

# Mad Women

**Despite what you may have seen on AMC, the heyday of **Madison Avenue** advertising had its fair share of feisty females. And these dames made a lot more than just coffee** BY ERIN DEJESUS

"THE CHEF DOES everything but cook—that's what wives are for!" proclaimed Kenwood's 1961 advertisement for a new kitchen mixer called The Chef. The ad's implicit sexism is anything but subtle: a beaming woman (wearing a chef's hat, no less) hugs her husband from behind, apparently thrilled by her new kitchen appliance. It seems to be a product of its times, as highlighted by the Emmy-winning AMC series *Mad Men*, which depicts the advertising industry's glamorous golden age by focusing on the chain-smoking, scotch-drinking good ol' boys stereotypical of the 1960s American business world.

But believe it or not, the halls of the real Madison Avenue hold a rich history of powerful, successful, and influential Mad Women. From creating Clairol's "Only her hairdresser knows for sure" to Alka-Seltzer's "I can't believe I ate the whole thing" campaigns, female copywriters, creative directors, and advertising executives have had an impressive presence within the industry since its infancy—long before the women's-lib movement. In a business where talent and creativity trumped stereotype, many ad alums say that advertising was far more accepting of women than other industries. "[Advertising is] a bit iconoclastic," says Jayne Eastman, who has worked in the advertising industry since the 1970s. "[The acceptance of] women is just another example of an atmosphere that says, 'Let's get down to brass tacks; what do you have to say?'"

It may be hard to believe, but women were working in advertising before they even earned the right to vote. At the end of the 19th century, manufacturers began to recognize the spending power of women: in addition to purchasing "ladies-only" products like cosmetics, most women were also responsible for buying food and clothing for their entire families. To better appeal to the "female viewpoint," retail stores, which often created advertising in-house, hired female copywriters in large numbers, and preconceived notions about women in the workplace took a backseat to the bottom line. In the 1920s, one of the most famous advertising slogans in America was written by one of these early pioneers. Helen Lansdowne Resor's slogan

*Image: Shirley Polykoff's "Does she...or doesn't she?" ad for Clairol, circa 1957*





Clockwise from top left: Bernice "the Fitz" Fitz-Gibbon; Phyllis Robinson at her desk at DDB in the '50s; Shirley Polykoff



for Woodbury soap, "A skin you love to touch," injected the first dose of sex appeal into American advertising, and Resor is also credited as the first woman to write a national campaign. Along with her husband, Resor founded the J. Walter Thompson ad agency, which included a first-of-its-kind women's editorial department, employing women in both creative and executive positions. "[Resor] made a place in advertising geography for women, a place no advertiser or agency ever before had granted them," writes Harriet Abbott in a 1920 *Ladies' Home Journal* article. "She pioneered the way for women in advertising, marking a trail for which successful women today are grateful."

In those early days of advertising, female copywriters usually specialized in selling directly to other women. Hired by retailers, they penned copy for beauty, fashion, and household products that capitalized on the average woman's role as mother, housekeeper, and homemaker. As a result, says feminist scholar Jennifer Scanlon in her book *Inarticulate Longings*, early female advertisers broke barriers for women to enter the workforce, but through their copy, they also had a heavy hand in enforcing images of female domesticity. And for female workers, standard business practices still applied: even the groundbreaking women's department at J. Walter Thompson segregated the office space by sex, as was common practice at the time. It also goes without saying that equal pay was not given for equal work.

But by the time the industry reached its glitzy cigarette smok-

ing, four-martini-lunching golden age (loosely defined as the two decades after World War II), manufacturers relied more on agencies to generate creative work. And as a result, the industry—in need of fresh viewpoints and ideas for both men's and women's markets—broadened to accept women in different roles. In the '40s, Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, known by her colleagues as "the Fitz," made an astounding \$90,000 a year writing advertising copy for Macy's and Gimbels department stores. In 1946, Jean Wade Rindlaub, who worked on campaigns for Campbell Soup and Velveeta, became one of the first female advertising executives when she was named vice president of the Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn agency.

Though the industry was growing to accept women, true success required tenacity and a sense of optimism—something that Phyllis Robinson, one of the first female icons of Madison Avenue, had in spades. A graduate of Barnard College's class of 1942, Robinson began a career as a playwright, but she was also intrigued by the advertising world. She broke into the industry by writing fashion copy for Grey Advertising, a major agency. It's a testament to her self-assuredness that, although there were still very few successful women in the ad game, she wasn't daunted by the prospect of breaking into the industry. "It seemed like a simple thing to do," Robinson, now 87, says during a phone interview from her home in Manhattan. "I had done plays and musicals on and off Broadway, and advertising didn't seem like anything special. I thought, 'Oh, this too? What the hell. Why not?'" When Grey's creative director

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left to start the now-legendary Doyle Dane Bernbach agency in 1949, Robinson joined the new agency as copy chief.

At DDB, Robinson created iconic work for Polaroid and Volkswagen. But she's best known for Clairol's famous 1971 “It lets me be me” slogan, a line often credited with inspiring the narcissism of the “me generation.” The slogan, which cemented her place in the annals of advertising history, “came so simply and easily to me,” she says. “A writer is a writer. Whether you write great novels or you write funny papers, you just say, ‘Hmm, what’s a good idea? What should I do here?’ And then, ding! It comes to you.” Despite the awards and accolades generated by the Clairol campaign, Robinson looks back at her years at DDB nonchalantly. “We were on Madison Avenue,” she recalls. “I took the job, hired a lot of interesting people who did wonderful work for me, and that was that.”

One of those “interesting” people was Mary Wells Lawrence, who, by all accounts, went on to become one of Madison Avenue's greatest heavy hitters, male or female. Lawrence, now one of the creators of [www.wowOwow.com](http://www.wowOwow.com), a news and opinion Web site for educated, successful women, started her career in 1951, writing ad copy for McKelvey's department store in Ohio. “Advertising just happened to me, like love,” Lawrence, now 80, recalls via email. “I was hired by a department store because I had been an acting student and performer, and the women who ran the advertising department thought that that was a good background for communicating with customers. I went to work and never looked back. It was a perfect fit.”

Although Lawrence had worked several ad jobs by the time she met Robinson, she describes her 1957 interview at DDB, at age 29, as nothing short of awe-inspiring, comparing Robinson to “the lead angel in an opera” in her 2002 memoir, *A Big Life (in Advertising)*. “Seeing how overimpressed I was, she eased down into the role of a friend and did all she could to help me with the interview.” It worked. A week later, Lawrence was hired at DDB, and seven years later, she left to join the progressive creative think tank Jack Tinker & Partners, where she branded Braniff Airlines' slogan “The end of the plain plane” (and later married the aviation company's president). When her bosses at Tinker refused to promote her because “the world is not ready for women presidents,” Lawrence quit on the spot and started her own advertising agency, Wells Rich Greene. By 1969 (a scant seven years after the second season of *Mad Men* is set, by the way), Lawrence was the highest-paid advertising executive in the United States, raking in \$225,000 a year.

Lawrence and her team at Wells Rich Greene created dynamic campaigns for a wide variety of clients, including American Motors, Benson & Hedges cigarettes, and New York City (Lawrence collaborated with legendary graphic designer Milton Glaser to design the ubiquitous “I [heart] NY” logo and campaign). But with her high-profile success came scrutiny. As the first female CEO of a company listed on the New York Stock Exchange, Lawrence achieved a level of celebrity that inspired *LIFE* magazine profiles and incessant public questions about her marriage and home life. Gloria Steinem even publicly accused her of “Uncle Tomming her way to the top,” suggesting Lawrence got ahead by acting subservient to men.

Lawrence—who called Steinem a “silly woman” in her memoir—says she didn't act subservient to men, but that she did downplay her femininity to get ahead. “I didn't march or make speeches. I worked extraordinarily hard,” she says. “I wasn't flirtatious. I wasn't sensitive. I was deeply interested in my clients' success and they always knew it. A lot of women worked this way at the time, and now, I imagine, most do.”

Perhaps surprisingly, Lawrence and many of her counterparts maintain that the advertising industry was overwhelmingly accepting of women. Female advertisers have “always been respected by men,” Lawrence says, because men appreciated “just how important women are as customers” and “that women are such easy communicators.” When asked if she ever experienced any sexism, Robinson replies without hesitation: “Not an iota. Not a whiff. No, I was totally accepted and saluted.” Eastman says that “while in any modern-day sense, there were not lots of women running things [in advertising], there were so many more than I was used to that it felt like breaking down gender roles was behind me.”

Even if the advertising world was accepting of women, however, sometimes its clients lagged behind. “Where you did feel sexism more was with the clients, because we were very frequently trying to convince a roomful of men,” says Eastman, who now works at Henry Rak Consulting Partners in Illinois. “There were more than one of those groups whose tendency was—whether consciously or not—to discount what you had to say because of your sex. And it's much more subtle than just ‘She's a woman so she can't have much to say.’ It's not like that. Largely what it turned out to be was that the kind of relationships men were brought up to have with other men, they didn't know how to have those with women.” Eastman, who joined Wells Rich Greene in 1979 and worked alongside Lawrence for a number of years, found that her gender could actually be an asset when dealing with those clients. She recalls one heated meeting with a client, during which Eastman questioned the way he ran his business by quipping, “If anything you had ever done on this business had worked, then we wouldn't be having this conversation.” “I don't think a man could have gotten away with that,” she says now.

Thanks to their creativity, ambition, and raw talent, Robinson and Lawrence's contemporaries also enjoyed similar success. Jane Trahey founded her own agency in 1960—her ads for Blackglama

furs, which featured celebrities in lush minks with the slogan “What becomes a legend most?” ran from 1968 to 1996. Paula Green, another Robinson hire at DDB, came up with Avis’ still-in-use motto “We try harder” and started her own agency in 1969. Reva Korda, who began her decades-long career writing for the Fitz, was named executive creative director of the Ogilvy & Mather agency in 1973. And most famously, advertising legend Shirley Polykoff, who became the Foote, Cone & Belding agency’s only female executive vice president in 1967, created Clairol’s cheeky “Does she...or doesn’t she? Only her hairdresser knows for sure” slogan in 1956. The campaign helped change perceptions about women who dyed their hair (from “loose” to “liberated”), and sales of hair dye across the board jumped from \$25 million to \$200 million a year.

In her witty 1975 memoir, *Does She or Doesn’t She? And How She Did It*, Polykoff alludes to client resistance because of her gender. When *The New York Times* wanted to write a story about the success of the “Does she...or doesn’t she?” campaign, Clairol balked, despite the free publicity. “Clairol, who at the time had no women in the management hierarchy or in the product groups, thought it was unseemly for a woman to be the focus of the story,” Polykoff writes wryly. “But *The New York Times* decided to kill it

any women today coming out of school, the doors are open,” says Mary Warlick, CEO of The One Club, a non-profit organization that supports the creative side of advertising. “There are a lot—a lot—of smart women working in the industry.”

But strides still need to be made. The same 2003 EEOC study shows that the number of women declines at each step up the ladder—in management positions, women make up only 47 percent. “I think you have to be strong,” Warlick says. “If you experience any kind of discrimination or experience any kind of glass ceiling, you gotta face it, you have to name it, you have to identify it, and you have to fight it.” Warlick admits that as in all other professions, many women feel compelled to make certain decisions—child rearing chief among them—that adversely affect their careers. But she maintains that those choices are more influenced by society than by the industry itself. “People say, ‘Well, where are the [female] creative directors?’ But they have to understand that a lot of times, women will opt to work freelance to build their careers around other things, whether it’s raising a family or writing a book,” Warlick says. “They’ll be very talented and they’ll do very successful work, but maybe they won’t be on that corporate track by choice.” Polykoff is a good example of how a mindset informed

by the social era can dictate ambition as much as overt workplace sexism—though she wasn’t shy about wanting to climb the corporate ladder, she requested that her salary (\$25,000 a year) not exceed her lawyer husband’s, “so as not to threaten [his] psyche.” As she explains in her memoir, “Though I loved my work, I was always more interested in being a woman first and an advertising person second.”

Warlick, who began her advertising career as creative manager at the Levine Huntley Schmidt & Beaver agency, recently curated a show at The New York Public Library called *The Real Men and Women of Madison Avenue...and Their Impact on American Culture*. Inspired in part by *Mad Men*, Warlick used the exhibit as an opportunity to shed light on the work of Robinson, Polykoff, and their contemporaries—Mary Wells Lawrence’s towering portrait serves as one of the exhibit’s main images. The exhibit gave several ad women the opportunity to reminisce about an era that was far more welcoming than the one most see on TV. “My daughter lives in Denver, and I took her to see that show,” Robinson says. “She got a big kick out of it. It was a shock to her, because she didn’t know anything about that. I mean, she knew what work I had done, but she was astonished to see how exciting it was.”

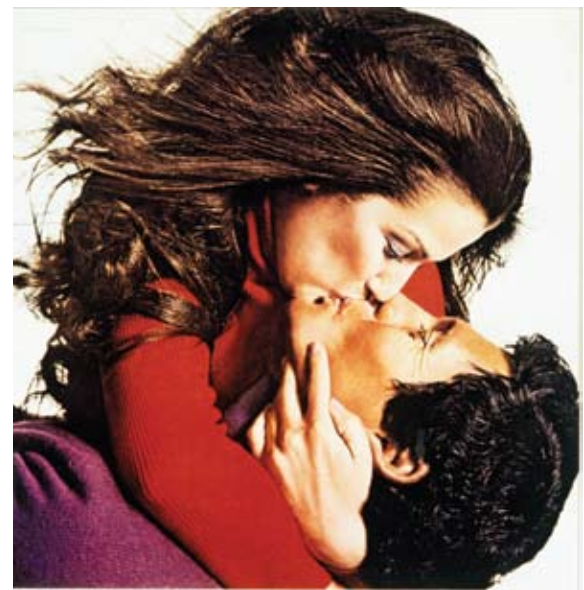
Lawrence echoes the sentiment. “The advertising business is the most glamorous business of them all, in my opinion,” she says. “Advertising is about changing people’s ideas, changing their styles, changing their knowledge, changing their education, changing their attitudes, changing them. It is thrilling to produce change. It is glamorous. It is powerful.” ■

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rather than run it without interviewing the writer. No writer, no article. I love you, *New York Times*.”

Clairol eventually agreed to the interview, and as Polykoff reached retirement in 1973, female executives continued to make strides. By the 1970s, the industry had finally broken its final unspoken barrier, opening its doors to women of color. Barbara Gardner Proctor began her career in 1965, eventually landing a job as copy supervisor at North Advertising Agency. When she was fired after refusing to work on a campaign she considered racist and sexist, she founded Proctor and Gardner Advertising in 1971. Caroline Robinson Jones, who began her career as a secretary and tenaciously worked her way up to copywriter, formed Mingo-Jones Advertising with another African-American advertising executive in 1977.

Today, women make up the majority of the ad industry. According to a 2003 study by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, women accounted for 65.8 percent of employees in advertising (and 58.2 percent of “professional positions,” defined as those that require a college degree). Though data varies by university, current enrollment numbers show that women greatly outnumber men in communications degree programs. “I think for



**It lets me be me.**

In hair color, as in make-up, clothes, hair, work... a woman wants to be herself. Not somebody else's idea of what she is, or should be. That's what women like about Nic's Easy. Whether you want to color or neutral, to change a little or a lot, Nic's Easy assures you of beautiful coverage, healthy-looking hair and beautiful color that becomes part of you. No wonder, now more than ever, it sells the most. Nic's Easy. From Claret.



*Nic's Easy*

Clockwise from top left: Mary Wells Lawrence at her desk at Wells Rich Greene in 1967; an ad from Phyllis Robinson's Nice 'n Easy campaign; Lawrence's suggestive 1965 Braniff ad. Gloria Steinem once accused Lawrence of "Uncle Tomming her way to the top."

## Introducing the Air Strip

We had a girl go through the motions to show you just what's coming off at Braniff International. As in the picture below, our hostess appears at the airport wearing a reversible cold-weather coat, matching gloves and boots and, if it's raining, an ingenious plastic helmet.

When she boards our airplane, she sheds these outer garments to greet you in a ruffled suit and color-coordinated shoes. This ensemble is two expensive to risk soiling during dinner, so at the appropriate moment, she

changes into a lovely serving dress which we call a Paccino (named for its creator, Emilio Paccini, who believes that even an airline hostess should look like a girl). After dinner, our hostess slips out of the Paccino, revealing the way-out outfit on the right.

Each change is made in a flash, which allows her to give you constant attention, from the time you take off to the time you land.

If the flight serves all ten meals, that's the whole idea.

**Braniff International**  
Flies 1 initial bases: Mexico-South America

