

# FROM BERBER TO BLUEBERRIES: RHETORIC, DESIGN, AND MARTHA STEWART

by

MELANIE JOY MCNAUGHTON

(Under the Direction of Kevin Michael DeLuca)

## ABSTRACT

In today's culture, it is almost impossible to think of an aspect of the home Martha Stewart is not involved with, making Stewart's discourse and products critical texts in how we imagine and live in the home. The design of her products and publications has yet to be explored in rhetorical scholarship, despite common acknowledgement that design features prominently in her success. Working to fill that gap, this project knits together discourses on rhetoric, design and domesticity. The key question this dissertation works to answer is, What views of the world underlie the design of Stewart's domesticity, and how is this world view manifested in MSLO's domestic design? Using MSLO as the pivot point for an investigation of Stewart's design of domesticity, I take up specific facets of Stewart's enterprise, namely "Everyday" and "Collection" merchandise at Kmart and Macy's, the Hampton Oaks Stewart-branded suburb, and Martha Stewart Living magazine. I contend that Stewart's position in lifestyle markets is so robust and wide-reaching because she rescues domestic arts from denigration, defining homekeeping as techne. The rhetorical appeal of "Everyday" and "Collection" merchandise is located in the consumer myths offered in packaging narratives for these products. Stewart-branded homes are a new feature of Stewart's oeuvre, which materially articulate the Martha Stewart lifestyle. Stewart's place in North American domestic history is intimately connected to the success of Living, the flagship publication of the MSLO empire, the success of which is intimately tied to its graphic design. I maintain that the surface (typography) of communication is as important as its depth (content), and correspondingly, that scholarly

analysis of typography is as important to rhetoric as analyses of message content. Tacking between broad, more theoretical analysis and close textual analysis of specific MSLO texts, this project thus collectively ties theory *on* design to particular practices *of* design.

INDEX WORDS: Martha Stewart, Rhetoric, Design, Domesticity, Home, Branding, Consumer myths, Suburban life, Graphic design

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## DEDICATION

To those who enjoy nothing more on a Sunday afternoon than hunting for just-the-right-shade of teal glitter, turning long-outdated sweaters into well-loved accent pillows, making the perfect cherry filling for their father's birthday cake, or crafting Christmas ornaments from last-year's holiday cards. This one's for you.

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## CHAPTER 1

### DESIGNING DOMESTICITY: AN INTRODUCTION

No one who came within the charmed circle of her aspiring influence could go away without a feeling of uplift, a realization of the “relative importance of things,” and a desire to seek the best in life, the things really worth striving for. And among these she placed first and above all others the peace and joy of a harmonious home life.

- Helen Ekin Starrett, The Charm of a Well Mannered Home, 1923

I could have done it better.

- Martha Stewart, on the parody magazine Is Martha Stuart Living?

In today's culture, it is almost impossible to think of an aspect of the home Martha Stewart is not involved with: she sells products for every room in the home from the kitchen to the bedroom to the laundry room, furniture to fill and decorate the home, lawn and garden products for the outside of the home, the very home itself, and publications whose content directs consumers on how best to make use of all these products in the quest for a better life. In short, from the home that you live in, to the table you dine at, to the dinnerware you eat off of, to the food you present and the wine you serve, Martha does it all. There is no more prominent figure in the design of 21<sup>st</sup>-century domestic life than Martha Stewart, making Stewart's discourse and products critical texts in how we imagine and live in the home.

Stewart is not only an exceptionally successful, but also a highly controversial, figure in North American culture. Much of Stewart's success, as well as the controversy she engenders, is located in the ways she both profitably violates and upholds conventional tenets and cultural roles: she is a billionaire, a homemaker, an aggressive and unemotional businesswoman, a master decorator, a mother, a feminist,<sup>1</sup> an anti-feminist,<sup>2</sup> an ex-model, an ex-stockbroker,<sup>3</sup> an ex-wife, an ex-CEO, and an ex-convict. The tension created by these contradictions has spawned a body of scholarship on Stewart and Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MSLO) which seeks to work through this financially lucrative muddle. Research on Stewart draws together sociologists,<sup>4</sup> feminists,<sup>5</sup> legal scholars,<sup>6</sup> cultural studies scholars,<sup>7</sup> and biographers (both saccharine and vitriolic).<sup>8</sup> By far, the bulk of this scholarship comes out of cultural studies, and wrestles with the identities Stewart performs and advocates. What remains unexamined in this literature is a consideration of the place of design in Stewart's discourses of domesticity, and the rhetorical functions of these designs. Working to fill that gap, this project knits together discourses on rhetoric, design and domesticity.

As both a concept and a place home holds a significant position in the practice of daily life and is an important subject of analysis. This project takes up Thomas Benson's definition of rhetoric as a way "knowing the world," "constituting the self," and "exercising control over self, others, and by exertion the scene" ("Malcolm X" 1), and explores the home to investigate how people are encouraged to know the world, constitute the self, and exercise control over self, others, and the wider social world through the design of domesticity. Alison Blunt and Ann Varley point out that as a "space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, the home is invested with meaning, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life" (3). Hazel Easthope similarly argues that home is not a geographical location, but a site of deep personal and social meaning: "In understanding a person's connection with their home, then, we go some way towards understanding their social relations, their psychology and their emotions and we can begin to understand their 'lived experiences'"

(135). Specifically, this project examines the design of domestic arts and personalized spaces as exemplified by Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MSLO).

Noted design scholar Victor Margolin testifies that by paying close attention to the designed objects we use in everyday life, “we can begin to recognize the manifestations of social values and policies. In design we can see the representation of arguments about how life ought to be lived. Design is the result of choices. Who makes those choices and why? What views of the world underlie them and in what ways designers expect a worldview to be manifest in their work?” (Design 28).<sup>9</sup> The key question this dissertation takes up is Margolin’s latter query: what views of the world underlie the design of Stewart’s domesticity, and how is this world view manifested in MSLO’s domestic design?

If we are going to take up the design of Stewart’s domesticity, we need to understand whom she intends to reach. MSLO’s overall demographics cohere around the demographics for Martha Stewart Living, though they vary somewhat according to the product at hand (for example, between the demographics of products at Kmart and Stewart’s line of furniture through Bernhardt). Living’s audience is almost exclusively women (85 per cent) with a college degree (82 per cent), are married (69 per cent), own their own home (78 per cent), have a median age of 46, and an average household income of \$67,593. Living’s demographics are more oriented to educated, upper-class women than its competition. For example, Better Homes and Gardens’ audience is less well-educated (only 54 per cent of BHG subscribers hold a college degree) and has an average household income of \$59,292. Though Living’s demographics give us a good idea of the core audience Stewart speaks to, the popularity of her products and publications is such that they percolate broadly throughout North American culture.

As with other texts that propound the personal as political, this project may seem to dance too close to the line where public knowledge or action is collapsed into personal responsibility,<sup>10</sup> leaving individuals with fabulous personal spaces that offer refuge from, not engagement with, larger political and social realities. I am not advocating a turn from the political

(both as a site for social struggle and critical analysis) to the personal, but rather aim to explore the political ways in which personal actions engage the world and work to form identity. In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I offer an overview of Stewart's marketplace achievements, and present an overview of the content covered in this dissertation.

### **Homekeeper to Billionaire: Martha's Domestic Domination**

To understand the rhetorical force of Martha Stewart's products and the design of her domestic discourse, we must first account for the full extent of MSLO's reach. Stewart's personal and professional history is relatively well-known. Born to a working class family in Nutley, New Jersey, Martha Kostyra was the second child in a family of six children. Martha Kostyra would become Martha Stewart part-way through her degree at Barnard College when she married Andy Stewart, a Yale law student. Starting in high school, Stewart held a concatenation of careers (model, stockbroker, caterer) that climactically came together in the shape of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia.

Stewart began her ascent as North America's lifestyle expert with the publication of her first book. Published in 1982, by the mid-1990s Entertaining had sold in excess of half a million copies. Entertaining has now sold over 1 million copies and there are over 15 million copies of 27 different Stewart-authored books in print today. Entertaining's success set the stage for other publishing ventures, namely Martha Stewart Living, the flagship publication of MSLO.

Stewart's 1991 move into the magazine industry was to many a risky venture. The magazine market was floundering and to most observers, the structure of the industry would have been a signal to look elsewhere to expand a commercial portfolio. Jerry Oppenheimer documents that the "combined circulation of the seven big women's magazines . . . had declined by 8 million during the '80s. Every year at least 1 million homemakers were joining the work force, leaving fewer women at home who had neither the time or money to do the complex cooking, decorating, and entertaining projects Martha advocated" (392-3). But where others saw failure Stewart saw an opportunity, and from the beginning sales for Living far surpassed all

projections and industry standards.<sup>11</sup> Living's circulation peaked at 2.3 million in 1997 and would hold steady at that rate until October 2003, when the rate base was lowered to 1.8 million following Stewart's conviction for obstruction of justice.<sup>12</sup> Since Stewart's release from prison, Living's rate base has climbed to 2 million (as of the close of 2007). Stewart's magazine portfolio has now grown to a total of four: in addition to Living, Stewart also publishes Martha Stewart Weddings (which has a circulation of about 270,000 but no stated rate base), Everyday Food (which has a rate base of 900,000), and Body + Soul (which has a rate base of 550,000).<sup>13</sup>

Stewart's success is largely attributable to Stewart's (and her executive team's) ability to locate and take advantage of unmet needs in lifestyle markets. For example, Stewart states that "[o]ne of the reasons I wanted to create Martha Stewart Living magazine was because I perceived a social trend: It was perfectly clear to me that women were hungry for information to help them run their homes more efficiently, entertain with more ingenuity and style, and learn all the clever homemaking techniques and tips that their mothers may not have taught them" (Martha Rules 98). Living's success illustrates that against prevailing wisdom, Stewart astutely assessed the magazine market and the hole her publication would fill. Even in 2004, when MSLO took a hit from the negative publicity following Stewart's personal court case, Living and Everyday Food "outperformed industry metrics" (MSLO, Annual Report 4). Stewart reported in 2006 that subscriptions were "at an all-time high in terms of response, probably twice the industry average" (Naughton, np).

Building on her publishing successes, Stewart looked to expand into television. Finding an executive who would listen, however, was an arduous process. When Stewart finally got the ear of Richard Sheingold he was initially resistant because even if the show launched successfully and pulled in audiences and advertisers, it could not generate enough revenue to cover the costs of production (Byron 233). Sheingold changed his mind when Stewart clarified her objective, naming the show "one of the most original and provocative marketing ideas he'd



ever heard of” (qtd. in Byron 235). Stewart intended the show to serve not as a revenue-generator, but as an infomercial for Living and her mail-order products, using the program to develop and strengthen her brand through cross-promotion. “Martha Stewart Living” took to the air in 1993, and ran until early 2004.<sup>14</sup>

Stewart took another risky business move when she parlayed her status as a lifestyle expert into a 1997 partnership with Kmart to sell a line of products for the home. Although many questioned this venture—the perfectionist expert of gracious living joining forces with a discount bargain chain—it proved wildly successful and remains the single largest revenue generator for MSLO.<sup>15</sup> Stewart chose to partner with Kmart, stating at the time, “How else could I reach 77 million people?”; Stewart would later aver her “ultimate goal is to get everyone in America to go to Kmart” (qtd. in Adler 91). In the beginning, the merchandising agreement with Kmart was relatively circumspect, Kmart projecting \$100 million dollars worth of sales (Schrage 23). Stewart’s “Everyday” line has, in 2007, done well over \$1 billion dollars worth of sales through Kmart (Schrage 23). “Everyday” performs so successfully that Kmart’s chairman and chief executive, James B. Adamson, notes that while Kmart continues to struggle financially, Stewart’s “Everyday” product line sells “far better than the company trend” and is key to Kmart’s financial viability (Stanley and Hays 1).<sup>16</sup>

Ahead of a male-dominated field of Fortune 500 companies, Stewart was the first to develop a truly cross-promotional, cross-media business platform. The cross-promotion enabled by MSLO’s structure is smart not only as a marketing move, but as a way to efficiently re-use and repurpose content, and is central to Stewart’s branding initiatives. In 1997 Stewart launched her website, MarthaStewart.com.<sup>17</sup> With the addition of a web presence, Stewart was now able to not only promote her products in every media market in America, but to also use these markets to promote each other. Alessandra Stanley and Constance Hays of The New York Times write that Stewart “sits atop an empire that is a business school blueprint of synergy. Her TV shows sell her magazines, her Web site sells her products, her products sell her TV shows”

(1). This cross-promotional platform would lead to the formation of MSLO. In 1997 Stewart leveraged funds from Kmart to buy Living from Time Warner, and founded MSLO. In 1999 Stewart took MSLO public. Initially priced at \$18, by the end of the day MSLO stock was trading over \$37—Stewart became a billionaire in the space of an afternoon.

MSLO took significant losses, both in terms of finances and reputation, when Stewart was convicted in 2004. Stewart's legal case was exceptionally well-publicized: Robert Slater states that although "the Martha Stewart legal case came at a time of seemingly constant corporate scandal, she received more media coverage during her courtroom drama than any other celebrity since the 1995 O.J. Simpson trial" (8).<sup>18</sup> But when Stewart emerged from prison six months later, she exited to rave reviews. A month after Stewart's release, Time magazine published its list of the "100 Most Influential People," placing Stewart alongside Condoleezza Rice, Hugo Chavez, and Bill Gates. Since her release, MSLO's stock price had risen steadily and the company is back in the black (in no small part to merchandising sales, which held steady throughout her trial and incarceration).<sup>19</sup> Adweek named the MSLO executive team the 2005 "Executive Team of the Year." In February 2008, MSLO made its first major acquisition, buying the rights to the Emeril Lagasse merchandising empire for \$45 million dollars.

Following her incarceration, Stewart has developed four new television programs and a satellite radio channel on the Sirius satellite radio network. Two of these television programs—"The Apprentice: Martha Stewart" and "The Martha Stewart Show"—were picked up by NBC during Stewart's incarceration. Although her version of the "Apprentice" was cancelled before completing its season, "Martha" (a daily program which showcases primarily the same content as "Martha Stewart Living," but is taped in front of a live audience) has been renewed for a fourth season. 2005 saw the launch of the PBS program Everyday Food, modeled after the MSLO magazine by the same name; in 2008, PBS added Everyday Baking. Today, Stewart notes that her television programs reach 30 million viewers a year, her magazines 14 million (Martha Rules 66).

Since 2004 MSLO has announced an impressive array of merchandising agreements, including partnerships with Macy's, Costco, Kodak, Lowes, Singer Sewing Machines, Waterford China, Ernest and Julio Gallo, and a joint venture with KB homes to sell Stewart-branded homes—a “smash alliance” Brandweek named as one of 2006's top 20 “most innovative” products. Based on consumer response (the suburban community of 655 homes generated ten times that number of inquiries), 2007 saw a total of nine Martha Stewart KB communities in development across the United States.

From the above review, it is clear that Stewart has created an incredibly successful domestic empire and has effectively positioned herself as a lifestyle expert, a position reinforced by the vast array of products available by MSLO.<sup>20</sup> Based on her cultural and marketplace prominence, Stewart presents a critical set of texts to examine the design of domesticity.

### **Designing Domesticity: Scholarly Foundations**

There are three bodies of scholarship I bring to bear in my investigation of design and domesticity: literature on visual culture, material culture, and design culture/studies. Of these three areas, scholarship on design forms my primary foundation, scholarship on visual and material culture complementing this underpinning. I treat each of these areas in turn, beginning with visual culture.

#### Visual Culture

Theory on visual culture is important to any analysis of design because much of the rhetorical force of design is found in its visual impact. W.J.T. Mitchell cogently distinguishes the difference between visual studies and visual culture. Mitchell names visual studies as “the field of study” and visual culture the “object or target of study. Visual studies is the study of visual culture” (166). Having made this distinction, Mitchell asserts he prefers to use the term visual culture over visual studies, because visual culture “is less neutral than visual studies, and commits one at the outset to a set of hypotheses that need to be tested—for example, that vision is (as we say) a cultural construction” (166). Following Mitchell's lead, I too use the term

visual culture to draw sustained attention to the social contexts in and from which visual discourse takes place.

There is an extensive body of rhetorical scholarship which productively explores visual culture, highlighting visual rhetoric's intersubjective<sup>21</sup> operations, as well as clarifying how visual rhetorics "reflect the differences, incongruities and clashes which characterize social life" (Kress and Leeuwen 20). This scholarship explores a variety of texts from 'screen'-based media<sup>22</sup> (photographic and televisual texts) to material artifacts.<sup>23</sup> Rhetorical scholarship on visual culture has its deepest disciplinary roots in studies of rhetorical iconology, for example Lester Olson's essays on Franklin D. Roosevelt and Benjamin Franklin. As the body of literature on visual culture expanded, the focus on rhetorical iconology widened to a consideration of the different ways in which visual discourse operates rhetorically, such as visual argumentation.<sup>24</sup>

Rhetorical scholarship on visual culture primarily investigates the visual as political tool, attending to its implications for governing systems and democratic polities. Robert Hariman and John Lucaites are perhaps the most well-known authors in this area, offering a collection of essays which explore iconic photographs in recent American history.<sup>25</sup> These essays discuss the role of photographs in fostering formations of American civic identity.<sup>26</sup> The political power of images is additionally explored in work by DeLuca, DeLuca and Demo, Demo, George and Shoos, and Harold and DeLuca, which respectively take up a range of ways (activist politics, environmental policy, immigration, death penalty, civil rights) visual imagery is used to affect public opinion and effect political change. The role of images in forming and managing public opinion is both a recent and a hot topic post-September 11.<sup>27</sup> Because rhetorical scholarship on visual culture tends to focus on what particular instantiations of visual style and design mean for citizenship and democratic decision-making, the importance of visual style and design to material culture is understudied in this body of work.

Rhetorical scholarship on visual culture emphasizes, as Cameron Shelley observes in his essay on images of human evolution, that "[v]isual arguments are useful for their ease of

comprehension and their emotional impact" (53). I contend that this tenet of visual discourse is inextricably connected to anxiety over visual discourse's social place. Much of the anxiety attached to appearances comes from the tension involved in viewing images: the understanding that surface lies, or at least an understanding that surface asks us to overlook that it might be fibbing.<sup>28</sup> We thus have a sort of love/hate relationship with visual images: we are attracted to them for their vibrancy and the efficiency with which we can understand them—the very reasons we are suspicious of them.

With the shift in Western economic practice from captaining industry to captaining consciousness,<sup>29</sup> the belief that surface appearances are not to be trusted is accentuated in a culture steeped in advertising and knowledgeable of the manipulative potential of imagery.<sup>30</sup> In their essay, "'Sighting' the Public," Cara Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang explore how theory on the public sphere leans to an iconoclastic framework positioning visuals as manipulative illusion, dangerous because of their compelling nature.<sup>31</sup> This framework is shared by other spheres of scholarship which construct the visual, especially popular visual media, as the new opiate of the masses.<sup>32</sup> For the purposes of this project, scholarship on visual culture is important not just to understand the visual workings of design, but also to understand some of the cultural antipathy directed at the emotional components of design—a status I reflect on in the conclusion.

### Material Culture

Beyond visual culture, any exploration of rhetorics of design must also account for the materiality of design. I use Attfield's definition of material culture as not simply the "study of objects" but "the integration of artifacts into the social world . . . through the acquisition of social meaning within specific cultural/historical contexts" (35)—what Attfield names "things with attitude" (32). Michael McGee writes that "the whole of rhetoric is 'material' by measure of human experiencing of it" (29). He goes on to argue that "rhetoric is not an 'art,' nor is it a 'body of principles'—it is a thing, a material artifact of human interaction" (45), a position to which I also adhere. However, it is important to distinguish between examining the materiality of

rhetorical discourse and examining the rhetorical discourse of material objects: to borrow an argument from design theorist Richard Buchanan—“[s]urely it should be fatuous to suggest that we interact with objects in the same ways that we interact with words” (106).<sup>33</sup> Buchanan makes a valuable point: the materiality of rhetoric is not the same thing as the rhetoric of materiality. I make this point here not to imply that rhetorical scholarship to date has conflated the two (it has not), but to make clear the boundaries of my project and to situate this study within a field of literature on rhetoric and materiality.

Carole Blair describes the project of examining the rhetorical discourse of material objects as exploring “what [a text] does” (23), the literal, physical ways a material text “inserts itself into our attention . . . encouraging or discouraging us to act or move, as well as think, in particular directions” (46). Mary Lay Schuster similarly positions material rhetoric as a “display” of “how rhetoric wields its power through the structures and organization of space” (11). By investigating the rhetoric of material objects we heed Jack Selzer’s call to attend to “the material conditions that sustain the production, circulation, and consumption of rhetorical power” (10).

Attfield believes it is important to study material culture because objects comprise “the vast array of things that testify to the importance of the sense of unique difference and individuality which activate people’s sense of agency . . . through the process of designing and making the material world” (xiii). Both Attfield and Virginia Postrel place design squarely in the province of domestic life (Attfield 12; Postrel xv),<sup>34</sup> further positioning design as a medium which reflects and manages the interplay between social structures and individual identity. By studying the design of domestic life, we can develop an understanding of the ways Martha Stewart’s audiences are encouraged to construct their material worlds and negotiate identity.

Attending to material culture as rhetorical medium means attending to material culture as a way “by which the bricolage of experience is pulled together, the logic in which subject positions are formed, and the parameters set for struggles over how signs are organized and unified in empowering and disempowering ways” (Brummett and Duncan 230). Picking up a

thread loosely woven throughout the Public and its Problems,<sup>35</sup> in Art as Experience Dewey argues that attending to material context is critically important to understanding human experience. Setting out an example, Dewey writes that although “[i]t is quite possible to enjoy flowers in their colored form and delicate fragrance without knowing anything about plants theoretically,” it is not possible to understand the how plants flower without understanding the material conditions necessary to that flowering: “the interactions of soil, air, water and sunlight” (Art 4). In a similar fashion I contend that to fully understand discourses of domesticity we must understand the material conditions necessary to its operations: domestic design objects and practices.

### Design Studies

Joining rhetoric, as a term design is infected by classificatory vaguery, although it suffers less from this disease than rhetoric. Some design theorists argue that design’s imprecise use as a commonplace term renders it incoherent, an indeterminacy arising out of debate over the institution of design: elitist instrument or tool of the masses?<sup>36</sup> This dissertation works to make clear the ways in which design is both a means of taste-making and social governance as well as a means through which people make space for themselves within this social context.

Definitions of design that construct it as a common activity tend to frame it as fundamental or universal human activity (Margolin, Politics 28; Postrel 45). Postrel complains that “[a]nalysts sometimes write as if no one but the very wealthy paid attention to aesthetics before the mid-1990s” (44).<sup>37</sup> Backing up her assertion, Postrel notes that Stone Age humans “worked intricate, multicolored patterns into their textiles” (45). But as Postrel herself points out (48), though design may be a fundamental or universal human activity, what we understand as design today requires large population groups and the accompanying distribution systems for products to sustainably circulate through both mass and niche markets.

Debates over design as a professional or a common activity aside, what definitions of design share is a focus on design as active.<sup>38</sup> Attfield defines design as “the product and the

process that conceptualizes an aesthetic and functional solution to industrially produced goods,” although she clearly positions design as a “common” rather than professional activity (xiv). The National Design Museum defines design “as an active process of making and communicating” (qtd. in. Lupton, Mixing 11). Margolin frames design “as a vehicle that reveals human intentions for making the world” (Politics 2). Design is aptly named as an active process because it means making decisions: “decisions about size, shape, arrangement, material, fabrication technique, color and finish” (John Pile, qtd. in Buchanan 109)

Design may be typically understood as a progressive activity, but design is not always understood as such. Some theorists position design as a process of unnecessary complication, as difference for difference’s sake. Lefebvre describes what he terms a not “uncommon” case in which a designer tinkers with products “to give a form (often a 'classical' one) to a function completely unconnected with it: they disguise a bed as a cupboard, for example, or a refrigerator as bookshelves” (148-149). Dieter Rams takes this position even further, asserting that “[o]ften you can count yourself lucky if the design is not disturbing during use” (111). Rams blames “aggressive individuality” and an obsessive search for “novelty” in design as being responsible for cultural “alienation, confusion, and sensory overload” (113). This phenomenon may be the effect of late-capitalistic production and the push to differentiate products to grab or increase market share, but it is design that gets the blame.

Common or professional, positive or negative, design theorists consistently point to design as a consummate rhetorical activity. Defining rhetoric as “an art of shaping society, changing the course of individuals and communities, and setting patterns for new action,” Buchanan avers that communication is the most central concept to design studies (93, 91).<sup>39</sup> Buchanan speaks at length about design’s rhetorical function as elucidated in design studies:

when dealing with the influence of designers and the effects of design on an audience of consumers or society at large, [such studies] move deeply into the domain of rhetoric. . . . In addition, when studies of the esthetics of design treat



form not only as a quality valuable in itself, but also as a means of pleasing, instructing, and passing information, or, indeed, as a means of shaping the appearance of objects for whatever intended effect, these studies are rhetorical also because they treat design as a mediating agency of influence between designers and their intended audience. (91)

Naming design as “much an expression of feeling as an articulation of reason; [as] an art as well a science, a process and a product, an assertion of disorder and a display of order,” Margolin likewise emphasizes design’s rhetorical operations (28). Characterizing design as “an instrument of social analysis, an area of intervention in everyday life, a language, a fashion, a tool,” Maurizio Vitta also draws attention to design’s social and communicative functions (35). Attfield outlines design as rhetoric when she describes design as a process “with a specific end in view—whether to fulfill a particular task, to make a statement, to objectify moral values, or to express individual or group identity, to denote status or demonstrate technological prowess, to exercise social control or to flaunt political power” (12).

Rhetoricians also speak to the rhetoric of design, although significantly less so. In his examination of courtly political style, Hariman connects style to “conceptions of power, communication, [and] inquiry” (“Courtly” 149). Pushing back against views of style and design as meaningless artifice Hariman posits, “[b]y understanding how matters of style are crucial to the practice of politics, we discover not sham, but design, not decoration, but a world of meaning” (Political 195). Kaufer and Butler argue that rhetoric is design, but because it is “generally overlooked as a design art . . . it is not likely to be heard in the same breath as arts like architecture, engineering, and graphic design” (12).<sup>40</sup> Rhetorical investigations of design, then, almost exclusively take up the design of discourse, not the design of material objects, a lacuna this project works to address.

## Rhetoric, Design, and Martha Stewart: A Preview

Using MSLO as the pivot point for my rhetorical investigation of the design of domesticity, I explore specific facets of Stewart's enterprise, namely "Everyday" and "Collection" merchandise at Kmart and Macy's, the Hampton Oaks Stewart-branded suburb, and Martha Stewart Living magazine. Each chapter offers a different vantage point from which to understand the design of domesticity, beginning with a contextual chapter on discourses of domesticity and moving through three case studies of MSLO products. Tacking between broad, more theoretical analysis and close textual analysis of specific MSLO texts, this project collectively ties theory *on* design to particular practices *of* design.

To fully investigate the design of domesticity as it is presented by MSLO we must begin by appraising the place of domestic arts in North American culture. To that end, I offer an analysis of Martha Stewart, public phenomenon, before turning to the specific case studies described above. I start by surveying North American domestic advice and position Stewart within this tradition. With that background I take up four feminist-oriented critiques of Stewart's discourse: that it is classist, racist, reactionary, and offers unrealizable fantasy. While I agree Stewart's discourse is well-described as classist and racist, I contend that Stewart is best-understood not as postfeminist but prefeminist, and that while she offers fantasy, it is a fantasy grounded in doing. Though not uncritically championing Stewart and her message, I maintain that Stewart's position in lifestyle markets is so robust and wide-reaching because she rescues domestic arts from denigration, defining homekeeping as an important form of doing.

The first case study examines packaging narratives from "Martha Stewart Everyday" and "Martha Stewart Collection" products sold at Kmart and Macy's. "Everyday" and "Collection" products are important, but unexplored, texts in the MSLO enterprise. Though product labels, advertising copy, and consumer stories are all consumption-based texts which have drawn scholarly attention, packaging narratives—defined by Mary Kniazeva and Russell Belk as "narrative literary texts that go beyond labeling requirements" (52)—are little studied in any

discipline. Consumption practices play an important role in material culture: as Daniel Miller declares, consumers “do not choose brands, they choose lives” (Consumption 107). For Miller, to understand brands is therefore to understand lifestyles and the practices important to maintaining them. I similarly contend that to understand brands is to understand the packaging narratives which accompany branded products. Kniazeva and Belk aver that brands “play significant roles” in bolstering jeopardized identities “by shaping the meanings of their brands to offer that which consumers find missing or threatened in their culture. Crafting their packaging stories, firms mythologize their brands by poetically reflecting societal dreams, hopes, and wishes” (63). Following Kniazeva and Belk’s framework, I read “Everyday” and “Collection” narratives for what they can tell us about missing North American social structures and threatened identities. I argue that “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives function as myth, resolving three sets of cultural anxieties and absences: reaffirming home as a valuable space, construction consumption as a rational process, and offering consumers the chance to purchase products with a sense of origin. This chapter thus offers insight into a heretofore unexamined aspect of MSLO and advances scholarship on the mythic functions of branding.

The second case study takes up the material expression of the Martha Stewart lifestyle as articulated in the Stewart-branded Hampton Oaks community, attending to the model homes as rhetorical medium. Henri Lefebvre writes that “[m]an does not live by words alone; ‘subjects’ are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may enjoy and modify” (35). Defining the home as a place that individuals modify so that they may enjoy and be recognized in it—key features to functioning productively in an environment<sup>41</sup>—this chapter works to answer the question, what do Martha Stewart homes persuade us to, and what ideas about social life do they express? My investigation is an amalgamation of sort of ethnographic study (a series of field trips, if you will, to a Martha Stewart-branded community) and a close-textual analysis of the promotional imagery attached to Hampton Oaks homes. I read the Hampton Oaks homes through architectural and design

theory by Max Jacobsen, Murray Silverstein, and Barbara Winslow, and argue Stewart-branded homes have three primary rhetorical implications: constructing the home as a place we aspire to, reifying the connection between class, design, and quality of life, and offering the home as a solid expression of self and a retreat from the mass-marketed world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The fifth chapter takes up my third case study, and tenders a close textual analysis of the style and (graphic) design of Martha Stewart Living. Stewart's place in North American domestic history is intimately connected to the success of Living, the flagship publication of the MSLO empire. In turn, the success of Living is tied to its graphic design—a subject which calls for rhetorical study.<sup>42</sup> The absence of rhetorical scholarship on graphic design stands in strong contrast to the ubiquitous presence of graphic design. Quoting design theorist Malcolm Barnard, “[g]raphic design is everywhere. Yet it is often taken for granted, passing unnoticed and unremarked as it blends in with the visual culture of everyday life” (1). Jessica Helfand similarly asserts that graphic design “is everywhere, touching everything we do, everything we see, everything we buy” (137). This chapter takes up this unremarked yet ubiquitous aspect of visual culture, investigating the typography of Martha Stewart Living as a way of investigating the social values and identity suggested through this typography. I maintain that the surface (typography) of communication is as important as its depth (content), and correspondingly, that scholarly analysis of typography is as important to rhetoric as analyses of message content. As this study shows, Living positions itself as the most helpful aid for today's busy woman by making its content easy to scan and comprehend. Moreover, by examining Living in concert with some of its competitors, I explore how Living's graphic design is a tangible affirmation and enactment of its self-defined identity as a modern resource on the traditions important to living well, an argument which gains rhetorical force from Living's still life imagery. In the conclusion to this study I draw the chapters together, clarifying how this project adds to present understandings of rhetoric, material culture, and the cultural operations of design.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1999 Stewart characterized herself as “one of the original feminists,” stating that she is “trying to help give women back a sense of pleasure and accomplishment in their homes” (qtd. in Adler 23). I contextualize Stewart’s place in feminist discourses in Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> Stewart complicates her place in feminist theory by both claiming and rejecting a feminist identity. In 1998, Stewart placed herself well within Faludi’s feminist backlash by claiming the home as the place of personal fulfillment (qtd. in Adler 122). Though Stewart is commonly understood as postfeminist, I argue in Chapter 2 that she is best understood as a hybrid of pre- and postfeminism.

<sup>3</sup> Describing her work-wear as a stockbroker, Stewart declares, “I was outrageous. I wore hot pants. I was one of the few women on Wall Street. I thought the way of dressing there was just stupid. I had beautiful long legs. I wore brown velvet hot pants with brown stockings and high heels” (qtd. in Adler 51).

<sup>4</sup> See Magalene Taylor.

<sup>5</sup> See Charlotte Brundson (“Feminism”), Cynthia Smith, and Carole Stabile.

<sup>6</sup> See Cynthia Caillavet and Joan Heminway.

<sup>7</sup> See Mary Anne Beecher, Michael Golec, Matthew Hyland, Sarah A. Leavitt, Karal Ann Marling, Ann Mason and Marian Meyers, Jay Mechling, Nancy Shaw, and Shirley Wajda.

<sup>8</sup> Among other things, this research illustrates how Stewart was selectively prosecuted and then pilloried in the press (see Heminway and Stabile), though whether that is due to Stewart’s position as a woman, a billionaire, a woman billionaire, a Democrat, or a not very nice woman, remains a matter of some debate.

<sup>9</sup> Margolin’s queries strike a similar note to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s appeal to “see in images not only the aesthetic and expressive, but also the structured social, political and communicative dimensions” (20).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of how public knowledge and action become collapsed into personal responsibility, see Dana Cloud's Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics in which she discusses therapeutic discourse as providing an inadequate substitute for political action.

<sup>11</sup> Expected sales of magazine test issues hovered around 50 per cent at that time: Living not only sold 70 per cent of newsstand copies, but outsold the projected number of advertising pages for the first issue by 25 per cent (Byron 218).

<sup>12</sup> Although Stewart is popularly understood to have been convicted of insider trading, she was never prosecuted for this crime. Stewart was originally charged with securities violations, but those charges were later dismissed by a judge. Instead, Stewart was prosecuted for lying about actions prosecutors could not prove were a crime.

<sup>13</sup> MSLO debuted Blueprint, a magazine directed at women between 25 and 40 (though it focused on women in their 30s) in 2006. Blueprint folded in late 2007 and its last issue was January/February 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Four years into the show's run, "Martha Stewart Living" reached 97 per cent of American audiences.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart notes that her partnership with Kmart was deemed such a down-market move that a Connecticut Junior League cancelled a scheduled speech.

<sup>16</sup> As important as Stewart is to Kmart, it seems Kmart may not be as important to her: it is likely that Stewart will dissolve her relationship with Kmart in 2009 when their contract expires, and focus more exclusively on her product line at Macy's.

<sup>17</sup> MSLO's website today receives 38 million views per month.

<sup>18</sup> For many, this is evidence of the sexist double standard that Stewart has had to battle throughout her career. For example, see Carole Stabile's incisive discussion.

<sup>19</sup> President and CEO Susan Lyne and Chairman Charles Koppelman report that in 2006, revenue rose 36 per cent to 288 million, the “largest growth rate since the company went public in 1999” (3).

<sup>20</sup> Stewart notes that her position as a lifestyle expert found basis in the publication of her first book, Entertaining, in 1982. As she states in a 2006 interview for CosmoGirl!, “When you write a book, you're an expert and people look at you in a different way” (Twombly np). Slater argues that Stewart’s position is “one of a kind”: “Who else could say that she began her career in catering and wound up a billionaire? Who else could lay claim to so much celerity for tossing a salad or arranging a floral display? . . . Who else had fans that knew her style well enough to say, when someone set a table just right, or nurtured a garden with flair, ‘That’s very Martha’” (4).

<sup>21</sup> In his landmark essay “Some Implications of the 'Process' of 'Intersubjectivity,’” Barry Brummett argues rhetorical discourse produces shared meaning, that rhetoric creates as well as uncovers knowledge.

<sup>22</sup> See Robin Andersen; Dana Cloud, “Veil”; Cori Dauber; Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo; Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples; Bonnie J. Dow, “Fixing Feminism”; Finnegan, “Naturalistic” and Picturing; Martin Medhurst.

<sup>23</sup> See Carole Blair; Kevin DeLuca; Margaret LaWare.

<sup>24</sup> Although a contested topic in the mid 1990s (See Argumentation and Advocacy’s 1996 special issues, featuring essays by Gretchen Barbatsis, David Birdsell and Leo Groarke, Anthony Blair, David Fleming, and Cameron Shelley, the debate over whether visual discourse can operate as argument has since been *de facto* settled in the affirmative (examples of perspective include Cara Finnegan, “Naturalistic”; Cori Dauber; Margaret LaWare.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert Hariman and John Lucaites “Iwo Jima,” “Accidental Napalm,” “Tiananmen Square,” as well as Lucaites and Hariman.

<sup>26</sup> Lester Olson's work offers another well-known set of essays which similarly study how pictorial representations visually construct political identities for viewers. See "Norman Rockwell," "British Colonies," and Libertas Americana. Martin Medhurst's essay on "Hiroshima, Mon Amour" also takes up rhetorical iconology.

<sup>27</sup> For example, see Jon Bird; Dana Cloud, "Veil"; John Murphy; Simon Philpott; Elli Roushanzamir; and David Ryan.

<sup>28</sup> As Cori Dauber expands with respect to photographs, their "very design encourages the reader to forget the behind the camera someone was making choices, pointing at one thing and not another, choosing one type of lighting and not another" (207). Cara Finnegan calls such encouragement the "naturalist enthymeme": that we "perceive photographs as fundamentally 'realistic.' . . . That is, regardless of what else a photograph communicates, at minimum it is continually making an argument about its own realism" ("Naturalistic" 135-143).

<sup>29</sup> See Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness.

<sup>30</sup> When corporations pay \$2.6 million dollars for a 30-second commercial spot during the Super Bowl, we know—at the very least—that these corporations assume such advertising will impact consumer behavior.

<sup>31</sup> Finnegan explores similar questions in her review essay "Visual Studies and Visual Rhetoric."

<sup>32</sup> Theodor Adorno and Guy Debord are two well-known scholars highly critical of mass media and its cultural impacts. Designer Jessica Helfand shares these same concerns, asserting the "more we grow accustomed-indeed, addicted-to the screens around us, whether in the form of television, computer, film, or a combination thereof, the more we imprison our minds and restrict our capacity to exercise thoughtful, independent judgment" (30).

<sup>33</sup> The title of Michael Leff and Andrew Sach's essay "Words the Most Like Things" makes this very point.



<sup>34</sup> Design theorist Abraham Moles cynically defines everyday life as “what remains when society has institutionalized everything” (119).

<sup>35</sup> In the Public and its Problems, Dewey points out that not only do material conditions have deep and irreducible political and theoretical outcomes (a point he explores throughout the book with his emphasis on consequences), but that material conditions have significant bearing on how we place ourselves in the world. As Dewey goes on to state, “ultimately all consequences which entire human life depend upon physical conditions; they can be understood and mastered only as the latter are taken into account” (171).

<sup>36</sup> For example, Penny Sparke asserts that if “the word designer has finally infiltrated the vocabulary of everyday life such that American commercials extol the virtues of designer jeans, [and] Vidal Sassoon proudly refers to himself as a hair designer” design loses its specificity as a particular professional practice (qtd. in Dilnot, “Part I” 214). Victor Margolin attributes some of the difficulty in defining design to difficulty in classifying society. Given that design is a social process, Margolin asserts that since “we don’t agree on a single theory of society, it is equally impossible to postulate only one theory of designing” (Design 10).

<sup>37</sup> Case in point, design consultant Bill Faust asserts, “[i]n this boom economy, people have a craving to express their individuality” (qtd. in Gibney np).

<sup>38</sup> If we understand design as a communicative medium, than by Brummett and Duncan’s standards we are bound to understand design as active: “A medium is a process, not a thing; it is something that people do, not a tool that people use” (230).

<sup>39</sup> To illustrate the rhetorical nature of design, Buchanan offers a neo-Aristotelian explanation of design. Buchanan points to “technological reasoning” as the “logos of design,” a “backbone” similar to “chains of formal or informal reasoning” in language-based rhetoric (96). Design involves ethos in that “the art of design is the control of such character In order to persuade potential users that a product has credibility [or value] in their lives” (Buchanan 101). Most

obviously, design also involves pathos because design aims to convince users that a product “is emotionally desirable and valuable in their lives” (Buchanan 108).

<sup>40</sup> Kaufer and Butler define a design art as “production process that involves the interdependent development of goals and a material artifact” such that the artifact is “a seamless integration of the knowledge and goals of the designer” (32-33).

<sup>41</sup> This is the argument Donald Norman makes in Emotional Design.

<sup>42</sup> For work that treats the rhetorical operations of typography, see Eva Brumberger; Robin Greeley; Miles Kimball; Ellen Lupton, Type and Messages; Carlos Salinas.

## CHAPTER 2

### OF ART AND DRUDGERY: MAKING SENSE OF MARTHA STEWART

And though home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit ever answered to, in the strongest conjuration.

- Charles Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit

Though domesticity has always been popular, Martha Stewart has also made it profitable.

- Sarah Leavitt, From Catherine Beecher to Martha Stewart

Whether Martha Stewart is the indefatigable icon of domestic advice or simply one of several important figures, there is no question Stewart is a significant figure in the American history of the home and is the preeminent expert on the home in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. There is also no question that Stewart is a polemical figure in the North American history of the home. Stewart faces intense criticism, coming under the fierce scrutiny levied by a litany of critiques: her television show is more perfect than her real life, she is too white, she is not WASP enough (she grew up in a poor Polish family) nor publicly polish enough (she kept her married name after her divorce), she is compared to Hitler (Press np), and is alternately lambasted as “ruthlessly perfectionistic” (Press np),<sup>1</sup> “domesticated by the details of her life” (C. Smith 353), the acme of “competitive entertaining” (qtd. in Oppenheimer 274), the “Ayatollah of Yuletide cookery” (Marling 135), the “social worker of consumerism” (Hyland 110), and a “little girl who never got over what life never gave her” (Byron 31).

The tension between Stewart's success and the opposition to her message makes accounting for the rhetorical force of Stewart's message a complicated endeavor, as does accounting for Stewart's message itself: Stewart traffics in discourses of domesticity, yet does so from the position of a self-made billionaire. Emily Cohen posits that "Martha is maddening less because of her perfection than because she takes the signifiers of an old-fashioned lifestyle and scrambles the conventional signifieds. Instead of posing in ads for power tools, she wields them" (669-70). In a similar vein, Jay Mechling asks, "What is the place of the Martha text in the whole constellation of 'texts' the viewer consumes, such as the shows on Home and Garden television or the Good Channel? Can the same person enjoy both Martha and the Iron Chef, for example, and what are we to make of that?" (68). The answer to Mechling's latter question is an easy yes. After all, Stewart herself watches the Iron Chef. But the answer to what we are to make of Stewart's place in American culture and her vision of domesticity requires a much more thoughtful consideration—the focus of this chapter.

This primary chapter provides an important framework for understanding the place of design in American discourses on domesticity as well as Stewart's position within these discourses. To do so, this chapter works to answer two foundational questions: how and why is the design of home life, epitomized by Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MSLO), so prominent in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture; and, what are we to make of this prominence? To explore these questions I start by reviewing American domestic advice, locating Stewart within this tradition. Building on that foundation, I take up feminist critiques of Stewart's discourse and classify Stewart as pre-, not post-, feminist. I close by investigating how Stewart frames domestic arts. This chapter ultimately argues that Stewart's profitability and popularity are so robust and wide-reaching because she rescues domestic arts from denigration, refiguring homekeeping as a techné of worth and importance.

## **The Importance of Keeping Dry in the Rain: American Domestic Advice**

Stewart adds her name to an inveterate field of domestic advisors who have informed and guided American thinking on domesticity and the home since the early 1800s. Sarah Leavitt argues that “Martha Stewart’s success becomes more interesting as we see her as the continuation of a genre that has taken different forms over the decades but has consistently brought the promise of middle-class success through domesticity to American women. . . . Her ideas have roots, just as our desire to listen to and learn from her has precedent” (“Good Things” 130). Exploring the American history of domestic advice illustrates that Stewart’s status as lifestyle expert not only has a steadfast cultural legacy, but also that Stewart’s status as expert is derived from her redemption of this legacy.

Corresponding to dramatic changes in domestic life, domestic advice became increasingly relevant in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to this period homemaking was an arduous responsibility: all of the foodstuffs and necessities of family life needed to be made at home without the benefit of stoves, indoor plumbing, or most of the labor-saving appliances we take for granted today. Mass industrialization made many basic domestic products (like soap and bread) commercially available, freeing housewives from manufacturing these items themselves. The influx of products into public markets created a consequent need for counsel<sup>2</sup> to guide homemakers on how to navigate this new field of consumption. In so doing, domestic advisors believed they could help educate women (and by extension their families) on the best way to have a happy, healthful, prosperous home life.

The availability of foodstuffs and basic home products were not the only changes that created a 19<sup>th</sup>-century market for domestic advice. Advancing home technologies also called for guidance and advice. Leavitt remarks that domestic advisors “began to include information about the science and technology of the household. Their goal was to bring a rationalized approach to household decorating and management, and to bring male-dominated systems of learning to women” (Catherine Beecher 128). Perhaps most importantly to the creation of a

market for domestic advice, literacy rates among middle-class women in the 1830s and 1840s rose dramatically, providing domestic advisors with an audience able to read their message.

Domestic advisors informed readers about the best ways to maintain upright character and well-being by instructing women on topics like appropriate wall colors, cleaning techniques, and furniture arranging—subjects still prevalent in domestic advice today. Choosing paint colors and wallpaper required advice since 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans believed strongly such decorations had a direct impact on the moral fiber of the inhabitants of the home (Leavitt, Catherine Beecher 137).<sup>3</sup> These choices were particularly complicated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because they were new choices and because “color was still seen as suspect by many Americans” who preferred white, the color of purity (Leavitt, Catherine Beecher 138). Advice on cleaning techniques was important because keeping a tidy house was, and still is, “a way of declaring one's superior values and standards a way of setting oneself and one's surroundings apart from the chaos and dirt of the outside world” (Horsfield 7). Furniture arrangements were important because like wall color and a spotless home interior, they offered a public statement of the family's values: for example, “declaring that this family believed it was important to keep dry in the rain, to obey the formality of wearing a hat, to leave a calling card, and to provide guests with a place to sit while they waited to be shown into the parlor” (Leavitt, Catherine Beecher 25).

The changes to homemaking facilitated by industrialization allowed women to treat the home as “an arena for the display of prowess” (Matthews 11).<sup>4</sup> Shrinking family size and conveniences like kitchen appliances and indoor plumbing made it even more possible for women to “approach domestic tasks as aesthetic activities,” and “the new value conferred on the home gave women a greater chance to feel satisfied about doing important work than had been the case in the eighteenth century” (Matthews 29). By making foodstuffs readily available, mass industrialization further changed homemaking by shifting the function of cooking. The availability of commercial products gave homemakers more time to devote to cooking, enabling them to engage cooking as a craft tradition involving talent and artistry. Glenna Matthews notes

that in the 1700s cooking was an unskilled activity in which food was simply stewed at length over an open hearth, documenting that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century “better equipment, more abundant ingredients, and more widely available cookbooks gave middle-class women the opportunity to approach cookery in a wholly new spirit” (6-14). These transformations in turn opened up additional avenues and exigencies for domestic advice.

Although some believe domestic advice was a field of industry that developed because it was one of the few acceptable professional avenues available to women (and there is no denying it was), Leavitt argues domestic advice also prospered because it addressed important social issues and gave women the chance to shape their worlds in meaningful ways (Catherine Beecher 206). According to Leavitt, domestic advisors were women with skills and capabilities: “professional architects, photographers, social workers, teacher, interior decorations, scientists, and psychologists. . . . concerned with clean air, nutrition, and health, with patriotism, education, and art. Domesticity was for them—and continues to be for others—a way to navigate through their complicated world” (Catherine Beecher 206). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, domestic advice matured into the professional industry of home economics. Seemingly a positive direction, the professionalization of homemaking ultimately led to its devaluation, aided in no small part by technological advances in home appliances.

Technologizing the home initially offered benefits for housewives without a reduction in social esteem or skill. But over time ready-made food products and advancing home technologies combined to deskill culinary labor,<sup>5</sup> demoting newly valorized cooking skills from craft tradition to a slapdash affair demanding only a can opener.<sup>6</sup> Cohen reports that “women who relied on new shortcuts—ranging from modern stoves to chemical leavenings and Jell-O—unwittingly contributed to the decline of their own standing, for the consequent loss of craft skills rendered their tasks unrewarding and made household chores appear worthless to others” (658-9). The deskilling of cooking was particularly helped along by the war efforts of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: women working in factories had little time and energy to prepare home-cooked meals

and were happy to take advantage of expedient shortcuts. Matthews argues that cooking continued to decline in the post-war period, pinning the “nadir of American cookery” on the 1950s, “the heyday of prepared foods and the cream-of-mushroom-soup school of cuisine whereby the cook could pour a can of this product over anything that was not a dessert and create a culinary treat” (211). The deskilling of home labor contributed to depreciating social esteem for the roles served by the housewife and an increased disregard for the women who filled that role.

Betty Friedan’s Feminine Mystique would prove to be the nail in the coffin for the 20<sup>th</sup>-century devaluation of home life. Though Friedan’s book led to public acknowledgement that social structures were to blame for some of the unhappiness in women’s lives (previously seen as solely personal failures), her biting critique of housework only concretized homemaking’s low social merit. The home had lost its place as an arena for the display of prowess and development of valued knowledge.

The history of domestic advice thus illustrates that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mass-marketed foodstuffs, home technologies, the deskilling of home labor, and a feminist philosophy built on a rejection of homemaking had come together to render homemaking a truly denigrated task in American culture. Taking this context into account, it is clear Stewart succeeds not just because she taps into a strong tradition of domestic advice, but because she elevates this tradition in a way not seen in present culture. Stewart is very aware that her valorization of homekeeping is an appealing message that has made her stand out:

Raising the notion of homemaking to an art rather than treating it as a chore, made me different and interesting and worth covering for the press. In the beginning, reporters treated me a bit skeptically, trying to understand the multitasking I talked about, the joy I experienced, and the enthusiasm I exuded when I discussed what I was working on. . . . In the process, amazingly, homekeeping was elevated to the art form it deserved to be. (Martha Rules 98)



Time and again, fans return to this valorization as the foundation for their interest in Stewart's programs and products. For example, one woman proclaims, "I think what Martha Stewart tries to show is that you shouldn't be ashamed that after you get home from an office, or from driving a cab, that your house is important to you . . . . You should not feel guilty about also wanting to be a housekeeper" (qtd. in Byron 197); another avers, "I think that she has made it cool to be a homemaker again" (qtd. in Mason and Meyers 818). One of Stewart's former assistants, Vicky Sloat, similarly assays "that what Martha was doing was elevating what women do all the time and saying it didn't have to be all drudgery. . . . It was honoring women's work and that was an incredible thing" (qtd. in Allen 100).

Stewart's elevation of homekeeping is not universally valued, however, and faces considerable feminist opposition. Leavitt observes that "Stewart's success in post-1970s America is mind-boggling to many observers. To her critics—and there are plenty—her ascension to popular acclaim simply does not seem possible. In the decades since Betty Freidan questioned the feminine mystique and the open-space plan in 1963, many individuals have joined in her call to liberate women from the household" (Catherine Beecher 202). For this reason, Leavitt notes that for women today, to "be a feminist and a subscriber to Martha Stewart Living, then can be a complicated proposition" (Catherine Beecher 203). The tensions between being a liberated 21<sup>st</sup>-century woman and a Martha Stewart fan is the topic I turn to next.

### **The Problem Has a Name—And it's Martha Stewart: Feminist Critiques**

In many ways Stewart is an archetype of feminist achievement: she chose a career she excelled at, refused to conform to gender stereotypes (though she reaffirmed others), and shattered the glass ceiling—all while celebrating women's work. But instead of being recognized for this achievement, Stewart is often vilified because the women's work she valorizes is homekeeping—that which feminism has traditionally defined itself against. To effectively explore how Stewart frames homekeeping as *techné* and understand Stewart's position in domestic discourses, we need to account for feminist critiques of Stewart's message: to use a domestic

metaphor, we need to organize our workspace before getting down to the project at hand. There are four feminist-oriented critiques I take up here: that Stewart is classist, racist, reactionary, and offers unrealizable fantasy. Though I agree Stewart's discourse is well-described as classist and racist, I contend Stewart is best-understood not as postfeminist but prefeminist, and that while she offers fantasy, it is fantasy grounded in doing.

Stewart's message is both classist and racist, a criticism much feminist theory<sup>7</sup> and the domestic advice genre<sup>8</sup> suffer from. From the interiors depicted in her magazine to the expensive and time-consuming projects and homekeeping practices she advocates, Stewart's discourse unmistakably argues for an upper-middle-class sensibility. This sensibility is mirrored in fan evaluations of her television programs and magazines. For example, one fan asserts, "It makes you feel like you're a Vanderbilt or an Astor or someone who is from old money who has taste and class" (qtd. in Mason and Meyers 814); and another observes, "I think that's what really kept me with her is that you knew when you did her stuff . . . it's not like a macramé hot-pad or something. It's a little more upper scale, I guess" (qtd. in Mason and Meyers 814). The upper-middle-class sensibility Stewart promotes is intimately connected to race and cultural heritage, evidenced, for example, in the recipes featured in Stewart's publications. While there is the occasional recipe for cabbage Pierogi or tabbouleh in The Martha Stewart Cookbook, and the occasional recipe for spanikopita or jambalaya in Martha Stewart Living, the heritage of these foods is erased, not honored (and is rarely, if ever, mentioned). Such erasures, coupled with the predominance of recipes for menu items like pear-filled crepes, fish chowder, and Shaker lemon pie, lead Amy Bentley to argue that "Martha Stewart food is whiteness with a high-church, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant gloss" (90).

The most prevalent critique Stewart faces is from those who charge her with effacing women's political and social progress by valorizing homekeeping. Stewart's affirmation of common gender stereotypes typically means that if Stewart is classed as feminist (and not outright caricatured as Beelzebub with a spatula) she is classed as postfeminist. In contrast to

first and second-wave feminism which brought women together in a struggle against patriarchy, postfeminism highlights individual action and personal difference,<sup>9</sup> dismissing patriarchy as a structure of the past. Susan Faludi popularly positions postfeminism as a backlash against progress, formed out of “whispers and threats and myths” which “push women back into their ‘acceptable’ roles” (13).<sup>10</sup>

Pushing back against totalizing constructions of postfeminism as antifeminism, Bonnie J. Dow argues that “some discourse that has been labeled ‘backlash’ is more fittingly labeled ‘postfeminist,’ a distinction recognizing that some discourse which questions certain feminist issues and/or goals assumes the validity of other feminist issues and/or goals” (87), an argument Lauren Gillingham et al also make, asserting that “women’s political needs of the present and future may not resemble or even coincide with those of the second wave, which defined itself largely through the construction and deployment of an activist female subjectivity” (24). Elspeth Probyn observes that postfeminism “seeks to portray a generation of women who have been through feminism and now want a break from the rigors of being ‘politically correct.’ . . . Like the famous advertising slogan for Virginia Slims cigarettes, ‘You’ve come a long way baby,’ it . . . says we know you are a feminist but, hey, chill out and have a smoke” (286). Postfeminism thus “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (McRobbie 255).<sup>11</sup>

Postfeminism’s choice to embrace traditional gender roles is deeply troubling for many feminists because it reverses the foundation much current feminist theory is built on: a rejection of domesticity. Charlotte Brundson explains that the polemical divide between “feminist” and “housewife” is central to second-wave feminism (the ‘branch’ of feminism which comes to mind most readily when the subject of feminism is broached or invoked),<sup>12</sup> and that the housewife “is the site of the ‘othering’ of conventional femininity, an ‘othering’ which is necessary for the constitution of the emergent identity, the feminist” (Soap Opera 216). If we connect a disavowal

of domesticity to feminism, than any valuation of domesticity must be antifeminist: if the choice not to be a housewife makes one a feminist, by reverse logic, the choice to be a housewife seemingly renders one postfeminist (or Beelzebub with a spatula). But instead of framing postfeminism as cannibalistic (as Susan Faludi does in Backlash) Brunsdon reads the postfeminist rejection of many feminist principles as symptomatic of the structure of feminism itself: "Disidentity—not being like that, not being like those other women, not being like those images of women—is constitutive of feminism, and constitutive of feminism in all its generations" ("Feminism" 112).

Along the lines of Faludi's Backlash, Cynthia Smith positions Stewart's message as postfeminist and therefore as a threat to feminism. Stewart can be fittingly characterized as postfeminist, able to take equality into account as that which has been achieved. Carole Stabile's description of Stewart's accomplishments makes this point clearly: "A savvy businesswoman who had built a billion dollar media empire out of a catering business, who had succeeded beyond all expectations in playing a game she was not supposed to be playing in the first place, Stewart's success suggested that women could transcend their gender and compete, on equal terms and in equal measure, with white, bourgeois men" (316). For C. Smith and others who share her concern about the popularity of neodomesticity, Stewart's success is dangerous, signaling not that women can transcend gender to compete in the business world, but that women are subsumed to gender and sexist stereotypes of homekeeping. C. Smith finds Stewart's message so problematic because she reads Stewart as not only encouraging women to stay home at the cost of working for social change, but also rendering "'choosing' the home an eminently reasonable and justifiable option for women" (353). Gillingham et al phrase this concern as a worry that Western cultures are "experiencing a grand regression from feminism to femininity, led by the Nigella Lawsons [and Martha Stewarts] of the world" (24).

Believing that there is "little evidence to suggest that women's empowerment with respect to their homes has a measurable effect on their political status," C. Smith avows "we

should turn a skeptical eye toward claims that glamorizing housework is a political solution to women's oppression" (339). In the same manner, Diana Henriques comments that "for many people [Stewart's] high-maintenance vision of gracious living crosses the thin line between genius and joke, raising the question of whether people with enough time to make citronella candles from scratch shouldn't be doing productive volunteer work instead" (1). To dismiss Stewart in this way, critics must both ignore the home as a site of valuable production in which individuals can cultivate meaningful skills, and efface prefeminist history—the forming ground of the suffragist movement. C. Smith gestures to Stewart's historical place in discourses on domesticity and observes that 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic advisors "worked for reforms that would improve the home and therefore society," but criticizes Stewart for that which she lauds in 19<sup>th</sup> century domestic advice (343).

Daniel Smith characterizes prefeminism as domestic feminism (what some other scholars also term maternal feminism), framing domestic advisors as domestic feminists because they worked to increase the importance of the home and women's place in it.<sup>13</sup> D. Smith maintains that domestic feminism was a key factor in improving the 19th-century woman's "power and autonomy within the family" (40). As the 19<sup>th</sup>-century public sphere emerged, men's central place in the home translated to a corresponding place in society (DuBois 63). By increasing women's importance in the home, domestic feminists believed they could improve women's place in society.<sup>14</sup> Although this dream has yet to be fully realized, domestic feminism increased the 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman's sense of accomplishment and self-worth, setting a foundation for the suffrage movement. To return to Cynthia Smith's critique, women's empowerment in the home has had a measurable impact on their political standing, though not the full effect domestic feminists hoped.

Joanne Hollows also takes up the Western expression of domesticity, but offers a more positive perspective than Faludi's or Smith's from which to understand postfeminism, domesticity, and female identity. In her essay "Feeling Like a Domestic Goddess" Hollows

analyzes Nigella Lawson (a British TV cook and cookbook author) from within postfeminist discourse, arguing that Lawson presents “a mode of femininity that is based around cooking and eating as pleasure, rather than servitude or denial” (197).<sup>15</sup> There are strong similarities between Lawson and Stewart that make Hollows’ study important to our understanding of Stewart’s discourse, for example, that both present cooking as “aestheticized leisure” (Hollows 187). More importantly, Hollows observes that Lawson has been “variously positioned as the prefeminist housewife, as an antifeminist Stepford wife, as the saviour of downshifting middle-class career women and as both the negative and positive product of postfeminism” (180).<sup>16</sup> These descriptions are also commonly applied to Stewart. We can frame Stewart’s discourse similarly, seeing in Stewart’s discourse an emphasis on domesticity as a pursuit to be enjoyed for its own sake and rewards.

However, Lawson’s flirtatious sexuality and her calculated hedonism, elements which further mark her as postfeminist, are not characteristic of Stewart’s discourse. Stewart’s discourse is instead typified by a moralizing tone (her emphasis on “good things,” for example) and her mission to educate America on the importance of home and homekeeping. I believe Stewart is popularly understood as postfeminist because she affirms traditional gender roles, which is a strong feature of postfeminism. But if we attend to the tenor of Stewart’s message—MSLO’s mission statement, for example, defines the company’s purpose as “enriching the changes lives of today’s women and their families” by “infusing them with the pleasure and confidence that come from the going sense of mastery and discover we foster in our customers and ourselves—it is evident that although Stewart’s discourse bears many markers of postfeminism, in its moral and educational focus her discourse is also clearly prefeminist. Indeed, a significant part of the rhetorical force of Stewart’s discourse may be located in the way she presents prefeminist moral and educational domestic imperatives as satisfying, technical expertise equivalent to male dominated workplaces.

Stewart is often accused of portraying a fantasy world, an illusion that is at best a temporary escape from the drudgery of everyday life and at worst a dangerous cultural palliative that encourages women to lust for an impossible ideal of home life.<sup>17</sup> The strength of this line of critique is evidenced in the fact that Stewart is popularly charged with peddling homemaker porn, critics arguing that Stewart succeeds not because she is a successful retailer of useful how-to know-how, but because she sells airbrushed, unattainable fantasies that harried housewives desperately want to buy into. Christopher Byron provides a good example of this line of critique:

the women who came home exhausted from jobs they didn't really want, to confront equally exhausted husbands and resentful latchkey children. . . . These were the women who picked up a copy of Entertaining and were instantly transported into the make-believe world where they'd always wanted to be—where the sun shone brightly through the panes of streak-free windows . . . where fresh fruits and flowers sat next to pitchers of iced tea . . . where men came to lawn parties dressed in suits and ties, and the women could prepare a lobster dinner for fifty and never break a sweat. (116)

Stewart's products and publications undeniably present an idealized version of domesticity. Though lionizing domesticity is hardly unique to Martha Stewart,<sup>18</sup> Stewart is criticized for this lionization to an extent others are not: but given that Stewart's publications and discourse are more heavily idealized than others', it is foreseeable Stewart will face more criticism on this count. For example, Nigella Lawson and Rachel Ray offer artful imagery of recipes and crafts, but they do not they treat the home as an artful masterpiece nor is the imagery in their publications as romanticized as the imagery in Stewart's publications (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of Living's still life imagery).

Instead of undercutting Stewart's message of production, I maintain that the fantasy Stewart offers is grounded in production, and further, that production and fantasy affirm each

other in a both/and (rather than zero sum) configuration making each more valuable. Literature on Stewart and her fans suggests that audiences enjoy completing the projects Stewart advocates (production), but do not feel compelled to complete them and also enjoy them for their inspirational value (fantasy). The connection between production and fantasy, and the importance of both, is widely evident in fan narratives. For example, fans state: “And so maybe she is a little more talented than I am when putting iced flowers on a cake, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t be creative and ice mine with an art deco touch!” (qtd. in Bentley 95); “I would do more of it, but I just can’t because it takes a lot of time and effort which I just don’t have—either one—with the kids. And I really don’t feel bad about it or anything because I like the pictures and I save her magazines because I figure one of these days I can get back to that stuff” (qtd. in Mason and Meyers 812); “She has great ideas, you have to admit it, and while not all of them can be incorporated into an average working woman’s budget and lifestyle, they certainly can be modified to everyone’s bank account and liking” (qtd. in Bentley 95). As one of Stewart’s former assistants observes, “We can’t all do it at the level that Martha does, but that’s not the point. She’s the example, she’s the artist and the inspiration” (qtd. in Allen 100).

The fantasy offered by Stewart’s discourse makes production especially appealing because it is an embodiment and a material way of participating in fantasies. Similarly, the production of Stewart-based projects legitimates fantasy because it offers concrete realizations of fantasy—or at least concrete realizations of particular elements of a fantasy. One might not have a grand dining room decorated with family antiques and heirlooms, but one can still create beautiful centerpieces and table linens to grace the family table. Despite its idealized nature, Stewart’s valorization commutes homekeeping from an unrewarding slog to a sophisticated art, providing affirmation, useful techniques, creative vision, and interesting projects.

### **An Artful Slog: Homekeeping as Techné**

John Dewey states that “[t]he hostility to the association of fine art with normal processes of living is a pathetic, even a tragic, commentary on life as it is ordinarily lived. Only



because that life is usually so stunted, aborted, slack, or heavy laden, is the idea entertained that there is some inherent antagonism between the process of normal living and creation and enjoyment of works of esthetic art” (Art 27). Written 75 years ago, Dewey’s assertion remains an accurate commentary on ideas of daily life today. In contrast to typical opinions of homekeeping, Martha Stewart frames homekeeping as an art of doing, a techné. Stewart’s construction of homekeeping as techné, however, is complicated by negative assessments of aesthetic value and by Stewart’s position as a dominant retailer of consumer goods for the home.

In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle defines techné (one of the intellectual excellences) as an art of production “concerned with coming into being, that is, with the practice and theory of how to bring into being some one of the things that are capable either of being or of not being” (VI.4.1140a11-14). A techné thus involves the ability to produce artifacts which can be manufactured in a range of ways and contexts. This ability grows from “rational prescription” and requires the capacity to consider the best way to master the project at hand (Aristotle VI.4.1140a8): effective choice-making is what distinguishes a productive art from a technical skill. At minimum, as Thomas Aquinas highlights, techné entails a three-part operation: “the first is to consider how an artifact is to be produced; the second is to operate on the external matter; the third is to accomplish the work itself” (555). A techné, what David Ross characterizes as “knowledge which enables us to make useful or beautiful things” (xv), creates contingent knowledge that can be shared with others and adapted as the project demands (Atwill 69). Technai accordingly “involve the study, training, and experience that enable one to recognize what means are available in a given situation” (K. Campbell, “Agency” 6). Though not a formalized nor rigid body of expertise, techné “is stable enough to be taught and transferred but flexible enough to be adapted to particular situations and purposes” (Atwill 48). This means that techné, “no matter how brilliant the plan or strategy, [is] never confined to a specific human or god. In other words, techné is never ‘private’ knowledge, a mysterious faculty, or the product of unique genius” (Atwill 48).

The context for Aristotle's discussion of techné is important. Aristotle reviews techné in an ethical treatise exploring the human good,<sup>19</sup> the realization of which is what he terms the complete life. In her introduction to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics Sarah Broadie argues that the study of ethics is a search for "practical philosophy, not merely in the sense of being about human practice, but above all in the sense of being intended to make a practical difference for the better" (11). To make a practical difference for the better, techné must be used in the service of the human good, motivated by ethical (not base) desires, and be executed under the guidance of phronesis—wisdom. Aristotle states: "the starting points of practical projects are constituted by what those projects are for; and once someone is corrupted through pleasure or pain, he fails to see the starting point" (VI.5.1140b18). As Aristotle continues, the "'product' is brought to completion by virtue of a person's having wisdom and excellence of character; for excellence makes the goal correct, while wisdom makes what leads to it correct" (VI.12.1144a7-9). A wise person is "able to deliberate well about . . . what sort of things conduce to the good life in general" (Aristotle VI.5.1140a25-30). Phronesis, according to Barbara Warnick, can be understood as "action which results in a virtuous life," as "wisdom applied to and made manifest in action" (303).

Homekeeping, involving the production of tidy and pleasing living spaces, artifacts for the home, and comestibles for family and guests, is well-defined as a productive art. That Stewart approaches domestic tasks as techné is evident in how she talks about entertaining in her book of the same name.<sup>20</sup> Throughout Entertaining Stewart (and her ghost writer, Elizabeth Hawes) consistently return to the importance of the artful nature of entertaining: "The last question—'How do I do this party?'—is the crucial one. It involves making decisions about location, decoration, and table that however pragmatic, must also be aesthetic—because ultimately they add up to style" (16); "The senses collaborate in the appreciation of food, and a well-composed plate is, for a moment, as satisfying as a Cézanne still life" (23);<sup>21</sup> "Several years ago I began combining crudités, fruit, and cheeses, and found the resulting parties

extremely successful. I realized that this was a new and important way to entertain; the food becomes a party in itself, for the visual dynamics set a mood” (64). Stewart’s construction of entertaining as techné is even more apparent in her reasons for writing Entertaining: “Many caterers might have smiled like Mona Lisa when their clients asked them questions, worrying that if everyone learned to do these things themselves, what would be left to cater? Instead, I went from thinking of myself as a caterer, which was an enjoyable and satisfying but extremely difficult job, to making myself an expert on entertaining” (Martha Rules 10). Stewart’s explanation clearly positions entertaining as a productive art requiring training and experience to develop situated knowledge. That such knowledge is meant to be deployed in a manner contingent on varying circumstances and conditions is plain from the wide variety of menus and functions described in Entertaining.

Beyond entertaining and Entertaining, Stewart explicitly frames all domestic arts as techné. Speaking to the content covered by Martha Stewart Living, in her 2005 New York Times best-selling business book, Stewart states: “I made it a point to discuss and promote the notion that ‘living’ encompassed much more than just decorating and cooking—that it also embraced crafts, collecting, gardening, cleaning, organizing, and inventive child rearing. (Martha Rules 98). Cited above, Stewart asserts she has worked hard to lift up the practice of homekeeping, in all of its forms and figurations, “to an art rather than treating it as a chore.” Stewart highlights the study, training and experience involved in homekeeping in her very first letter to readers in the inaugural issue of Martha Stewart Living. She declares: “We haven’t always done it right the first time—we’ve all been humbled by a fallen cake, a seed not sprouted, a messy spatter of paint. So we learn and start again” (“Letter from Martha” 1990, 4).

Other “essential” Stewart texts likewise draw attention to the training and expertise tied to homekeeping as techné, as do popular assessments of these tomes. In her opening to The Martha Stewart Cookbook, Stewart discloses the time it has taken to develop her skills and knowledge, asserting: “Looking back over the past thirteen years, to 1982 and the publication of

Entertaining, my first book, I'm reminded of the saying, *Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose* ("The more things change, the more they stay the same"). This is certainly true in cooking and recipe writing" (x, emphasis in original). In the opening to Martha Stewart's Homekeeping Handbook (also known as "The Marthapedia," a moniker offered by reviewers and adopted by Stewart), Stewart makes a similar case: "When the first issue of Martha Stewart Living was published in 1990, I could not have begun to anticipate how wide-ranging our readers' homekeeping concerns would be. Since then, we have discovered new solutions to age-old problems, brought in experts to advise us on very specific questions about very specific concerns, and experimented with all the new (and not so new) home-care products" (iv).

Speaking of "The Marthapedia," one enthusiastic fan posts on Amazon.com,<sup>22</sup> "I want to be the first to say that good 'homemaking' IS an art!" Another avers of Stewart's Handbook, "It is more or less a home companion on how to clean, maintain, do and repair most every item in your home. There is lots of wisdom like we used to pass down from generation to generation, before people stopped listening and families fragmented." While Stewart's omnivorous competence and knowledge are admittedly daunting for some readers, they nonetheless recognize the technical expertise behind effective homekeeping and Stewart's facility in this area:

For individual suggestions, it is a godsend and very valuable but it will have the potential to make you feel inferior if you can't do it all. On the other hand, if you are just setting up your first home, it's good to get it up and running in the most efficient way possible. It's worth the effort to start from scratch. Just allow yourself the leeway to be imperfect so you can get the most of Martha Stewart's Homekeeping Handbook: The Essential Guide to Caring for Everything in Your Home without running yourself ragged.

Given Stewart's self-styled position as expert, it might be tempting to dismiss her oeuvre as techné because the position of expert often connotes an individualized proficiency, not a

body of knowledge meant to be shared. Stewart's description of her purpose with Martha Stewart Living, however, reveals that Stewart considers her advice and instruction as a contribution to a body of transferable knowledge: "It was perfectly clear to me that women were hungry for information to help them run their homes more efficiently, entertain with more ingenuity and style, and learn all the clever homemaking techniques and tips that their mothers may not have taught them" (Martha Rules 98). Stewart is well aware of the deep traditions which inform her place and success in American culture and references the works of nineteenth-century domestic advisors to develop ideas for her magazines (Leavitt, Catherine Beecher 1), drawing on the knowledge proffered by previous generations. Stewart's characterization of MSLO as "an omnimedia company centered on content and inspirational ideas for anyone passionately interested in the subject of everyday living" even more plainly establishes Stewart's intention to develop transferable knowledge ("From my home" 2006, 21), as do the presence of extensive message boards on MarthaStewart.com which provide fans the opportunity to share knowledge with one another, online community members soliciting and receiving advice on home-related topics such as planting mint, finding stylish range hoods for the stove, decorating medicine chests, and disciplining toddlers.

Stewart's artistic construction of homekeeping, however, lends itself to easy elision by those who question the value of aesthetics. For example, Matthew Hyland asserts that "in Martha's vision," the world "would be a better place only if people redecorated with the paints from Sherwin-Williams and spruced up their yards with her Kmart line of garden tools" (104-5). Though I am not suggesting, nor do I believe Stewart suggests, that repainting a room and sprucing up the yard can address complex social problems and inequities, the fact remains that people live, work, and play in the home and improving the home impacts how people feel and use this space. Negotiating production and fantasy, one Stewart fan describes the important role the aesthetics of her backyard plays:

You play an active role in doing it, even though you really have to scale it down. I know I always have to because I don't have that kind of time. I mean, you look in my backyard. . . . It isn't Martha Stewart's backyard. So if nothing else, one can aspire to have one like it. It won't be like hers, but at least when you open the door, you gain comfort, relaxation maybe, looking at something that's attractive as opposed to weeds. (qtd. in Mason and Meyers 815)

To borrow an argument from David Hume, to “imagine that the gratifying of any sense, or the indulging of any delicacy in meat, drink, or apparel, is of itself a vice can never enter into a head that is not disordered by the frenzies of enthusiasm. . . . These indulgences are only vices when they are pursued at the expense of some virtue” (265). As Hume continues, “[w]here they entrench upon no virtue but leave ample subject whence to provide for friends, family, and every proper object of generosity or compassion, they are entirely innocent” (265). Based on the desire to create welcoming spaces for friends and family, the aesthetic improvements Stewart advocates are “innocent” indulgences that better the material fabric of daily living. Allowing that there is much to be said about the class-based nature of the aesthetics Stewart champions, that is a question I defer to Chapter 4.

Virginia Postrel avers that recognizing aesthetic pleasure as an “autonomous good,” not even as the greatest nor most important good but as one of a plurality, is a “challenge” for Western cultures (89). Accepting aesthetic skills as “real skills” which “help us to perceive and understand the world” is an even more considerable leap for Western cultures (Postrel 170). Against the weight of Western belief, design theorist Donald Norman uses scientific studies to make his case that aesthetics help us function better in the world. Norman posits that “being happy” (one of Aristotle’s components of a good life) is a state which can be induced by aesthetically pleasing environments. Pleasing aesthetics “broaden” and “facilitate” creative thinking: “attractive things make people feel good, which in turn makes them think more creatively” (Norman 19). Considering Stewart’s aesthetic approach from within Norman’s

framework affirms artful homekeeping as an important facilitator of human well-being rather than meaningless frippery.

It also might be tempting to dismiss Stewart's construction of homekeeping as techné because techné demands ethical goals and Stewart's ends (capital gain and social status) are antithetical with the virtuous promotion of human well-being. Stewart is an unquestionably driven businesswoman, and we cannot bracket out the fact that Stewart's company exists for the purpose of making money. Despite these motives, Stewart's discourse repeatedly positions her homekeeping projects as a means of combining beauty and tradition in a "celebration of life" (Martha Rules 195). As follows, while we cannot exclusively characterize Stewart's ends as ethical, insofar as Stewart's products and publications lift up domesticity and improve the home, her ends can be understood as ethical. Likewise, though we cannot characterize Stewart's discourse as exclusively embodying phronesis, insofar as the domestic projects Stewart advocates demand excellence in effort and call for thoughtful decision-making, Stewart's discourse exemplifies phronesis.

For Stewart, homekeeping is a way to improve the quality of life for homemaker, family, and guests alike and she emphatically frames artful homekeeping as a statement of thoughtful goodwill. In the inaugural issue of Martha Stewart Living Stewart writes: "Our families and our homes are the centers of our lives. This magazine will always be filled with ways to make those homes more beautiful, more comfortable, more full of life and light and joy for those we love" ("Letter from Martha" 1990, 4). 15 years later, Stewart holds true to this stance, asserting, "I first voiced this sentiment in the inaugural issue of MSL . . . and it resonates as much today as it did then" ("Note from Martha" np). Indeed, homekeeping as a means of bettering the lives of family and friends is a consistent theme in Stewart's communication with Living readers, shown in a representative sample of 2007 "From my home to yours" columns: "Why bother making fresh pasta when one can buy it? Well, for several reasons—it is easier than you think, faster than you can imagine, and fun for you and your family" (May 2007, 12); "And keep a file or notebook

full of those recipes that will give your guests that special feeling that, yes, indeed, you took the time out of your busy, busy, life to care” (July 2007, 24); “If you are a pet lover, as I am, you will certainly understand my desire to make my pets’ lives as comfortable and interesting as possible” (December 2007, 35).

MSLO’s mission statement explicitly delineates the company as a “community of how-to experts . . . committed to teaching, innovating, designing and inspiring with ideas and products that make every day more meaningful, more functional, and more beautiful.” In MSLO’s 2004 Annual Report, Stewart movingly speaks to the “why-to” of MSLO’s “how-to” content: “Any parent who has made cookies for his or her child, and has seen the delight and gratitude in the child’s eyes, knows the connection between ‘doing’ and ‘loving.’ The time we take to plant a vegetable garden with our families, the joy we experience when we, together, harvest the beans or the tomatoes is the real reason ‘why’ we garden” (“Valued Shareholders” np). Stewart also works to make sure that MSLO makes a positive contribution to society. For example, MSLO is pursuing green business practices and is committed to improving quality of life for the elderly. Stewart states that her belief in “living well in every sense of the word” prompted her establish a Center for Living at Mount Sinai Hospital, “dedicated to learning new ways for all of us to live healthier, more productive lives, even as we age” (“Letter” 2006, np). From the above accounts, it is evident how strongly Stewart connects homekeeping to the betterment of human life.

Accounts charging Stewart with promoting consumption over production further problematize Stewart’s vision of homekeeping as techné. Stewart explicitly promotes a “do” rather than “buy” message, but because Stewart’s “do” message prompts “buy” behaviors, her discourse is caught in the tension between her overt message and the money-making operations of her company. For example, Mechling maintains that Stewart “belongs to a long tradition of domestic advice literature, and we see precisely how the advice is aimed at helping readers and viewers ‘perform’ a white, middle-class gentility through the careful arrangement of the commodities—the props, sets, and costumes—essential to that performance” (68). Karal



Ann Marling describes Stewart's version of Christmas as "an occasion almost wholly defined by things: strings of lights, 'old-fashioned gingerbread cookies,' fruitcakes, decorations, mincemeat, and homemade gifts," and correspondingly contends that Stewart's "ideas exist only insofar as they are embedded in Proustian objects centered on the home and those who live there" (136). Hyland similarly posits that Stewart's "cultural program of affluence and influence through material acquisition never overtly suggests a political dimension, but her faith in the certain happiness attending all good things reveals her vision of national welfare. She has a goods message" (104).

I am not arguing we cannot or should not understand Stewart's message as consumerist (as Mechling, Marling, and Hyland do), but that to fully understand Stewart's discourse we need to understand it as more than consumerist performance. Further, if we examine Marling's statement carefully we see that the "things" Stewart champions are artifacts produced through hand labor, and are better characterized as the output of *techné* than exemplars of consumerism. Viewing Hyland's statement through Norman's lens of aesthetic values repositions Stewart's "faith in the certain happiness attending all good things" as a faith in the power of aesthetic enjoyment to positively mediate individuals' relation to their world, reclaiming consumer objects from the sole province of acquisition.

Consumption and production are not dichotomous opposites, but participate together in processes of creation. In The Design of Everyday Life, Elizabeth Shove, Matthew Watson, Martin Hand, and Jack Ingram explore the ways consumer products are used in domestic practices. Noting that "[r]hetorics of consumption have tended to emphasize acquisition rather than use," Shove et al argue for consumption as an activity of "using, making and doing" (14). Because we must employ tools and materials to produce artifacts, "doing matters for having and having matters for doing" (Shove et al 142). Additionally, because projects completed with consumer products help users build competencies through production (Shove et al 144), consumption practices materially contribute to *techné*.

Turning to Stewart publications, as stated in consumer reviews on Amazon.com, Martha Stewart's Handbook to Homekeeping helps readers "clean a linoleum floor, and also how to wax it," "how to fix a lamp, unclog a sink, and start a compost heap," and "how to set the table and serve dinner for a formal party"; Entertaining helps hosts and hostesses feel confident "making French bread, creating wedding bouquets, [and] building a gingerbread mansion"; Classic Crafts and Recipes offers "ideas for ornaments, wreaths, and ingenious ways to wrap money as a gift"; and Gardening 101 assists readers in keeping up "vegetable and flower gardens," "matching [plants] to the site," and getting started on your first garden. Purchasing these books, as well as the tools and materials needed to complete the projects described within them, provides consumers the knowledge and opportunity to become producers.

Stewart believes that taking the time to complete a craft project carefully, to thoughtfully prepare a well-balanced and well-presented dinner, to organize a kitchen so that it is both pleasing to the eye and easy to use, are some of the "good things" (to borrow Stewart's trademark expression) that come together in the betterment of human life. To wit, Stewart's validation of homemaking draws power not just from affirming important but denigrated tasks, but in rendering these tasks productive arts essential to human well-being.

### **Conclusion**

Once a showcase for women's expertise and skills, home no longer occupies a prominent place in American culture. Stewart's validation of homemaking, then, serves an important rhetorical function for women who work within the home, positioning Stewart as an authority to whom audiences want to listen. From a business that began as a small catering venture she ran (less than legally, according to neighbors' evaluations of municipal bylaws) out of her home, Stewart has grown a complex, award-winning, highly successful publishing and merchandising empire, and remains one of a handful of self-made female American billionaires.<sup>23</sup>

The power of Stewart's message about the design of domesticity is not simply that she makes domesticity important, but that she positions domestic arts as techné. Though we cannot ignore the tensions between homekeeping and feminism, production and fantasy, or doing and having in Stewart's discourses of domesticity, if we overlook or dismiss Stewart's construction of homekeeping as techné, we miss both the heart of Stewart's argument and her appeal. By rendering homekeeping as techné, Stewart positions homekeeping as a valuable practice and provides domestic arts, and the persons who use them, a place of importance and pride in American culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An example of how Stewart's perfectionism is pilloried is found in Bert Christensen's list of the "Top 10 Signs You Are Being Stalked By Martha Stewart":

- 10) You get a threatening note made up of letters cut out of magazines with scalloped pinking shears, and they're all the same size and precisely lined up in razor-sharp rows.
- 9) That tell-tale lemon slice in the dog's water bowl.
- 8) On her show, she makes a gingerbread house that looks EXACTLY like your split-level, right down to the fallen-over licorice downspout and the half-open, graham-cracker garage door.
- 7) You come home to find your pet bunny on the stove in an exquisite tarragon, rose-petal and saffron demiglaze, with pecan-crusteds hearts-of-palm and a delicate mint-fennel sauce.
- 6) The unmistakable aroma of potpourri follows you even after you leave the bathroom.
- 5) You discover that every napkin in the entire house has been folded into a swan.
- 4) No matter where you eat, your place setting always includes an oyster fork.
- 3) You find that your prized Red Savina plant has been stripped, the fruit hollowed-out and used to create a "spicy and festive holiday feel in your home" by capping Christmas tree lights with them, and then hanging the strings about the mantle and on your hand-made wreaths.
- 2) You wake up in the hospital with a concussion, and to your horror find yourself rubbed-down with sweet creamery butter and kosher salt with endive stuffing in every orifice.
- 1) Twice a week you're the victim of a drive-by doilying.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the massive flux of tableware created a dramatic need for explanation. Not only did consumers need advice on what pieces of flatware to purchase for their table, they needed

to be able “to demonstrate finesse by immediately knowing which fork was to be used for salad, which for fish, and which for meat” (Goldstein 139). von Drachenfels notes that in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century basic table etiquette was well-understood, but “as the century progressed, the addition of numerous specialized implements, especially in the United States, created new and elaborate forms of etiquette. The anxiety and greater social stratification which ensued was, in part, based on the knowledge of the correct placement and usage of these utensils” (173). Coffin correspondingly argues that “the perceived connection between education and the knowledge of how to correctly hold and use one’s flatware spawned hundreds of etiquette books” (68).

<sup>3</sup> Such sentiments are still expressed today (see Matthews 226), though they are not as widespread nor so strongly expressed.

<sup>4</sup> As industrialization continued to expand, the aesthetic of the machine age transformed even food presentation. The “tidiest,” most sophisticated way to present vegetables was to mold them into a sleek shape by confining them in gelatin: “[u]niformity, sterility, predictability” literally took culinary shape in the “sanitary gloss, the smooth, unvarying texture, the evenness of quality” offered by the gelatin salad (L. Shapiro 99). Laura Shapiro writes that in the heyday of gelatin salads, one in particular “crowned all these achievements, for it captured, confined, and molded raw vegetables themselves. This was the Perfection Salad, a mixture of cabbage, celery, and red peppers, all chopped fine and bound by a plain aspic” (100). As unappetizing as Perfection Salad may seem today, gelatin salads remain a prominent feature of North American family gatherings.

<sup>5</sup> Shove et al discuss objects and home technologies as “person-tool hybrids,” characterizing deskilling of home labor as a shift in agency from the person to the tool or appliance. Though lacking Karl Marx’s pessimistic tone, Shove et al’s observation highlights Marx’s concerns about technology. Marx’s antipathy for machine technology is rooted in his belief that the machine would render humanity as an all-but-worthless appendage to the machine. For Marx, the

devaluation of human beings started in the commodification and alienation of labor, finds its final resting place in the machine. Thus the machine makes the worker “superfluous” (557). Walter Benjamin similarly decries machine technology, classifying his ill will toward the technological reproduction of art works as a function of machine technology’s assumption of tasks previously performed by human hands, reducing the usefulness of human beings “to the minimum” (107).

<sup>6</sup> Matthews writes that “the tone of advice in [1920s] women's magazines suggested that it would be almost atavistic to make one's own soup, say, when canned soup was so much more scientifically correct” (192).

<sup>7</sup> Marlene LeGates’ introduction to her book In Their Time demonstrates that feminism has historically been a movement organized and led by white, middle-class women. Making this same point, Charlotte Brunsdon states: “In the 1990s, although she may not be staying at home all day and watching daytime television, the feminist herself has more than a passing resemblance to a middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual first-world white woman” (Soap Opera 218).

<sup>8</sup> Leavitt notes that 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic advisors “assumed a white, middle-class audience as their readership. . . . They understood the needs for all Americans to have certain basic rights, but domesticity was reserved for their own kind” (From Catherine Beecher 20).

<sup>9</sup> Postfeminism’s emphasis on difference and move away from political action are what lead Georgina Murray to characterize postfeminism as “a sidetrack to the feminist struggle for equality” (37).

<sup>10</sup> Blaming feminists for having ruined everything she holds dear, in her book Women Who Make the World Worse, Kate O’Beirne stridently pushes back against what she calls radical feminists and their repudiation of traditional roles, asserting they “talk ‘freedom and choice,’ but feminists are too contemptuous of dissenting women to allow them to choose freely how to live their lives without ridicule and disdain” (xvii). Riffing off the feminist mantra, “the personal is

political,” O’Beirne argues the feminist movement grew out of the unhappy home lives of feminist leaders like Friedan, Greer, and Steinem (xxiii). O’Beirne’s attack on feminism bears many similarities to attacks on Stewart which explain her success by pathologizing her motivation (see in particular Byron and Oppenheimer).

<sup>11</sup> Also see Dow (Prime Time) and Probyn.

<sup>12</sup> Dow argues that second-wave feminism is popularly misunderstood as an assault on domesticity per se: “second-wave feminists did not simply attack the family as an impediment to women’s self-actualization (the premise Friedan and Hewlett both work from) but they also attacked it as a source of material oppression manifested in a gendered division of labor, domestic violence, marital rape, and unequal divorce laws” (88-89).

<sup>13</sup> D. Smith here distinguishes between “domestic” feminism and “public feminism,” which would come to fruition in the suffrage movement. Leavitt also points to a divide in 19<sup>th</sup> century feminism, asserting that Catherine Beecher, for example, “did not believe ‘women’s rights’ outside the home would improve women’s lives” (From Catherine Beecher 19).

<sup>14</sup> Marlene LeGates notes that 19<sup>th</sup>-century women “saw their emancipation in society’s recognition of their special contribution and the elimination of any barriers to it” (192).

<sup>15</sup> Hollows also argues that Lawson proffers a stable picture of femininity, be it mythic or real, which offers a temporary escape for women in a world where femininity is fraught with complexities (195). Put differently, the domesticity Lawson presents gives women the chance to chill out and have a smoke. We can position Stewart correspondingly, and argue that her message allows women temporary respite from unstable and competing feminine identities by affirming elements of domesticity. Using Dana Cloud’s work on therapeutic discourse, Cynthia Smith argues such escapist moments encourage the privatization of social ills, making personal therapy the solution for political problems. Although I am not advocating domestic diversions as a way of addressing inequitable social structures, in the same manner as taking a vacation

enables individuals to return to work with a sense of purpose, being able to temporarily step away from these problems may give women the respite they need to engage them. See, for example, Janice Radway's work on romance novels.

<sup>16</sup> In some respects Lawson is also the outright opposite of Stewart: Lawson is messy, happy-go-lucky, glories in slap-dash imprecision, and refuses standards of entertaining that require intensive labor.

<sup>17</sup> For example, one TV Guide review of Stewart's 1993-2004 show posits, "Viewers don't turn to Martha Stewart to get a new recipe or a tip on gardening so much as a view of what the perfect life should look like" (qtd. in Oppenheimer 399).

<sup>18</sup> Leavitt frames Stewart's idealistic offerings not as a failing on Stewart's part, but a key feature of the domestic advice genre, asserting that domestic advice has "always been the stuff of fantasy," having historically offered "cultural ideals, not cultural realities" (Catherine Beecher 5).

<sup>19</sup> Martha Nussbaum separates Aristotle's discussion of practical deliberation from Plato's, based on Aristotle's "anthropocentric" philosophical approach—his concern with the human good (291).

<sup>20</sup> Describing the artful nature of her catering business, Stewart states: "I worked incredibly hard to set myself apart from other caterers. My parties had to look different, they had to taste different, and they had to deliver an altogether different experience than those of other caterers" (Martha Rules 8). Aesthetics would take on an even greater importance when Stewart parlayed her cooking prowess and catering know-how into a book contract for Entertaining. Stewart's brother George notes that the creative and development process for Entertaining was a long process: "People don't know that it took three years to make that book and during that time every single plate and every platter that left every party was photographed. Everything had to be perfectly designed and laid out" (qtd. in Allen 111). Stewart herself heavily emphasizes the importance of style and design to the development of Entertaining:



When I envisioned creating my book Entertaining, I learned as much as I could about good photography, book design, typography, and good styling. . . . I knew what I wanted and how I wanted it to look. I was not a professional photographer, but I studied how different cameras functioned, what kinds of pictures they took, and the different lighting techniques that would make the photos look the most appetizing for the book I envisioned. I pored over photography books and art books to learn how to present images in a compelling way. (186)

And indeed, Stewart's efforts paid off. Not only did the expensive book go on to far outsell its projections, the style of photography (refined in Martha Stewart Living) has had an incredible effect on the industry. At times, however, the aesthetic nature of Entertaining warred with its nature as a sort of cookbook. Reviews of the book highlighted its imagery—"this is a treat for eye and palate"—but framed the book as one which "belonged 'in the living room rather than in the kitchen'" (qtd. in Oppenheimer 254).

<sup>21</sup> The final section of Chapter 5 explores Martha Stewart Living's photography as both exemplars and refigurations of the still life genre.

<sup>22</sup> 138 Amazon.com customer reviews of Handbook give the book an overall rating of 4.5 out of 5 stars.

<sup>23</sup> Stewart's influence even extends even beyond the bounds of Earth: astronauts on the International Space Station solicited her guidance on how to make the space station more welcoming and comfortable.

## CHAPTER 3

### COFFEE CUPS THAT WILL MAKE YOU HAPPY: PACKAGING MARTHA STEWART

The colors for the paints come from everywhere—my eggs, my flowers, even my pets. We sat with my five cats and three dogs and looked through their fur for inspiration. One cat alone gave us 13 colors.

- Martha Stewart

Is that a coffee cup that will make you happy?<sup>1</sup> This is one of the important questions Martha Stewart asks herself about Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia products. Stewart states: “Make it beautiful. . . . I say it every time I meet with the design teams who create the thousands of products we sell: ‘Is that a coffee cup that will make you happy? Is that a design that you will want to buy for your kitchen or your home?’” (Martha Rules 193). The visual identity and aesthetic appeal of MSLO’s merchandise is a significant feature of the corporation’s success, and the packaging of their products is no exception. Indeed, one of the widely-lauded features of her “Martha Stewart Everyday” line at Kmart is the packaging of these items. Stewart is very aware of the importance of how her products are presented and asserts that MSLO has “gone to great lengths to ensure that the packaging conveys that special quality and style. Our design team created sophisticated, upbeat packaging, using bright, modern colors and a pleasing typography” (Martha Rules 88).

Stewart’s home merchandise is an integral component to her success: sales of “Everyday” products make up 82 per cent of MSLO’s merchandising revenue. The popularity of

“Everyday” products, via the revenue they generated, enabled Stewart to buy Martha Stewart Living from Time Warner and create Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia. In a feature essay for New York Magazine, Kelly Alexander avidly asserts that in the ensuing scandal over Stewart’s indictments, America “seems to have forgotten Martha’s true contribution to society”—her “stuff” (np). Stewart’s products are so well-loved (indeed, merchandise sales held steady throughout her incarceration) because they offer better merchandise, both in terms of quality and elegant design, than her competitors.<sup>2</sup> Alexander concludes, “I can imagine a world without Martha. But a world without Martha’s stuff? That’s much harder” (np).

“Martha Stewart Everyday” has been joined by “Martha Stewart Collection,” Stewart’s line of home products for Macy’s: both are important texts in the MSLO empire. Though Kmart’s contract with MSLO comes to an end in 2009 and it is doubtful the contract will be renewed,<sup>3</sup> studying “Everyday’s” packaging remains an important endeavor given the popularity of these products. Moreover, since “Everyday’s” success created the foundation for the MSLO empire, examining these products is vital to our understanding of the rhetorical draw of Stewart’s merchandise. The “Martha Stewart Collection” at Macy’s will most likely supersede Kmart’s place in MSLO’s merchandising portfolio, giving “Collection” a central place in MSLO’s offerings. Though new (the line debuted in September 2007), by March 2008 “Collection” was the number one brand topping Macy’s bridal registry lists. By exploring both “Everyday” and “Collection” merchandise we can develop a broader understanding of Stewart’s rhetorical appeal than examining only one of these two product lines.

In this chapter I explore “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging, specifically packaging narratives. Packaging is a crucial element in product purchases, and packaging narratives are a key element in this. Nevertheless, packaging narratives are consumer texts yet to receive significant academic investigation. Despite the significance of “Everyday” and “Collection” products, they are unexamined texts, save industry reviews of “Everyday’s” packaging design. To be clear, I am not using the term “packaging narrative” in the way rhetorical and literary

scholarship typically understands narrative—as storytelling marked by a plot, character development, initiating and rising action, a climax, and dénouement. I am applying the term “packaging narratives” as a technical industry label: within marketing and design industries, “packaging narrative” is the term used to distinguish explanatory or descriptive prose text on product packaging from product labels and keyword lists of product features. Though not a fully developed narrative in the literary sense of the term, packaging narratives nonetheless “convey values, ideas, associations, and messages to the consumer” (Kniazeva and Belk 52).

I borrow my framework for this investigation from Maria Kniazeva and Russell Belk’s study of food packaging narratives. Kniazeva and Belk survey these narratives as explicitly rhetorical artifacts, looking to answer two questions: “1) How do brands seek to mythologize themselves through the packaging stories? and 2) What can consumers learn about their world from the ‘poetry’ of packaging?” (52). In a similar fashion I survey “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives to explore how they mythologize the MSLO brand, and what we can learn about cultural anxieties and absences from the consumer myths created in these narratives. While it would be possible to read these narratives as a tool of cultural discipline à la Foucault, following Kniazeva and Belk, I want to read (and reverse engineer) them here for what they can tell us about 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture and the rhetorical functions of branding.

I argue the rhetorical appeal of “Everyday” and “Collection” products is found in their ability to connect consumers with three important cultural myths: the construction of homekeeping as a valued and valuable practice, consumption as a rational process, and the opportunity to purchase products with a sense of origin. I begin my analysis by offering a review of key branding functions, how these functions are materialized in MSLO products, and the central role packaging plays in MSLO’s branding successes. Moving from the contextual to the practical, I analyze packaging narratives from “Martha Stewart Everyday” and “Martha Stewart Collection” merchandise. I close with an exploration of the cultural absences and anxieties these

narratives point to, and explain how consumption of “Everyday” and “Collection” products address these issues by connecting consumers to important cultural myths.

### **Branding Principles and Components**

A brand is how we know whose product, and therefore what kind of product, we are purchasing: a brand is a marker of what of what an organization stands for. Branding has undergone significant evolutions from a symbol of personal ownership, to an emblem of familial identity and values, to a statement of product quality, to an identifier of social status, to an expression of personal identity. These transformations do not mark absolute shifts in brand functions, but rather illustrate general differences in roles ways branding has performed throughout history. As a practice, branding arguably reaches back to ancient Mesopotamia, when craftsmen carved marks into pottery to signify ownership, though its origin is more commonly assigned to Norse cattle brands (from which branding got its name). Some of branding’s first social functions emerged in 12<sup>th</sup>-century heraldry, a practice that used symbols and colors to communicate familial values and identity among men fighting in the Crusades. With the advent of industrial manufacturing, the custom of using marks to designate manufacturing origins became standard. With industrialization came urbanization, social anonymity, and an increased need to communicate social status through the use and display of goods. In the post-industrial age identity has become even more consumption-based and branded products are heavily used as a form of personal expression.

Branding today looks very different today from its early instantiations, though it serves many of the same roles. In the 1970s, when marketing was popularized as a tool for constructing corporate identity, branding began to take on the explicit corporate functions we associate with it today (Allen and Simmons 118). In the 1980s marketing became a driving force of product development, centralizing branding’s importance to consumer sales and corporate identity (T. Edwards 55). In the 2000s branding is a crucial component of product development because concrete differences in quality and product function have all but disappeared with

improvements in manufacturing processes. Absent concrete differences, the appearance of difference is the primary separator among products, and “brands—by attaching to consumer goods a carefully crafted lifestyle, image, and attitude—provide the mechanisms for the individualization necessary in a competitive marketplace” (Harold xxii). Brands are now almost entirely separated from the goods that bear their messages: as Naomi Klein famously observes, the “real work” of companies today lies “not in manufacturing but in marketing”—in producing meanings, not goods (4).

Today, brands—not products, not services, not actual assets—are the most important component of a corporation (Clifton 3; Lindemann 28). The importance of brand over products, services, and assets is why Starbucks fights so fiercely against fair-use parodies of its logo, why Bennetton fired Tibor Kalman when public outcry over their controversial social advertising campaigns came to a zenith with Kalman’s depictions of death-row inmates, why Burberry lost significant market share when consumers perceived the clothing line to have gone mass- (and therefore down-) market, why Snapple was almost destroyed when Quaker attempted to tone down the product’s quirky personality (infamously dubbed “Crapple” by former spokesperson Howard Stern), and why MSLO’s stock has risen and fallen based on Stewart’s public image. Not one of these corporate crises was caused by a change in products, assets, or services: they were caused by a perceived change in the identities offered by the brand. Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter argue that 21<sup>st</sup>-century consumption is so driven by a desire to participate in the identity offered by a brand, that “[m]ore often than not, we don’t care about the quality of the material in our shirts, the stitching in our jeans or the alcohol in our bottles. What we care about are the identities conferred” (212). Brands’ ability to operate as identity-builders and status markers are highly problematic for critics of consumer culture:<sup>4</sup> this ability is thus both “at the heart of a growing critique of consumer culture” (Harold xxv), and the growing predominance of cultural branding strategies.

Paying close attention to the emotional and lifestyle connections brands make with consumers is fast becoming the new face of marketing, and is known as emotional or cultural branding. Here I choose to use the term “cultural branding” to maintain an emphasis on the social construction and negotiation of meaning in consumer culture. Cultural branding campaigns “seek to expand consumer's emotional, social, and intellectual investments with the goal of shaping consumption patterns” (Jenkins 63). Previously, branding campaigns worked to create “impressions”: now, “they are exploring the concept of audience ‘expressions,’ trying to understand how and why audiences react to the content” (Jenkins 63).

Cultural studies scholar Henry Jenkins points to the shift toward cultural branding (which he refers to as affective economics), noting that this turn is motivated by a desire to “understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions” (62). Cultural branding is an approach that goes above and beyond traditional branding strategies to position the brand in a relationship with consumers.<sup>5</sup> Defining cultural branding as “how a brand comes to life for people and forges a deeper, lasting connection,” Marc Gobé writes that cultural branding offers a “methodology for connecting products to the consumer” (Emotional xiv-xv). Particularly effective cultural branding campaigns—those that most successfully connect consumers’ emotional, social, and intellectual desires with particular products, those that most successfully tell a “story that addresses the identity desires of a particular constituency” (Holt 211)—are those that build iconic brands: for example, Mac, Coca-Cola, VW, Budweiser, Nike, and MSLO. What is important about the stories told by cultural brands is that they function as myth by speaking to cultural anxieties and absences. Douglas Holt argues that consumers purchase culturally-branded products “to experience these stories” and make the myth real through the ritual of consumption (36). Holt asserts that over time, an iconic brand “becomes a symbol, a material embodiment of the myth. So as customers drink, drive, or wear the product, they experience a bit of the myth” (8). Based

on this contention, Holt argues that strong cultural brands “compete in myth markets, not product markets” (39).

Provided with a lens through which to understand MSLO, I want to now examine how MSLO positions their brand, some basic components of branding, and how these branding components are executed in “Everyday” and “Collection” merchandise. This background is important because the rhetorical strength of “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives is connected to the MSLO brand: packages are expressive fragments<sup>6</sup> which get much of their meaning from larger brand associations. I will return to how MSLO products function as myth, and what cultural anxieties and absences they speak to, in a subsequent section.

According to David McNally and Karl Speak, what sets strong brands apart from average or mediocre brands is their message: strong brands are distinctive, relevant, and consistent (13). These characteristics are expressed through a brand’s verbal and visual identities and need to cohere across these identities to “make the brand more attractive and saleable” (Feldwick 140). A brand’s verbal identity is comprised of company and product name(s), advertising slogans, mission or values statements, as well as the tone and type of language used in these elements. A brand’s visual identity is comprised of the logo, typeface, colors, and imagery, and is what Marc Gobé refers to as the “brand’s graphic dress” (Brandjam 82).

MSLO is a compelling example of well-developed branding practices. First, MSLO products are distinctive in their craftsmanship and packaging (discussed in greater detail below). Second, MSLO labors very hard to make their products relevant consumers. Bearing witness to the governing purpose of their merchandising lines, President of Merchandising (Robin Marino) asserts, “Our goal is to provide our customers with everything they need to decorate their home in their own way with beautifully styled, high-quality, Martha Stewart designs” (Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia Promotional np). The success of MSLO’s products (seen in sales figures and the expansion of merchandising agreements) illustrates that consumers see MSLO products as relevant to their lives.<sup>7</sup> Finally, MSLO products are exemplars of strong branding in that they



have a record as quality merchandise. Speaking to her “Everyday” line, Stewart states: “I wash the sheets myself. I count the stitches. Someone bought sheets that had a crooked seam, I made her send them back” (qtd. in Schrage 19). Stewart places a high value on the quality of her products when considering licensing agreements for Martha Stewart-branded merchandise, wanting to know of possible future products: “Is it better designed or of a higher quality than other products in the category?’ If the answer is no, then it shouldn’t carry the company name. Our brand is a promise to consumers” (Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Annual np). This commitment to product quality, this promise, is a large part of MSLO’s strong relationship with its consumers and might partly explain why merchandising sales held steady throughout Stewart’s trial and incarceration while ad revenues and stock prices dropped dramatically.

Turning to the expression of MSLO’s distinctiveness, relevancy, and consistency, we can see how the corporation’s verbal identity sets both the foundation for the brand elements which come together in “Everyday” and “Collection” products, as well as the framework for the corporation’s visual identity. MSLO’s verbal identity is clearly expressed in its mission statement as well as its brand values statement. Here I want to focus on MSLO’s brand values statement because it more clearly outlines the tone and manner, as well as the desired associations, of MSLO product offerings. MSLO’s brand values statement reads:

Every home is a *canvas*. Homes reflect our *dreams* and *aspirations* for living every day to its *fullest*. We are about the *handmade*, the *homemade*, the *artful*, the *innovative*, the *practical*, the *contemporary*, and the *beautiful*. We believe in a little more *quality*, a little more *permanence*, a little more *lasting beauty*. We’re not just a company but a *laboratory* for ideas and a *community* celebrating the art of *creative living*. (Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Promotional np, emphasis in original)

This avowal clearly emphasizes the home as a place of artful expression through which to realize personal goals and ambitions, as well as a space in which to create handmade items as

an expression of both skill and caring. MSLO's brand values statement also clearly emphasizes the importance the corporation places on developing aesthetic, innovative, yet practical merchandise: products meant to hold important and lasting places in the home. These values come to the forefront in "Everyday" and "Collection" packaging narratives. The values expressed in MSLO's verbal identity also come to the forefront in MSLO's visual identity.

Design is the dominant player in visual identity. Ellen Lupton writes that it is design which "creates a visual personality for institutions, products, [and] audiences . . . to convey a sense of purpose and a set of values" (Mixing 83). In today's product-heavy environment, it is design that "rises about the clutter," design that functions as "the glue between the people and corporations; style is the message that makes the brand special and true" (Gobé, Brandjam 7, 67). Visual identity plays a significant role in product packaging. Gobé maintains that packaging "alone can create product preference" and "is sometimes the only thing" that drives consumer attention (Emotional 199). Packaging is so dependent on visual expression and identity because it "has to work instantly to catch your attention or establish your familiarity with a product. A package has half a second to be acknowledged and another half a second to be loved" (Gobé, Emotional 197).

Like branding, packaging has an extensive history. Also like branding, ancient packaging practices (leather pouches to hold wine, for example) bear little resemblance to product packaging today. Like the goods they protected and advertised, packaging advanced as manufacturing and printing processes improved (Sacharow and Brody). Product packaging—as well as consumption itself—took on a different character with the emergence of large chain stores in the early 1900s. Consumers were no longer able to rely on the advice of the general store owner or familiar salesperson, but selected products based on their own assessments of a product's reputation or utility: packaging played a significant role in these decisions, as it still does today. The explanatory and advertising functions of product packaging intensified during the Depression: after the economy crashed, advertising expenditures were meager at best, a

dramatic change from the extravagant budgets which typified the early 1920s (Sacharow 39). Instead of depending on advertising to drive brand differentiation and product purchase, packaging became a primary site of consumer communication. By the 1950s, packaging was not only considered an integral component of the product, in some cases it became the product: Stanley Sacharow reports that “one advertising agency announced candidly, ‘we couldn’t improve the product, so we improved the package’” (42).

Returning to the components of strong brands, MSLO’s packaging<sup>8</sup> creates a very distinctive appearance. In particular, “Everyday’s” packaging is lauded by the design industry for its aesthetic appeal. The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) highlights the simplicity and clean lines of “Everyday’s” packaging, observing that the “bright, colorful packaging provides a cohesive, unifying effect for products in many different categories” (AIGA Design Archives np). STEP magazine similarly draws attention to Amy Sealfon Eng, one of “Everyday’s” art directors, noting the challenge she faces in designing products that look good under Kmart’s abrasive fluorescent lighting.

Both “Everyday” and “Collection” packages are distinguished by their welcoming, refined colors—soothing pastels that evoke peace, warmth, and tranquility. “Collection’s” packaging is almost exclusively rendered in a beautiful robin’s egg blue (the only exceptions are specialized kitchen tools and glassware, which are packaged in a delicate celery green). Beyond the emotional associations tied to pastels, the particular color of “Collection’s” packaging carries additional connotations of quality and worth. “Collection’s” robin’s egg blue is distinct from the more vibrant turquoise that characterizes Tiffany merchandise, but suggesting that consumers might instinctively connect soft blue with quality merchandise is a reasonable stretch, given the longstanding strength of the Tiffany brand and its robust color association. The visual identity of “Everyday” and “Collection” merchandise consequently frames these products as superior to other brands. Discussing her “Everyday” packaging, Stewart contends:

The labels and boxes mirror the packing for more expensive products and reinforce the value that our brand represents: heirloom quality products—products that will look just as wonderful years from now as they do today. . . . We suspected, and found to be true, that our Kmart customers are delighted that they can purchase quality merchandise, so nicely packaged and affordable. This marketing strategy helps our customers to feel good about their purchases and be proud of their choices. (Martha Rules 88)

Stewart's argument is bolstered by strong sales: "Everyday" merchandise outsells all other brands Kmart carries. Though speaking here only of her Kmart line (the Macy's line was not yet in development), Stewart's assertion applies equally to Kmart and Macy's merchandise, the elegant packaging of each arguing for their quality.

Whether "Everyday" or "Collection," the consistent color palette of the packaging makes an array of MSLO merchandise a beautiful exhibit, especially in opposition to packaging for other products (like OXO's line of kitchenware) which create arrays of dark or unappealing colors (see Figure 3.1 and 3.2). The artistic qualities of MSLO packaging visually position the home, via "Everyday" and "Collection" products, as a place of artistic expression. This message is explicitly and repeatedly affirmed in packaging narratives. Consequently, "Everyday" and "Collection" verbal and visual identities work to affirm the statement created by the other, providing an internal message reliability which offers a sense of ethos beyond the Martha Stewart name.

Illustrated in MSLO's branding strategy, visual and verbal identities come together to create a coherent message that forges a connection between brand and consumer. Armed with an understanding of some of the basic components of branding, in the next section I turn to packaging narratives to more fully investigate the verbal identities of "Everyday" and "Collection" products.

## **Packaging Martha Stewart**

Referring to the functions of cultural branding, Gobé declares that “[c]onsumers today expect their brands to know them—intimately and individually—with a solid understanding of their needs and cultural orientation” (Emotional xxiii). One of the ways this knowledge is expressed is packaging narratives. The packaging narratives I examined for this study came from “Martha Stewart Everyday” and “Martha Stewart Collection” merchandise in the respective kitchenware and bedding departments at Kmart and Macy’s.

I recorded package narratives from each line of merchandise on visits I made to Kmart and Macy’s stores in Athens, Georgia over the course of two back-to-back afternoons. Though the selection of products available at each store may have varied somewhat according to local availability, as national chains their merchandise should be relatively consistent across the country. I recorded only discrete narratives from each line of merchandise: when categories of products shared the same description (for example, servingware and dinnerware items from the same pattern, or general kitchen tools), I recorded one narrative; while the attributes highlighted on the products sometimes changed (to describe the characteristics of dinner plates or teapots or whisks or spatulas), the narrative remained the same across items in the same product family. I did not examine products which lacked an explicit narrative (such as a “Tip from Martha” or “From My Home to Yours”) but only listed key features of the item; these products were almost exclusively Kmart “Everyday” items. This left a set of 26 “Everyday” and 32 “Collection” narratives. I first explore some of the differences between the two sets of products and narratives, then move to an inquiry of the specific narratives themselves, looking at merchandise from the following categories: kitchen linens, kitchen tools, dinnerware, cookware, and bed linens.

The most significant difference between “Everyday” and “Collection” narratives is that “Collection” narratives are both more personal (they present first-person narratives with a prevalent use of “I”) and extensive than “Everyday” narratives. “Collection” narratives are

prefaced with the phrase “From My Home to Yours” and closed with Stewart’s signature (Figure 3.8), whereas “Everyday” narratives are prefaced with the less personal phrase “Tip from Martha” and lack a closing signature. Noted above, Kmart merchandise had a significant number of items that listed product features absent a narrative; the only Macy’s product lacking a narrative was the Wedgwood dinner and servingware (it is quite likely that the packages for these products offer narratives, but since fine dining merchandise is not shown in its packaging but displayed in showcases, these narratives are unavailable to consumers prior to purchase). “Everyday” products without narratives have labels clearly identifying product features in an organized table: this is not the case with other brands. Pointing out the features of “Everyday” merchandise thus implies that other products in the same category do not have the same features to highlight. Additionally, by explaining product features and construction in a tabular format, “Everyday” merchandise appears more informative, organized, and hence more reliable.

Macy’s merchandise tended to be arrayed out of its packaging and shown in displays, whereas Kmart’s merchandise is only presented in its packaging, stacked on store shelves. With the exception of a few bedding items, Macy’s merchandise lacked pictures. Kmart merchandise consistently provided product pictures on its packaging, with the exception of kitchen linens. The absence of pictures and presence of displays of “Collection” merchandise, and the presence of pictures and absence of displays of “Everyday” merchandise, may be connected to varying practicalities attached to displaying merchandise in these two chains. For example, Kmart stores may not have the resources to maintain in-store displays of merchandise and absent displays, “Everyday” merchandise must depend on packaging to provide consumers with images of the products.

The most compelling observation about “Everyday” and “Collection” narratives is that there *are* packaging narratives. While other products in the same categories may have care or use instructions, or may list a few features about the item, this information is presented in keyword phrases, not prose text: the products are essentially left to simply speak for

themselves. What sets “Everyday” and “Collection” merchandise apart from its competitors, then, is that “Everyday” and “Collection” merchandise are not goods that must flounder in a sea of mass-produced and anonymous products, but have (the fiction of) an established and recognizable creator who testifies to their quality and place within the home.

Packaging narratives for both “Everyday” and “Collection” kitchen linens speak to the purpose behind specific towels. “Everyday” has two lines of kitchen linens, one of which is set apart as the vintage collection. The vintage collection of towels, sure to “add charm to any kitchen” is distinguished by cutesy titles<sup>9</sup> and labels that evoke the graphic design of the 1930s—a period in American history when homekeeping was much more valued than it is today. Whether vintage or regular, each type of “Everyday” kitchen linen—woven towel, terry towel, flour sack towel, glass towel, bar mop dishcloth, scrub dishcloth—describes the precise tasks it can be used for. Woven towels “[make] a wonderful oversized napkin”; terry towels can help “hold the bowl steady” when “[w]hipping up vinaigrette”; flour sack towels can “wrap just steamed vegetables so that they stay hot, cover rising bread dough,” and can be used “instead of cheesecloth for straining”; all-cotton glass towels “are ideal for cleaning and drying glasses”; bar mops are “ideal for mopping up spills”; and scrub dishcloths “have a slightly rough texture perfect for scrubbing.” “Collection” kitchen linens with narratives—kitchen towels, glass towels, and bar mops—offer similar task-based descriptions. Generic kitchen towels “are as indispensable as the kitchen sink. You can use them for wiping up spills, lining a bread basket, even securing a mixing bowl while whisking”; “[f]inely woven” glass towels “easily [polish] without leaving streaks or spots”; and the bar mop’s “looped cotton fabric” is “extremely absorbent . . . excellent for wiping off countertops and buffing surfaces.”

Clearly it is to Stewart’s advantage to sell a variety of kitchen linens, each needed to accomplish distinct jobs: using only one set of towels for a wide assortment of kitchen tasks means that Stewart sells less merchandise. But having precise items for specific tasks also positions the kitchen as a technical workplace in which particular apparatus are needed for

designated functions. Describing the variety of tasks kitchen towels can be used for also connects the consumer to the body of knowledge needed to approach cooking as a craft tradition, a key message throughout Stewart's publications.

Paradoxically, both “Everyday” and “Collection” general kitchen tools, which have more precise functions than kitchen towels (or perhaps because they have more precise and better understood functions than kitchen towels), have common descriptions. “Everyday” stainless steel kitchen tools list product features specific to each tool on the front of the package, telling consumers, for example, that the pie server has a “double serrated edge” and that the triple-rivet design of the slotted spatula is “reminiscent of 1930s kitchenware.” The back of all “Everyday” kitchen tool packages explains that “[not] all stainless steel is the same,” offering technical details of the tool’s construction: the “steel that this utensil is made from is classified as 18/8, which indicates that the steel had been alloyed with 18% chromium and 8% nickel” which gives this steel the luster and durability that “make it an excellent choice for everyday kitchen tools.”

Though all stainless steel is not be the same, “Everyday’s” packaging is misleading in that it implies 18/8 construction is the best. In fact, 18/10 construction is the best (for culinary use) because with a higher nickel content it is more resistant to corrosion. 18/10 stainless steel is also more expensive (18/0 stainless steel is the least expensive). It is likely that “Everyday” kitchen tools are higher quality than their Kmart competition (providing better products at a low price-point is one of the hallmarks of MSLO brands), but “Everyday” kitchen tools are not made from the highest-quality stainless steel. However, because kitchen tools from other brands available in Kmart stores do not explain their construction in the same way, “Everyday” kitchen tool packaging narratives both insinuate that their materials and construction are superior to other products and educate the consumer on the importance of properly alloyed steel.

Opposed to “Everyday” kitchen tools, “Collection” kitchen tools do not offer any information on the front of the packaging save delineating the tool as basic, must-have, or have-



you-tried. The lack of text on the face of these tools creates an elegant, high-quality package (Figure 3.3): explored in Chapter 5, ‘white’ space inexorably connotes quality. On the back of their packaging, basic “Collection” kitchen tools are described as those “everyone should have in the kitchen,” “essentials” that enable users to “tackle almost any cooking task.” Must-have kitchen tools, such as measuring cups, kitchen shears, meat thermometers, and a waiter’s corkscrew, are “handpicked and treated by the experts in the Martha Stewart Test Kitchen. . . . designed to deliver the best results with maximum comfort.” Whether basic or must-have, consumers are directed to view these products “as building blocks and then add more specialized tools to your collection that suit your personal taste and cooking style,” a message which encourages consumers to purchase more products at the same time as it affirms individual creativity. Shown in the narratives above, basic kitchen tools are positioned as implements a cook needs to complete meal preparation; must-have tools are similarly indicated as those a good cook should never be without, although how necessary a meat thermometer or a pair of kitchen shears are to success in the kitchen is doubtful—I have been cooking for 15 years and have survived without either of them.<sup>10</sup> That all must-have kitchen tools have been specially chosen and used in the Martha Stewart Test Kitchen gives these products a high degree of ethos, since it is probable professional chefs demand more from their kitchen tools than the average Macy’s customer—or at least consumers are encouraged to so believe.

Have-you-tried “Collection” tools have individualized narratives clarifying the use and importance of each specific tool, such as Asian strainers, apple corers, melon ballers, pitters, turners, avocado slicers, citrus presses and stainless steel ‘soap.’ Narratives for the Asian strainer and melon baller, for example, read:

*Asian strainer.* I am always looking for inspiration from other cultures. I found a strainer like this on one of my trips to Asia, where it is traditionally used for wontons and rice noodles. Yet its fine metal mesh allows you to safely remove almost any type of food from boiling water and oil, especially delicate items like

ravioli and beignets. The generous basket size lets you lift large quantities of vegetables and pastas, while the long handle keeps your hand away from the heat.

*Melon baller.* I think of a melon baller, also known as a Parisienne scoop, as an indispensable kitchen tool. When it comes to scooping out vegetables and fruits, nothing else can do the job. In addition to making lovely spheres of fruit for salads, I use it for everything from creating elegant cups from tomatoes or cucumbers for hors d'oeuvres to turning small gourds into candle holders.

The narratives attached to specialized “Collection” kitchen tools go even further than basic tools to frame consumers not just as cooks (even those in a craft tradition) but as erudite and sophisticated chefs. That Macy’s sells specialized kitchen tools and not Kmart can expectably be attributed to MSLO’s greater interest in developing their relationship with Macy’s. Selling specialized kitchen tools at Macy’s over Kmart is a product development decision that can also be attributed to the demographic markets of these stores: Macy’s consumers have more disposable income (Kmart shoppers have an average household income of \$42,000; Macy’s shoppers have an average household income of \$60,000) and are therefore more able to afford these specialized items.

Moving from the kitchen to the dining room, “Everyday” and “Collection” dinnerware packaging narratives offer insight into the design of these sets, tying artistic expression to meaningful contexts. Dinnerware sets have the most extensive narratives of all the “Everyday” products, offering purpose and care instructions as well as explaining the inspiration behind the designs. Almost all dinnerware packaging describes the importance of setting an interesting and elegant table, telling buyers: “A table is like an artist’s canvas: the options are infinite. Complement your dinnerware with dishes in different patterns to add texture to your table, or coordinate patterned dishes with solid-colored ones. Remember, people eat with their eyes first, so the way food is served is just as important as the ingredients.” Art curator Sarah Coffin offers

parallel reasoning for using decorative flatware in Feeding Desire: Design and the Tools of the Table, 1500-2005: “If one thinks of the table as a work of design that includes food flavors, aromas, and presentation, the range of media and styles of flatware design takes on new meaning . . . [and] help turn a meal from mere necessity into a creative and pleasurable experience, giving full meaning to the phrase ‘the art of dining’” (75).

Pattern inspiration descriptions lend a sense of depth to aesthetic dinnerware choices. Listed below are pattern inspiration descriptions for two of the earthenware and one of the porcelain “Everyday” dinnerware sets:

*Moss-crackled earthenware*: Dating back to 17<sup>th</sup>-century Japan, crackled finishes have traditionally graced everything from elaborate bases to tea ceremony sets. We’ve applied the look of this ancient technique to our dinnerware for a delightfully modern result.

*Color-banded bistro earthenware*: The bistro restaurants of France have a long-standing tradition of serving their guests on china with a solid-colored band that bears the restaurant’s name. This dinnerware allows you to enhance your home with the same understated elegance, whether you’re dining on coq au vin or French fries.

*Wreath porcelain*: Wreaths have many meanings. Most commonly, they are a sign of welcome when displayed on a front door. They also represent victory, honor, and affection. Serving from this [dinnerware] brings a special elegance to any meal.

“Collection” dinnerware offer similar narratives which describe the inspiration behind their design, two of which are listed below:

*Maple dinnerware*: In my garden, Japanese maples are like living artwork. Visually intriguing, their sculptural form inspired this embossed pattern. This dinnerware is a unique way to add the elegance of nature to your table. It’s

especially suitable for a meal celebrating the coming of spring, or the turning of the leaves in autumn.

*Basket dinnerware:* I admire Nantucket baskets not only for their beautiful tight weave but even more so for all the hours that went into hand-making them. This dinnerware pattern, reminiscent of those baskets, captures the refined yet relaxed air of the island off the Massachusetts coast. Worthy of meals that you've lovingly crafted, this dinnerware blends seamlessly into a formal setting or elevates a more casual meal.

Illustrated above, package narratives for both "Everyday" and "Collection" dinnerware sets focus on how these items elevate the everyday, making even casual daily dining an experience to look forward to. Explored in Chapter 2, setting an artful table is an activity grounded in the practice of homekeeping as *techné*, as is approaching cooking as a craft tradition.

"Everyday" and "Collection" dinnerware narratives provide a sense of history for these products—a rare feature in today's age of disposable wares. This function is very much in keeping with Stewart's above-cited characterization of "Everyday" merchandise as "heirloom quality products—products that will look just as wonderful years from now as they do today." At \$39.99 a set for 4-person Kmart dinnerware sets and \$75.00 for 4-person Macy's dinnerware sets, it is unlikely these pieces will be passed down through time to future generations:<sup>11</sup> I know I like to purchase inexpensive dinnerware sets so I can affordably replace them with something fresh every four or five years. Whether or not consumers actually purchase this dinnerware with the intention of treating them as heirlooms, packaging narratives invite consumers to feel good about their purchases by framing them as special.

Moving into the more private spaces of the home, packaging narratives for "Everyday" "Complete Bed" linen sets highlight features of their construction, such as detailed box-stitching, grosgrain borders, and pin-tucked cuffs. These narratives also point to the particular moods invoked by different styles of bedding: the boxed suede collection creates "an inviting look"; the

suiting stripe collection offers “timeless” elegance; and the damask collection brings “texture and sheen.” Packaging narratives for matching items offer helpful tips, for example, how to easily fit a pillow into its case (trying to shake it in plumps the fibres, making it difficult to get the pillow in its case) and how to make a window seem larger by hanging drapes above the window frame. Narratives for generic “Collection” bed linens encourage buyers to use “creativity to combine colors and patterns in your own unique style,” directing consumers bedding can be changed “seasonally to suit your mood and comfort.” Descriptions for “Collection” bedding patterns offer comparable explanations of the moods invoked by linen styles: the coral bedding collection present the “curious beauty” of coral and “gives any room an unexpected natural touch”; faux bois (stylized wood) “can punctuate any room with character and wit” and brings “rustic sophistication to your home”; trousseau bedding “recalls some of [Stewart’s] favorite finds from 19<sup>th</sup>-century European wedding trousseaus” that can be combined in varying permutations to “create a uniquely luxurious bed.” Like other “Everyday” and “Collection” products, bed linen narratives suggest additional opportunities for consumption couched in terminology (“tie the look together”) that connects consumption to the creation of a welcoming home.

Taking a step back, several overarching themes emerge out of “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives. “Everyday” and “Collection” products are consistently characterized as high quality, the home is repeatedly positioned as place of expertise, and consumers are encouraged to feel as if purchasing these products forges a personal connection with Stewart and the lifestyle she advocates. By defining the merchandise as high-quality, “Everyday” and “Collection” narratives invite buyers to purchase these products over other brands and to feel like savvy consumers by doing so. The continuous references to homekeeping as a sophisticated art requiring hard work and intelligence flatters the consumer by suggesting he or she is discerning, frames the home is as a site of *techné* (which is also flattering to the home product purchaser), and constructs the purchase of MSLO products as material expressions of discernment and expertise. By fostering a sense of connection between

Stewart and consumers, packaging narratives render purchasing “Everyday” and “Collection” items a more personal interaction, not merely a financial transaction.

So far this analysis of “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives points to how “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives position both their products and the consumption of them, illustrating some of the reasons consumers may be prompted to purchase these items. To the extent that consumers find these narratives pertinent to purchasing decisions, these narratives also point to some of the reasons consumers may find MSLO products relevant to their lives. But what do these packaging narratives tell us about wider cultural absences and anxieties?

### **Shopping as Religion: Consumption and Cultural Myths**

In this section I explain how “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives, buttressed by larger brand associations and cultural contexts, collectively come together to fulfill mythic form. I then take up the myths expressed in “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives—homekeeping as valued and valuable, rational consumption, and product origin—and analyze how these myths assuage cultural anxieties and absences. With this background I examine the myths offered in “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives to parse North American cultural anxieties and absences, the social problems “Everyday” and “Collection” consumer myths resolve. I round out my discussion of “Everyday” and “Collection” consumer myths by problematizing the traditional assumption that acquisition is the ritual which makes real the myths presented by cultural brands.

I primarily rely on rhetorical scholarship on mythic criticism, borrowing loosely from Robert Rowland’s definition of myth. No doubt Rowland would be appalled by my appropriation here, given that Rowland’s purpose in “On Mythic Criticism” is to rescue mythic criticism from scholars who have “stretched the definition of myth far beyond its traditional usage” (101). But like Barry Brummett, Michael Osborn, Janice Hocker Rushing, and Martha Solomon, I believe inclusively using mythic criticism provides scholars greater insight into the rhetorical operations

of myth, not less.<sup>12</sup> For example, Osborn argues that ignoring advertisements as a suitable subject for mythic criticism because they fail to meet narrow criteria costs scholars opportunities to understand myth and rhetoric as they operate in common social texts (124). As Osborn does, I find value in Rowland's description of mythic structure, even though I disagree with Rowland over how and with what rigor mythic criticism should be used. Rowland asserts myths contain five structural elements: myths are stories that resolve social problems, present heroic characters, take place in mythical time, occur in a mythical place, and use archetypal language (103-4). For my analysis, I discard Rowland's fifth element, which he describes as "the least useful defining characteristic" (106). By categorizing packaging narratives as myth, I recognize I am "construct[ing] the words into a certain configuration" (Brummett, "Rowland" 128), creating these narratives as a certain kind of text by analyzing them in this way.

Before turning to "Everyday" and "Collection" packaging narratives, there is one additional distinction I want to make: the difference between grand and little myths, the latter being the subject of this analysis. In Sidney Levy's oft-cited essay "Interpreting Consumer Mythology," he distinguishes between grand myths and "little myths," a category he uses to describe consumer myths.<sup>13</sup> Grand myths are the traditional subject of mythic criticism,<sup>14</sup> and explore existential questions in "tales of the gods, beasts, and heroes that are about the creation of the world, human birth and death, taking form as accounts of floods, supernatural creatures, matings of gods and mortals, heroic family romances, saviors and seers, and cataclysmic physical events" (Levy 51). Little myths are "secular" and "mundane," and "organize consumer reality in accordance with underlying logical structures" (Levy 53).<sup>15</sup>

"Everyday" and "Collection" packaging narratives conform to the structure of myth because they resolve social problems, present a heroic figure, and occur in a special time and place. One of the most recognized elements of myth is their ability to meet the psychic needs of social groups by resolving cultural contradictions and lessening cultural anxieties. Myths thus work to "symbolically" resolve social contradictions (Rowland 103). Leroy Dorsey and Rachel

Harlow assert that myths function as “touchstones for human behavior within a community and the criteria for meaning in that community’s existence” (62). Accordingly, myths offer “stories about the wisdom of life” (J. Campbell, Power 9), providing not only a way of being in the world, but a way to “transcend the everyday and provide meaning for an audience” (Bormann 253). Myths, at their core, are stories: a formal standard packaging narratives cannot meet. Nevertheless, as explained below “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives are rhetorical artifacts which function to resolve cultural anxieties and absences, and so I treat them as myth here. “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives clearly offer touchstones for human behavior and offer a way of being in the world that makes daily life meaningful.

The second element of myth is the presence of a heroic figure, someone “larger than life” (Osborn 121), a role model who possesses “exceptional gifts” (J. Campbell, Hero 35). Heroes serve important rhetorical functions for communities because they are “constellating images” who bring community members together “into some intention” (J. Campbell, Power 134). Because community members identify with the hero, and the hero “has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience” (J. Campbell, Power 123), the hero’s struggles “define the type of behavior necessary for survival” in the community (Dorsey and Harlow 62). Though not a hero in any grand sense of the term, I contend that Martha Stewart functions quite capably as a heroic figure:<sup>16</sup> Stewart’s ability to create and run a multi-billion dollar corporation founded on domesticity is well beyond the normal range of achievement, as the literal face of her brand she is larger than life,<sup>17</sup> without a doubt she serves as a role model for many women who identify with the values she espouses, and Stewart’s exceptional gifts—located in her homekeeping expertise—are well-recognized. Though “Everyday” and “Collection” myths do not explicitly present Stewart as a heroic figure, as MSLO brands Stewart’s secular heroism is automatically tied to her products.

The third element of myth is its temporal context: an extraordinary time, often “a sacred past or a yet-to-be realized future” (Kelley-Romano 386). The time of “Everyday” and



“Collection” narratives is a cross between a sacred past—a nostalgic ‘memory’ of a time when homekeeping was valued, and a yet-to-be realized future—a time in which consumers will have time and abilities equal to “whipping up vinaigrette” by hand, baking “the most delicate layer cakes,” and “turning small gourds into candle holders.” As I will explore below, “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives are primarily future oriented, though the homekeeping practices advocates in them draw on the weight of tradition. Speaking to the future-oriented nature of Stewart’s products, fans commonly save her magazines as “idea books” to keep on hand for a forthcoming time, for example, when they have money to redecorate the bedroom or redo the dining room (see Bentley, as well as Mason and Meyers).

The final element of myth is its spatial context, a sacred place or a “real place possessing special symbolic power” (Rowland 104). The myths of “Everyday” and “Collection” narratives are located in the home, a place which holds significant symbolic power. A subject examined more fully in Chapter 4, “homes are ‘places’ that hold considerable social, psychological and emotive meaning for individuals and for groups” (Easthope 135).

Having established “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives fulfill mythic structure, what do the myths expressed in these narratives tell us about North American cultural anxieties and absences? By offering the myth of homekeeping as valued and valuable, the myth of rational consumption, and the myth of product origin, I argue “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives point to the denigrated nature of homekeeping, the emotional impulsivity of consumption and the confusion of shopping in product-saturated environments, and a desire to feel that goods are personally produced.

#### Myth of homekeeping as valued and valuable

“Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives present the world as a place where homekeeping is a valued and sophisticated practice. “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives also present the world as a place where bringing “casual elegance to the everyday” matters. This is a world in which a beautifully designed fondue pot “gets guests mingling and

brings family together,” in which the time and effort it took to prepare a “carefully crafted” meal is noticed and validated by those at the dinner table. Packaging narratives highlight homekeeping as *techné*, referencing activities like making bread from scratch, creating sophisticated cakes, preparing fancy hors d’oeuvres, and making beautiful table centerpieces. Homekeeping’s importance is further reflected in the call for specialized cooking tools, tools which have been tested and proven by culinary experts. If homekeeping were not important, any old implement would do. But because homekeeping is important, the very best tools and materials, those worthy of homekeeping’s importance and tested in the mythic place of the MSLO test kitchen, are needed. As I argued in Chapter 2, homekeeping is denigrated in North American culture, which is problematic for women who work within the home. Margaret Horsfield effectively expresses this tension: “Like many women I vaguely believed that expressing interest in such menial matters would somehow be a betrayal of the sisterhood: after all our feminist forebears did not chain themselves to railings to empower us to keep our houses bright and clean” (3). The myth of homekeeping as valued and valuable meets the psychic needs of women who identify themselves as homekeepers by making this identity important.

Speaking of Stewart’s craft projects, Mary Anne Beecher writes that Stewart “reject[s] convenient shortcuts and mass production” in the practices she advocates, arguing instead for “keeping a practice alive for the sake of preserving the quality of the experience” (120). I contend that what M. A. Beecher says of Stewart’s philosophy on crafting applies equally to Stewart’s philosophy on homekeeping. When Stewart explains in packaging narratives why she values having good spices on hand to make a meal taste its very best, why she takes pleasure in using her avocado slicer to make homemade guacamole, and why she enjoys the perfect cup of tea, she speaks of homekeeping practices as activities which bring quality to life—as practices that make living special. As such, “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives present homekeeping as both valued and as a value in itself.

### Myth of rational consumption

What is perhaps most evident across “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives is their authoritative voice. These narratives are peppered with precise terms, telling consumers what metals the stainless steel “has been alloyed with,” that herbal teas “are technically called tisanes” and that true tea “is made only with *Camelia sinensis*,” what knives are best for “delicate work, such as peeling fruits and vegetables,” the mop-up value of looped cotton fabric, and how honing steels help “realign [knife] blades.” This technical-sounding language reinforces Stewart’s position as an expert on the home.

The sheer variety of available home products begs the question, for example, why would one need a berry colander? What might one need to fully equip a kitchen or dining room? Why would one need a cast iron pot? Why purchase faux bois bedding over coral? By clarifying how berry colanders protect delicate fruit, what kitchen tools cooks “must have,” the many uses of kitchen towels, why apple corers are useful, why one would need individual cast iron serving dishes (they “keep food heated long after serving”), and the differences among styles of bed linens, packaging narratives present bite-sized pieces of advice consumers can use to guide their purchases. Cultural expertise on the home is more limited today than in previous generations and is not as widely known. One of the overarching motives behind Stewart’s oeuvre is her desire to teach others “all the clever homemaking techniques and tips that their mothers may not have taught them” (Martha Rules 98). Stewart’s ability to offer advice on homekeeping techniques is most apparent in her book Martha Stewart’s Homekeeping Handbook, a 752 page tome with an exhaustive array of homekeeping practices. Stewart’s homekeeping expertise strongly positions her as an excellent advisor on the products necessary to effective homekeeping.

Packaging narratives offer Stewart’s guidance to “help” consumers ascertain what products they should purchase to effectively run their homes, relying on Stewart’s ethos as a preeminent domestic advisor to steer consumers through vast arrays of home products. These

narratives therefore offer consumers a logical reason for their purchase, or at least a solid logical screen for what may be a primarily emotional decision (for example, buying individual casserole dishes because they are absolutely adorable)—an important myth in a consumption-based society. One of the primary critiques leveled against consumption is its affective nature. Because we believe style and design to be fickle and nonrational—for example, Stuart Ewen asserts that “[s]tyle makes statements, yet has no convictions” (*Images*, 16)—the emotional appeal of design is often seen as fearful. In a society that believes “legitimate” value must come from content, not packaging, and must be rational, not emotional, the suasive nature of design is at best suspect, and at worst, dangerous (Postrel 69). By providing technical expertise on the benefits of her home products, Stewart offers consumers rational decision-making structures through which to code their purchases, thereby making consumption safe for Western consumers who are taught to value rational decision-making over affective decision-making.

#### Fostering relationships

“Everyday” and “Collection” narratives also provide consumers with a sense of personal connection with Stewart, as well as a myth of origin for these products. To understand how this myth gains cultural traction, we first need an understanding of how brands can operate as relational partners. Susan Fournier makes this intriguing case in her essay “Consumers and Their Brands.” She asserts that brands can function as relational partners, imbued with human and personal characteristics (344). To do so, a brand must both be personalized and able to “behave as an active, contributing member of the dyad” (Fournier 345). One of the most effective ways a brand is personalized is through identifying the brand with the “spirit of a past or present other,” such as a spokesperson (Fournier 345). Brands are able to operate as contributing relational partners by delivering on brand promises and providing support (for example, affirming one’s chosen identity as a homekeeper).

“Everyday” and “Collection” brands are well-positioned to operate as relational partners, in large part through the strong connection between Stewart and MSLO products—Stewart is

literally the face of her brand.<sup>18</sup> Stewart is positioned most strongly as a relational partner in “Collection” narratives, though “Everyday” narratives also offer this construction. That “Everyday” and “Collection” products offer narratives immediately personalizes these brands in a way other brands are not. Ralph Lauren’s products, for example, bear only his logo and an impersonal list of product features. Stated above, “Everyday” packaging narratives are prefaced with the phrase “Tip from Martha” which fosters a sense of relationship between advisor (Stewart) and advisee (consumer).

The personal relationship with Stewart offered by her products is magnified in “Collection” packaging narratives, which are prefaced by the phrase “From My Home to Yours” and boast Stewart’s signature at the close of the narrative. “Collection” narratives predominantly feature the use of first-person singular, a language choice which puts the consumer in direct communion with Stewart, and read almost as if the consumer were having a conversation with her: “Whatever I use them for, I make it a habit to collect all used kitchen linens while cleaning up after dinner”; “Soft and finely woven, a glass towel is the only thing I use to dry my delicate glassware”; “I find keeping my knives at their sharpest results in precise work and saves time in the kitchen”; “I rely on my apple corer to save time and get the most from my apples”; “I like to use mini casseroles to add a warmth that’s also functional.” Consumers know that Stewart did not actually sign her packaging, and are familiar with mass-produced “signatures” that close mass-produced solicitations from credit card companies seeking new business to pleas for donations to the local SPCA. Nevertheless, the presence of a narrative and Stewart’s signature lends a personal feel to her merchandise absent in competing products.

That Stewart’s brands can be seen to function as relational partners gives “Everyday” and “Collection” consumers the opportunity to “know” the person whose products they are buying. In the age of mass-produced merchandise, consumers lack a connection to the manufacturing process, an understanding of where their goods come from and how they were produced. While consumers do not *really* want to know that teenage girls in Asia machine-

embroidered their “Collection” bed linens for extremely low wages in even worse working conditions, I contend that the prospect of purchasing merchandise that offers a sense that a known human hand (or eye, in the case of design decisions) played a part in its construction is an attractive myth that sets MSLO merchandise apart from other brands whose founders are not known for personally participating in the design process but simply license the use of their name (for example, Ralph Lauren), and even further apart from brands with no publicly known founder (for example, OXO).

Stewart’s brands offer consumers the mythologized opportunity to purchase goods that have a sense of origin, “Everyday” and “Collection” packaging narratives suggesting that these items are produced through thoughtful, personalized craftsmanship, not by faceless enterprise in an unknown manufacturing plant. Clearly, Stewart’s products are not any more impersonally produced than OXO’s or Ralph Lauren’s, but inasmuch as packaging narratives create a sense of relationship with Stewart, her products offer consumers a personal connection not found in other brands.

### Shopping as ritual

Holt argues that the ritual which realizes the myths of consumer products is acquisition, that purchasing a particular product tangibly enacts the myth “loaded” into the product, enabling buyers to “viscerally experience the myth” through consumption (60). M. A. Beecher likewise frames Stewart’s discourses as theoretical beliefs, not actual practices. She states: Stewart’s suggestions do not “always lead to literal actions but rather act as myths that keep them conscious of what is possible,” which “may be enough to satisfy some people’s desire for myth, ritual experience and nostalgic longing in everyday life” (124). By purchasing “Everyday” and “Collection” merchandise, whether or not the consumer takes part in rituals that connect him or her to tangible traditions and expressions, they are able to connect to this desire through the products, and keep the ideal of cooking as a craft tradition, for example, alive and relevant.

Thus, we could say that purchasing “Everyday” and “Collection” products is the ritual through which the myth of valued homekeeping is realized.

As rituals go, however, the way Holt frames consumption renders this ritual personally important and persuasive but vacant in content—the epitome of Plato’s critique of rhetoric. Holt explains: “Because the myth is grounded in a populist world, its consumers believe that it is not entirely fictional. Implicitly, they think ‘There are people in the world who really live this way, so I can bring some of these values into my own life’” (59). With respect to “Everyday” and “Collection” products, consumers do not just think there are people in the world who practice homekeeping as *techné* and value its place in culture, they know that there are actually people in the world who enact homekeeping as *techné*. More importantly, what Holt neglects here is that buying is not just about having, but is also about doing.

Evaluations of consumption that frame it as a practice of having, not doing, overlook the ways that products are used to accomplish goals and prompt particular kinds of practices and actions—they overlook the ways products are “embedded” in “socio-technical systems of everyday life” (Shove et al 10). Shove et al’s investigation of the design of domestic life effectively makes the case that “consumption is organized in terms of past, present and future practice and that things are acquired, discarded, and re-designed with reference to culturally and temporally specific expectations of doing and of having—not of having alone” (141). In this figuration consumption is not a pretty but empty shell, but a ritual with material import.

Consumer objects are not to “entirely passive tools with which individuals realize aspects of their identity,” but are important items that literally enable material practices: to make a spectacular Easter brunch for 12, one might need a bundt cake pan in the shape of a cathedral, or a range of cookie cutter shapes to creatively cut biscuits with. At the very least, one will need mixing bowls, cooking utensils, and baking pans. If we understand consumption as not just connected to but as part of the foundation for material practices and ways of living, consumption is not an empty ritual, but rather the access point for the dominant ritual of making.

## Conclusion

Robert Slater asserts: “Nothing was harder in business than to create a personal brand. Only a handful of people had done it: Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Coco Chanel, and Donald Trump come to mind. Martha Stewart did it too, and the more products that bore her name, the smarter she seemed. She fused her name and her personality into the company that she founded and eventually took public” (4). Martha Stewart has unquestionably created an impressively successful company, built on the consumer appeal of her merchandising lines. The rhetorical draw of Stewart’s products is partially found in their aesthetic charm: a charm consumers can rely on to create beautiful and comfortable living spaces. The rhetorical draw of Stewart’s products is also located in the consumer myths they sell, the ability of “Everyday” and “Collection” products to compellingly address cultural anxieties and absences by allowing consumers to valorize a denigrated identity, obtain personalized instruction from an expert and frame consumption as rational, and purchase products with a sense of origin and personalization. Through their mythic functions, “Everyday” and “Collection” products offer what Joseph Campbell names as one of the important functions of myth: to present “a wonderful reconstruction, of the bolder, cleaner, more spacious, and fully human life” (Hero 3).



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Figure 3.4 for an image of a coffee cup that will make you happy (one of Stewart's coffee cups from her line at Macy's).

<sup>2</sup> Ikea's success is also built on this very premise.

<sup>3</sup> Kmart continues to struggle financially and has focused on cutting costs over increasing revenue as its bailout strategy. Kmart has also struggled to make the minimum royalty payments to MSLO and has had to pay out of pocket to meet its contractual obligations. In 2008, Kmart rolled out its own in-house quality brand, "Abbey Hill," and it may be that Kmart is intending "Abbey Hill" to take "Martha Stewart Everyday's" place in its stores. Another sign that points to this dissolution is the fact that Kmart has discontinued purchasing many popular products from MSLO, such as furniture and lawn and garden items.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Richard Lanham asserts: "So enamored of brands have we become that we walk around splattered with sponsor decals like a race car. The clothes, the stuff, have become an excuse to display our brand loyalties, what we think about stuff" (203).

<sup>5</sup> MSLO is extremely aware of the importance of developing a relationship with consumers, rather than simply making statements to consumers. They foster this relationship by providing easily-accessible content, for example, on MarthaStewart.com. Stewart's has emphasized building relationships with customers from the start of her catering business, happy to answer client questions about how she pulled off her magic (Martha Rules 10). Customer connection is so important, Stewart names it as the "the single most important principle that I believe has fueled the success of all my own ventures, from my catering business to my media empire" (Martha Rules 66). Stewart notes that if "you do not understand the customer connection, you may wonder why customers buy Lobel's cookbooks at all when they can get some of their recipes for free. The smart entrepreneur, who understands what customer connection is all about, knows that by sharing with the customers, more products will sell" (Martha Rules 75).

<sup>6</sup> In "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," Michael McGee argues that all texts are but fragments which derive their meaning from the wider cultural contexts in which they are embedded. McGee asserts that examining texts with explicit attention to their contexts allows scholars to best understand the rhetorical workings of a text. Packaging narratives are highly fragmented texts, which because of their extreme fragmentation, depend even more fully on their contexts.

<sup>7</sup> Speaking to the success of Martha Stewart Living, in the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue Stewart posits that the growth of the magazine "wouldn't be possible, I think, unless readers were pleased with the content, the images, and the underlying philosophy of the magazine's editorial approach" ("Letter" 2002, 12).

<sup>8</sup> The online presentation of both "Everyday" and "Collection" products is heavily reliant on the style of still life photography with which MSLO has become synonymous. Product pictures for Stewart's home products at both Kmart and now Macy's illustrate how this imagery is reflected (Figures 3.5 and 3.6).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the dishcloth label reads "don't cry over spilt milk / there's more in the fridge"; the flour sack towel label reads "bake a cake / don't forget the frosting"; the glass towel label reads "half full or half empty? / either way, glass towels keep it spotless"; and the scrub cloth label reads "scrub a dub dub / scrub cloths dish out tough love" (Figure 3.7).

<sup>10</sup> One could argue, however, that the waiter's corkscrew is a reasonably important kitchen tool—after all, if one cannot cook like a pro, one can at least try drown one's sorrows over meal-preparation fiascos like a pro.

<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, it is quite likely that Stewart's Wedgwood fine dining ware, priced between \$99.00 and \$228.00 for a 1-person set, will be purchased with an eye to passing the collection on to future generations.

<sup>12</sup> Barthes adopts a highly inclusive approach to myth, arguing in Mythologies that “everything” can function as a myth (109).

<sup>13</sup> Levy’s distinction echoes Clyde Kluckhohn’s observation that myths take shape in both sacred and secular contexts (61).

<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Kelley-Romano’s recent work on alien abduction myths is a good example of this type of mythic criticism.

<sup>15</sup> Roderick Hart and Suzanne Daughton make a similar distinction, separating myths—“Master Stories describing exception people doing exceptional things and serving as moral guides to proper action”—from fantasy themes—“abbreviated myths providing concrete manifestations of current values and hinting at some idealized vision of the future” (236)

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Campbell describes John Lennon as a “public hero” based on The Beatles’ ability to bring a “spiritual depth into popular music” (Power 134).

<sup>17</sup> Naomi Klein describes Stewart as “one of the new breed of branded humans” (2).

<sup>18</sup> Martha Stewart is so much the face of her brand that the browser icon for MarthaStewart.com is an image of Stewart’s face.



Figure 3.1: “Collection” display at Macy’s



Figure 3.2: “Everyday” display at Kmart



Figure 3.3: Macy's "Collection" packaging



Figure 3.4: Macy's coffee cup





Figure 3.5: “Everyday” images from Kmart.com



Figure 3.6: “Collection” images from Macys.com



Figure 3.7: Vintage “Everyday” bar mops



Figure 3.8: “Collection” packaging narrative

## CHAPTER 4

### FIELD TRIPS TO AN UPPER-CLASS HOMESTEAD: OR, HOW MARTHA STEWART DOES SUBURBS

A house is the shape a man's thoughts take when he imagines how he should like to live. Its interior is the measure of his social and domestic nature; its exterior, of his esthetic and artistic nature. It interprets, in material form, his ideas of home, of friendship, and of comfort.

- Henry Ward Beecher, 1859

Defining design as “an art of thought directed to practical action through the persuasiveness of objects,” Richard Buchanan asserts that design thus “involves the vivid expression of competing ideas about social life” (94). The design of the Martha Stewart lifestyle presents us with one set of vivid and extremely well-liked ideas about social life, about how we are invited to orient ourselves to the world through practices of domestic life. Noted in previous chapters, Stewart comes under consistent criticism for espousing a lifestyle that many, if not most, will not be able to achieve. Stewart is hardly alone in this, however—shelter magazines, sitcoms, soap operas, and product advertisements alike depict images of lifestyles beyond the reach of most. Though Stewart has much company, she is a particularly strong embodiment of Stuart Ewen’s commentary on the influence of aspirational style and design. Ewen states: “Even if the ‘life-style’ of style is not realizable in life, it is nevertheless the most constantly available lexicon from which many of us draw the visual grammar of our lives” (20). Stewart’s popularity



and the wide reach of her products give her an especially prominent place in the expression of the lifestyle of style and the visual grammar of American domesticity.

This chapter takes up the material expression of the Martha Stewart lifestyle as expressed in the Martha Stewart KB Homes Hampton Oaks community, attending to the model homes as rhetorical medium. The particular development I explore in this chapter is a Martha Stewart-branded suburb located in Fairfield, Georgia, just south of Atlanta<sup>1</sup> near the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. The Hampton Oaks community opened in 2006, and was the second Martha Stewart branded community to be built. I visited the community and toured the model homes on two separate occasions, once in September 2007 and once in March 2008. When completed, Hampton Oaks will feature 800 homes on a 480 acre plot of land.

By exploring design in this way, I take up Attfield's call to "dislocate design from the habitual aesthetic frame devised by conventional art and design historical and theoretical studies, to present it as just one of the many aspects of the material culture of the everyday" (12). This approach requires taking the material culture of the home seriously. Speaking of public memorials, Carole Blair writes that such sites "suggest—sometimes prescribe—pathways for a visitor to traverse, and those pathways influence reception significantly" (47). In a like manner, I investigate the prescribed pathways Hampton Oaks visitors are directed to traverse and unpack these pathways to discover what they tell us about Stewart's vision of domestic life. I argue that the design of the Hampton Oaks homes tells us that the home is an explicit site for the expression of identity, that careful attention to design most effectively realizes this identity, and that the celebration of family spaces in the home is premised on the home's interior as a refuge from the suburban environment.

I open with a brief exploration of the culture of home and contextualize Hampton Oaks within this framework. Using architectural and design theory by Max Jacobsen, Murray Silverstein, and Barbara Winslow outlined in their book, Patterns of Home, I then offer a reading of the Martha Stewart Hampton Oaks model homes. I close by considering the rhetorical

implications suggested by these homes. My analysis is explained throughout with reference to promotional imagery for the suburb as well as photographs taken on my visits to this community.

### **The Culture of Home**

Home is a place where people mediate social relationships through practices of self-expression which creatively express their place in the world. For all the importance of the public sphere (and I am not here repudiating its importance), “it is at the level of the personal where the individual relates to their social context and the world at large” and where “the process of self-creation is played out” (Attfield 92). Judy Attfield argues that “[d]welling furnishes the most fundamental spatial experience in the orientation of individuals in relation to the external world through the everyday mundane practices of managing and ordering domestic life” (153). Daniel Miller likewise asserts that because home is a place of critical significance, people pay close attention to “their relationship to their own home, to its structure, its decoration, its furnishing and the arrays of objects that fill its spaces, and they reflect back on it their agency” (1).

A critical piece of the home’s role in American culture is the connection between owning a home and the American dream: owning a home is a key feature of this dream. One early 20<sup>th</sup>-century architectural firm goes so far as to argue in the 1920s that the “desire to own a home is one of the natural, primal instincts of every real man and woman. . . . It has been man’s sublime incentive in all ages for greater effort” (Harris, McHenry, and Baker 108). John Agnew writes that home ownership is a notable “indicator of status and source of personal autonomy” (74), going on to state that the “single-family detached house<sup>2</sup> with its greater isolation and insulation from others is a particularly appreciated symbol of self-sufficiency and personal autonomy” through which “people both provide a means for communicating their identity as autonomous individuals and [signify] the practice of the personal life” (76). David Hummon also similarly observes that the home has come to symbolize “not only prosperity and social respectability but also diligence, self-reliance, and thrift” (211).

Home ownership patterns reflect the strength of this American desire. According to U.S. census data, average home values have nearly quadrupled since 1940: adjusting for inflation, the media price for a home in 1940 was \$30,600; the median price for a home in 2000 was \$119,600. Despite these rising costs, in 2007 68.1 per cent of American householders owned their home, compared to 62.1 per cent in 1960, and compared to fewer than half in 1900. Home figures so strongly in the American imagination that Dolores Hayden contends the ideal home has now “replaced the ideal city as the spatial representation of American hopes for the good life” (Redesigning 36).<sup>3</sup>

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century idea of home looks quite different from the idea of home prior to the 1500s. Before the 16<sup>th</sup> century homes were multi-use facilities providing room for a range of activities including “work, welfare, learning and worship” (C. Edwards 5). With the move toward industrialization came changes to the structure and internal layouts of the home, as well as a more intense focus on what C. Edwards terms “comfort infrastructure” such as hearths (to avoid smoky fires), glazed windows (to prevent drafts), and specialized living spaces (90). The idea of the home as a private space evolved between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the home was no longer understood as a multi-use space but was refigured “as a completely private affair” (C. Edwards 5).

The urbanization that followed industrialization changed social relationships, creating interpersonal anonymity which in turn fostered a stronger need and desire for the expression of identity (C. Edwards 152). Because one no longer knew one’s neighbors or coworkers and their family history and status, identity needed to be communicated in ways unnecessary before. With respect to the home, the expression of identity was located in items like home furnishings “and probably more importantly, by the display of personal items, created objects and accumulations of ‘things’” (C. Edwards 152). Though the home existed as a site of personal expression and identity prior to industrialization and urbanization, these changes intensified the importance of this expression. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century the expression of identity through material

objects in the home has become even more predominant. As David Hummon avows, homes are “significant locales that situate identity in social space, providing both a sense of attachment and a sense of being ‘me’ here” (227). Because “visual aspects of culture have come to dominant our understanding of identity,” today a significant component of identity “is an awareness of ourselves as we imagine others see us—an image that includes our physical appearance, clothing styles, jewelry, tattoos, car, home decoration, and so forth” (Schroeder 14, 33). In this figuration it is “important to ‘know houses’ to know self and other” (Hummon 211).

Home holds an important rhetorical place in American culture as both an idea and a reality. Clive Edwards argues that as an idea, the home “is the concept of bourgeois comfort and is a mentally fixed point in life. As a reality, it is the result of the interplay between necessity, availability and aspirations, which are represented in terms of goods and services and through the choices of the people that live in it” (4). Speaking to the ways domestic practices operate as a tangled working back and forth between social constructs and individual actions, Alison Clarke’s ethnographic study of home decoration illustrates how the idea of home “objectifies the fictions the occupants have of themselves in the eyes of others and as such it becomes an entity and process to live up to, give time to, show off to. As against actual observers it is an interiorized image of the other that can actually be worked on and fed into the aspirations and a labor of the occupants” (42).

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century idea of home also differs from early conceptions of home in that our present-day idea of home is almost inextricably connected to suburban life. Suburbs are today framed as “crucial contemporary landscapes” (Dickinson 215) and are argued to be “among the most pervasive influences on contemporary culture” (St. Antoine 127). A structural formation with its roots in 18<sup>th</sup> century England and 19<sup>th</sup> century America, suburbs are such an important feature of American home life because they are the place most Americans call home (Hayden, Building 17). American suburbia primarily blossomed in the post-war period in response to an increased demand for affordable housing. Applying the lessons of Fordist factory production,

master builders like William Levitt both produced and popularized mass-produced housing affordable by the lower and middle classes (Baxandall and Ewen 125). Though a model of housing premised on affordability, suburbia is a lifestyle choice attached to class aspirations (Garreau 157), rendering the suburbs a felicitous fit for the upper-class vision of domesticity Stewart offers. Hampton Oaks' nature as a suburb has critical rhetorical implications for the expression of identity through home interiors, a subject I reflect on in the final section of this chapter.

Examining Stewart-branded communities as an instantiation of 21<sup>st</sup>-century visions of home finds merit in Stewart's place in domestic markets: Robert Slater argues that Stewart has had "far greater influence" on American domestic culture "than any individual in the nation's history" (3). Such influence is perhaps why Stewart-branded homes are highly desirable commodities. In 2005 MSLO and KB Homes struck a partnership to build a Stewart-branded community of 650 homes in North Carolina. Those 650 homes received more than 6,000 visitors, 3,500 of whom visited during the community's opening weekend. Based on this result, nine more Stewart-branded communities are in development across the United States, located near Raleigh/Durham, Atlanta, Daytona Area, Greater Los Angeles, Houston, Denver, and Riverside County, California. With such a powerful consumer response, it is clear that Stewart-branded homes offer a vision of domesticity and a picture of 'self'-expression that is compelling to many. A significant feature of this appeal is tied to the model homes' position as both an idea and a reality. While all homes can be understood as an idea and a reality, model homes—in that they are *model* homes—draw particular attention to the (hoped) realization of a particular idea of home. Thus, there is perhaps no better text to study the interplay between ideal and actual homes than model homes.

### **The Structure of Home**

In Patterns of Home, Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow explore 10 patterns they identify as key to creating a welcoming home, defining a pattern as the routines, habits and

processes we use to navigate daily life (9). Patterns of Home takes up the project of A Pattern Language, which presented 250 patterns “that affect the way we live” (Susanka 3). Defining good architecture as good visual grammar, Pattern Language remains one of the best-selling architectural books more than 25 years after its 1977 publication, a popularity tied to its nature as a near-exhaustive and landmark examination of architectural design principles. Several decades later, two of the original writers returned to the idea with a third co-author, but focused exclusively on patterns of home (over community and environmental planning) and narrowed the number of patterns to a more manageable 10.

Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow locate the essence of home in the way a house incorporates both old and new elements in its construction: new “in so far as it is a fresh response to the existing conditions of neighborhood, site, climate, program, and budget; and old, in that it contains the deep and familiar qualities that, regardless of location, budget and size, make a place a home” (7). The 10 patterns these authors identify are: inhabiting the site, creating rooms outside and in, sheltering roof, capturing light, parts in proportion, flow through rooms, private edges / common core, refuge and outlook, places in between, composing with materials. I explore five of the 10 patterns named by Jacobsen, Silverstone, and Winslow, using them as a framework to guide my analysis of the Hampton Oaks homes. I organize the five patterns, chosen because they have the greatest impact on how we experience the home, into three groupings: the exterior approach to the home (inhabiting the site, composing with materials), how we move through the home (flow through rooms, private edges / common core), and how we remain in the home (creating rooms).

### Approaching the home

Our approach to a home, our impressions of its exterior, are governed by two patterns: how the home inhabits its site, and the materials from which the home is composed. Judged by Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow’s framework, Hampton Oaks falls far short of the harmonious exterior vision advocated by these authors. South of the Atlanta airport, Fulton

county (the district Fairburn is located in) is characterized not by idyllic rolling hills (as journalist Ben Neims would have us believe), but by backwater towns overshadowed by the stream of air-traffic in and out of Hartsfield-Jackson Airport and connected by a never-ending maze of faded asphalt and power lines. Traveling down Highway 29 on the way to Hampton Oaks one passes through a once-wooded landscape, now dwarfed by the suburban communities which have carved the trees into thin aesthetic clumps doubling as privacy barriers (Figure 4.1).

Strongly contrasting with the unappealing roadway, the entrance to Hampton Oaks is beautifully designed and landscaped, suggesting residents are entering a country estate (a design feature common to many suburbs). This impression is bolstered by the dark wood fencing which borders the community and the oversized brick archways positioned on either side of the entrance. The pastoral effect offered by the entrance fades quickly, however. Having not only viewed the carefully photographed and edited promotional imagery for Hampton Oaks (Figure 4.2), but also having subscribed to Martha Stewart Living for years, it was hard to shake the belief (despite knowing this could not actually be the case) that this suburb should feel like the bucolic escapes featured in Stewart's magazines and shown in a few carefully chosen photographs of the development. The community itself was thus a disappointment—Martha Stewart-inspired or no, Hampton Oaks looks and feels like a suburb. An affluent suburb, but a plain old ordinary suburb nonetheless.

Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow maintain that “[l]ike a tree grabbing a roothold in the slope, reaching down for water and minerals and arching up toward the available sunlight, a house must begin and grow from its site” (23). But like other suburban communities the homes in Hampton Oaks do not so much grow from their sites as they master them, a perception reinforced by the presence of earthmovers, ubiquitous construction materials, and scarred cinnamon-colored earth. Given that many of the lots are under construction, it is difficult to get a sense for the site itself, never mind how the finished homes will relate to their environs. Row after row of similarly themed houses do not offer a sense that the homes are organically

connected to the site as much as they offer a sense the homes are forcefully imposed upon the site.

Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow also maintain that homes should be placed on a site “to increase exposure to the site’s best features, minimize unwanted intrusions, and show respect for neighboring homes” (23). However, the ability to choose how a home will inhabit a site is fairly constrained for most suburban dwellers. Some of the more expansive (and expensive) homes in Hampton Oaks are positioned on their lot in a way that takes better advantage of the site’s best features, but the vast majority of homes simply follow the lines of the roads (which are not laid out with attention to the landscape nor for the purpose of creating a pleasing path for the eye, as much as they are laid out to maximize the number of homes which can fit on the development property). Although not as crowded as some developments—you cannot actually touch the outside wall of one home while touching the wall of another—Hampton Oaks homes do not offer much space between sites (Figure 4.3). Overall, Hampton Oaks is not a space of inhabitation as much as it is a restless movement between homes pushed in together in cramped clusters, resembling nothing so much as the weaving rows of Monopoly houses that begin peopling a game board after several rounds of play.

Beyond inhabiting the site, the materials which create a home’s exterior are an important part of the outward expression of the home. Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow argue that homes should “celebrate the innate qualities” of each type of material used in construction (253). If we attend to the descriptions of the different styles of KB Homes available in Martha Stewart-branded communities, we see that homeowners are not guided to select materials according to the innate qualities of the materials *qua* materials, as much as they are directed to select materials based on their imitative attributes.

Martha Stewart homes are available in four exterior styles: Katonah, Lily Pond, Skylands and Dunemere. The accounts of these four styles very much evoke the “Pattern Inspiration” descriptions offered in packaging narratives for “Martha Stewart Everyday” and “Martha Stewart



Collection” dinnerware (see Chapter 3). Katonah homes feature traditional “Colonial” architectural details like “front pillars” and “unique window shapes” and are inspired by Stewart’s homes in Westport, Connecticut (where Stewart’s famous “Turkey Hill” home, sold in 2006, is located) and Katonah, New York (the site of Stewart’s current primary residence). Lily Pond homes have a “vintage charm” offered by “faux cedar-shake siding” and “unique roof lines” in a country design styled after Stewart’s Long Island, New York beach cottage. Skylands homes combine “nature with elegance,” a look created by the “stone facades,” “Craftsman-style” windows, and “clean lines” of these residences, which echo Stewart’s 1925 home on the coast of Maine. Dunemere homes are a recent addition to the KB Homes style family, and although they are not mirrored after a particular Stewart residence, the stucco exteriors, “louvered window shutters,” and French doors manifest Stewart’s “appreciation for coastal architecture.”

With respect to the two patterns pertaining to the exterior of the home, we see that these patterns, though wonderful ideals, are simply not realizable for the majority of American homeowners. The constraints tied to these choices offer one explanation of why the interior decoration and individualization of home becomes of critical importance—if the suburb could be located in Anytown, USA (and viewing the promotional imagery for these developments certainly offers the sense that these communities are virtually interchangeable since they have no sense of a specific place), what makes a home distinctive and an expression and embodiment of family identity is not the way it inhabits a site nor the materials it is composed of, but the way its interiors are designed and decorated. The interior of the home becomes the site homeowners emphasize as an expression of identity because this is the space which offers the most opportunities for the expression of identity.

Connecting Hampton Oaks homes with the home life described and pictured in Martha Stewart Living, the compensatory importance of interior design is affirmed in the cover imagery of the magazine. For the three years spanning 2005-7, only four covers out of 36 portray exterior images: two images illustrate a home exterior, one image offers a close-up of a

picturesque garden shed, and one image presents an expansive shot of a beautifully tended garden. Of the remaining 32 covers, eight feature images shots of home interiors and 24 are close-up photographs of craft projects and comestibles, produced and displayed in home interiors.

### Moving through the home

Turning from how we approach a home to how we move through it, there are two interconnected patterns which impact this progress: the flow of rooms (how they are laid out in relation to one another), and the presence of private and common spaces. Using these patterns as a way to read Hampton Oaks homes shows the emphasis these homes place on family space. Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow contend that “how we enter the house and move through it have profound influences on our sense of the building as home. . . . The entire sequence of movement through and around the house determines whether we feel welcomed, invited to move farther, or encouraged to linger at a threshold, settled and comfortable within a space” (14). As architect and interior designer Stanley Abercrombie states more directly, floor plans “direct linear movement toward a goal” (17). If we examine floor plans from a few eras in American history we can see how the functions of home have changed over time, giving us a better context from which to understand Hampton Oaks’ floor plans.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, homes were much more compartmentalized and maze-like than they are today (Figures 4.4 and 4.5). Domestic space was partitioned into rooms separated according to function: public spaces were very clearly divided from more private family spaces, and both were even more clearly divided from servant spaces. Upon entering a home, visitors were contained in a reception hall where they waited to be greeted by family members. To gain entry into the social and family areas of the home such as the parlor, sitting or dining rooms, one needed to be ushered through a doorway which could be opened or closed to allow or prevent access. The kitchen was located at the very back of the house and was a removed

space of servant labor. Margaret Marsh notes that the “interior arrangement [of the 19<sup>th</sup> century home] both protected family privacy and encouraged separation within the family” (29).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century we see a move to more open domestic spaces (Figure 4.6).<sup>4</sup> Formal reception areas like entrance halls, as well as front and back parlors, were absorbed into a multipurpose living area that guests directly entered into from the street. Laura Miller argues that this change was the “first major modification in floor plans in nearly 150 years,” and that the absorption of formal social space into multipurpose living space “demonstrated a greater willingness to expose family life to the view of guests” (400; see also Marsh 84). In addition to signaling a greater willingness to open up family spaces to visitors, floor plans from the 1920s point to other shifts in domestic culture. Servant labor was now a thing of the past and homes no longer needed to accommodate live-in help. Kitchens were correspondingly downsized to be more navigable for the housewife. As one pattern book from the 1920s asserts, “[l]arge, cumbersome kitchens are no longer wanted by the modern efficient housewife who does her own work” (Harris, McHenry, and Baker 109). The kitchen was still very much considered a hidden work space of the home, although informal dining areas (breakfast nooks) began to be incorporated to ease the amount of work attached to family dining (Marsh 144). Floor plans from the 1960s move even further in the direction of open-plan design, and we see the incorporation of explicitly designated family rooms (Figure 4.7). Living space was opened up to better “integrate housekeeping functions into the life of the family, allowing another, for example, to prepare dinner or wash dishes while watching her children play. . . . Such open domestic architecture dismantled the barriers between work and play, ritual and routine” (Lupton, “Modern Flatware” 108-9).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, open-plan design has erased virtually all of the walls on the first floor of the home, seen in the floor plans for Hampton Oaks. Floor plans for Stewart-branded homes are similar across various models, though for my analysis I focus on plan 2968, with a base price of \$218, 990. The structure of the first floor of Hampton Oaks homes indicates that it floor

is intended as shared space open to family and guests alike: the only rooms with doors on the first floor are the bathroom and laundry room. Like floor plans from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century forward, Hampton Oaks floor plans divide the home's common and private rooms vertically: private space (bedrooms) is located on the second floor, and the first floor is given over to common space like the formal living and dining rooms, as well as the more casual family room, eating nook, and kitchen (Figures 4.8 and 4.9). The kitchen is located at the rear of the home, but without walls this orientation designates the kitchen more as an intimate space for gathering rather than a private or hidden space for labor. The kitchen is open to the informal dining and family rooms, and is clearly intended to be a space integrated into the social life of the family.

The more formal areas of the home suggest, by their placement in traffic patterns, that they are not likely to be common areas for the family. The home is laid out in an "L" shape: family space stretches across the rear of the home (the back stroke of the "L"), abutted by formal spaces arranged perpendicular to the family spaces. The stairway to the second floor is located just outside the family room, in between the family room and the formal dining room, meaning that household occupants will likely concentrate their time in the spaces at the rear of the home and do not need to go beyond these spaces to access the second floor. Homeowners rarely enter their homes by the front door but instead enter through the garage, which leads into the kitchen. The kitchen itself 'leads' onto the informal dining area (this is entirely open space with no separation) and the family room. This circulation pattern emphasizes family space over formal social space and is common to floor plans from the 1920s onwards. Though the circulation pattern of the Hampton Oaks floor plans functionally gathers household members in the family room, it also draws guests entering via the front door back into the family spaces: the openness of the home's floor plan makes the family spaces, which are cozier and sheltered by the stairwell walls.

Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow posit that one of the key functions of a well-functioning home is the way it "balances private and communal space throughout," ensuring

“claimable private areas for everyone” (14). Hampton Oaks homes offer a wide array of private space in the form of bedrooms. The homes have no fewer than three bedrooms, and almost all offer the ability to add a fourth or fifth. According to U.S. census data, in 1790 the average number of persons living in an American home was 5.79. By 1900, that number had declined to 4.76 persons. The size of American families has continued to shrink at an increasingly rapid rate: by 1950 3.27 persons occupied a home, and by 2000 it was 2.03. In contrast to this, the average size of the home has increased dramatically. In 1950 the average home was 983 square feet (to be shared among 3.27 persons); in 2000 the average home was 2,349 square feet (to be shared among 2.03 persons). Accounting for the size of the average 21<sup>st</sup>-century American family, it is clear that Stewart-branded homes boast significant opportunities for household members to claim private space of their own.

One of the most important common spaces of the open-plan home is the kitchen. Noted above, the kitchen’s place in the American home has changed from a 19<sup>th</sup>-century space run and used only by servants, to an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century space run by the housewife but hidden away from guests, to a late 20<sup>th</sup>- and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century space intended for socializing by the family and explicitly constructed as a “comfortable and convenient living space” (Hand and Shove 239).<sup>5</sup> The kitchen’s evolution into an open space for living, “one in which leisure, beauty, and sociability figure alongside themes of functional efficiency” began in the 1950s when the use of informal dining areas gained popularity, though eating nooks were a design feature which had emerged several decades previous (Hand and Shove 246). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, kitchen tasks are figured “not as obligations or domestic duties but as sociable lifestyle activities” (Hand and Shove 246). The importance of the kitchen to Hampton Oaks homes is iterated through promotional imagery. The image gallery at KBhome.com offers photographs of three Stewart-branded kitchens; the only other room to be highlighted this often in the 18 picture gallery is the family room. Moreover, a kitchen is featured on the front cover of the promotional brochure

provided to prospective buyers (Figure 4.10) and the first upgrades mentioned in the floor plans included with this brochure are upgrades to luxury kitchens.

Based on the above analysis, the two patterns which impact how we interact with and pass through the home illustrate that the living space of Hampton Oaks homes is to be openly shared with family and guests alike and that the kitchen and family rooms are the central spaces of the home. In this, Hampton Oaks homes confirm what L. Miller contends has been the grounding vision of suburbia from its inception: home as an ideal of family togetherness.

#### Remaining in the home

Above and beyond the exterior expressions of the home and how we move through a home, rooms both within and without have a critical impact on our relationship with a home, be it ours or another's. The pattern with the most direct impact on how we inhabit a home is the formation of its rooms, both outside and in. Illustrated in Hampton Oaks homes, the suburban environment pushes homeowners to foreground interior over exterior spaces.

Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow declare that “unless a house is conceived from the beginning as simultaneously shaping both kinds of rooms, the outdoor rooms end up as leftover spaces, without the coherence of design required to make them truly work. The indoor rooms can also suffer when a house is located and organized primarily with respect to its interiors. The indoor spaces can feel cut off from the site” (51). This is a limitation that Hampton Oaks, and likely any suburban development, suffers from. In today's pattern of suburban living, there simply is not the opportunity to design outdoor rooms: suburban homes have relatively small lots, typically not much larger than the houses. Or rather, suburban homes have relatively average lots with very large houses. This makes it difficult not only to create outdoor rooms (since there will not be the space for them), but also decreases the likelihood that individuals inhabiting the home would choose to spend much time inhabiting what outdoor rooms there are. Because neighbors are in such close proximity, outdoor rooms do not feel private enough to be truly relaxing and enjoyable spaces (see Figure 4.11, which illustrates how exposed and

cramped Hampton Oaks back patios are). In and of itself, the lack of outdoor space indicates that a suburban life is a life meant to be lived on the inside, not the outside, of the home.

In stark contrast to the outside rooms of the house, homeowners have a high degree of control over the interior rooms. Though Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow speak more to the construction and not the design of these spaces, here I want to consider interior design as part of the construction of the interior spaces of the home. I contend that the interior design of the home is one of the most important features of the American home today, reified in the Hampton Oaks model homes. Styling the interior of the home is a traditionally important activity—Helen Starrett asserts in 1923 (somewhat hyperbolically) that the “desire to adorn and beautify the home is one of the highest and best instincts of the human heart” (117).<sup>6</sup> Abercrombie correspondingly maintains that interior design commemorates those who live within the home, that home interiors “are the screens on which we project our inner visions: they are the shells from within which we view the world beyond, their windows our eyes, their walls and ceilings our security, their furniture and decor our convictions and our fancies” (166).

As model homes the interiors of the Hampton Oaks homes cannot speak to the specific people who live within their walls; they can, however, speak to the type of people whom we are intended to identify with, the type of people whom these homes suggest we ought to become.<sup>7</sup> As model homes, successful sales are dependent on the extent to which Hampton Oaks visitors identify with and/or aspire to the lifestyle expressed in these homes. Given that Stewart-branded homes sell at twice the rate as homes in similar communities in the same areas, Stewart-branded homes are clearly offering something meaningful to potential homeowners, something I contend is located in the interior design of these places.

As uninspired as the suburban exteriors of these homes are, their interiors are as captivating. The model homes feature 10-12 foot ceilings, refined pastel-colored walls, and a great many windows which create bright, inviting interiors. These are rooms in which you want to remain (see Figure 4.12). The interior design of the Stewart KB homes tells us much about

whom they are intended for. First, these are homes which testify to disposable income of their occupants: the ability to purchase ornamental decorations, particularly on the scale seen in these model homes, only comes with significant income. That purchasers will have significant income is also reflected in details like separate walk-in closets—it is assumed these home-buyers will need space to accommodate clothing and accessories. The interior design of these homes also tells us that potential homeowners entertain, read, craft, believe in keeping the dirt of the world outside (almost all of the homes feature beautifully appointed mudrooms) and in preserving the cleanliness of the home inside (laundry rooms feature shiny, white, top of line machines).

The manner in which Hampton Oaks homes are decorated bespeaks the quality and elegance for which Stewart is famous. Ornaments are not fiddly and numerous, but significant in size and often white—a color known for its connotations of purity and perfection (Figure 4.13). The houses are decorated throughout with books: everywhere, there are books (see Figures 4.12 and 4.13). Using books as decorative elements is quite likely a practical and decision, since buying stacks of books at a second hand bookstore (and then pulling off all the dust jackets and arranging the books based on the color of their bindings) is not an expensive decorating choice. But the continuous presence of books throughout these homes fosters the impression that potential homeowners are well-read and erudite.

Decorating choices are a key feature which makes the kitchen consistently stand out across all of the model homes, bearing witness to its importance as a central space of the home. What separates the 21<sup>st</sup>-century kitchen from earlier incarnations is how the 21<sup>st</sup>-century kitchen is figured as a space of personal expression. Martin Hand and Elizabeth Shove assert that when compared to the 1950s, present-day kitchens provide “more obvious opportunities for reflexive self-expression. This takes a number of forms, including the prominent display of ‘antique’ scales, bottles of olive oil/balsamic vinegar, wine and wine glasses, chopping boards, and so on” (247).<sup>8</sup> Hampton Oaks kitchens are aptly characterized by Hand and Shove’s



assertion, given the heavy emphasis these homes place on the kitchen as an expressive place: each of the model homes' kitchens highlight various items of 'personal' expression such as oversized glass jars of flour and oats, specialized cookbooks, cooking herbs, various oils and vinegars arrayed on attractive trays, ceramic accessories, and decorative vases, all artistically presented (see Figures 4.14 through 4.17).<sup>9</sup>

Turning to the cover of the promotional brochure (Figure 4.10), we see that this image presents the template for Hampton Oaks kitchen design and is figured as a place of expression, featuring an elegant stainless steel espresso-maker, sparkling chrome-finished cookware, colorful spices arrayed in stylish glass containers along the back of the counter, and a French press coffee maker perched on the kitchen island next to a bowl holding a selection of Araucana chicken eggs (the multi-colored eggs Stewart famously uses). What such items tell us about this kitchen is that it 'belongs' to an elegant, sophisticated, modern woman (we know the kitchen belongs to a woman because of the expensive pebbled-leather designer shoulder bag resting on a bar stool next to the island). That the woman to whom this kitchen belongs is sophisticated is also shown by the presence of high-end and technical appliances: the professional gas range, espresso maker, French press.<sup>10</sup> This is a woman capable of mastering complicated recipe items and comfortable using this kitchen as a work space (its nature as such designated by the serious-looking appliances and steel overhead light fixtures). In short, this is the ideal kitchen for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia's central demographic.

The importance of the kitchen in Hampton Oaks homes corresponds to the position of the kitchen in Stewart's vision of domesticity. Margaret Marsh contends that what is "remarkable" about 1920s floor plans and discourses on the home is the extent to which the "emotional content of family life" is emphasized (145), a characterization we could make of floor plans and discourses on Stewart-branded homes. The tenor of this content, however, is significantly different. 1920s discourses named child-rearing as the most important focus of the home, and suggested effective child-rearing could only be accomplished "by planning the whole

house around the children” (Marsh 145). Stewart’s discourse on her KB homes names entertaining as the most important focus of the home. The opening paragraph of Stewart’s letter to prospective buyers, printed on the first page of the promotional brochure, reads: “Home is more than just a shelter. It’s where we plant gardens and put down roots. Entertain fiends and celebrate family. Where we take off our coats and stay a long, long while” (“Letter” 2006, np). This emphasis lines up well with the content of Martha Stewart Living, which emphasizes cooking and decorating projects pertinent to entertaining over other home practices such as gardening or parenting.

Though not foregrounded in promotional imagery to the same extent as the kitchen, it is clear that the other common spaces in the home are also intended as spaces for self-expression by the variety of furniture and ornamentation displayed in these rooms (Figures 4.12 and 4.18). Incidentally, all Stewart-branded model homes are decorated with Stewart’s line of furniture from Bernhardt, illustrating Stewart’s skill at using one commodity to sell another.

When considering the ways in which interior design and decoration mark identity, C. Edwards points out an important caution: “in terms of major furnishings the process of development of an identity is often hindered by an individual’s lack of control over product choice” (217). Although in theory we may have infinite resources from which to cobble our consumerist expressions of identity, in practice this is rarely the case. Beyond the obvious limitations of price, stores may not have the items in stock one wishes to purchase, or the store may not be able to ship or deliver the item to a particular address, or if deliverable, the item might not fit around the bend in the stairway landing. Further, though post-industrial manufacturing processes (namely the ability to develop and cater to niche markets) and the ever-shrinking global village have significantly expanded the range of goods we have access to, there is not an endless variety of products which are available. Interior design choices are even more constrained when it comes to selecting structural design details for a new home: construction companies (like KB Home) do not offer infinite varieties of home hardware and

molding upgrades, for example, but create a master list of choices from which homeowners can select the particular items they like best, according to their styles and budget. Stewart-branded homes are no exception, and offer limited sets of choices. Of course, the more one is willing to spend, the nicer and more expansive the choices become.

### **The Implications of Home**

Both the culture and structure of home have important rhetorical implications for how we understand home and identity. I argue that Stewart-branded homes have three primary rhetorical implications: constructing the home as a place we aspire to, reifying the connection between class, design, and quality of life, and offering the home as a “thick” space of retreat from the “thin” and intractable space of the suburban world.

Applying Jacobsen, Silverstein, and Winslow’s patterns of home to this Stewart-branded community, it becomes apparent that what Hampton Oaks homes tell us about the structure of home is that the truly ideal home is beyond the reach of most. It is simply not possible for any but the truly wealthy to achieve the type of home lauded by these authors. This is not to say, however, that Stewart-branded homes present an image of home attainable by all—it is more attainable than the ideal home described by Jacobson, Silverstein, and Winslow, but it is hardly the picture of middle-class affordability. Hampton Oaks homes are currently priced between \$200,000 and \$250,000—with the current crisis in the housing market, the community is not building homes in the upper ranges of its intended price structure. Hampton Oaks homes were originally priced between \$220,000 and \$440,000; the very first Martha Stewart homes in North Carolina were priced between \$220,000 and \$550,000. As much as KB homes asserts that their homes are available to families with modest resources (and they do), according to 2000 U.S. census data, only 22 per cent of the American public owned a home worth \$200,000 or more. In 2000, the two largest price brackets of home ownership were homes worth between \$100,000 and \$124,999 (12.4 per cent of Americans owned homes in this range) and \$125,000 to \$149,999 (11.3 per cent of Americans owned homes in this range), indicating that although

Hampton Oaks may represent the lifestyle many Americans aspire to, this is not the lifestyle most Americans have access to. Stewart-branded homes are thus clearly caught up in discourses of class. They are also clearly caught up in discourses of class-based taste.

The carefully designed interiors of Hampton Oaks homes communicate the importance of design to harmonious home life. The ability to express personal identity through design is a critical skill in the Stewart-branded home and potential homeowners are strongly encouraged to design and decorate their homes. But they are not invited to design on their own: homeowners are invited to design like Martha Stewart. As Stewart states, though “[y]our home is a reflection of you, your tastes, and your style. . . . We’ve decorated each [model home] with beautiful furniture, upholstery, and paint colors to show you just a few possibilities. I hope you’ll be inspired by our designs” (“Letter from Martha,” Promotional Brochure np). That Hampton Oaks homes are decorated with her furniture and other home product lines indicates how strongly home buyers are invited to design like Stewart. The call to decorate and live like Stewart is further bolstered by the presence of Stewart’s publications throughout the home. Stewart’s magazines and books are scattered throughout the model home as pleasure reading, coffee table books, cookbooks, and crafting reference books. The constant presence of these publications is a visual reminder of the way Stewart’s advocated upper-class lifestyle is implicated in the practices of home life advocated by these model homes.

The class-based lifestyle of Hampton Oaks homes is deepened when we consider the importance placed on the kitchen from within the context of culinary tastes and practices. Barry Brummett writes that culinary taste is an important signifier of class which “consistently identifies people with one sort of group or another,” exploring how gastronomic references in the 1980 presidential campaign functioned to code candidates as classist (“Gastronomic”). A similar sort of commentary came into play in news stories following Stewart’s release from prison highlighting what Stewart missed most during her incarceration were fresh lemons and cappuccino. In Consumption, Food and Taste, Alan Warde asserts that culinary choices are key

features in identity building, particularly in the consumption-oriented structure of Western identity today. The sorts of kitchen appliances and expressive kitchen objects displayed in Hampton Oaks homes constructs these kitchens as places of upper-class gastronomy.<sup>11</sup> The professional gas ranges and counter-top appliances like vintage blenders and Kitchen-Aid mixers suggest that urbane menu items are carefully prepared in these kitchens, an impression reinforced by expanses of counter space that can be used to set out all of the materials necessary to making sophisticated meals. Hampton Oaks kitchens also imply (as Stewart's publications outright assert) that food is to be prepared and displayed with style, an aesthetic concern typically attached to visions of upper-class dining.

One of the well-advertised advantages of buying a Stewart-branded home is the opportunity to own a home decorated with "unique Martha touches like wainscoting, picture-frame molding, open shelving, [and] landscaping packages designed by Martha's personal gardener." As the promotional brochure proclaims, "Martha's influence is seen in the many options available to homebuyers, such as specialized flooring, bathroom and kitchen fixtures, lighting, paint colors, cabinetry selections," and other "additional features so thoughtful they could only come from Martha." The importance of Stewart's guidance is emphasized by Stewart herself in the "Letter from Martha" presented on the inside cover of the homes' promotional brochure. Speaking to her KB Homes, Stewart asserts that the "wonderful results are high-quality homes that feature my favorite details and ideas, many inspired by my very own houses in New York, Connecticut, and Maine."

The cover image of the brochure bears striking similarities to covers of Martha Stewart Living, and Stewart's note to prospective buyers on the inside cover bears the same title as her monthly Living feature, thereby offering prospective buyers the opportunity to live in her (created) world. This invitation provides buyers with social mobility by offering access to important signifiers of class, namely a home coded as upper-class through its design. Pierre Bourdieu argues that taste is "the product of the conditions associated with a particular class of

conditions of existence,” that taste is an “essential” identifying feature of class (56), and that class is defined on the basis of consumption patterns (483; see also Ewen, Style 61). Because notions of class are tied to knowing what kinds of products to consume and how to display them, by hand-picking the design options of her homes, Stewart provides buyers with a cheat-sheet for the expression of upper-class identity.

Interestingly, however, inasmuch as Stewart reinforces and relies on class-based markers of identity, she also destabilizes them. One of the features of late-capitalist consumption is the way it democratizes design, the way it makes material markers of status available to individuals beyond narrow class boundaries. Stuart Ewen notes that “consumer democracy, which was propelled by the mass production and marketing of stylish goods, was founded on the idea that symbols and prerogatives of elites could now be made available on a mass scale. The values of elite culture were simultaneously upheld and undermined by this peculiar variant of democracy” (Style 32). Even more so than consumer design democracy, Stewart’s focus on craft labor democratizes both design and status by offering her audiences access to markers of upward social mobility through home design projects. Though Stewart is not redefining what class markers stand for, nor how class markers function to inscribe identity, Stewart privileges the visual form of status over its content by rendering access to markers of class available to those able to cultivate aesthetic handiwork.

In addition to imbricating the home in social desires of upward mobility, Stewart-branded homes point to the power of home to create a stable environment for the self. Phenomenologist Edward Casey identifies one of the challenges facing the self in 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture as the “scattered” nature of the postmodern self (406). Casey ties this scattered self to the “disarray of place—with what [Robert] Sack calls the ‘thinned-out places’ of our time” (406). Evidenced in Richard Lanham’s description of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world, the proliferation of thinned-out places is typically framed as an assault on place and therefore self, since much of our identity is established in relation to place:

Actual physical location threatens to evaporate everywhere we look. Information, we are taught, has annihilated distance. . . You don't have to go to the office to go to the office. You can shop in your kitchen and go to school in your living room. And, sadly enough, when you actually do go out shopping, one mall seems much like another. For what actually matters, physicality doesn't matter anymore. (2)

In contrast to the perspective evinced by scholars like Sack and Lanham, Casey argues that “thick” and “thin” places do not operate in a zero-sum configuration whereby the proliferation of one must result in a reduction of the other. Casey suggests instead that thick and thin places operate in a “logic of more with more. The more places are thinned-out, the more, not the less, may selves be led to seek out thick places in which their own personal enrichment can flourish” (408). I argue that denigrations of suburbia are tied to its nature as a thin place, a place often understood as vacuous pastiche, and that the proliferation of thinned-out communities is what leads individuals to create the interior of their homes as a thick place of enrichment and meaning.

There is much to support an interpretation of suburbia as thin place. Gary Cross notes that suburbs have been disparaged from the start of their late 19<sup>th</sup>-century origins (112), frequently decried (as I do earlier) as communities lacking a sense of authentic personality, as communities that testify to the “ways in which our built environment can be an obstacle to community” (Hochschild 59). Suburbs are looked down upon because “they are not places for wandering, [because] they lack the charm of a medieval village, the excitement of a metropolis, or the architectural variety of an upper-income suburb” (Gans 186). 1970s synonyms for suburbia—“‘land of mediocrity,’ ‘middle America,’ and ‘silent majority’”—are monikers illustrating perceptions of suburban life as “a mindless consumer utopia” (Hayden, Building 15). These labels are still apt characterizations of how many think of suburban life today. Some authors even go so far as to outright charge suburbanization with the “breakdown in community and the

evisceration of public space” (St. Antoine 128). Characterizing traditional suburbs as barren communities (as opposed to “solid neighborhoods” with pedestrian access to stores and meeting places), Hayden asserts that the “dream for housing was flattened into a stereotype of a traditional house stuffed with appliances and furniture, equipped with two cars, and surrounded by a yard. The ideal of situating that house in a planned neighborhood with pedestrian access to schools, shops, parks, and public transit had all but disappeared” (Building 153).

Herbert Gans argues that many of these objections to suburbia can be overcome by building suburbs oriented toward more diverse lifestyles (431). Speaking to this proposed model, Gans states: “If people are told what community plans and what level of services they are buying when they purchase a house, and if they have alternative choices in different communities, then their decision to buy assumes agreement with the proposed level of services. Planning of the next round of suburban communities should reflect the increasing diversity of life styles and should ensure that many different kinds of communities are built” (431). Pieces of what Gans argued for in 1967 can be seen in suburban developments today, though these elements are seen more in the marketing of particular suburbs than in the tangible realization of these claims. Suburbs attempt to distinguish themselves from other like developments by establishing so-called unique features of these communities. For example, the press release announcing Hampton Oaks’ opening describes the development as a “swim and tennis community,” featuring a community clubhouse “for gathering, socializing, and entertaining,” and a community garden “offering plots for homeowners, brining families together to plant their choice of vegetables, flowers, and herbs.” This description, however, does not cohere with some of the actual features of the community. For example, the community garden is in actuality a sad arrangement of three small raised beds located near the clubhouse: hardly a space large enough for one family to profitably garden, never mind the hundreds of planned homes.



Additionally, the outdoor spaces of the community feel thin and forced, and are not welcoming places to gather.

Roger Silverstone pushes back against those who position suburbs as a pastiche of real community, lacking identity and spirit. Silverstone vigorously defends Levittown, the first mass-produced American produced suburb, often understood as the prototype (if not protoplast) of American suburbia:

The standardization so bemoaned by modernist critics is itself, plausibly, quite superficial. Levittown has now become a passable model of postmodern individuality, as standardized houses have been transformed, trees and gardens plated, and the basic structure of grid and lot has been overlaid by other designs and other models of suburban architecture. (6)

Silverstone's critique is well taken. Yet this individuality, this sense of real place, took 50 years to develop: Silverstone is writing about the community half a century after its construction. When Levittown was built, the houses were so similar a common story abounds of neighbors mistakenly going to bed in someone else's home. Hampton Oaks homes are not so similar that late at night one would mistake the neighbor's house for one's own, but the newness of the community quashes any sense of actual place. Perhaps one of the difficulties in ascribing a sense of specific place to a new suburb, a sense of being grounded in a specific locale, is that the forced nature of the community is made all too apparent by the incomplete newness manifest by ever-present construction, thin plantings of shrubbery, and the tell-tale sod lines of instant lawns.

As community exteriors become less tied to a sense of specific place, the interiors of home become increasingly important—a relationship of more with more. Especially in the face of a world increasingly marked by virtual culture and a belief that the outside world is unsafe and unpredictable, Hazel Easthope observes that in response to thin places “more and more people cling strongly to notions of place as secure and stable” (130). One of the primary places we turn

to for this sense of thick stability is the home, in which individuals “are able to foster a (conscious) sense of place” (Easthope 133).

### **Conclusion**

Returning to Buchanan’s assertion with which I began this chapter, as object, what do the Martha Stewart homes persuade us to? What ideas about social life do they express? I argue that Hampton Oaks homes persuade us of the importance of design, that home is a place of expression and therefore a solid foundation for anchoring identity, that home is meant to be shared with others through entertaining, and that the social relationships of the home are meant to take place within, not without, the home. This is not to say that the Hampton Oaks homes are built on a refutation of community—a critique long-leveled at suburban communities in general—but that the sociability promoted by Hampton Oaks homes is community lived on the inside. Using home as a way of expressing individual and social identity, however, is a messy operation implicated in conflicting discourses of agency: “The question of identity raises fundamental and contradictory issues in this consideration of the home in the twentieth century. It could be argued that a consumer culture encourages individual freedom of expression and identity, but on the other hand it can appear to construct parameters within which people can consume a ready-made identity” (C. Edwards 217). Though Stewart-branded homes are an expression of self, they are an expression of a certain kind of self. Inasmuch as homeowners are invited to design like Stewart, they are invited not to design like themselves, but to design an image of themselves as they would like to be.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bullard argues that Atlanta is a city which epitomizes urban sprawl (7).

<sup>2</sup> 80 per cent of houses sold in 1986 were detached, by 2006 that had climbed to 86 per cent.

<sup>3</sup> Hayden notes that the shift toward home and away from community represents a shift toward a desire for an ideal private, not public life, “without urban problems such as unemployment, poverty, hunger, racial prejudice, pollution, and violent crime” (Redesigning 18).

<sup>4</sup> Marsh notes that although Frank Lloyd Wright claimed responsibility for this style of living, other architects were designing open plan floor plans before him, though Wright popularized this plan.

<sup>5</sup> The importance of the kitchen as a space of domesticity is also affirmed in Living: the vast majority of the content relates to kitchen-based tasks like recipes and tips on entertaining.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Ward Beecher cautions that we ought to be careful about how much and what we interpret from the interior design of a home, since the “conceiving power may be greater in us than the creative or expressive power” (285).

<sup>7</sup> In his classic essay “The Second Persona,” Edwin Black argues that texts function to create a second persona: the ideal audience, who the text invites us to become.

<sup>8</sup> Hand and Shove observe that shelter magazine readers “are expected to acquire and exercise talents in interior décor. Skills in shopping and design appear to be an increasingly important part of ‘good housekeeping’” (247).

<sup>9</sup> The ability to achieve this sort of decorative vision requires both time and aesthetic knowledge. While Stewart cannot provide the time, her magazines and website offer the sorts of decorating tips, guidelines, and suggestions which can provide aesthetic knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> The most discerning (or so French press connoisseurs argue) coffee drinkers prefer French presses over coffee makers with filters because the press does not filter out the natural oil of the

coffee beans. Brewing the perfect French press coffee, however, is a painstaking task that must be executed with care.

<sup>11</sup> Warde notes that rejecting convenience foods, as Stewart does, is often symbolized as a statement of (primarily feminine) caring (163).



Figure 4.1: US Highway 29 on the way to Hampton Oaks



Figure 4.2: Promotional imagery for Hampton Oaks







A Residence in Kansas City, Mo.

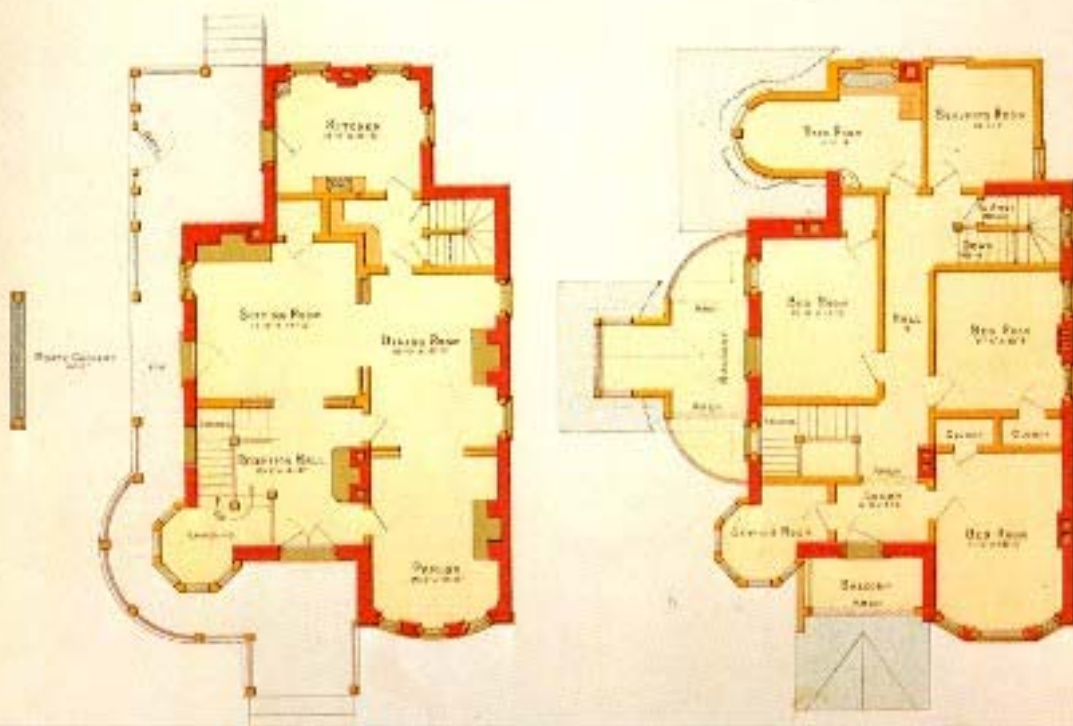


Figure 4.5: 1887 floor plan; Mitchell and Waldhorn, Plate 9



**The WESTHAVEN** (Size 12x18')

Specious honey homes like the Westhaven are usually constructed in the suburbs by those whose generous natures lead them away from the cramped and crowded districts where limited space and unfeeling artists tend to choke their creative thoughts during hours of meditation. Furthermore, The Westhaven is strictly practical as well as peaceful and restful, and its dignity is undecorated in any community.

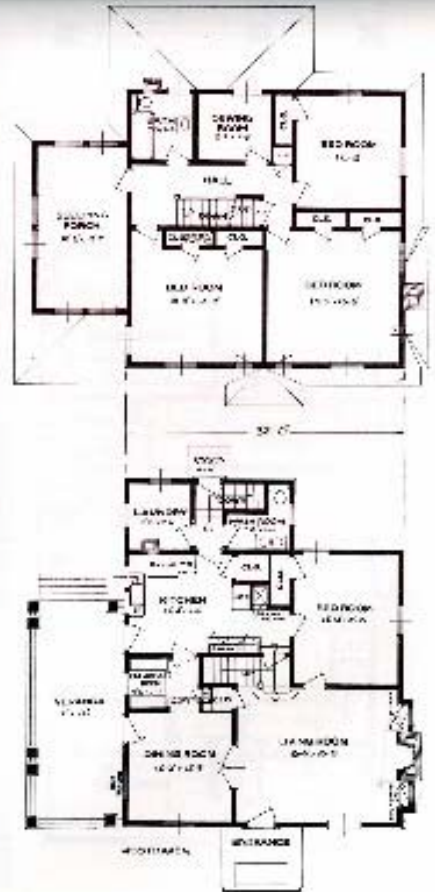


Figure 4.6: 1920s floor plan; Harris, McHenry and co, page 17



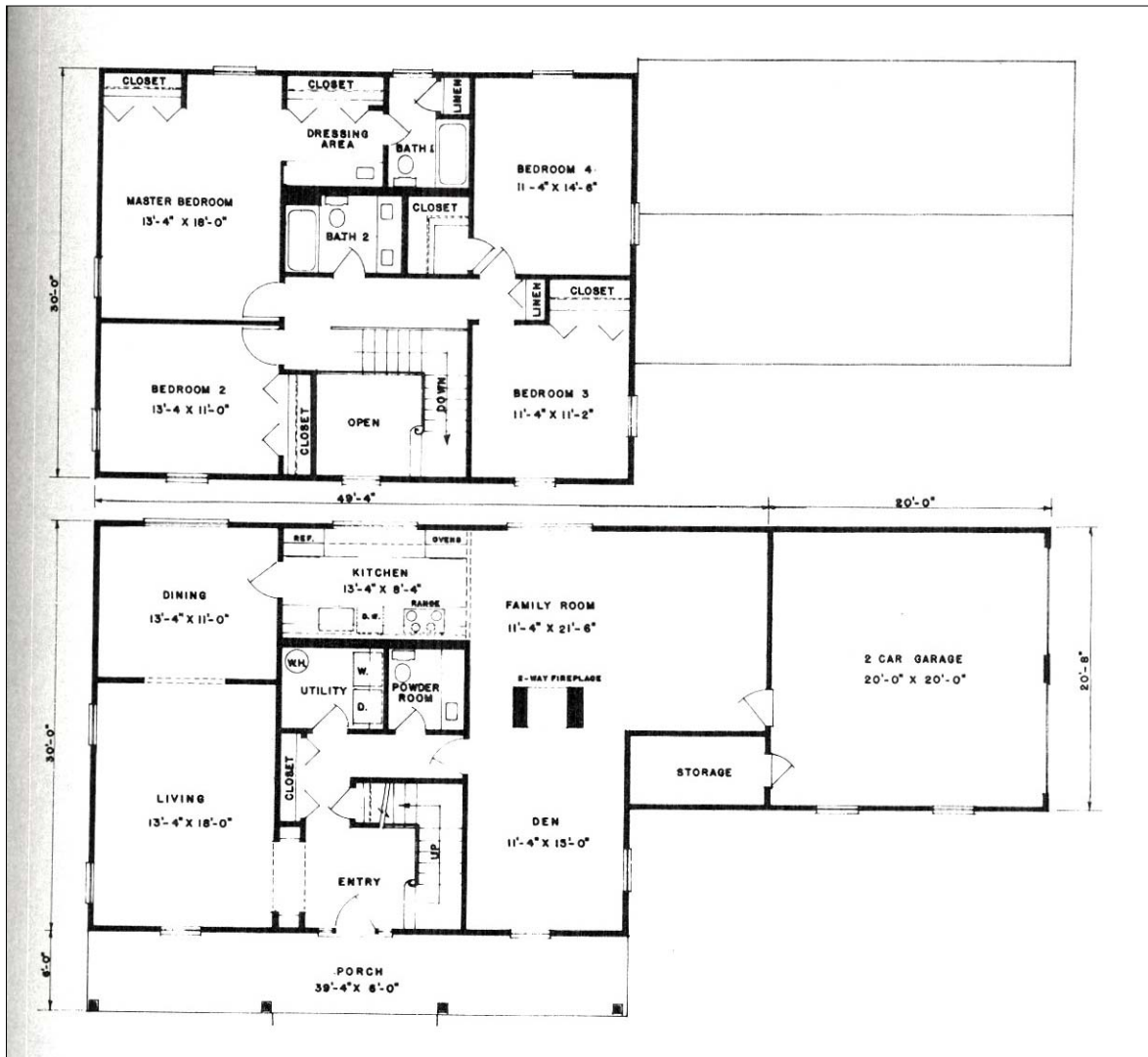


Figure 4.7: 1960s floor plan; from Norris, Design no. 1007



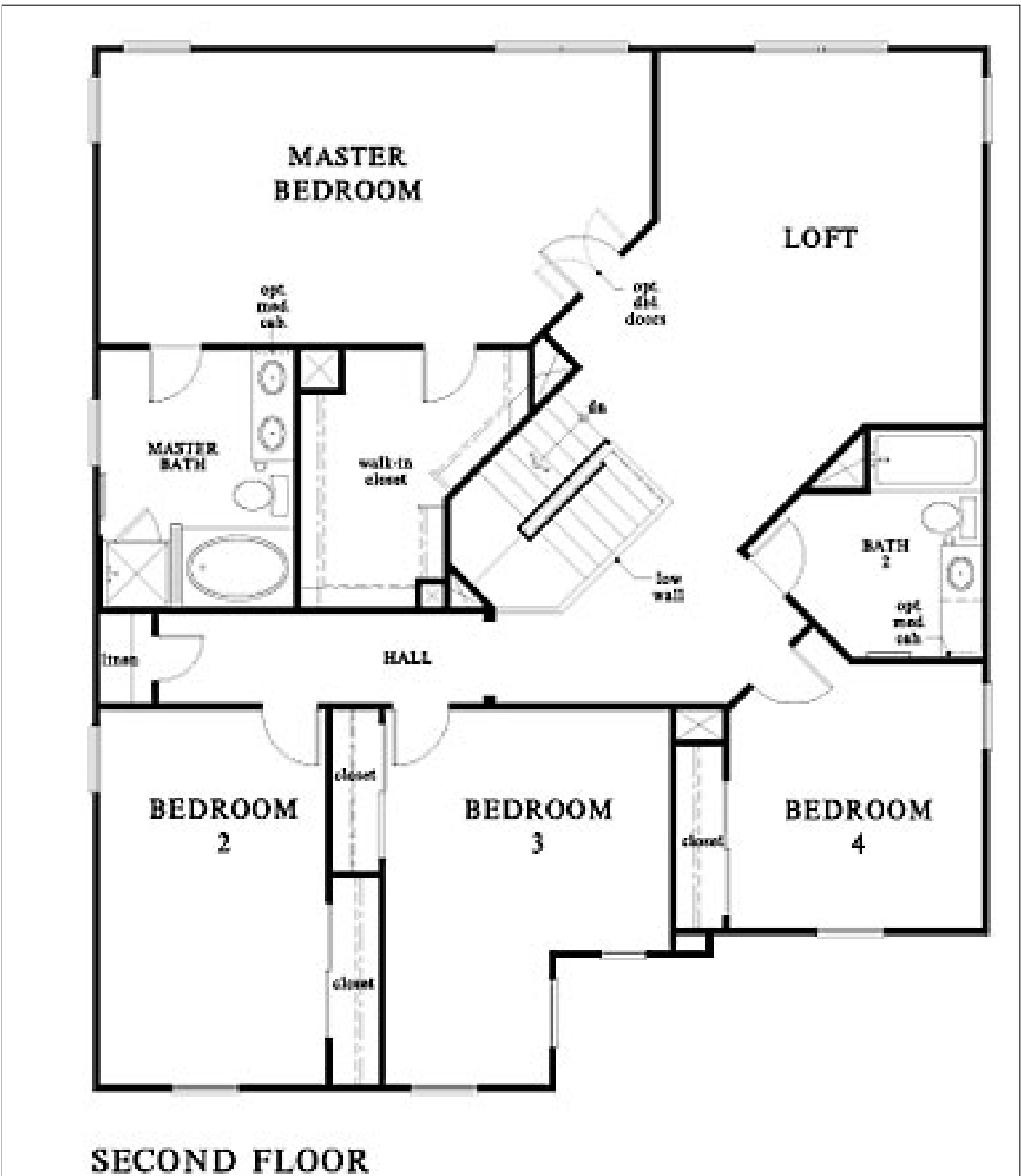


Figure 4.9: Second-floor; Martha Stewart KB Homes Plan 2968



Figure 4.10: Front cover of Martha Stewart KB Homes promotional brochure



Figure 4.11: Hampton Oaks back patios



Figure 4.12: Hampton Oaks formal living room





Figure 4.13: Decorative objects, Hampton Oaks model homes



Figure 4.14: Hampton Oaks kitchen



Figure 4.15: Hampton Oaks kitchen detail



Figure 4.16: Hampton Oaks kitchen detail



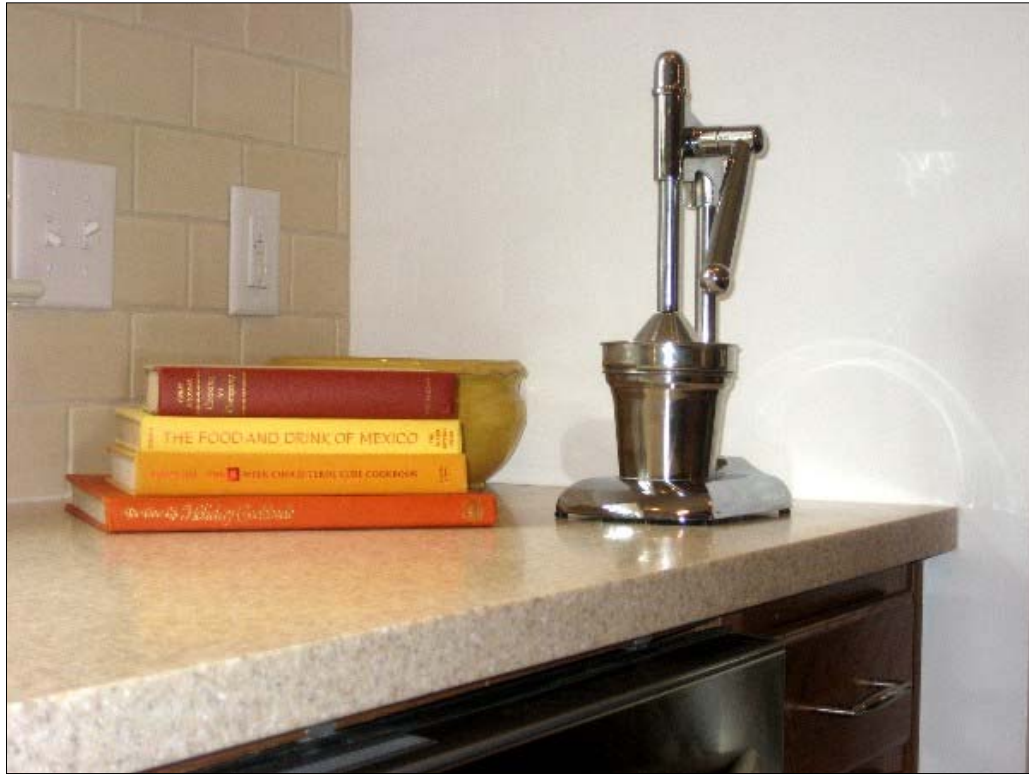


Figure 4.17: Hampton Oaks kitchen detail



Figure 4.18: Hampton Oaks family room



CHAPTER 5  
GRAPHIC DESIGN AND GRACIOUS LIVING: TYPOGRAPHY AND RHETORIC IN  
MARTHA STEWART LIVING

Martha Stewart, as every American knows, is a living brand . . . a force of nature, the most influential person alive in terms of giving shape to our living spaces.

- Kevin Kelly

Martha Stewart is a witch. . . Nobody could do that much decoupage without calling on the powers of darkness.

- “Wrecked,” Buffy the Vampire Slayer

A living brand or a force of darkness, Martha Stewart is an indomitable figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century domestic life. Stewart’s place in North American domestic history is tied to the success of Martha Stewart Living, the flagship publication of the Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia empire. In turn, the success of Living is tied to its graphic design—a subject little examined in rhetorical scholarship. Despite its importance in the construction of identity, the visual role of text, its typography, is one that has been dramatically overlooked. Rhetoricians have paid significant time exploring the rhetoric of ideas expressed through letterforms but they have given little thought to the rhetoric of letterforms themselves. This chapter argues for the importance of attending to the form of content, presenting a different approach to print media analysis (which tends to examine the content of articles and advertisements while ignoring the style and design

of the media in question), while at the same time making clear the persuasive operations of graphic style and design.

Ellen Lupton defines graphic design as an active process which “involves forging relationships between ages and texts by cutting and pasting, enlarging and reducing, layering and framing, comparing and isolating” (Mixing 11), asserting that the primary “social function” of graphic design is to “visualize the identity of institutions and audiences” (Mixing 13). Continuing, Lupton argues that graphic design articulates identity “by creating symbols and styles that become associated with particular groups” (Lupton, Mixing 95). A central component of graphic design is typography, “the design of letterforms and their organization in space,” what Lupton terms the “common currency” of graphic design (Type 9).

This chapter takes up this common currency, investigating the typography of Martha Stewart Living as a way of investigating both the values and identity of the magazine as well as the values and identity of the ideal audience suggested through its typography.<sup>1</sup> Living is a particularly strong example to investigate the rhetoric of graphic design, having consistently demonstrated compelling sales from its initial publication, as well as “[transforming] the everyday domestic environment and the way we use and imagine it” (Lupton, “Women” np). My investigation of Living’s typography takes three parts and is informed throughout by close textual analysis of the magazine. I begin by exploring Living’s meticulously constructed typefaces. I then turn to a study of the way the magazine structures its text and photographs, paying attention to Living’s use of the space and the connotations invoked by its page structure. I close with an exploration of Living’s imagery, arguing that its photography finds rhetorical force from the genre of still life painting. As this analysis will show, Living typographically enacts the values it argues for by fusing traditional elements with modern edges to present a vision of homemaking that is soft and appealing yet also a statement of skilled precision and quality.

## **Typeface: The Currency of Surface**

I begin this investigation with the smallest, most ubiquitous element of typography: typeface. Letterforms play a “unique” communicative role based on their liminal position as “both verbal and visual” (Brumberger, “Ethos” 13). Eva Brumberger posits that letterforms “communicate with readers through their design as well as through their words and that inextricably links verbal and visual rhetoric together” (“Ethos” 15). Robert Bringhurst eloquently gestures to the rhetoric of typography when he asserts that writing “begins with the making of footprints, the leaving of signs” (18). Typeface, at times an almost invisible textual element, plays a central rhetorical role in the interpretation of these footprints, an importance perhaps in some ways attributable to the seeming transparency of letterforms. Though rhetoricians have spent considerable time exploding the opacity of language,<sup>2</sup> rhetoricians have paid little attention to the opacity of letterforms, to the rhetoric of typeface itself. Just as the very language we use to communicate shapes others’ responses to and interpretations of these ideas, the typeface used to communicate content likewise shape others’ response to and interpretation of said content.

Bringhurst argues that the surface of communication is as important as the content being communicated, avowing, “letterforms that honor and elucidate what humans see and say deserve to be honored in their turn. Well-chosen words deserve well-chosen letters; these in their turn deserve to be set with affection, intelligence, knowledge and skill” (Bringhurst, 18). I argue here that the surface (typography) of communication is as important as its depth (content). Corresponding to this importance, I also argue that scholarly analysis of typography is as important to rhetorical studies as scholarly analysis of message content.

The rhetoric of typography begins with the tone and persona established through letterforms. Ellen Lupton, one of the foremost experts on typography, notes that designers “use specific styles and arrangements of type in order to attract attention, interpret content, or set a mood. . . . A typeface and the way it is used can declare the identity of an institution, the

interests of an audience, or the personal sensibility of a designer,” and can thus “modulate the meaning of their work” (29-37). Bringhurst similarly assays that typefaces “have tone, timbre, character, just as words and sentences do. The moment a text and a typeface are chosen, two streams of thought, two rhythmical systems, two sets of habits, or if you like, two personalities, intersect” (22). Bringhurst’s admonition that typefaces and content “need not live together contentedly forever but they must not as a rule collide” (22) echoes Brumberger’s research into the interaction between typeface and content. Brumberger’s quantitative investigation of the rhetoric of typography found that readers ascribe different interpretations to different forms of typeface and ascribe different personas to different types of content (“Ethos”).<sup>3</sup> Brumberger explains that the “persona of the text passage interact[s] to shape the ethos of the text passage,” and argues this interaction “indicates that a reader’s perception of the writer’s ethos may be sensitive to the interactions between verbal and visual rhetoric” (“Ethos” 20-1). Part of the visual sense-making of typography is thus grounded in the historical-contextual aspects of typography. Martha Stewart Living’s fonts are an especially strong illustration of this.

The creative team at Living is well-aware of the important rhetorical roles played by typeface, and they use this information to strong advantage. In late 2000, Living began the long, careful process of renovating its typography. Typeface ranked high on the list. Barbara de Wilde, former design director for Living, ties the importance of Living’s type to the functions it serves for readers: “We needed a typeface that would work hard for us in recipes, charts and listings, and that in display sizes would support our heroic photography and make the words compelling” (qtd. in Ellen Shapiro np). To design proprietary typefaces that would express and literally embody MSLO’s ideals, the creative team turned to the firm of Hoefler & Frere-Jones, who have designed typefaces for clients like Tiffany and the Guggenheim museum (E. Shapiro). Living’s persona is largely derived from its visual artistry. Given that, it should be no surprise that to redesign their typeface Living selected a firm known for their artistry. When it comes to creating typeface, Jonathan Hoefler and Tobias Frere-Jones are the acme in technical skill and

creativity. “Jonathan and Tobias are good with letterforms the way Stradivarius was good with wood and Van Gogh was good with paint,’ sums up Susan Casey of Time Inc. magazine development. ‘Once you’ve worked with them, there’s no going back.’ Adds Barbara de Wilde, ‘Their faces are beautiful expressions that continuously inspire me to be a better designer’” (E. Shapiro np).

Connotations invoked by particular fonts play a key role in a typeface’s rhetorical import. Having a unique font makes a visual statement in and of itself about the values of said organization, for example, that the corporation is a bellwether, not a follower.<sup>4</sup> Having a unique typeface sets an organization apart from its peers. As Ellen Shapiro states, “To some, a proprietary typeface can be as essential to branding strategy as the logo and color palette, part of a distinctive voice” (np). Having a unique font is a tangible, visual affirmation of Living’s identity as an industry leader. Sarah Gonser notes that after three National Magazine Awards, Living “had proved a little too inspirational. To stop the blatant borrowing and defend its turf on the newsstand, the designers had to create something that couldn’t be easily copied” (np). Stewart herself observes that “[o]ther magazines had started looking like our magazine. Others began using the same typeface, logos, and visual style. And that just wasn’t appropriate. We are more trendsetters than followers” (qtd. in Gonser np). Changing the typeface was therefore a very specific move designed to create an identity for Living that would remain singular and matchless: Eric Pike, Living’s Creative Director, asserts “[i]t’s hard to emulate you when you have a proprietary typeface. The innate quirkiness of the particular font has a really specific character. People can’t copy it to the same degree” (qtd. in Gonser np).

Developing a proprietary typeface that cannot be copied also speaks to the organization’s argument for painstaking and careful artistic execution. The projects that Stewart and her team advocate within the pages of Living are ones that cannot be easily reproduced. Living celebrates the handmade, the exceptional, the singular: while anyone can go out and buy spaghetti sauce, Stewart promotes blanching, chopping, and stewing fresh tomatoes and herbs

for several hours to create a homemade sauce whose qualities cannot be reproduced in a can bought off a shelf. Likewise with their type. Speaking to their work, Hoefler explains “[there’s couture type and there’s off-the-rack type. We design couture type” (qtd. in E. Shapiro np). Speaking to the connection between the new typefaces and the MSLO identity, de Wilde states, “Making from scratch is definitely part of the Martha Stewart Omnimedia brand identity. That’s why we wanted our own fonts” (qtd. in E. Shapiro np). Living’s fonts are, accordingly, an enactment of company values.<sup>5</sup>

Hoefler & Frere-Jones designed two fonts for Living: a text (front-of-book) font which operates as the “workhorse” of the magazine (Gonser np), and a display (feature well) font to catch the eye of the reader. Both are serif fonts, which Lupton describes as humanist. Lupton observes that humanist typefaces “are closely connected to calligraphy and the movement of the hand. Transitional and modern typefaces are more abstract and less organic” (Type 42). If we take Lupton’s claim that the “goal [of typography] is to find an appropriate match between a style of letters and the specific social situation and body of content that define the project at hand” as our starting point (Type 30), we can see that Living’s typography connects the style of its letterforms to the social context in which the magazine is embedded and to the audience to whom the magazine is directed—skilled women who value both tradition (grandmother’s recipes) and technology (building master recipe files on the computer), and who appreciate the hard work involved in creating an expressive home.

The well font designed by Hoefler & Frere-Jones is named Surveyor, and is a light serif font (Figure 5.1). Suggested by its name, Surveyor is “inspired by old, hand-drawn maps” (Gonser np). Hoefler notes that one of the design goals of this font was to make a “typeface that felt very handmade, to evoke the craft philosophy of the magazine” (qtd. in Twemlow np). Lupton declares that when first created, engraved letters “offered an apt medium for formal lettering” (17). Today, engraved letters still very much connote formality, careful elegance and tradition.

The front-of-book font designed by Hoefler & Frere-Jones is named Archer, and is a slab serif font (Figure 5.2). A slab serif font is marked by “an abrupt or adnate serif of the same thickness as the main stroke” (Bringhurst 330). Lupton writes that slab typefaces “transformed the serif from a refined detail to a load-bearing slab. As an independent architectural component, the slab serif asserts its own weight and mass” (*Type* 20). The teardrop terminal which marks a number of the characters in the Archer typeface is “typical of typefaces from the Late Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassical periods” (Bringhurst 331). The slab serifs drive out with more forceful, geometric lines, a contraposition to the more rounded finials. Hence *Living*’s slab serif font marries modern aesthetic boldness and elegant tradition, echoing the move made by the magazine’s content.

### **Structure and Flow: The Shape of Eye-Catching Transparency**

Moving from typeface to how typeface is arranged on a page, a document’s visual structure plays an important role in engaging the reader as well as communicating the purpose, tone, and persona of the content. This role holds a peculiar function: it must be both eye-catching and transparent. Bringhurst posits that in “a world rife with unsolicited messages, typography must often draw attention to itself before it will be read. Yet in order to be read, it must relinquish the attention it has drawn. Typography with anything to say therefore aspires to a kind of statuesque transparency” (17). Richard Lanham correspondingly contends that typography is a “silent element” of communication, once which “aims not to be seen or more accurately, since true invisibility is hard to read, to seem not to be seen, not to be noticed” (46). The statuesque transparency of typography takes its shape from two sets of interrelated features: what I am calling first principles of graphic design, and the use of space. These features are integral to the “goal of graphic design”: a document’s “visual unity or harmony” (White 51). Visual unity and harmony are important so that the elements “work together with the greatest interest to the reader and with the least resistance from the reader” (White 51).

To understand the rhetorical function of these typographic elements, I explore first principles of graphic design by closely analyzing the front cover of Living's January 2008 cover, as well as the January 2008 covers of two of Living's competitors: Canadian Living (the preeminent Canadian shelter magazine) and Good Housekeeping.<sup>6</sup> To understand the rhetorical functions of the use of space, I explore simplicity of design in Living's Table of Contents, as well as the Tables of Contents and body text from Canadian Living and Good Housekeeping; I explore the use of white space in Living's body text, as well as the body text from Canadian Living and Good Housekeeping.

### First principles

Bringhurst asserts that typography must perform a number of key tasks for readers: "invite the reader into the text, reveal the tenor and meaning of the text, clarify the structure and the order of the text, link the text with other existing elements, induce a state of energetic repose, which is the ideal condition for reading" (24). White also has an opinion about the key tasks graphic design needs to perform: typography should offer visual stimulation drawing "viewers into the page, arousing their curiosity and actively involving them in the process of absorbing information" (3). White observes that in so doing, graphic designers "are in service to their readers by accelerating learning and making content stick" (viii). Turning to the typography of Living, although it would be certainly possible to analyze Living's cover (as well as its competitor's covers) using all of the key elements named by Bringhurst and White, for practicality and conciseness I want to focus on three central functions: inviting the reader into the text, revealing tenor and meaning of the text, and making the content of the text stick. In no place is the visual structure of magazines more important than the cover, since that is the first point of contact with the reader: the more the cover appeals to and connects with consumers, the more that magazine will outsell others next to it on the display.

There are two primary ways in which Living invites readers into the cover: the use of color, and the cover image itself (see Figure 5.7 for the cover). Living's cover first grabs readers'



attention by the bright, cheery yellow the title is rendered in. This color is pulled directly from the cover image, which contains a number of yellow elements. The yellow elements in the image (from top to bottom) are Stewart's yellow sweater (Stewart is shown on the screen of a small monitor under-mounted to the cabinets, depicted in a still shot from her daily television show), a toaster and a Kitchen-Aid mixer positioned on the countertop, a striped kitchen towel draped over the farmhouse sink, the keyboard tray for the kitchen computer/TV, a stoneware mixing bowl set on another striped towel on the kitchen island, a stick of butter placed near the mixing bowl, and two stools arranged near the island.

Because the title of the magazine draws from colors in the image, the color works to harmoniously bring readers into the whole of the image, especially with respect to the way the yellow elements are structured on the page: for the most part these elements are centered on the page, drawing the eye down the cover in a smooth line. Starting with the title text, the yellow elements form an inverted triangle on the page. The triangle is a shape known for its dynamic nature: the inverted triangle ties this dynamism to a particular viewing path. The yellow elements bid viewers' eyes to travel from the inverted base (top of the page) to the apex of the triangle (bottom of the page).

The yellow title text is narrowly bordered in white, which both brings a crisp cleanness to the text and brightens the yellow by contrast. The white border also creates a clean boundary between the title and the image it is superimposed on. Like the yellow elements, the white of the border is found (from top to bottom) in the creamy white kitchen cabinetry, the white flour and sugar filling glass jars on the kitchen counter, the kitchen sink, the keyboard and mouse atop the keyboard tray, the bowl holding the eggs, as well as the flour and milk set on top of the island. Also like the yellow elements, the white elements provide a smooth visual flow of color that draws the reader's eye across and into the image.

Readers are also invited in by the appealing image on the cover, which features a medium-length shot of a beautifully appointed kitchen: mullioned upper kitchen cabinets,

carefully set backsplash tile, marble counter- and island-tops, brilliant chrome hardware, yellow and chrome appliances, a flat-screen computer/TV to research recipes or watch television while making dinner, and an art-print of a still-life painting elegantly propped behind the sink, adding a human touch to the technologically sophisticated appliances. The photographic distance is important here. In a medium-length shot, the viewer is positioned at close social distance, “as if the viewer is engaged with it as if he or she is using the [appliances], . . . preparing or eating the food” (Kress and Leeuwen 124-127).<sup>7</sup> This kitchen is therefore a space in which the viewer is positioned as an inhabitant, literally invited in by offering the sightline one would have if perched on a stool just on the other side of the kitchen island, ready to help mix eggs and milk into the cookie batter. The sunny yellow and soothing white elements create a welcoming, sparkling kitchen interior which most of us would like to inhabit.

Once invited into the text, the typography of Living’s cover reveals the tenor (elegant quality) and meaning (the act of living) of the content of the magazine through three aspects: the primacy of the title text, the careful craftsmanship of the typography, and the aesthetics of the cover. As shelter magazines, Living—as well as its peers—uniformly emphasize quality of life. Of the rhetorical choices made on the Living cover, the title text may be the most important. The most prominent element on the cover is the word “Living” and takes up one fifth of the height of the page. Stewart’s name is one tenth the height of the title, matched in size and vertically aligned to the dot over the second “i” in “Living.” Rendering Stewart’s name in a significantly smaller font, tucked in over the “n” and “g” of “Living,” denotes that of the two terms in the title (“Martha Stewart” and “Living”), “Living” is by far the most important term.

The title of the magazine was not always rendered with Stewart’s name presented in a color and position designed to minimize its presence. In its earlier conceptions, Stewart’s name was depicted as white all caps text inside a colored box aligned to the back stroke of the “L” in “Living” (for example, see the August 2004 cover in Figure 5.8). In this previous arrangement, though “Living” is technically the most visually dominant word, Stewart’s name maintains greater

visual emphasis: because her name was in a solid colored block, it was one of the more prominent features on the cover, the eye being naturally drawn to the largest colored element.

Following her conviction for obstruction of justice (in April of 2004), Stewart announced in September 2004 she was electing to serve her sentence early rather than waiting for the completion of her appeal.<sup>8</sup> With the September 2004 issue, Stewart's name takes a much smaller visual footprint and fuses into the title, blending more into the background (Figure 5.9). Moving Stewart's name to the tail end of "Living" reduces its significance in a number of ways. First, it is no longer the first element of the title viewed by the reader, but the last. Second, Stewart's name is now more difficult to see (since it cannot be read in a truly linear fashion) and therefore cannot call our attention to its presence in the same way. In the redesigned configuration, instead of elbowing its way to the front, Stewart's name now literally takes a back seat to living. The typography of the title accordingly implies that it is the act of living that is of importance, not Stewart herself. The argument suggested by this visual structure is also supported by the fact that Stewart is rarely featured on the cover image. With the September 2004 issue there were a few other subtle changes to the title as well, that more fully communicate the tenor of the content. To start, the "g" in "Living" changed from a more decorative and artful character to a simpler, more clean-lined "g" and the dots over the "i"s became rounded (a change from small angular blocks). These changes give the title a simpler, softer, organic feel more in line with the *raison d'être* of the MSLO brand in general and Martha Stewart Living in specific.

The craftsmanship of Living's graphic design visually affirms the magazine's commitment to quality and attention to detail. For example, on the January 2008 cover, the x-height (the top of the main body of lowercase letters: literally, the height of a lowercase "x") is precisely aligned with the molding at the top of the upper kitchen cabinets in the image. Such

precise alignment is no accident, a subtle detail that corresponds to the carefully crafted home interiors depicted in the magazine.

Beyond catching the reader's attention and communicating the tenor and meaning of the content, the typography of Living's cover also emphasizes important content items. To start, the image on the cover is accentuated by the absence of text: with only a few lines of text, what stands out is the image of gracious living adorning the cover. The use of color is another key way to make particular content items stick in the mind of the reader.

Yellow is the most attention-grabbing of all the colors, the color that our eyes see first. The yellow of the title text is a subtly brighter (more lemon) yellow than the other (more butter) yellow items in the image, rendering the title text more eye-catching than the other elements and therefore more likely to stick in the mind of the reader: in a competitive marketplace, making the title of one's product stand out is an important precursor to purchase decisions. Over and above rendering the title important and eye-catching, the use of color on Living's January 2008 cover plays another rhetorical role. The yellow items on the cover (Stewart's yellow sweater, the toaster and Kitchen-Aid mixer, striped kitchen towel, keyboard tray, stoneware mixing bowl, stick of butter, and kitchen stools), the items emphasized through use of color, are tools for quality living, including Stewart herself—precisely the message Living is hoping to communicate and make stick in the minds of readers. Few textual elements on the page work to make each of the visual components of the cover more memorable.

The balance and elegance of Living's cover stands in strong contraposition to Canadian Living's and Good Housekeeping's covers for the same month. If we take a look at some of Living's competition, we can see why Living has held on to its position as the gold standard by which other shelter magazine are measured for the more than 15 years Living has been in business: illustrated in a close textual analysis of their covers, both Canadian Living and Good Housekeeping fail to effectively invite the reader in, accurately reveal tenor and content, and render important content items memorable.

The Canadian Living cover (Figure 5.10) works to grab attention through the bright magenta pink of the title, a color seen again in a pink circular decal lower on the page advertising a trip give-away. However, because the magenta is not a color drawn from the cover image, it does not pull the reader into the image the same way that Living's use of yellow does. Further, the title fights for visual prominence with a cerulean blue color block promoting a chance to win a \$10,000 investment and advertising a story on financial strategies. Because of its solidity, the blue block holds more visual prominence than the title. Canadian Living's cover makes an attempt to mirror the still-life imagery which is a hallmark of Living's iconography and its success. But though the cover image is presumably designed to invite the reader in, the image does not effectively perform this function. Canadian Living's January 2008 cover image is a close-up of a bowl of pork stew, highlighting chunks of pork, potatoes, celery, and peas in a shiny, taupe-colored gravy. The closeness of the shot frames the stew within an intimate distance. Despite the intimacy of the tight photograph, it is doubtful how appealing this particular image is—while stew might look good in a bowl on a table, magnified to larger than life proportions on a front cover, it seems glutinous and unaesthetic. Further, the cover image fights for space with seven different blocks of text rendered in five different colors. Together, the colors of the text, the amount of text, and the cover image create a magazine cover which is jarring and off-putting (if not an outright typographic assault) rather than inviting.

The Good Housekeeping cover suffers from many of the same obstacles to effectively inviting readers into the cover (see Figure 5.11). Like Living and Canadian Living, Good Housekeeping works to attract attention to its title through the use of color, in this case, a bright turquoise. The colors of the Good Housekeeping text (turquoise, magenta, and brown) effectively move the eye around the page by offering text blocks in each color, but the colors do not echo nor connect with the image. As with Canadian Living, Good Housekeeping's January 2008 cover is crowded by text. Further, the fonts on the Good Housekeeping cover are busy: there are two fonts, one in five different sizes, the other in three. The amount of text (seven text

blocks), the number of colors, and the variety of sizes make the cover complex, a characteristic at odds with welcoming invitation.

Good Housekeeping's cover image, however, does much to invite the reader into this image. The photograph is a medium close shot of country singer Brad Paisley, his wife Kimberly, and their son, Huck. The three are seated on an armchair, Huck on Kimberly's lap, Brad perched on the back with his arm around Kimberly. All three are looking out, making eye contact and smiling, creating a connection that invites viewers into the cover. The cover image does do a good job inviting readers into the document, but because the image fights with the text for prominence the cover does not do as effective a job at inviting the reader in as it could otherwise.

Turning to the tenor and meaning of the document, Canadian Living's cover does a fairly terrible job at accurately communicating the tenor and meaning of the magazine's content. The most prominent feature for the month, denoted by the size of the text (it is bigger than all of the other text blocks), its central placement on the page, and its clear relation to the image, is "Heartwarming Comfort Foods." Other features include "How to Negotiate a Flexible Work Week" and "Romantic Bedroom Décor." From these headlines, it would seem that the magazine is aiming for a friendly tenor, emphasizing quality of life and connected family relationships. This is not the message delivered by the cover image, nor is it the message delivered by the typeface on the cover: the text blocks are rendered in a bold sans serif font, some of them in all-caps. To start, the modern sans serif font is at odds with the traditional focus of the magazine. Additionally, sans serif fonts are not humanist but mechanistic. Lupton asserts of modern sans-serif fonts: "Assembled, like machines, from modular components, these experimental designs emulated factory production" (Type 25). The more cold, abrupt nature of the sans serif font on Canadian Living's cover is amplified by blocks of all-caps text: without variation in letter height, all-caps text turns words into uniform, angular blocks. The tenor of the cover, then, does not match the tone of the story headlines nor reveal the meaning of Canadian Living's content.

When it comes to revealing the tenor and meaning of the magazine, Good Housekeeping's cover does a decent job. From the title, it is clear that Good Housekeeping is focused on taking care of the home. Since taking care of the home is also figured as way of taking care of relationships within the home, the cover image works to reinforce this belief in the social importance of home. The bright, cheery colors evoke some of the associations one has with a good home. The predominant font for the text blocks on the cover is a serif font, which connotes tradition; this is paired with the sans serif font that the title and more minor text blocks are written in. Together, the serif and sans serif fonts present a sense of tradition fused with more modern undertones, which is a good match with the magazine's content.

Neither Canadian Living nor Good Housekeeping effectively render important content items memorable. Canadian Living's cover is so busy it is difficult to select any one item over another. The use of bright magenta for the title hints that this item might be the content readers are to retain, but because there is so much competition between the cover's use of color, amount of text, and the image, it is unlikely any one (or any few) item(s) will be remembered. The phrase "COMFORT FOODS," pointing to the most important story the issue, may also be the content item readers are to retain, but in a product market that depends on name recognition, visually encouraging readers to focus on particular stories over particular titles is not a strategy likely to engender repeat purchases. With respect to Good Housekeeping, the most visually dominant element on the cover is the image, though it fights for attention with the lead story on "How to Lose Weight." As with Canadian Living, however, this emphasis connects readers with particular stories rather than the overall magazine itself, especially given that the title of Good Housekeeping is obscured by the image. White avers that the "best design moves the reader across the page in order of the type and images' significance" (63). By this standard, it is clear why Living has become the standard-bearer for the graphic design of shelter magazines.

## Use of space

Moving from first principles to the use of space, the literal structure of a page is an important feature of compelling typography. I divide the typographic use of space into two categories: simplicity of design (how many elements on a page fight for visual attention), and the amount and arrangement of white space. Here I want to first explore the rhetorical role played by simplicity of design by exploring Living's cover and its Table of Contents (TOC), then turning to Canadian Living's and Good Housekeeping's covers and TOCs for contrast. I then explore the rhetorical role of white space in Living's TOC and its body pages, as well as the role of white space in Canadian Living's and Good Housekeeping's TOCs and body pages.

Simplicity is important to good graphic design: like good writing, good graphic design “eliminates unnecessary elements and structures those that remain in a logical, consistent system” (White 3). By doing so, good graphic design makes information more comprehensible by rendering information more compelling and absorbable. Simplicity of design is important because it is needed to make documents visually compelling. White asserts that unless a document is compelling, it will not stop readers, and a “message that doesn’t stop readers won’t be read” (ix). Simplicity is also important because it makes information more absorbable. White argues that the “best use of a page’s empty space is to help make information scannable, not merely to make the pages pretty. That will automatically follow. The point is to increase the page’s absorbability” (3).

The simplicity of Living's cover is a hallmark of its production from the very first test issue issued in December 1990 (Figure 5.12). Looking at Living's December 1990 in comparison to Living's January 2008 cover, the 1990 cover might seem busier and more disjointed than its present-day counterpart. However, when compared to the Better Homes and Gardens cover of the same month (Figure 5.13), Living's cover clearly outperforms Better Homes and Gardens' cover. Living's December 1990 cover has one minimal image (Stewart seated on an outdoor bench) and a limited amount of text in a single font rendered in a color pulled from Stewart's



plaid flannel blouse. Better Homes and Gardens' December 1990 cover has two images—one small, simple photograph (a cake) imposed on a large, complex photograph (two children gathered in front of a Christmas tree surrounded by furniture, toys, and presents)—a heavy red and green border, as well as a high degree of text in three fonts rendered in three colors, none of which come from the dominant image (the children in front of the Christmas tree). Living's simplicity, its ability to “[d]istill the essential from the mass of confusing muchness” (White ix), is what made it stand out on newsstand and grocery store magazine displays in 1990 and what makes it compelling to consumers today.

Comparing the January 2008 Living cover (Figure 5.7) to the January 2008 Better Homes and Gardens cover (Figure 5.14), we can see that although there is less of a disparity between the two magazines' respective styles today, Living's cover is still simpler, more elegant, more easy to navigate. Like its December 1990 cover, Living's January 2008 cover does not have much text, featuring the picture. What text there is, is written in Living's two proprietary fonts and in only two sizes, the black of the text balanced by keyboard tray's shadow and the vanilla extract bottle on the kitchen island counter. Illustrated in the above analyses of Canadian Living's and Good Housekeeping's January 2008 covers, the amount of visual and textual information makes these covers near impossible to scan and absorb, never mind scan and absorb quickly while standing in a grocery store checkout lane fending off requests from overtired children begging for soda and candy.

Living was redesigned in 2002, reflecting its first major makeover since the magazine's inception. The redesign was principally intended to make the magazine content easier to comprehend. By making its content easier to scan, and easier to scan than the content of its competition, Living positions itself as the most helpful aid for today's busy woman. Speaking to the needs prompting the 2002 makeover, Stewart asserts: “Sometimes Living was a little difficult to read. . . . That doesn't work for the homemaker. She wants clarity. She wants information that's easy to read, instructions that are simple to follow, and beautiful photography” (qtd. in

Gonser np). Gonser notes that between “the mid 90s and 2002, the magazine's circulation grew by 40 percent, and as it collected more readers, it drew more ad pages. More ad pages meant more content, and soon the TOC was teeming with dozens of departments and sections” (np). That Living’s redesigned simplicity makes its content easier to comprehend and navigate is strikingly illustrated in the Tables of Contents for Living, Canadian Living, and Good Housekeeping.

If we examine the TOCs from the January 2008 issues of Living, Canadian Living, and Good Housekeeping (respectively Figures 5.15, 5.16, and 5.17), we can see that Living’s cover is simpler in that it has less text and more white space than the TOC for the other magazines. Canadian Living’s TOC makes some strange typographic choices which make its pages difficult to navigate. To begin, the use of color, instead of providing direction, emphasizes too many elements and impedes visual sense-making. The stripe of blue across the top of the two pages unites the images which run across this double spread, but at the same time literally divides these images so that they lack a smooth flow. Further, this strip of images exists as an entirely separate component from the TOC text. To make sense of Canadian Living’s TOC, we must account for the images running left-to-right across the top of both pages, account for five columns of textual information running top-to-bottom across the rest of the space (compared to two columns in Living), and account for a graphic of the front cover which has page numbers and arrows pointing to the headlines on the cover. The eye does not have a natural place to go, so the reader must work to make sense of the competing visuals. Good Housekeeping’s TOC is relatively well-laid out in two columns of text with vertically (rather than horizontally) aligned images, but suffers in scannability because of the dense nature of the text columns. This is exacerbated by a second TOC on a third page (Figure 5.17, bottom right), which is an exhaustive content list jam-packed into three narrow columns. Though Good Housekeeping’s TOC effectively uses color to organize the information, the sheer volume of information

presented requires time and effort to navigate. Of the three TOCs, Living's is the only one which gives the information any room to breathe.

Like simplicity, white space is a critical component in structuring content so that it is both compelling and absorbable. Living's use of white space may be the characteristic which gives the magazine its design unity, aside from its imagery (a subject I take up in-depth below). The magazine's deliberate and dramatic use of white space renders content scannable because with fewer elements on the page competing for space, it is not only easier to discern the important information but it is also easier to read since there are fewer elements demanding a reader's attention (see Figures 5.18-20 which respectively show body pages from Living, Canadian Living, and Good Housekeeping).

Unlike simplicity, white space carries strong cultural connotations separate from its utility in organizing information. Some of the meanings connoted by white space include quality, cleanliness, purity, openness, and calmness (White 39). Most of all, however, white space "is considered extravagant, exclusive, classy. It symbolizes wealth and luxury" (White 39). This is what leads White to argue that "leaving space empty automatically lends meaning to a design, regardless of what is being shown in the figures that lie atop it" (39). One popular analogy used to explain this rhetorical quality is likening white space on a page to deliberately empty space in a store, for example the difference between shopping a couture store and a bargain chain: Prada stores have very little merchandise on display and great expanses of polished expensive flooring, whereas TJ Maxx is so filled with merchandise one can hardly see the floor (never mind walk past another person in the aisles). The greater the amount of empty space in the store (or on the page), the higher quality and more expensive the merchandise.

Living's 2002 redesign worked to maximize the amount of white space, including cutting 10% of the content text (Gonser). Speaking to the rhetorical import of Living's use of white space, de Wilde states: "The amount of white space is like a drum roll. It leads you up to an event, stages everything else on the page. If you use white space when you design, you can

add drama" (qtd. in Gonser np). The sense of quality and anticipation offered by the use of white space is tangibly affirmed by the weight of the page. Living's pages are of a higher, thicker, quality of paper than those of its competitors and have a beautiful glossy sheen to them. The weight of the paper feels nice in your hand: you can turn the pages without needing to worry that you will tear them, making the magazine easier to handle and read. The high quality of the paper is what also makes it technically feasible for Living to use so much white space: in competitor magazines with thinner, cheaper pages, content on other side bleeds through the white space, making it muddy and unclear instead of open and dramatic.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to typographically arguing for its quality through the use of white space, Living uses asymmetrical white space to typographically argue for its modern take on traditional values. White asserts that symmetrical white space "is a predictable arrangement that implies order and balance. It suggests peacefulness and stability" (33). White describes symmetrical white space this way:

Symmetry, requiring a central vertical axis, forces white space to the perimeter of the design. White space in a symmetrical design is passive because it is not integral to our perception of the positive elements. If it is noticed at all, it is seen only as background. . . . passive white space shows up at the perimeter of pages as unused and unbroken-into margins. (33)

Order, balance, peacefulness, and stability are all qualities that Living affirms as important to the project of living well. Prior to the 2002 redesign, although Living used white space, it tended to do so in a symmetrical manner. If we examine a story on flower arranging from the December 1996 / January 1997 issue (Figure 5.21) we see that the photographs are laid out on a vertical axis, forcing white space out into passive, unbroken margins.

In contrast to symmetrical white space, asymmetrical white space is alive and energetic, calling attention to its presence and interacting with photographic and textual elements. If we examine a story on knitting from the February 2003 issue (Figure 5.22) we see that the

photographs, though still vertically aligned, push out into the margins of the page, injecting a sense of energy and drama to white space and photographs alike. However, as Towey notes, "As your readership ages, you can make the mistake of becoming your mom's magazine" (qtd. in Gonser np). de Wilde argues that by using white space asymmetrically, the magazine "added a modern element" to the magazine's content (qtd. in Gonser np). The asymmetrical use of white space lends a contemporary feel to traditional themes and content like knitting, visually arguing that the content is fresh and relevant to today's world.

### **Imagery: The Heroic Overlooked**

Living's imagery is an exceptionally important element of its typography, noted by magazine personnel and industry reviewers alike. Towey states that part of the purpose with the 2002 redesign was to increase the photography's visibility by cutting text and increasing white space: "We didn't want the typography to overwhelm the photography—we wanted the photography to be the hero" (qtd. Gonser np). The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) highlights the importance of Living's photography in their 2007 press release naming MSLO as a recipient of AIGA's Corporate Leadership Award. AIGA states that MSLO has been "instrumental in changing the look and attitude of domestic magazines forever, elevating the quotidian to unexpected levels. Using beautiful photography, uncluttered design, an inventive color palette and effective typographic treatment to enhance its accessible how-to content, Martha Stewart Living set the tone for the expansive MSLO empire to come" (np). Lupton describes Living's content as a "mix of articles— at once educational and sensual—that combine detailed, original research with a romantic sensibility that provokes pleasure and longing" ("Women" np). What emerges out of these affirmations of Living's photography is more than a clear picture of their efficacy.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, what emerges out of these descriptions is a sense of their power as still life imagery. I contend in this section that Living's imagery is so compelling because it treats its subject matter as still lifes, drawing upon magazine covers from 2006 for textual support.

Living's photography is easily characterized as still lifes. Still lifes are typified by their subject matter: the material of daily living. This subject matter is hardly unique nor exclusive to Martha Stewart Living. What is unique to Living as a shelter magazine is how they photographically treat this subject matter (see Figure 5.25 which presents six of the 12 covers from 2006). Compared to its competitors, Living's magazine covers are typified by an absence of text. Although Living's content pages do not rely on what I call general photography (imagery accompanied by text, used to illustrate a story or a recipe) more than its peers, Living's content pages rely more on what I am call artistic photography (imagery offered for its own merits, without accompanying text) than its peers. For instance, in the January 2008 issue, Living had 68 content pages dominated by text and 33 pages dominated by images. Of these 33 pages, 22 were full-page images unaccompanied by story or explanatory text. For that same month, Good Housekeeping had 65 content pages dominated by text and 31 pages dominated by images. Of these 31 pages, 13 were full-page images unaccompanied by text. Real Simple<sup>11</sup> had 42 content pages dominated by text and 45 pages dominated by images. Of these 45 pages, only nine were full-page images unaccompanied by text. Canadian Living had 77 content pages dominated by text and 27 pages dominated by imagery. Of these 27 pages, only six were full-page images unaccompanied by text. Better Homes and Gardens had 34 content pages dominated by text and 42 dominated by images. Of these 42 pages, only five were full-page images unaccompanied by text.

Moreover, though other magazines focus on similar content, the style of imagery in Living is more cohesively characterizable as still life than its peers. Living celebrates homemade goods and craft labor to a degree not matched by its peers: sidestepping domestic labor, Better Homes and Gardens almost exclusively shows medium-length shots of interiors<sup>12</sup> which lack the eloquent lighting that makes Living's imagery so compelling; Good Housekeeping uses images of well-known women (sometimes photographed with their families); Canadian Living uses images of food but these images lack Living's heroic qualities; Real Simple's photography

has heroic qualities but their imagery tends to close-ups of decorative objects, not handmade crafts or comestibles. Mariët Westermann, an art historian specializing in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch painting, directly compares Living's style of photography to the tableware paintings of 17<sup>th</sup>-century painter Abraham Van Beyeren, stating that both “beguile” viewers with images “of elegant dining” (18).

H. W. Janson writes in *History of Art* that “[s]till lifes exist above all to delight the senses” (584).<sup>13</sup> Still life, as a genre, “pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs” (Bryson 610). E. H. Gombrich similarly maintains that the genre of still life is a “humble one” that “surprise[s] the eye by celebrating the beauty of [ordinary] things” (180, 175). The material culture depicted in still life has long roots in Western history. Highlighting ancient Roman frescoes, art historian Norman Bryson writes that the “things which occupy still life's attention belong to a long cultural span that goes back beyond modern Europe to antiquity and pre-antiquity” (12). Of still life, Bryson states,

Perhaps one may draw on the distinction made by Charles Sterling between 'megalography' and 'rhopography.' Megalography is the depiction of those things in the world which are great—the legends of the gods, the battles of heroes, the crises of history. Rhopography . . . is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks. (61)

Still lifes draw rhetorical force by calling upon viewer to “recognize the experience of emotion or pleasure (condemned or repressed) before objects that were apparently not worth the trouble” (Démoris 463).

There are some interesting corollaries between Living, Dutch still lifes, and the social contexts of both. To start, Stewart's elevation and celebration of the elements of daily life, exhibited in MSLO's mission statement, shares much in common with the artistic project<sup>14</sup> of still lifes:

Our community of how-to experts is committed to teaching, innovating, designing, and inspiring with ideas and products that make every day more meaningful, more functional, and more beautiful. We elevate the familiar elements of daily life, infusing them with the pleasure and confidence that come from the growing sense of mastery and discovery we foster in our customers and ourselves. Our product and our style are distinctive, with a consistently high level of quality. Though our content is timeless, we deliver it in the most current ways: wherever, whenever, and however our customers need and want it. (Stewart, Martha Rules 50)

As both the foundational and flagship publication of MSLO, Living is the medium through which MSLO's values are most ardently realized.

Museum directors Lewis Sharp and Mary Sue Sweeney Price call attention to the strong parallels between the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch golden age and late 20<sup>th</sup>-/ early 21<sup>st</sup>-century American culture, noting that in "both periods the individual's sense of identity, as well as the community at large, was founded on daily life. In both, the home provided a private retreat and, paradoxically, a semi public showplace for the display of the family's status and values" (8).

Continuing, Sharp and Price essay that

just as today's home-decorating magazines and mail-order catalogs further our dreams of the ideal home, the paintings that filled the walls of seventeenth-century Dutch homes mirrored and reinforced the family's aspiration. So powerful were these very first images of domesticity that they have helped articulate for Western culture an entirely new concept of home and family that still influence our lives 300 years later. (8)

Westermann remarks that the "modernity of mission" in Dutch still life painting "becomes clear when we compare them to illustrations in modern house and home publications [like] recent catalogs issued by Pottery Barn (17).<sup>15</sup> What we could call Living's conventionality of mission is



located in the ways it elevates the quotidian elements of daily life. The denigrated nature of domestic space and pursuits is a cultural feature as germane to Living as it was to golden age painters, and is an integral feature to Living's marketplace success (as explored in Chapter 2).

Beyond subject matter and their celebration of domestic space and pursuits, golden age art and Living's imagery share in the affirmation of Herculean hand labor and testify to the rhetorical power of rational order and control. For example, if we compare Living's June 2006 cover to Willem Van Leen's 18<sup>th</sup>-century "Still Life with Roses, Iris, a Bird and a Dragonfly" (Figure 5.26), we can see a striking similarity in artistic vision, composition, and focus (likewise with the comparison of Living's August 2006 cover and Roelof Koets' 18<sup>th</sup>-century "Still Life on a Draped Table," shown in Figure 5.27). Bryson asserts that Dutch flower paintings "are non-pastoral and even anti-pastoral in that the flowers chosen for depiction are those which require for their existence a high level of horticultural sophistication" (104). The flowers depicted in these paintings are varieties which require intensive caretaking and meticulous cultivation, as are the flowers in Living's June 2006 cover. The arrangement of these flowers is a similarly technical skill: these are not loosely gathered wild flowers, but carefully selected blooms arrayed in an artful composition. Be it golden age art or Living's photography, the artistic eye needed to compose the floral arrangement, and the technical skill needed to complete it are abilities that take time and care to develop—labor valorized in these images.

Still life, whether Dutch golden age paintings or present-day photography, highlights the positive social influence of domestic order. Van Leen's "Still Life with Roses" and Roelof Koets's "Still Life on a Draped Table" emphasize domestic order, demonstrated in Van Leen's carefully arranged blooms and Koets's precisely set tableau. Equally so with Living's manicured bouquet (Figure 5.26) and methodically ordered table (Figure 5.27). Bryson argues the domestic order presented in still lifes was a way to "impose . . . principles of intelligibility and control" on new-found middle class affluence (131). These paintings offered viewers "images in which the historically unprecedented instability and volatility of their material culture could appear as

regulated and stabilized” (Bryson, 132). Continuing, Bryson avers that the “stabilizing” influence of order in these paintings is buttressed by the stabilizing influence of craft labor: “Amid the general uncertainty and anxiety surrounding consumption, still life affirms skilled labour as a kind of gold standard that will hold its own through all the vicissitudes of (over)abundance” (132). In a similar way, we can argue that Living provides its subscribers a way to code affluence and humanize capital. 300 years later, the material wealth of the upper-middle class is hardly unprecedented and is a normalized aspiration for much of the American public in a way it could not have been for 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch society. Nevertheless, Living’s imagery alibis and regulates this affluence through domestic order, positioning wealth not as a destabilizing threat to family values and the positive experience of home, but as the means through which the ultimate in craft labor upholds the social constancy generated by the moral core of domestic space.

The imagery in Living, however, is more than a present-day incarnation of the traditional values and principles in still life paintings. Opposed to still lifes, Living celebrates individual creation. Through the weight of history and tradition, Bryson argues that Dutch still lifes ultimately efface individual subjectivity and agency. Bryson avers that the “forms of still life are strong enough to make the difference between brutal existence and human life: without them there is no continuity of generations, no human legacy, only an intermittent and flickering chaos: with them, there is cultural memory and family, an authentically civilised world” (138). The force of this imagistic tradition explodes individual subjectivity and agency by identifying “the irrelevance and expendability of the individual contribution” (Bryson 140). Bryson explains:

the individual creation of the artefacts is overruled by a collective intelligence that bypasses the necessity for invention. For as long as such forms are able to do the job, they propose that human life can best be organised by submitting the requirements of the present to the solutions of the past and by subordinating the impulse of invention to the authority of cultural formulae. (139)

Bryson posits that in large part, individual effort and creation is effaced in still lifes because still lifes are anti-narrative, “the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest” (60). For Bryson, still lifes are anti-narrative because to narrate is “to name what is unique” and still lifes celebrate continuity of action (60).

Golden age still lifes also efface individual craft labor because they tend to celebrate the epic labor of the painter over the labor needed to create the subject matter (for examples, arranging a beautifully set table or a stunning floral arrangement). This is not the case in Living’s still lifes. Elegant photography does take technical skill, but not as much skill nor time and effort as t’rompe l’oeuil. Additionally, in photography the hand of the photographer is erased in a way that it cannot be in painting, and thus Living’s photography celebrating the craft labor involved in creating the subject matter to a degree not seen in golden age still life paintings. Furthermore, the purpose of paintings is to put them on display as luxury art objects: purpose of Living is to use the magazine as a directional manual to create the projects displayed on the cover.

### **Conclusion**

Bringhurst argues that typography “is to literature as magical performance is to composition: an essential act of interpretation, full of endless opportunities for insight or obtuseness” (19). As this analysis shows, Living’s typographic interpretation of its content is an essential component of its success. Living’s typeface is a tangible affirmation and an enactment of its self-defined identity as a “unique and pioneering influence both as a business and as a voice inspiring people to live creatively, beautifully, and well.” This enactment draws rhetorical force from the success of MSLO. By examining Living in concert with some of its competitors, we can learn how the typographic and pictorial design of Martha Stewart Living renders traditional content fresh and important to today’s world.

Westermann writes that the “visual culture in Holland in the second half of the seventeenth century articulated with unprecedented emphasis and clarity protomodern ideals of home, privacy, and self, as well as the relationships among them. Our domestic photographs

are the heirs in their realistic style and in their function” (20). By connecting with this visual tradition, Living renders its content timeless, at the same time as it celebrates the ability of the human hand to pleasingly order the world around it. What distinguishes Living from its peers is its visual emphasis on hand-crafted projects, a focus central to the ways that Living refigures still life imagery to elevate the human subject and to reclaim the home as a space of hand production.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My purpose here is not to offer a prescriptive reading, but , following Thomas Benson, to explore one set of ways Living calls upon its audience and “invites them” to experience this text a particular way (“High School”). Additional readings may illuminate other ways Living invites its audience to experience this text.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the very discipline of rhetoric itself is premised on the belief that language always carries meaning beyond its denotative functions.

<sup>3</sup> Brumberger’s study found that although the people characterize sets of typefaces in varying ways (elegant or friendly, for example), “they did not perceive the different typefaces in and of themselves to convey differing levels of ethos. That is no one particular typeface consistently improved or lowered text passage ethos” (“Ethos” 20).

<sup>4</sup> MSLO’s typefaces receive a great deal of attention from graphic designers, especially (self-defined) “typophiles.” Although the average reader may not explicitly notice Living’s unique fonts (I did not until I was viewing Good Housekeeping and Living, literally stacked on top of each other), in the same manner that some people fail to explicitly notice that “mankind” is not a general neutral term, I contend that subtle details like typeface impact our interpretation of content.

<sup>5</sup> Living’s fonts stand in strong contraposition to those of Canadian Living and Good Housekeeping. If we look at the front-of-book fonts of Canadian Living and Good Housekeeping, we see that they are common fonts with nothing special to offer in terms of tone or persona. Both magazines primarily uses a serif font (see Figure 5.3 for Canadian Living, Figure 5.5 for Good Housekeeping), but also use a sans serif font (see Figure 5.4 for Canadian Living, Figure 5.6 for Good Housekeeping). This variation gives a choppy feel to the content.

<sup>6</sup> The magazine covers I examine for this study are representative: I reviewed covers for these magazines for a two year period (three, in the case of Living), and the covers I dissect in this chapter are characteristic examples.

<sup>7</sup> Kress and Leeuwen actually ascribe this function to close-up imagery. I refigure their observation here to more appropriately apply to medium-length shots, which present objects at the same visual distance as if one were using them in real life. The ability to get such a tight focus on an object that it literally fills the sight is a photographic one: to achieve the same result in real life, one would need to hold the object right in front of one's face, which is not the visual perspective we have when interacting with objects.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart's appeal was not completed until January 2006, when her conviction was ultimately upheld.

<sup>9</sup> Canadian Living attempts to negotiate their desire for the look and feel of white space with the practical limitations presented by thinner paper by using colored white space: magazine sections are announced by pages with large colored blocks that fill the space (see Figure 5.23). However, though the large color blocks add drama and bring a modern typographic sensibility to these pages, because they are colored and not white they lack the same connotations of luxury and quality.

<sup>10</sup> Living's imagery is so compelling that it is routinely copied by other magazine, for example, US Airways' June 2007 in-flight magazine, and Southern Living magazine (Figure 5.24).

<sup>11</sup> Real Simple is Time Warner's Living knockoff: they developed this magazine to directly compete with Living after Stewart bought her magazine from them. When asked what she thought of the magazine, Stewart is reported to have said she thought it was "real stupid."

<sup>12</sup> Living depicts interiors, but in limited numbers: for the three years spanning 2005-2007, Living has only eight covers which feature interiors.

<sup>13</sup> Janson notes that Dutch Baroque still lifes have a moralizing function particular to themselves, which is not present in French still lifes of the same period . These paintings “treat the theme of Vanitas (the vanity of all earthly things). Overtly or implicitly, they preach the virtue of temperance, frugality, and hard work by admonishing the viewer to contemplate the brevity of life, the inevitability of death, and the passing of all earthly pleasures” (Janson, 584).

<sup>14</sup> In a similar fashion Jonathan Schroeder notes that “Golden Age Dutch art shows a world constructed, posed, groomed, and carefully represented to portray a vision of the secular good life,” likening Dutch art to advertising, because both depict “lifestyles’ filled with friends, lovers, consumer goods, and entertainment [as well as] . . . instructions on how to live a good, pious life” (21). Schroeder also connects Dutch art and advertising, based on the word views both project. Schroeder states that the “interior genre scenes of Dutch art encapsulate a way of seeing and representing the world, a world in which interior space signifies privacy, seclusion, withdrawal, and escape,” a world not unlike that portrayed in much of contemporary advertising which depends on images which “reify the everyday, the vernacular, the lost moment, and the consumer lifestyle” (21).

<sup>15</sup> Though Westermann calls attention to important similarities in Dutch still life imagery and Pottery Barn catalogs, she also highlights key differences, including: still life paintings are luxury objects, whereas catalogs are not; still life paintings are themselves the object for sale; catalogs often arrive in one’s mailbox, unbidden, whereas paintings are commissioned or purposely sought out; catalogs are mass-marketed, which also means they reach a broader audience; and we read photographs as more “real” than paintings (18-30).



Figure 5.1: Surveyor



Figure 5.2: Archer



private, tranquil and  
uncluttered bedroom. Calm  
and inviting, cosy and  
comfortable, these are the  
elements that can transform  
a bedroom from a place to  
sleep to a personal – and  
romantic – retreat. It's the  
only room in the house  
where it's OK to disregard all  
the decorating rules of  
practicality and function and  
surround yourself in  
luxurious and sensual  
indulgences – tactile fabrics,  
heady scents, ambient light

Figure 5.3: Canadian Living serif font

- In large bowl, whisk together eggs, oil, molasses, almond butter and SPLENDA® Brown Sugar Blend until smooth; stir in blueberries and sunflower seeds.
- In separate bowl, whisk together flour, skim milk powder, wheat germ and baking powder; stir into liquid ingredients until blended.
- Spread into greased 9 inch (2.5 L) square cake pan. Bake in 350°F (180°C) oven for 35 minutes or until browned and firm to the touch. Let cool on rack; cut into bars. Makes 18 bars.

Per bar: Total Calories 249, Total Fat 14 g, Saturated Fat 1 g,  
Cholesterol 21 mg, Sodium 41 mg, Carbohydrate 28 g, Fibre 4 g,  
Sugars 9 g, Protein 6 g.

Figure 5.4: Canadian Living sans serif font



Figure 5.5: Good Housekeeping serif font

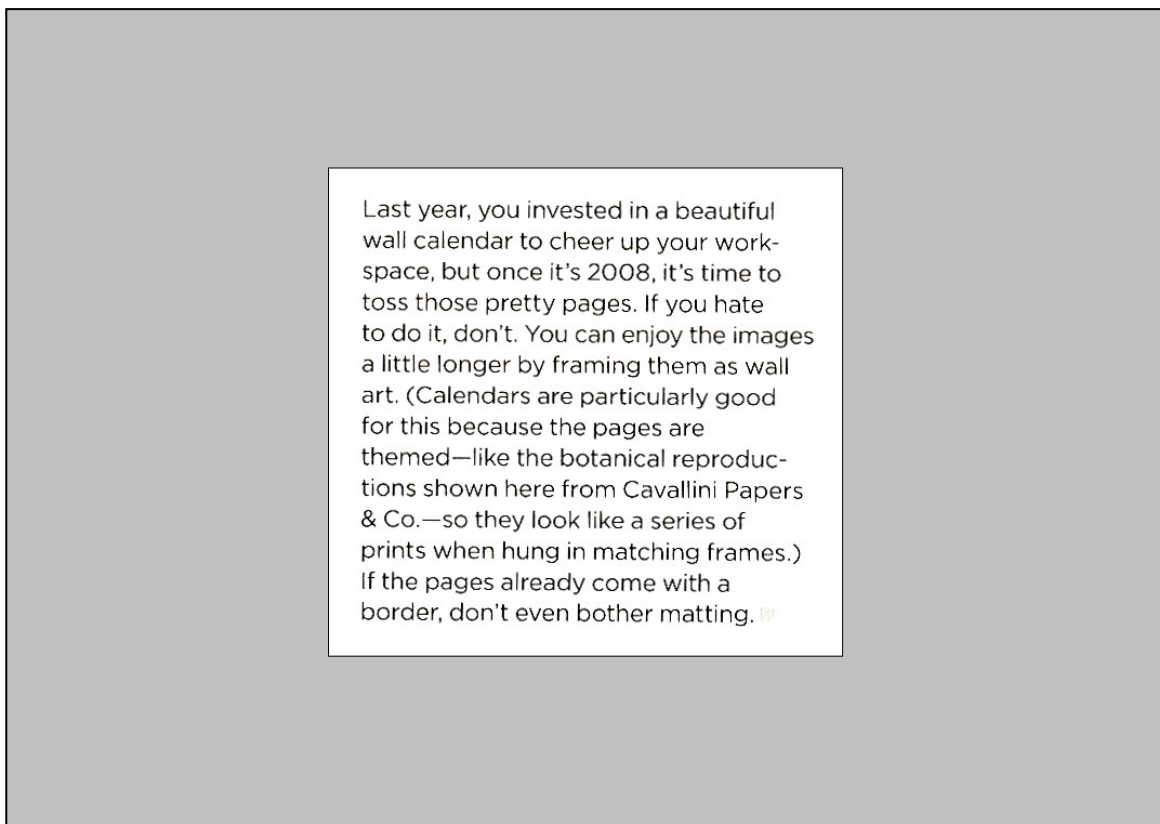


Figure 5.6: Good Housekeeping sans serif font

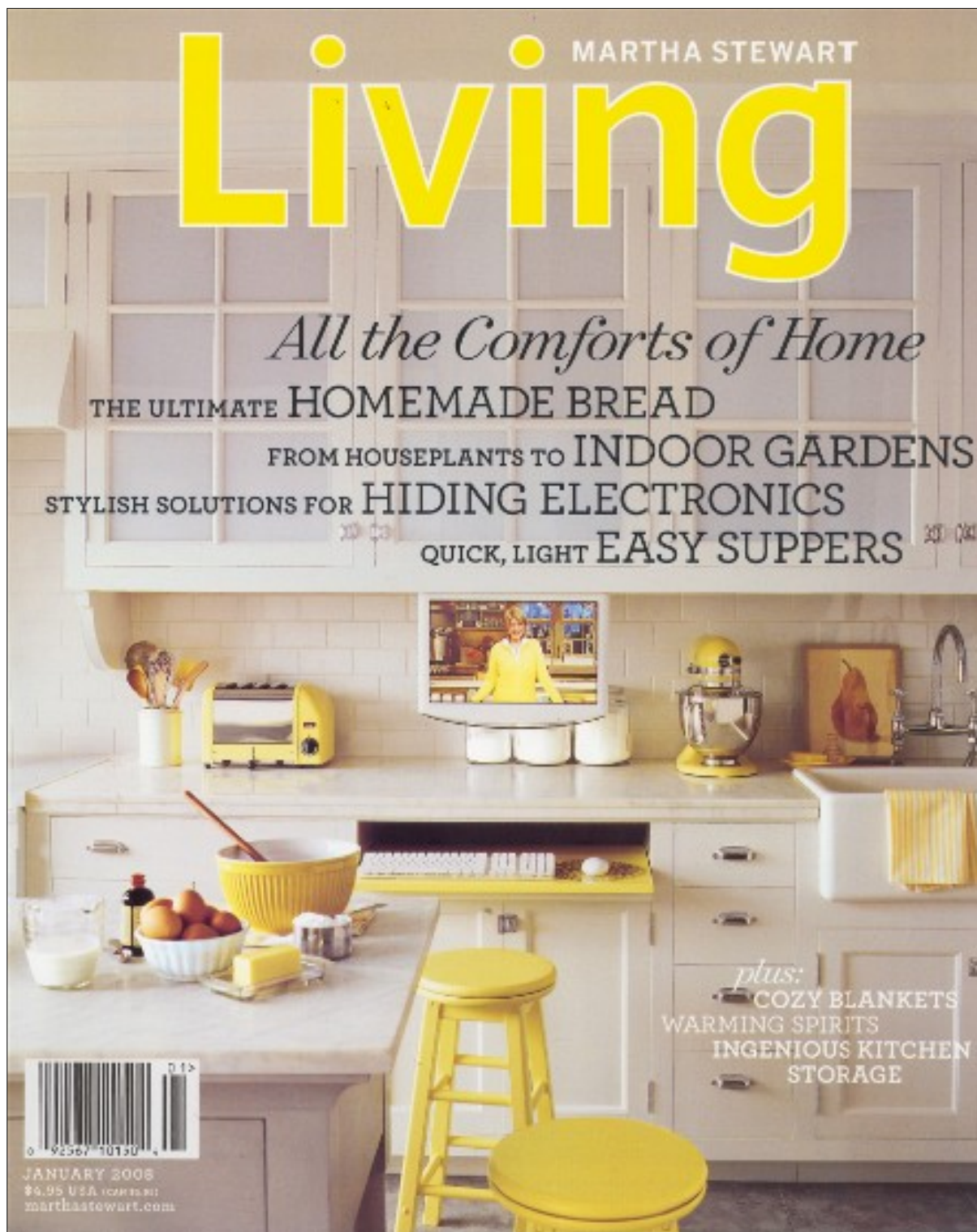


Figure 5.7: January 2008 cover of Living





Figure 5.8: August 2004 cover of Living

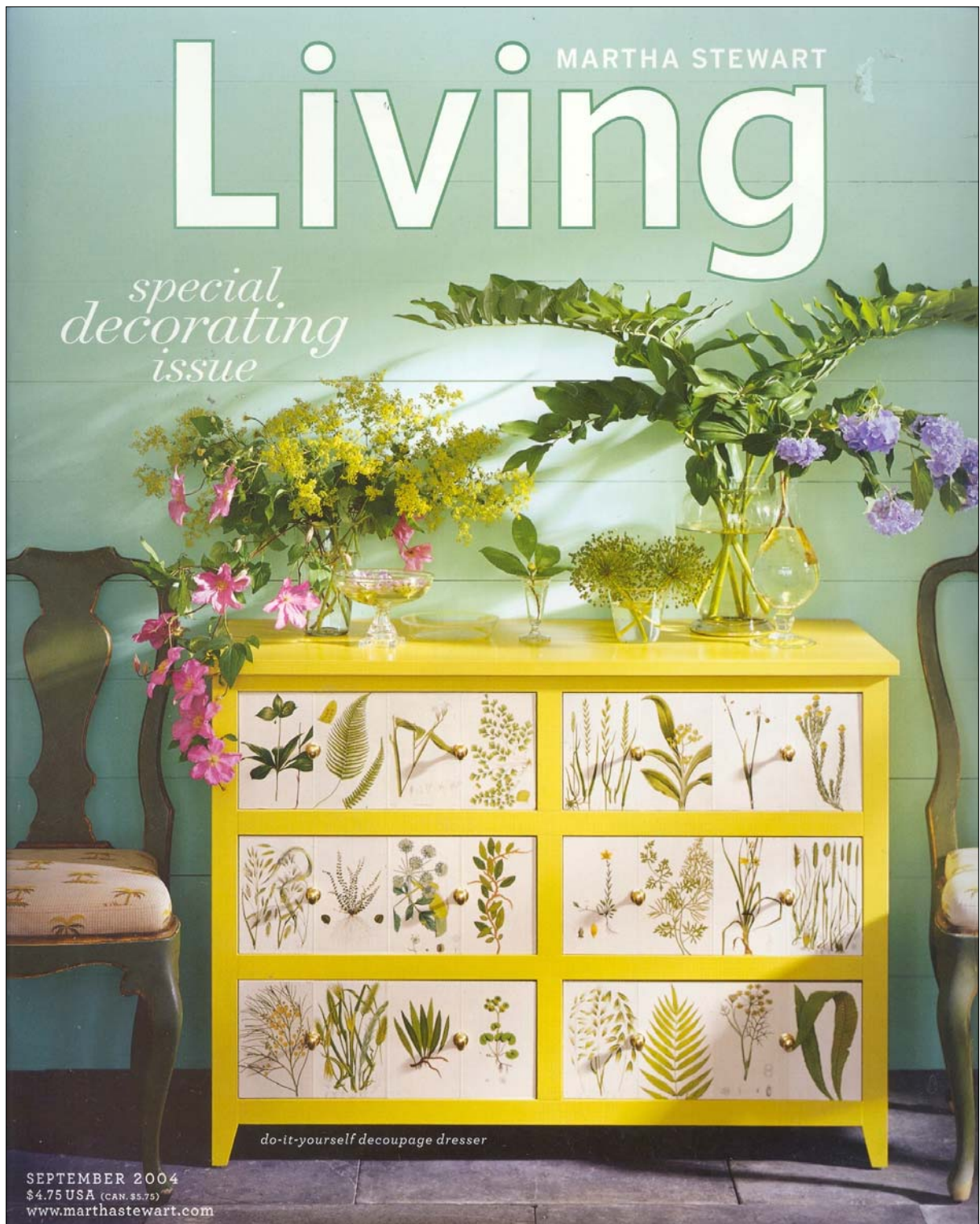


Figure 5.9: September 2004 cover of Living





Figure 5.10: January 2008 cover of Canadian Living



Figure 5.11: January 2008 cover of Good Housekeeping



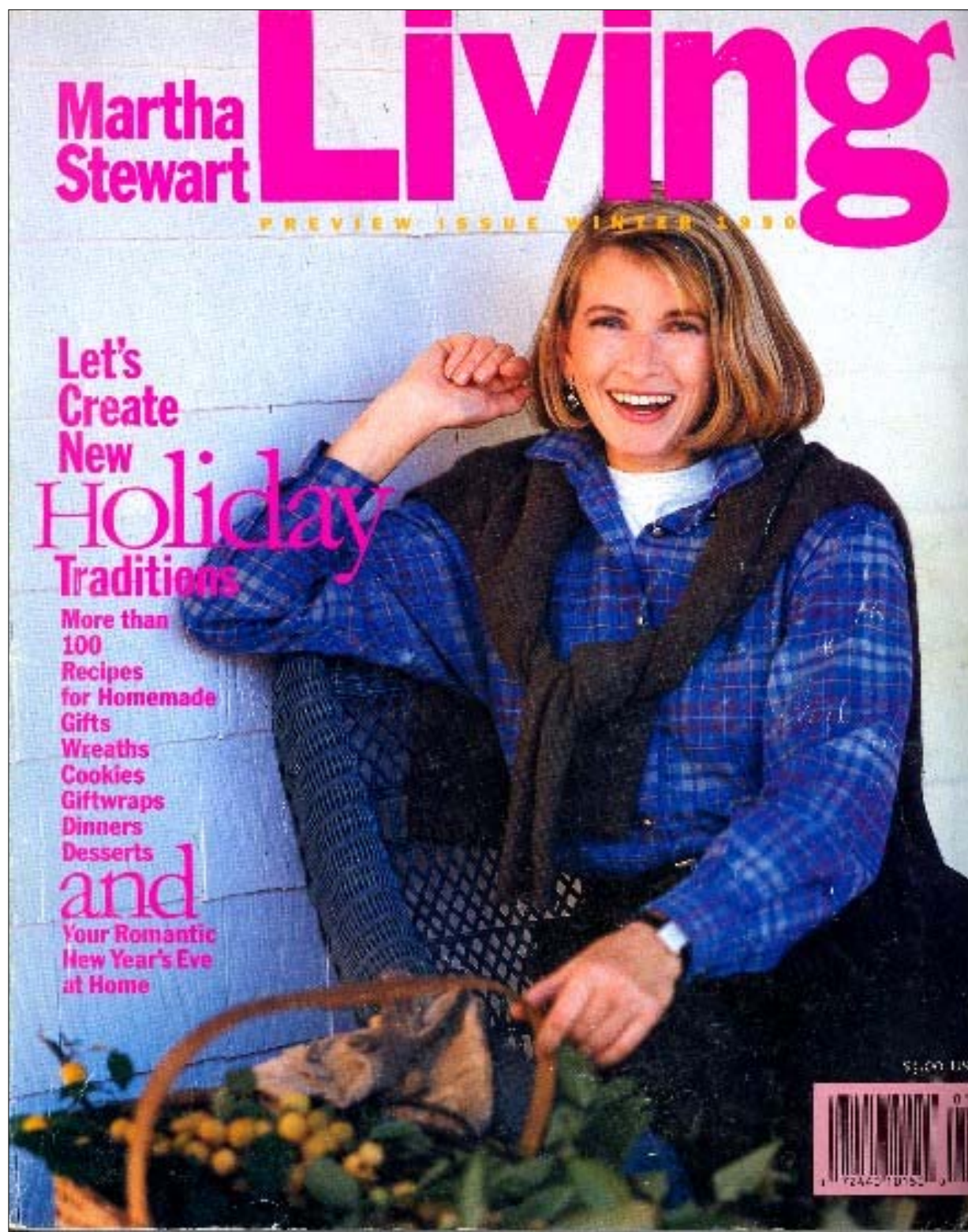


Figure 5.12: December 1990 (1<sup>st</sup> test issue) cover of Living





Figure 5.13: December 1990 cover of Better Homes and Gardens

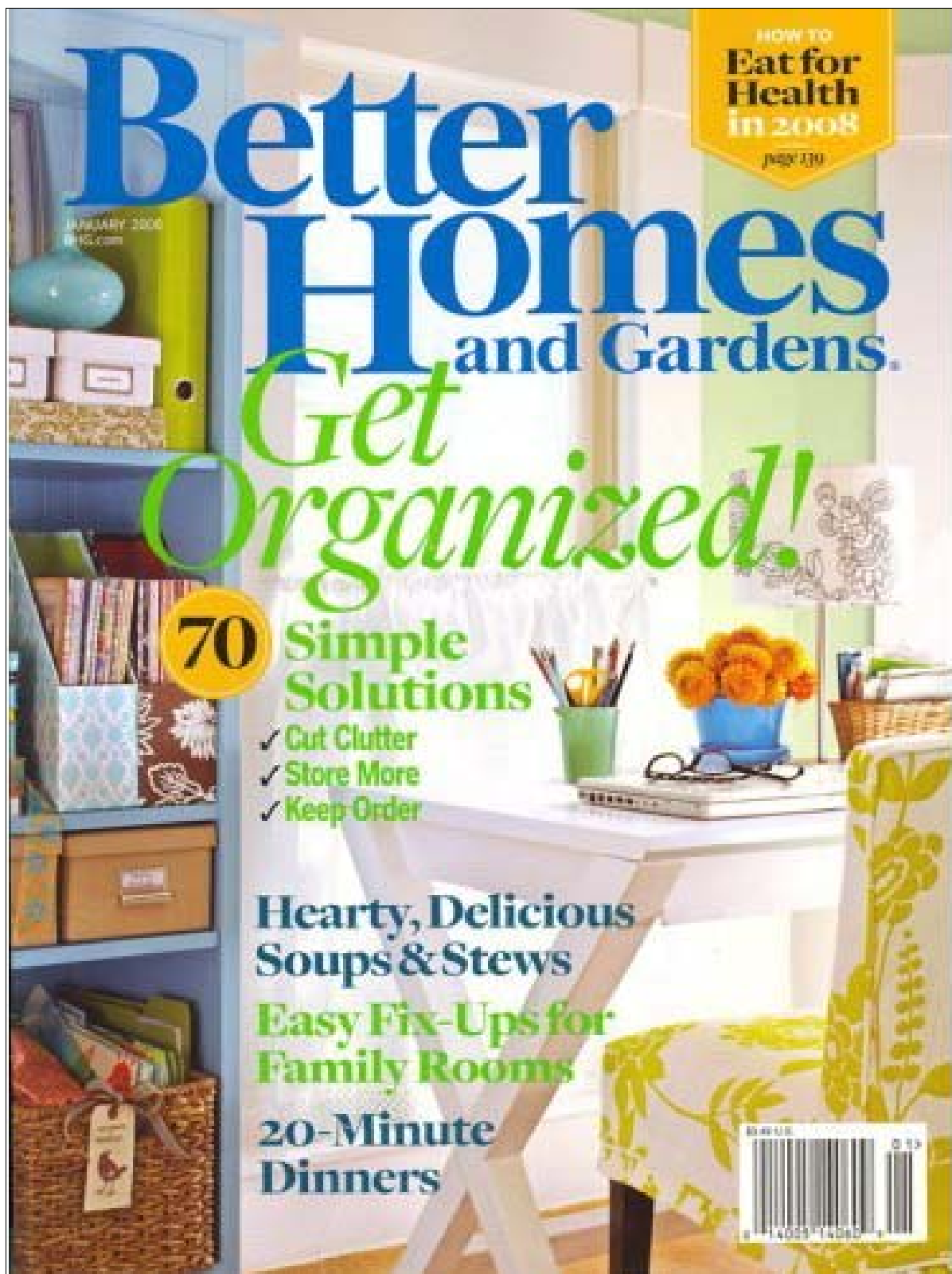


Figure 5.14: January 2008 cover of Better Homes and Gardens

<h1>contents</h1> <p>Marie Stewart Living JANUARY 2008</p> <p>104</p>  <p>112</p>  <p>120</p>  <p>128</p>  <p>96</p>  <p><b>FEATURES</b></p> <p>96 <b>hidden secrets</b> With a lot of important functions, the in-use high-tech electronic can be integrated discreetly into every room in the house.</p> <p>104 <b>by hand alone</b> Very one perfect elegant and easy to follow with this uncomplicated, designed method.</p> <p>112 <b>photo play</b> Inspiration projects that take home in photographs all the computer and all of different materials, glass and every decorative element.</p> <p>120 <b>entertaining by design</b> A colorful, vibrant restaurant focuses on a multi-colored room that is as an evening dinner dining experience.</p> <p>128 <b>inner growth</b> With this story of colors, stress, and shape, components can add life to your most recent sunny season.</p> <p>CONTENTS OF THE TABLE</p>	<h1>contents</h1> <p>Marie Stewart Living JANUARY 2008</p> <p>21</p>  <p>28</p>  <p>36</p>  <p>44</p>  <p>52</p>  <p>60</p>  <p>68</p>  <p>76</p>  <p>84</p>  <p>92</p>  <p>100</p>  <p>108</p>  <p>116</p>  <p>124</p>  <p>132</p>  <p>140</p>  <p>148</p>  <p>156</p>  <p>164</p>  <p>172</p>  <p>180</p>  <p>188</p>  <p>196</p>  <p>204</p>  <p>212</p>  <p>220</p>  <p>228</p>  <p>236</p>  <p>244</p>  <p>252</p>  <p>260</p>  <p>268</p>  <p>276</p>  <p>284</p>  <p>292</p>  <p>300</p>  <p>308</p>  <p>316</p>  <p>324</p>  <p>332</p>  <p>340</p>  <p>348</p>  <p>356</p>  <p>364</p>  <p>372</p>  <p>380</p>  <p>388</p>  <p>396</p>  <p>404</p>  <p>412</p>  <p>420</p>  <p>428</p>  <p>436</p>  <p>444</p>  <p>452</p>  <p>460</p>  <p>468</p>  <p>476</p>  <p>484</p>  <p>492</p>  <p>500</p>  <p>508</p>  <p>516</p>  <p>524</p>  <p>532</p>  <p>540</p>  <p>548</p>  <p>556</p>  <p>564</p>  <p>572</p>  <p>580</p>  <p>588</p>  <p>596</p>  <p>604</p>  <p>612</p>  <p>620</p>  <p>628</p>  <p>636</p>  <p>644</p>  <p>652</p>  <p>660</p>  <p>668</p>  <p>676</p>  <p>684</p>  <p>692</p>  <p>700</p>  <p>708</p>  <p>716</p>  <p>724</p>  <p>732</p>  <p>740</p>  <p>748</p>  <p>756</p>  <p>764</p>  <p>772</p>  <p>780</p>  <p>788</p>  <p>796</p>  <p>804</p>  <p>812</p>  <p>820</p>  <p>828</p>  <p>836</p>  <p>844</p>  <p>852</p>  <p>860</p>  <p>868</p>  <p>876</p>  <p>884</p>  <p>892</p>  <p>900</p>  <p>908</p>  <p>916</p>  <p>924</p>  <p>932</p>  <p>940</p>  <p>948</p>  <p>956</p>  <p>964</p>  <p>972</p>  <p>980</p>  <p>988</p>  <p>996</p>  <p>1004</p>  <p>1012</p>  <p>1020</p>  <p>1028</p>  <p>1036</p>  <p>1044</p>  <p>1052</p>  <p>1060</p>  <p>1068</p>  <p>1076</p>  <p>1084</p>  <p>1092</p>  <p>1100</p>  <p>1108</p>  <p>1116</p>  <p>1124</p>  <p>1132</p>  <p>1140</p>  <p>1148</p>  <p>1156</p>  <p>1164</p>  <p>1172</p>  <p>1180</p>  <p>1188</p>  <p>1196</p>  <p>1204</p>  <p>1212</p>  <p>1220</p>  <p>1228</p>  <p>1236</p>  <p>1244</p>  <p>1252</p>  <p>1260</p>  <p>1268</p>  <p>1276</p>  <p>1284</p>  <p>1292</p>  <p>1300</p>  <p>1308</p>  <p>1316</p>  <p>1324</p>  <p>1332</p>  <p>1340</p>  <p>1348</p>  <p>1356</p>  <p>1364</p>  <p>1372</p>  <p>1380</p>  <p>1388</p>  <p>1396</p>  <p>1404</p>  <p>1412</p>  <p>1420</p>  <p>1428</p>  <p>1436</p>  <p>1444</p>  <p>1452</p>  <p>1460</p>  <p>1468</p>  <p>1476</p>  <p>1484</p>  <p>1492</p>  <p>1500</p>  <p>1508</p>  <p>1516</p>  <p>1524</p>  <p>1532</p>  <p>1540</p>  <p>1548</p>  <p>1556</p>  <p>1564</p>  <p>1572</p>  <p>1580</p>  <p>1588</p>  <p>1596</p>  <p>1604</p>  <p>1612</p>  <p>1620</p>  <p>1628</p>  <p>1636</p>  <p>1644</p>  <p>1652</p>  <p>1660</p>  <p>1668</p>  <p>1676</p>  <p>1684</p>  <p>1692</p>  <p>1700</p>  <p>1708</p>  <p>1716</p>  <p>1724</p>  <p>1732</p>  <p>1740</p>  <p>1748</p>  <p>1756</p>  <p>1764</p>  <p>1772</p>  <p>1780</p>  <p>1788</p>  <p>1796</p>  <p>1804</p>  <p>1812</p>  <p>1820</p>  <p>1828</p>  <p>1836</p>  <p>1844</p>  <p>1852</p>  <p>1860</p>  <p>1868</p>  <p>1876</p>  <p>1884</p>  <p>1892</p>  <p>1900</p>  <p>1908</p>  <p>1916</p>  <p>1924</p>  <p>1932</p>  <p>1940</p>  <p>1948</p>  <p>1956</p>  <p>1964</p>  <p>1972</p>  <p>1980</p>  <p>1988</p>  <p>1996</p>  <p>2004</p>  <p>2012</p>  <p>2020</p>  <p>2028</p>  <p>2036</p>  <p>2044</p>  <p>2052</p>  <p>2060</p>  <p>2068</p>  <p>2076</p>  <p>2084</p>  <p>2092</p>  <p>2100</p>  <p>2108</p>  <p>2116</p>  <p>2124</p>  <p>2132</p>  <p>2140</p>  <p>2148</p>  <p>2156</p>  <p>2164</p>  <p>2172</p>  <p>2180</p>  <p>2188</p>  <p>2196</p>  <p>2204</p>  <p>2212</p>  <p>2220</p>  <p>2228</p>  <p>2236</p>  <p></p>
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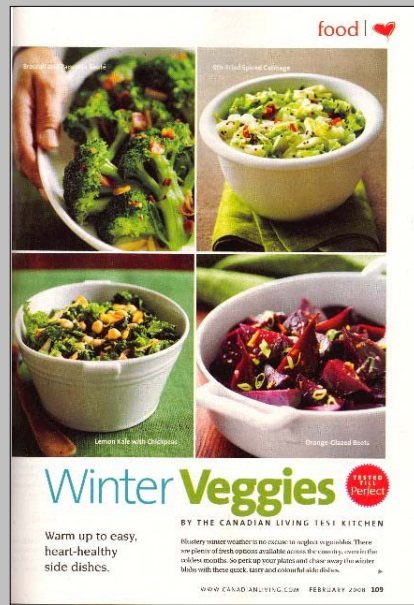


Figure 5.19: White space in Canadian Living



Figure 5.20: White space in Good Housekeeping



Figure 5.21: Traditional use of white space in Living

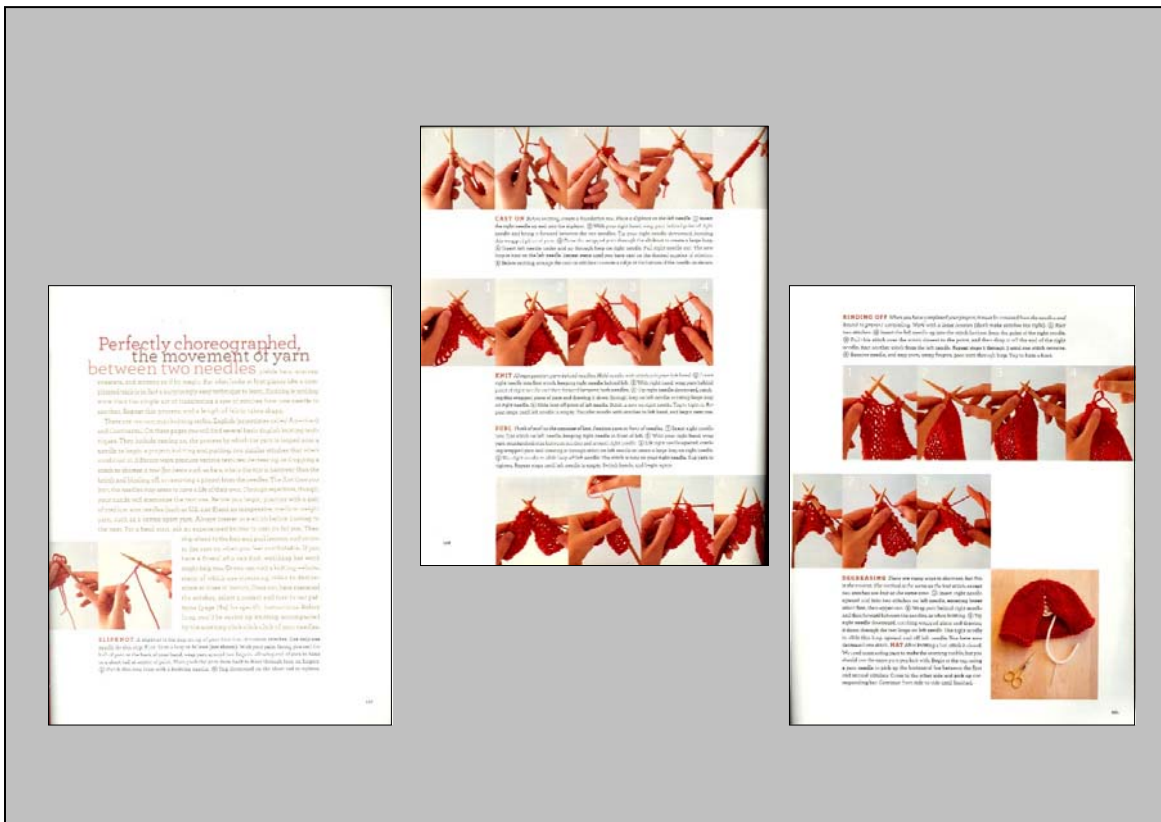


Figure 5.22: Modern use of white space in Living





Figure 5.23: Canadian Living's colored 'white space'

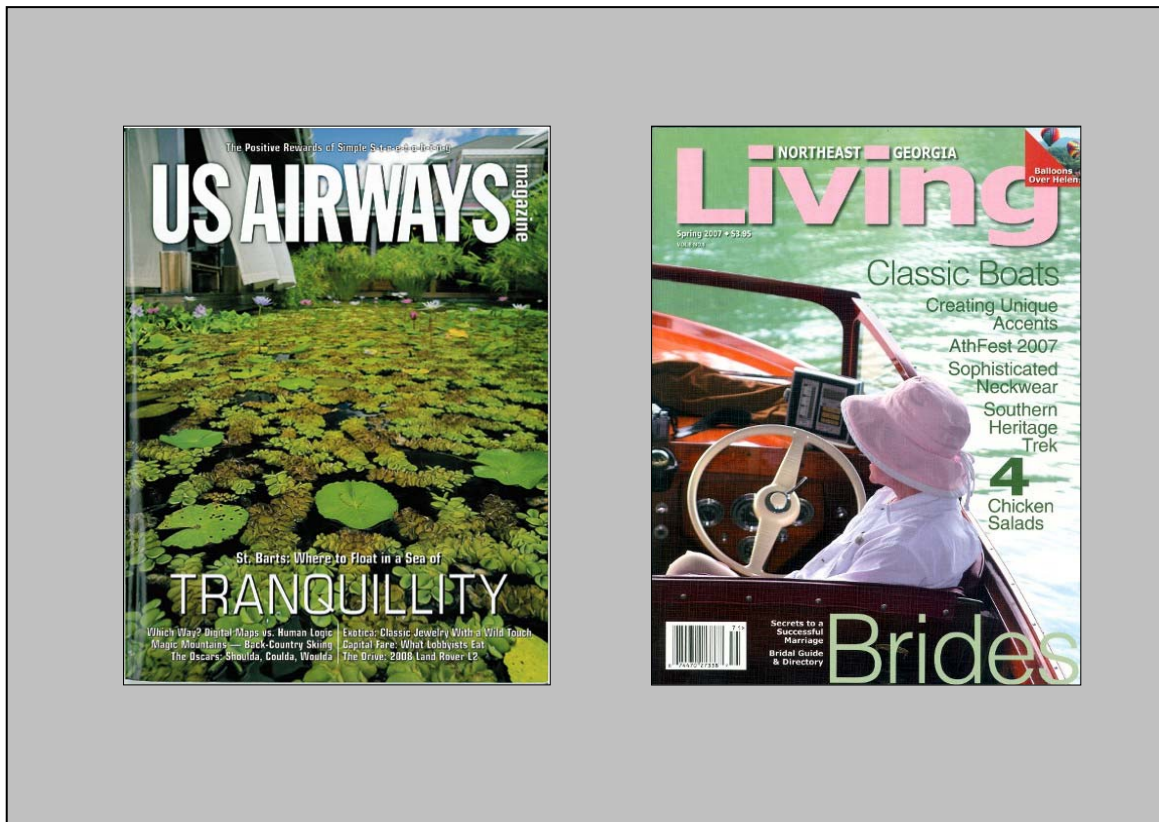


Figure 5.24: US Airways Magazine cover (L); Southern Living cover (R)

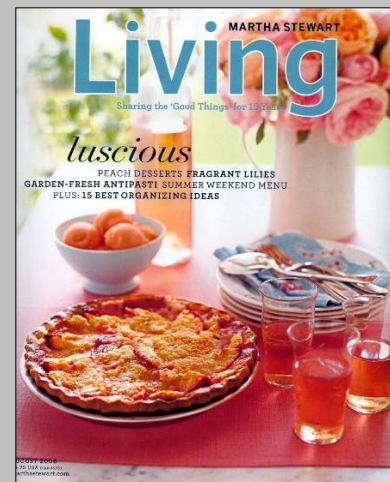
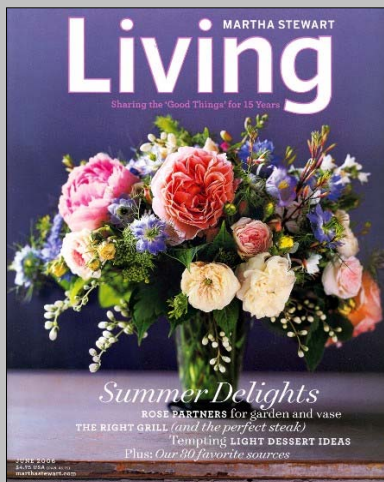
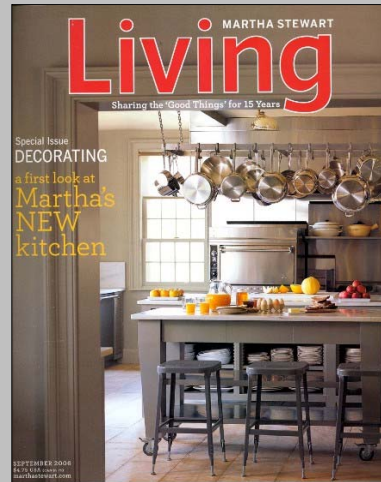
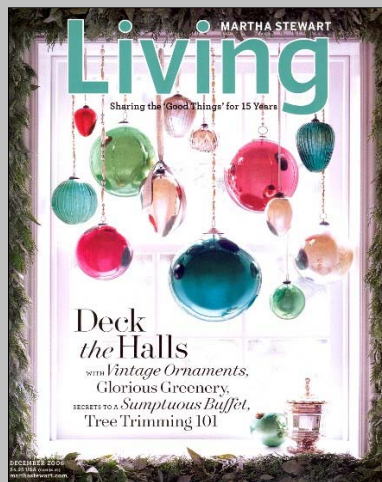
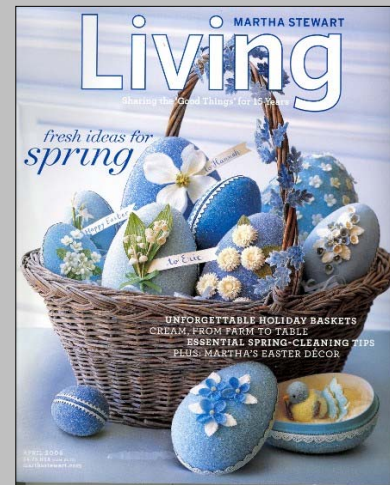
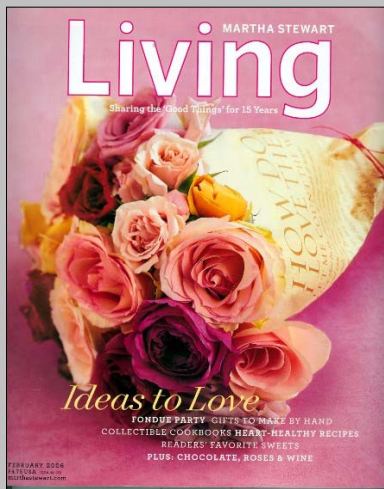


Figure 5.25: February, April, June, August, September, and December Living covers from 2006





Figure 5.26: June 2006 Living cover (L); “Still Life with Roses” (R)



Figure 5.27: August 2006 Living cover (L); “Still Life on a Draped Table” (R)

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS

What is not an open question is the fact that all of us need home, whatever our particular household arrangements might be.

- Glenna Matthews

We are reliving living as an art form.

- Martha Stewart

As I stood in Macy's, hugging a set of multi-colored Stewart-branded mixing bowls to my chest, declaring my undying love for them and insisting I had to have these bowls to make my new apartment—nay, my life—complete, the colleague I was shopping with questioned my critical distance from this project. I vigorously defended my academic honor by asserting that I could be scholarly and love Martha Stewart at the same time. Having reached the conclusion, it is perhaps time I officially came clean about my love for all things Martha: I unabashedly admit that much of my motivation for this project lies in my belief in the magic to be found in color-coordinated bakeware and coral-patterned bedding. Given the wide-reaching success of Stewart's multi-media products, clearly I am not alone in my estimation. My purpose here has not been to uncritically celebrate Stewart and all that she stands for, but to use my connection to Stewart's products and messages as the starting point for an investigation of her popularity. There is certainly much to be said about the programmatic way Stewart constructs domesticity,

femininity, and the (White upper-class) good life. But that is not all there is to be said. Stewart's discourses also point to the positive power of design in forming the material practices and places through and in which we live. Although my analysis is limited to the audiences interpellated by Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia's discourse, it is a valuable starting point for discussing rhetorics of design.

Stewart's marketplace domination, similar to her 19<sup>th</sup> century forebears, can perhaps be partly understood as a hyper-fulfillment of traditional gender roles: professionalizing the home does not require a significant revision of how we conceive or account for women's achievements. Yet Stewart's popular reception illustrates strong cultural opposition. Stewart is publicly derided for not being enough like a woman—she is aggressive, stoic, and exacting—and for being too much like one—coiffed, manicured, and always, always talking about the home. If not the acme of feminist achievement, Stewart is certainly the culmination of polyvalent discourses on feminism and the home. Stewart's status as a lifestyle expert, and the financial success attached to that position, have strong ties to North American traditions of domestic advice. As Leavitt argues, the genre of domestic advice is “embedded in social and cultural contexts” (Catherine Beecher 206); attending to the construction of domestic advice thus gives us insight into how we understand both the larger cultures around us and the place of home within these contexts.

Though Stewart states that the MSLO consumer “still wants to iron, to polish silver, to set a sensible table, to cook good food” (“Letter” 2002, 12), celebrating homekeeping in present-day American culture is a contentious venture. By celebrating homekeeping as a techné, Stewart offers the present-day homekeeper a way to value both the home and a sense of self as accomplished and sophisticated. Stewart's message is not “Quit your jobs and stay home,” but rather “This is why and how the home is important.” That women (the vast majority of Stewart's audience) are in the home is not the problem. That they feel constrained to stay there and that this work is so culturally devalued, is. Thus, while Stewart does not lessen cultural

constraints that encourage women to stay in the home and men to stay out of it, she improves its cultural esteem—and in a society where most women still perform most of the work in the home, I would call that a good thing.

Stewart's construction of homekeeping as *techné* is also an important component in the success of her merchandising lines, in the ethos of her products and publications. Richard Buchanan argues that products "have character because in some way they reflect their makers, and part of the art of design is the control of such character in order to persuade potential users that a product has credibility in their lives. In essence, the problem is the way designers choose to represent themselves in products, not as they are, but as they wish to appear" (101). The design of Stewart's "Everyday" and "Collection" packaging works hard, both visually and verbally, to present this merchandise as top of the line products.

In addition, "Everyday" and "Collection" merchandise are successful because they compellingly address cultural anxieties. Sidney Levy asserts that consumer myths "are ways of organizing perceptions of realities, of indirectly expressing paradoxical human concerns, they have consumer relevance because these realities and concerns affect people's daily lives" (52). Speaking to the way myths culturally emerge, Clyde Kluckhohn observes that "when pressures are peculiarly strong and peculiarly general, a considerable number of different individuals may almost simultaneously develop substantially identical phantasies which then become widely current" (53). Stewart's products are popular because they are culturally relevant, because they organize perceptions of reality that allow consumers to validate the identity of homekeeper, rationalize consumption, and purchase products with a sense of origin. The marketshare captured by these products is testament to Stewart's ability to not only transform domestic arts into a multibillion-dollar enterprise founded on exquisite applications of style and design, but to her ability to develop products which offer consumers material access to important practices and cultural desires.

One of the most encompassing products Stewart offers in terms of the overall experience of domestic life, is her co-branded homes with KB Homes. By attending to the ways in which the rooms of Hampton Oaks model homes are constructed, we see the emphasis of the home as a space of design, of personal expression. Clive Edwards observes that 19<sup>th</sup>-century homeowners responded to cultural anxiety over class status through interior design, specifically “the furnishings of their homes. . . . The home was consequently a bulwark against its opposite: the coarseness and impropriety apparent in the world outside” (15). Stewart-branded homes illustrate that 21<sup>st</sup> century homeowners also respond to status and other social anxieties by creating the home as a bulwark, through choosing furniture and other items of interior design that reflect particular identities. The use of home to express individual and social identity, however, is not an uncomplicated process: “The question of identity raises fundamental and contradictory issues in this consideration of the home in the twentieth century. It could be argued that a consumer culture encourages individual freedom of expression and identity, but on the other hand it can appear to construct parameters within which people can consume a ready-made identity” (C. Edwards 217). Stewart-branded homes thus also illustrate the contradictory nature of home—both the power of home to express and realize identity, and the material constraints which limit and frame this expression.

Graphic design is important not just because it convinces people to read or buy a particular product, or because it successfully communicates the meaning of a text or the identity of an organization, but also because graphic design constructs public culture: typography is “one of the ways in which the identity and existence of social classes and social institutions are established and assured. . . . [and is therefore] one of the signifying systems in which [community] beliefs and values are communicated, one of the ways in which those beliefs and values may be reproduced or challenged” (Barnard 59-68). Living says, by its typographic structure, that it is a credible authority and speaks to the importance of quality and

craftsmanship. The success of the magazine lends rhetorical force to Stewart's credo, since Living is such a highly successful and influential publication.

The case studies explored in this dissertation collectively point to the cultural significance of home and design at the same time as they illuminate the material rhetoric of domesticity. Buchanan frames design as a material rhetorical medium when he writes that "the designer, instead of simply making an object or thing, is actually creating a persuasive argument that comes to life whenever a user considers or uses a product as a means to some end" (95-96). John Dewey writes that the term medium "signifies first of all an intermediary," a material valued not for "what is physically is, but [for] what it expresses (197, 201). Barry Brummett and Margaret Duncan similarly assert that a "medium is a process, not a thing; it is something that people do, not a tool that people use" (230). Expanding, Brummett and Duncan contend:

A medium is a form immanent in recurring, similar experiences that provides a discursive structure in which the self is extended as a subject position and within which the subject position orders and unifies the experience in ways that are empowering or disempowering. The medium, in this sense, is the means by which the bricolage of experience is pulled together, the logic in which subject positions are formed, and the parameters set for struggles over how signs are organized and unified in empowering and disempowering ways. (232-3)

Connecting Dewey with Brummett and Duncan, to take up the material design of domesticity, then, means to explore the home's signficatory value, its significance as a rhetorical process. When we explore the design of domesticity we gain understanding of the arguments which come to life for users of MSLO products, an understanding of the way domestic design objects and discourses operate in the construction of social practices. Further, to explore the MSLO products and publications as medium is to explore these material rhetorics as sites which unify social experiences within the framework of subjectivity.

In addition to understanding design as a material rhetorical medium, we also need to understand design as an architectonic art. Richard McKeon describes an architectonic art as “an art of constructing systems” (10). Buchanan similarly describes architectonic arts as “those that organize efforts of other arts and crafts, giving order and purpose to production” (108). Buchanan defines design as an architectonic art based on how design “provides the intelligence, the thought or idea . . . that organizes all levels of production” (108). To value design as an architectonic art we must be willing to positively value design’s aesthetic appeal. As an aesthetic enterprise design is very much connected to emotional response. Postrel states: “Look and feel appeal directly to us as visual, tactile, emotional creatures” (171). But as Dewey points out, in a culture in which honor is bestowed upon “those who use their minds without participation of the body . . . sense and flesh get a bad name” (*Art*, 21). Thus, “heirs to Plato and the Puritans, we suspect sensory impressions as deceptive, inherently false” (Postrel 7). Illustrating just this point, Michael and Suzanne Osborn propound in their well-known public speaking textbook: “*Always support pathos with logos*” (393, emphasis in original). Throughout its development as a discipline, rhetoric has therefore been partial to traditional notions of discursive communication as language-based. Following this, rhetorical criticism has been partial to logocentric investigations and applications of rhetoric, meaning that affective rhetorics are less well understood.

Part of the distrust of emotion is connected to fear of being swayed, of being seduced by emotion. In their rhetorical investigation of seduction theory, Erickson and Thomson tie seduction to design. And in a Western culture very much premised on Judeo-Christian principles, seduction is understood as a tool of the wicked, particularly the wicked woman.<sup>1</sup> Writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Georges Duhamel names American visual culture as a “masturbation of the eye” and Oliver Wendell Holmes pronounces that “[e]very conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins and leave the carcasses

as of little worth,” these authors illustrate an anxiety, if not hostility, toward aesthetic indulgence. Making this point in present-day terms, Postrel expands: to critics of emotion or aesthetic appeal “form is dangerously seductive, because it allows sensory to override the rational. An appealing package can make you believe that Nazis are good,<sup>2</sup> or that colas are distinguishable” (68). In this figuration, rhetoric may be the handmaiden of content but design is its harlot, going anywhere and everywhere with no fidelity or intrinsic worth.

Mistrust of emotion is not a state of mind limited to unstylish naysayers: designers, too, espouse caution when considering matters of emotional appeal. Concern over the affective power of design is tied to a belief that the emotional value of designed objects has no substance of its own, a worry that in celebrating design we are celebrating the reversal of form and content,<sup>3</sup> leaving each without meaning. While not offering a complete disavowal of emotion, Jessica Helfand presents a cautionary tale of the power of this appeal: “Clearly, the desire to reach people emotionally is, in and of itself, a perfectly respectable goal. It is the idea however, that emotional resonance exists at the expense of intellectual truth that is so troubling” (33). Taking this position even further, Rams blames emotional design indulgences for Western cultural chaos:

The latest design trends are intended to evoke emotions by trivial, superficial means. . . . The issue is stimuli: new, strong, exciting, and therefore aggressive signals. The aggressiveness of design is expressed in the harshness of combat to attain first place in peoples' perception and awareness and to win the fight for a front place in store display windows. I don't support dull or boring design but I do take a stand against the ruthless exploitation of people's weaknesses for visual and haptic signals, which many designers are engaged in. (112)

While I appreciate the admonitions in these accounts, I find them troubling, pervaded by an elitist celebration of rationality that not only eschews the value of emotion, but also constructs consumers as naïve audiences in need of the sort of protection offered by cultural critics.<sup>4</sup> This



snobbery is perhaps located in the (increasingly fluid and indeterminate) divide between high and low culture. For example, art objects are not derided by cultural critics for their emotional content, but rather are celebrated for it: emotion is well and good when contained within the boundaries of a museum, but loosed and free to wander among the masses and perch atop the department store shelves, the affective power of design is often decried as base manipulation.

Donald Norman makes a clear case for the positive role of emotion in the material rhetoric of design. Norman assays that “everything you do has both a cognitive and an affective component—cognition to assign meaning, affective to assign value. You cannot escape affect: it is always there. More important, the affective state, whether positive or negative affect, changes how we think” (25). Richard Lanham argues that one of the important functions of design’s emotional charge is the way it serves as an important “filter” for interacting with the world around us:

Clean information is unnatural and unuseful. Information always comes charged with emotion of some kind, full of purpose. That is why we have acquired it. The only way to make it useful is to filter it. . . . And here is where style comes in. We keep striving for ‘pure information,’ but the more information we have, the more we need filters, and one of the most powerful filters we have is the filtration of style. (19)

Objects, by nature of the fact that they must have some sort of design (even if ill-considered and unappealing), carry “an emotional charge” (Lanham, 20). The emotional charge found in design is design’s affective ability to “[connect] us to the world. It is the matter in us responding and resonating with the matter around us” (O’Sullivan 128). To negate the emotional power of design, then, is to negate one of the important modes through which we engage in the world around us.

This dissertation has worked to explore the style and design of MSLO products and publications, investigating how MSLO uses design in the construction of domesticity. At points

this project has gestured in this direction, but what we do not yet fully understand is what style and design is for its users. For example, how and to what purposes do individuals use material MSLO products as a medium through which to form and communicate identity? What are the contexts in which these decisions are made, and what are the possibilities and constraints of these contexts? How are these decisions understood by others? What spaces for identity are created by the design of everyday life? Exploring the ways people use domestic design objects will help us better understand the everyday uses to which people put style and design, to better understand what style and design are for its users.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The distrust of affect is partly connected to affect's connection with femininity. Erickson and Thomson frame seduction as a feminine rhetorical strategy, opposed to masculine rhetorical strategies of linear reasoning. Robert Hariman similarly positions (and chauvinistically trivializes) style as a feminine concern in his characterization of the four types of style he discusses in Political Style: "These texts provided not the mirror of nature, but something closer to the hallway mirror that reflects, frames, and creates a moment for critical assessment of the figure standing in front of it, looking herself over, before she steps out for the evening" (177).

<sup>2</sup> Randall Bytwerk takes up this question in his article "The Argument for Genocide in Nazi Propaganda."

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Lanham's argument in the introduction to The Economics of Attention, which illustrates some of the cultural tensions attached to valorizing the affective pull of style and design.

<sup>4</sup> Selle argues that this perspective on design has begun to shift. He states that over the last 50 years designers were steeped in a professional culture which believed "the proper and moral use of things must never be left to the users," seeing their social role as "cultural guardian[s]" (55). In contraposition to this stance, Selle asserts that design has been taken back as an everyday process by "mass users" who have "mutely but consistently developed and implemented [their] own concepts and competencies" (55).

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