketches can be treated in the most artistic

manner in wash drawings, and the half-tone process enables their reproduction with the nearest possible approach to the delicacy of feeling and touch of the original. [Johnson, "Half-Tone Engravings: Their Use in Advertisements," pp.179-181.]

Johnson's sentiments regarding halftone were shared by the editors of *Profitable Advertising*. In 1893 they made a like-minded appeal to advertisers to exploit the photographic realism of this new medium of mass communication. "Readers everywhere appear to appreciate cuts," they remarked, noting the inroads that magazine journalists had already made in using halftone to enhance the objectivity of news reports. ["Newspaper Cuts," *Profitable Advertising*, v.2, n.12, May 15, 1893, pp.360-61.] "It is obvious that if such events must be pictured in the daily newspaper, the camera should then be called into use for the purpose, in order to insure something at least akin to a likeness."

Unfortunately, newspaper-makers were still dependent on wood engraving to satisfy their graphic needs: "Representations of fires, railroad casualties, etc., are generally left to the imagination of artists, who seldom happen to be 'eye witnesses.'" By contrast, magazine illustrations were far more newsworthy: "The weekly periodicals have been far more accurate in their pictorial treatment of news events than the daily newspapers, because they have taken greater pains to secure a photographic presentment of them."

Halftone brought new freedom of expression to the art and science of page design by making it possible to seamlessly combine photography, painting, drawing, and typography into a unified composition. This new freedom revolutionized the work of journalists and advertisers, who until this moment had been largely confined to the written word as their principal means of mass communication.

Halftone made it possible for turn-of-the-century page designers to create multimedia compositions with ease. Halftone freed journalists and advertisers to create meaning through juxtaposition and association by combining photographs not only with texts, but with other images like charcoal sketches, watercolors, and line drawings as well. Alone, a halftone image was dull and uninteresting. But when incorporated into a larger design, the halftone could come to life. "The principal fault we have to find with the half-tone block," wrote the editors of *Process Work and Electrotyping* in 1896,

is the monotonous and uniform manner in which every photograph or drawing whatever be its nature or subject, is turned out from the engraver's hands. Square or rectangular in shape, with the regular thin line drawn round, wherever one turns they are always the same.

To avoid this problem, the editors suggested that designers combine halftone images with one another to create photo-montages:

Where there are a number of small illustrations, it is often better to group them together in the form of a mosaic; as it has become customary to call the design. A light and suitable ornamentation in design may fill the space between, or the screen tint may be simply left on, and worked irregularly at the outer margin....In this way the engraving is saved from becoming so wholly mechanical that it is deprived of every germ of art.

["The Mosaic," *Process Work and Electrotyping*, v.14, n.41, October 1896, p.158-59.]

Not only could halftone images be combined with one another, they could also be retouched. In 1898, Oscar Binner demonstrated the possibilities of this technique to the readers of *Profitable Advertising*. In his column entitled "Illustrated Advertising," Binner compared two versions of a photograph of a young woman in conversation with her mother, one version "from life," the other "from life, retouched". [Oscar E. Binner, "Illustrated Advertising," *Profitable Advertising*, v.7, n.10, January 1898, pp.388-390.]

Although the images are similar insofar as the poses held by the models are identical, the images are dissimilar in respect to differences in background and detail. "[P]hotographs can be made much more lifelike and effective," Binner wrote, "by the use of effective and appropriate drawing." In the unretouched original, the floor and wall are barren and flat. In the retouched version, however, a carpet and large window have been added, the furniture has been re-upholstered, the flowers in the vase have been rearranged, a clock added to the mantelpiece, and two kittens play on the floor. The daughter's hair has been tied back with a ribbon and an open book placed in her hand. In overall effect, the retouched version of this scene is much cozier and more homelike than the original.

In 1903, *Profitable Advertising* summed up the progress that illustrated advertisers had made in applying the art of photography to the science of advertising. Like journalists, *Profitable Advertising* believed that photography's principal advantage as a medium of illustration was its realism. "There is an old saying that 'the camera never lies,'" they wrote, "It depicts people, places, and things as they are, and by so doing tells a story that is sincere and convincing....There is scarcely an article on the market that is not a good subject for a camera design." ["Photography in Advertising," *Profitable Advertising*, v.12, n.7, October 1903, pp.518-523.]



THE PHOTOGRAPH FROM LIFE.



THE PHOTOGRAPH FROM LIFE.



THE PHOTOGRAPH FROM LIFE, RETOUCED.



THE PHOTOGRAPH FROM LIFE, RETOUCED.



On the Rocks at Newport.

Photo-retouched magazine cover. *Metropolitan Magazine*, June 1895.

Example of photo-retouching. From Oscar E. Binner, "Illustrated Advertising," *Profitable Advertising*, v.7, n.10, January 1898, pp.388-89.

Example of photo-retouching. From Oscar E. Binner, "Illustrated Advertising," p.390.

Profitable Advertising's faith in the commercial efficacy of photographic illustration was based upon sociological observation:

If you will watch a person glancing through the advertising pages of a magazine, you will notice that he pauses in turning the leaves only when his eye has been caught by an attractive cut. He passes by all the ordinary advertisements -- those that do not have anything noteworthy in their appearance; but as soon as a catchy picture appears he immediately proceeds to examine it.

If an advertisement was to be effective, it needed to depict reality. "[I]t will accomplish this result if it is pleasing, appropriate, and true to life....and it is here that the camera plays a star role." As *Profitable Advertising* explained:

In no other way than by photography can real true-to-life pictures be satisfactorily produced at a moderate cost. It is the only practical method of securing such effects....For since this is really the only method by which nature or natural objects can be depicted in a manner that is absolutely true to life, it follows that a photograph is the most convincing kind of a picture that can be attained, and that the prospective purchaser can be most readily influenced by means of a photograph. It shows him the article as it really is, enables him to determine whether or not it is what he wants, and is altogether far more effective than the picture (necessarily inaccurate) made by an artist, or the simple type display that can do nothing but describe....You see, there's something fascinating about a good photograph, because the reader knows that it isn't a figment of the imagination, but a true delineation of people and things that actually exist -- that it is taken from life. And if the photographer is clever, he can add to this fascination by making the picture tell a story in which the article advertised figures prominently.

But in spite of photography's many advantages as a medium of true-to-life representation, *Profitable Advertising* understood that a photograph alone could not make for a successful advertisement. To realize its true effectiveness, that is, to be made attractive and interesting to the general public, the raw photographic image needed artistic enhancement: "[I]n the untouched photograph there are details that may not show up well, owing to mechanical imperfections in the making of photographs; but a few skillful touches of an artist's pen or brush will remedy this difficulty." Realism, in effect, was the product of artists, not cameras:

It must not be supposed...that the use of the camera does away with the services of the artist of the pen and brush. On the contrary, there is an intimate relationship between the two that cannot be ignored. The camera merely takes the picture. It remains for the artist to embellish it, to add the little touches that enhance its beauty, to give it the greatest possible value from the advertiser's standpoint.

Thus "realism," in the context of advertising, is the art of making dull reality interesting:

There is nothing so superlatively attractive or convincing about most articles as to make a simple reproduction of them the best kind of advertisement; but put that article into the hands of the proper person and it becomes an object of interest.

For the illusion of realism to take hold in the mind of the beholder, the artist needed to remove all signs of artifice from the scene:

Of course, it is also necessary to see that the person is posed correctly, that his or her expression is what it ought to be, and that there is nothing to indicate that the scene was composed for the special purposes of the photograph [emphasis added]. Everything must be natural and lifelike, with as much action as possible, and result will be a photographic design that for real advertising value cannot be duplicated by any other method of picture-making. It will show the article as it appears when in use, and not as it appears when posed to have its picture taken.

By the end of the decade the historic implications of the halftone revolution on the development of the advertising industry had become clear. "It is not difficult to prophesy the future of commercial art," wrote Brainard Leroy Bates in the *Graphic Arts and Crafts Yearbook* in 1911. [Brainard Leroy Bates, "Commercial Illustration,"

Graphic Arts and Crafts Yearbook, 1911-1912, v.5., pp.117-140.]

Advertisers will talk less and illustrate more. There is much debate at present as to the relative merits of copy and illustration, but if we judge by past performances, the advertising of the future will run as much to pictures as to text. Pictures show a thing better than words, even without considering factors of time and space. And the quality of illustrations will continue to improve just as fast as advertisers are willing to educate themselves.

"The Language of the Brain:" Halftone Photography and Commercial Art Theory

"Why use pictures in advertising?" was the question that C. Everett Johnson asked the readers of *Profitable Advertising* in 1899. [C. Everett Johnson, "Why Use Pictures in Advertising?," *Profitable Advertising* v.9, n.6, November 1899, p.406.] Hoping to raise the consciousness of "that large class of advertisers who, while they use pictures, do it in a half-hearted way," Johnson sought to "go back to first principles" in his article and examine "the fundamental value of picture advertising."

At the core of Johnson's theory of how illustrated advertising worked was an analogy between images and words. Johnson claimed that the image was the origin of the word, that images were the true substance of thought and that words were but a textual gloss over the deeper reality of pictorial consciousness. "The language of the average human being is pictorial," Johnson wrote, "or, to state it differently, words carry pictures to our brain."

Johnson believed that images, like words and phrases, could be strung together in grammatical fashion to create, through combination and juxtaposition, new meanings and associations:

Take any word and repeat it to yourself, and you are conscious of a picture illustrating the meaning of it. A series of words brings up a series of pictures, like a kinetoscope, blending into a concrete picture as a sentence is rounded off.

Pictures, Johnson believed, penetrated into human consciousness "much more quickly and surely than words." The picture preceded the word. "Pictures are the language of the brain," he wrote, "and no translating is necessary." Images, Johnson believed, could serve as a means to manipulate thought. "Too much attention cannot be given to the picture advertisement," he wrote.

By this I mean that indescribable impression, pleasant or otherwise, which is made on the beholder aside from the essential meaning of the advertisement, and which is always associated with the article advertised in that picture.

If the picture is bright, and suggestive of high quality, taste and refinement, those qualities go with the article.

Unfortunately, most commercial art was still of mediocre quality and much work still needed to be done if

illustrated advertising was to realize its true potential as a medium of visual mass communication.

[I]llustrated advertising is a much maligned and little developed means of securing publicity. Its worst enemies are those who make use of it without understanding its principles, and thus bring it into contempt and ridicule. Used rightly and intelligently there is no more powerful method of reaching the masses.

Like Johnson, J. Ellsworth Gross, the Chicago-based photographer, envisioned tremendous, but still unrealized, commercial possibilities for this new medium. Gross believed that photography was the perfect medium of commercial illustration. "Advertising is the power in the world of business," he wrote in 1903, and "this enlarged trade is made through illustrations and printing." [J. Ellsworth Gross, "The Picture in the Ad," *Profitable Advertising* v.13, n.8., p.774.] Like Johnson, Gross believed that illustrated advertising was not art for art's sake, but art for industry's sake. "[P]hotography has taken strides," he wrote, remarking on the partnership into which art and business had recently entered through the medium of halftone. "With an artistic advertising man of experience at the camera, photographic art and business illustration have been made to harmonize....The advertiser wants [the] bare facts that the camera will give; he also wants the artistic touches that will please the aesthetic public's eye. Hence, the artist photographer can...satisfy the [businessman's] demand for the beautiful."

[J. Ellsworth Gross, "Photographic Designing," *Profitable Advertising* v.13, n.5, p.396.]

Photography, Gross believed, was a medium of communication far more powerful than the written word. Photographs, he wrote, "speak to all ages of years and intelligence, to all nationalities, and compel the memory to retain them by repeated impressions." Moreover, rich and poor alike could appreciate the beauty of commercial photographic art. Such images, Gross wrote, "are often seen tacked to the walls of the most luxurious homes, and again adorn the shacks of the frontier." They "fairly cover the walls of some cottages and college men's and girl's rooms." [J. Ellsworth Gross, "The Picture in the Ad," p.775-776.] Indeed, like Johnson, Gross believed that a mental language of images was the foundation of written language itself. "In infancy we began to read the story by the picture," he wrote. "A child who does not know his letters will read every page of 'Mother Goose' aloud from the illustrations." [J. Ellsworth Gross, "The Picture in the Ad," p.774.]

Gross argued that an effective advertising picture was instructional: "[It] must lift the unknown to the known." [J. Ellsworth Gross, "The Picture in the Ad," p.776.] To realize this didactic purpose, Gross strongly advocated the use of professional models to add "the breath of life" to advertisements and thereby attract the attention of customers. "There is a certain element of interest in the picture of a real person that is not presented by a drawing -- hence photographs of a figure, whether a man, woman, or child, have a living interest which is impossible for an artist to draw, no matter how great his skill." [J. Ellsworth Gross, "The Picture in the Ad," p.775.]

The views of Johnson and Gross were echoed in the writings of Ernest Elmo Calkins, another turn-of-the-century pioneer in the field of commercial art theory. "Very recently," Calkins wrote in "The Camera as an Ad.-writer" in 1903, "the photograph has been intelligently applied to several different kinds of advertising designing. Some interesting facts have developed in connection with it." [Ernest Elmo Calkins, "The Camera as an Ad.-writer," *Profitable Advertising* v.12, n.12, May 1903, p.1040.] Like Gross, Calkins believed that photography was especially suited to the advertiser's communicative and economic needs. This theory was based on observations of the success of photographically illustrated *Ten Cent Magazines*. "Comparing the design made from a photograph and the design made from a drawing by a good artist," he wrote,

there are two advantages in favor of the photograph. One is that an equally good design by an artist costs several times as much. The other is that most people would rather see a picture taken from life than a good drawing. This of course applies to the mass of people who buy -- not to the limited artistic few. The success of magazines based on photographic work, such, for instance, as *Munsey's*, is a proof that the public like photographs.

For these reasons of economy and taste, the figure of the professional model was at the core of Calkins's theory of effective commercial photography. "When the illustrated article needs to have something done to illustrate it to the best advantage," he wrote, "then the intelligent model comes in and adds to the picture a quality which could not be had otherwise, except by very good and, therefore, expensive drawing."

Calkins measured the artistry of commercial photographic design in terms of the eloquence of its social and psychological manipulation. It was for this reason that Calkins maintained that a model was more than just a pretty face. The ideal model, he believed, was a character actor who could play a range of social roles for the camera. The artful commercial illustrators could then combine these stylized portraits of class and status together to create a photographic reconstruction of the social drama of everyday life in the final design. "[T]here is something known to the psychologists as association of ideas," Calkins wrote, "which it is important should be secured in an advertisement."

Calkins explained what he meant by the "association of ideas" through a reading of an advertisement for Eaton-Hurlbut stationery that was published in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1903.



Advertisement for Eaton-Hurlbut Paper demonstrating the "association of ideas." Reproduced in Ernest Elmo Calkins, "The Camera as an Ad-Writer," *Profitable Advertising*, v.12, n.12, May 1903, p.1042.

The photograph in this ad, which depicts a woman seated at a table writing a letter with her maidservant standing by her side, demonstrates the intelligent use of photographic models to construct visual social montage. "Here the intention is to advertise letter paper of the kind that is used by women of the best social position," Calkins wrote. "For instance," he added, the model who is using the paper should be of the type and belong to the class of woman that you are trying to persuade to use the paper. If the woman looks like a

lady help, the mistress of the house is not going to be interested in the paper. Therefore the model selected for this purpose has the appearance of the sort of woman who would have her own individual letter paper stamped with her monogram and who is up in all the little amenities of class society. This is further enhanced by having a maid waiting for the nearly finished letter, the maid being the everyday housemaid, and not the fancy French article indigenous to farce comedy.

Although the scene depicted in this ad was obviously staged, the underlying social tensions and pretensions represented through its iconography were true-to-life. "[I]t is a real picture," Calkins wrote, "but drawn with a camera."

But in spite of all his enthusiasm for photographic illustration, Calkins realized that a photograph alone could not, in and of itself, make for a successful advertisement. To realize its ultimate effectiveness, Calkins believed that the photograph in the ad needed to be "worked up" and incorporated into the larger composition.

After the photograph has been secured,...[a]ll sorts of designing can be used with it. Straight, strong line borders with background, a heavy white line or a black line around the photograph itself, or the photograph can be used outside of the advertisement, silhouetted against the white paper...[or] worked up into designs for two or more colors.

It was vitally important that photograph and design complement one another. "The design should not be loaded with decorative work so as to detract from the effect of the photograph." At the same time, Calkins maintained that the photograph "should not be used as the design. It is far stronger and better worked up into some definite design, so its vital feature is brought out and emphasized." And although it was possible to remove the blemishes from a photograph through retouching, in the end a photograph was effective because it was a photograph and it was up to the commercial artist to advantage of this ontological fact.

It is possible to retouch photographs, of course, but, after all, a photograph is a reproduction of some real object. In this way it has a certain veracity which is effective. When you see a photograph of a certain scene, or landscape, or machine, you feel that it must look like the article. All the retouching in the world will not take that out. The truthfulness of the picture is one of those things which may be called self-evident.

The joining of forces by artists and businessmen through the medium of commercial illustration was a remarkable event. As A. Rowden King remarked in 1911, in an article for *Profitable Advertising* entitled "Art versus Commercial Art": "No two classes of men have points of view more diametrically opposed than advertisers and artists." [A. Rowden King, "Art Versus Commercial Art," *Profitable Advertising*, v.21, n.5, October 1911, pp.49-53.] Businessmen being practical and artists being dreamers, King believed that it was "the ideal mixing of the best that is in the brain of each that makes for good pictorial advertising." King described the conceptual framework within which this grand historical synthesis of American art and business was taking place:

Art is subjective; business is objective. The poet and artist have been born and educated to think of the esthetic qualities of a thing for its own sake subjectively -- art for art's sake. The advertising man must weigh objectively every line of space, whether it is to be type matter or illustration, on the basis of the results it is potentially capable of bringing to pass. The artist dreams of harmonies in color -- of sunsets and rainbows and fields of flowers, with blending color-values, each shading off into the other. The advertising man seeks color combinations which will be most attractive and compelling under artificial light, so as to make his car card stand out among a car full in the subway.

For the commercial illustrator this meant abandoning one's classical training and learning to use the tools of art in new and different ways. King elaborated on this point:

All artists divide themselves into two classes: impressionists and realists. The advertising world has no use for the impressionistic school at all. No two people see an impressionistic picture exactly the same way....The advertising world has but slightly more use for the strict realists. For instance, if women's gloves are to be advertised, little or no realism is needed or wanted on the texture of the waist of the woman wearing the glove in a commercial design.

True commercial artists practiced impressionistic realism:

The advertising man is a realist when the product he is selling is being pictured. But he tends to be an impressionist for the greater part of the rest of his design, not hesitating to use cross-hatch and distemper effects and to double-etch his plates, if need be, to keep down bewildering unessentials. He wants a combination of both the leading schools...

And, unlike John C. VanDyke, who had written in *How to Judge of a Picture* that the "chief aim of art is to express the ideas, feelings, impressions, or beliefs of the artist...not to deceive and make one think he stands in the presence of real life," King claimed that "it is the object of commercial art to deceive and make the reader believe he is in the presence of real peanuts and postage stamps, if these are the goods advertised and if such a result is possible."

The Halftone Revolution: From Art for Art's Sake to Art for Industry's Sake

If the art of halftone was Realism, the reality of halftone was its commercial context. The historic implications of the marriage of art and industry through the medium of halftone was a frequent subject of philosophical and sociological rumination in photographic and advertising industry trade journals at the turn of the century.

In 1895, Henry Peach Robinson, the celebrated British photographic pictorialist and early master of photomontage, remarked on the effects that this marriage was having on the art and industry of photography: "Nothing, perhaps, that was ever discovered or invented, ever spread into so many branches, created so many trades or professions, destroyed so many, or changed the face of such a number, as photography," he wrote. "Of all these newly created trades, the result of process work [i.e. halftone] is undoubtedly the most prodigious material outcome, for good or evil." Although Robinson readily acknowledged that "the craze for illustration" had opened up "another way of making money by photography, which ought to have the further advantage of improving the pictorial side of the art," his general assessment of this new medium was much more pessimistic. [H.P. Robinson, "Illustration," *The Photo-American* v.6, n.8, June 1895, pp.228-229.]

Most of all, Robinson believed that halftone had created an unholy alliance between artist and businessman that was corrupting the aesthetic integrity of the photographic beauty-making process.

Occasionally...one sees that beauty is possible by process; nearly always one feels that beauty is swamped by cheapness, or for want of knowledge of what is beautiful in the workers. It is cheapness, perhaps, or the desire to undersell, that is the root of most of the evil....Quality does not much matter, and books containing little else than illustrations are published, as fast as titles can be found for them."

Indeed, not only was cheap halftone threatening to destroy the art of illustration, Robinson also believed that it was threatening to destroy writing itself.

Illustration used to be employed to 'embellish' and help the author; now the author, instead of being embellished, goes in palous fear of being abolished, for few have time to read, and it is as much he who runs - - to catch a train -- can do to look at the pictures and chuck the paper out the carriage window, for it is seldom worth keeping.

The reality of photomechanical reproduction was very different from the dream: "[T]he more thoughtful of our editors are beginning to recognize that it is not altogether the best thing for photography, but we cannot now escape. It is a Frankenstein's monster of our own creating. The tail wags the dog, and the dog must bark." Robinson recognized the irreversibility, inevitability, and irony of the cultural and economic changes that halftone was bringing to the art of photography. "Many are endeavoring to make the best of it in a characteristically photographic way, by running madly after the inevitable processes so dear to the mechanical photographer; while others more wisely recognize that the dearth that is threatening is that of food for the monster."

Many of Robinson's contemporaries in the field of turn-of-the-century photographic art theory shared in his view that halftone was a mixed blessing. "Considering the fact that space is the greatest expense in

connection with an advertisement, and the expense of illustration the smallest," wrote Oscar Binner in 1897, bemoaning the penny-pinching logic that was driving the market for shoddy illustrated advertising, "is it not strange that advertisers do not more generally use good illustrations?" [Oscar E. Binner, "Illustrated Advertising," Profitable Advertising, v.7, n.2, July 1897, pp.50-53.] Likewise, in an article for the *Process Year Book* written in 1898 entitled "Photography as an Aid to the Decoration of a Book," the Reverend F.C. Lambert, made a similar observation:

The present age is undoubtedly a book-making age. But, alas, the craze for cheapness and quantity has brought with it an undesirable result -- viz., inferior quality in some respects. And while, on the one hand, we must all be glad that the cheapness of production has brought the literary treasures of the past within the reach of the many, yet this rejoicing is not altogether free from the regret that the age of making beautiful books seems about to pass away. [Rev. F.C. Lambert, "Photography as an Aid to the Decoration of a Book," *Process Year Book: Penrose's Annual Review of the Graphic Arts*, 1898, pp.57-61.]

Likewise, in an article published in the 1903 *Process Year Book* entitled "The Selection of Photographs for Publication," Frank M. Sutcliffe, the well-known British photographer and author of several popular treatises on photographic art, lamented the numbing effect that the halftone revolution was having on the mind of the public: "This wealth of illustration is spoiling the eye of the multitude," he complained. "A public fed on photographic illustrations is like a horse fed on chaff, it gets blown up with an indigestible quantity." [Frank M. Sutcliffe, "The Selection of Photographs for Publication," *Process Year Book: Penrose's Annual Review of the Graphic Arts*, 1903-04, pp.119-120.] Sutcliffe blamed this glut of mediocrity on editors and publishers, whom he believed had sold the soul of art to the false god of profit.

[T]he editor of today does not care in the least for that thing which the photographer strives after the most, namely, pictorial quality....What the editors and publishers of to-day want are photographs of things which are happening at the moment or about to happen to-morrow. Yesterday's event, no matter how beautifully done, is of no use to them; they want, too, portraits of the man who will be famous to-morrow, or the celebrity who will die to-night: whether these portraits are at all faithful or artistic portraits of the people represented does not matter in the least.

In 1905, in an article for the *Process Year Book* entitled "Cheap Pictures," Sutcliffe continued his rant against the excesses of photomechanical reproduction. Bemoaning the fact that "they still prefer Quantity to Quality," Sutcliffe blamed magazine editors for permitting this intolerable situation to continue:

For some misguided reason or other the editors of papers refuse to buy the best work and to pay a good price for it. Instead they flood the world with fifth-rate work, paid for at a cheap rate....A cheap picture bought for 3s. 6d. may save the publisher 6s. 6d. or so, but what is six and six for a paper with a circulation running into hundreds of thousands?...[T]he enormous quantity of so-called pictures turned out in newspapers, magazines, and as postcards is sure to make people either surfeited with, or indifferent to, good pictorial work. Whatever we have in abundance we value but lightly. [Frank M. Sutcliffe, "Cheap Pictures," *Process Year Book: Penrose's Annual Review of the Graphic Arts*, 1905-06, pp.109-110.]

The negative views of Robinson and Sutcliffe toward the halftone revolution were not shared by everyone however. Indeed, many observers were far more favorable in their assessment of the impact that halftone photography was having on the development of society and culture. In 1899, in an article for *The Amateur Photographer* entitled "The Influence of Halftone Process," A. Horsley Hinton, wrote: "[I]llustration is to-day of hardly less importance than the hieroglyphics and sculpture of the ancients were in their day -- a splendid method of writing in a manner far transcending language, and it is hardly possible that the prevalence of half-tone illustrations can fail to have an actual effect upon the present generation." Moreover, unlike Robinson and Sutcliffe, who believed that halftone was eroding the public's artistic sensibilities, Hinton believed that halftone was serving to invigorate this awareness. "[T]he half-tone process has co-operated with photography pure and simple to cultivate in the public a better and finer taste in the matter of pictures and illustrations." [A. Horsley Hinton, "The Influence of Halftone Process," *Process Year Book: Penrose's Annual Review of the Graphic Arts*, 1899, pp.90, 93.] Halftone, Hinton believed, could serve as a means to share the wealth of the nation's cultural heritage, which could only be a good thing.

This optimistic view of the great social promise of the halftone revolution was shared by the craftsmen, manufacturers, thinkers, and educators who convened in Chicago for the first national conference of the Industrial Art League on October 4, 1902. The term "industrial art," explained a reporter from the conference, "applies to any form of production or manufacture where art and labor join together, and hence can be applied to any form of production wherein art is given a place, as labor is already present in all forms of production." ["Art and Industry. Being a Report of an Interesting Conference," *Profitable Advertising*, v.12, n.6, pp.423-25.] Because the "production of

advertising matter is a form of activity where art has or should have a very large place," explained the reporter, and because "[a]dvertising also is the force which largely controls the distribution of all the products of industry, so again advertising has a place in any discussion of industrial problems." If for no other reason than its enormous commercial proportions, industrial art was a cultural force of tremendous social and historical significance.

James Howard Kehler, an advertiser and self-proclaimed industrial artist, was one of the speakers at this inaugural conference of the Industrial Art League. Inspired by the ideals of Ruskin and William Morris, Kehler proclaimed the revolutionary implications of this new field of creative endeavor: "The phrase 'prostituting art to commercial uses,'" Kehler stated, seeking to expose the arrogance and backward-mindedness of industrial art's detractors "is much used by those (mainly unsuccessful artists) who affect to uphold a standard sometimes called 'art for art's sake.'" This argument, Kehler believed, created a false dichotomy between "art" and "commercial art," an elitist cultural dichotomy which served to perpetuate social division between rich and poor. "Prostitution is the misapplication or perversion of the faculties of man," Kehler continued.

The restriction of art to galleries and parlors, following a custom wholly medieval and founded on class distinction, constitutes in my mind the prostitution of art. The artist who works for the limited public of leisure and wealth, the artist in whose work is no element of real utility to mankind at large and who works to a standard not of our time or country, is in my mind the prostitute, his purpose a vain one, and his art the merest of vanities. He is, moreover, a copyist and not a creator, a worshipper at the shrine of an artist no longer vital, a mere fetish in fact, without voice or power, despite the efforts of the feudalists of our time to give it these attributes....They would shut out art from industry and commerce, the only places, almost, in this great commercial and industrial country where it could sustain a vital or useful relation to the people. They have actually made the men who do things believe that art is a thing too good, too high, too holy, for daily use, which in fact the only thing which makes art a high and holy thing is its capacity, when rightly used, to serve the every-day purposes of men.

The mechanical proliferation of art was a good thing, Kehler believed, for the same reason that the mechanical proliferation of books and newspapers was a good thing; it liberated culture from the clutches of the rich and powerful and redistributed it to the masses of ordinary people where it rightfully belonged.

It was for this reason that the editors of *Profitable Advertising* wrote, in an article entitled "The Advertiser as Historian," that "the only part of the magazine of today that would interest the student in the distant future is the advertising section." ["The Advertiser as Historian," *Profitable Advertising*, v.12, n.3, August 1902, pp.177-78.] We should "preserve the advertising pages when we bind our magazines," the editors admonished, because only through this advertising could the historian of the future discover "what the people wrote of their life without the interference of the editor." Indeed, they continued, "the advertisements of today form a complete elucidation of all our manners, customs, and habits, and it is barely possible that with the antiquarian of a few hundred years hence, our advertisers will be regarded as having left behind them a more authentic history of these times than did our historians." Unlike historians, who were preoccupied with telling stories of kings and presidents and battles and treaties, advertisers told stories of ordinary people living ordinary lives.

This progressive assessment of the social and historical implications of the halftone revolution was echoed by A. Murray in an article for the 1906 *Process Year Book* entitled "The Dissemination of the Arts." Murray believed that halftone promised to liberate art from the confines of gallery and museum walls, revolutionizing the Arts in the same way that the printing press had revolutionized the Text by liberating the book from the confines of the Medieval scriptorium: "The influence of the Arts as an agency in the higher evolution of the human race is beyond dispute," he wrote:

If Art then is to fulfill its functions and exercise the influence it is capable of on the social life of our times, it must be disseminated in the ranks and masses of the people. The best that our masters and teachers can give must be put into touch with the life-throb of the nation....The spirit of the motto of "Art for Art's sake" must be brought to its full fructification in the devotion of Art for man's sake." [A. Murray, "The Dissemination of the Arts,"

Process Year Book: Penrose's Annual Review of the Graphic Arts, 1906-07, pp.31-32.]

Murray's optimism for halftone was buoyed by his understanding of the social and historical context in which this cultural technology was being developed. "The democratic movement in Art is manifested in the printing processes," he wrote. Murray celebrated halftone's social benefits and dismissed the criticisms of naysayers like Robinson and Sutcliffe who had characterized photomechanical proliferation as the nemesis of Art:

The process worker is the middleman in the field of reproductive operations; he takes up the work of the creative artist at the stage where it could remain a possession of the privileged few, and by his manipulation, multiplies it a thousand-fold and puts it within the reach of the many. Of course he would be the last to claim that all the

wealth of color and texture in Art can be thus transcribed from the original; he is only too alive to his limitations, but he is as convinced that these are merely transitory in their nature, and fast vanishing into thin air.

The halftone revolution represented a cultural transformation of epic proportions. Some witnesses to this event believed that it created the possibility for the emergence of a new kind of art, an art that could reproduce the true spirit of the nation by combining the industrial force of commerce with the cultural dynamism of the artistic imagination. As Herman C. Lammers wrote in 1908, in an article for *Profitable Advertising* entitled "Modern Commercial Art":

Somehow history seems to show that every successful nation had an art that was in a measure a reflex of the characteristics of its people and the tendencies of the time it lived in. Some among us will have it that Americans have no national art. Maybe so. But we do, as a people, have a great commercial instinct....We have businessmen with ideas and artists with talent. What we need is to have them closer together, working to perfect a new force, a modern commercial art that will make all advertising doubly effective. [Herman C. Lammers, "Modern Commercial Art," *Profitable Advertising*, v.18, n.2, July 1908, pp.125-127.]



One of the first halftones printed in Harper's Magazine, from a plate manufactured by Frederick Ives while working for Crosscup & West. From J.L. Kipling, "Indian Art in Metal and Wood," *Harper's Magazine*, June 1883, p.59.

Schmedling Studio (Chattanooga, Tennessee):
Advertising Card for Cole the Hatter

Albumen print cabinet card, circa 1875

A rare example of early advertising photography, this dapper portrait of "Mike" is evidence that dogs have been acting like humans in ad campaigns for a very long time.

<http://www.photography-museum.com/colelg.html>

