

# Structured Consumption and Manipulated Meaning: Two Aspects of Style in Industrial Artifacts<sup>1</sup>

John Blanford

## Introduction

Stylistic analysis of artifacts has been one of the most versatile, and elastic, of analytic tools available to the archaeologist. Recent interest in how material objects are part of cultural meaning systems has led prehistorians, following the influential work of Martin Wobst (1977), to examine the expressive content of style. This article, written by a North American historical archaeologist, will examine the link between meaning and style in industrially produced artifacts. Rather than attempt to construct a universal notion of style, the article will focus on a specific historic and social context, 19th and 20th century United States capitalism. In this context, unlike many prehistoric contexts, there is a radical separation between the producer of material goods, and the consumer of these goods. Not only are they separate spatially, but, it will be argued, they also attach very different meanings and interests to these goods. The focus of the article will be on the role of style in this consumer-producer dialectic.

In contrast to much of the work on "Consumer Choice" current in historical archaeology, it will be suggested that the meaning assigned to goods is central to this dialectic, and further, that style is, in varying degrees, used as material symbol for meaning. The general thesis will be that individuals consume, not randomly, but as part of a structured process of developing and maintaining self and group identity. Crucial to this process is the fact that goods have, in addition to utilitarian aspects, meanings that can be used by people in their social life. Increasingly during the 19th and 20th centuries the producers of goods have attempted to manipulate these meanings to increase product sales. This has taken the form of large scale advertising and mass media. So the producer-consumer dialectic is not just about the production and use of goods, but the production and use of meaning as well.

A study of contemporary US beer and soft drink can design will be used in order to examine the role played by style in this dialectic. In addition, an analysis of beer and soft drink television advertising will identify the images being put forward by the producers of these goods. The study will look for the link, if any, between the meanings associated with beer and the style of beer cans.

## Material Goods and Identity

One of the most influential studies on material goods and meaning is Douglas and Isherwood's *The World of Goods* (1979). The authors argue that goods have both utilitarian and meaningful aspects. Material goods are "a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty" (1979:62). As such, they give fixed, visible form to the cognitive structures of a given culture. The way people see their world, the hierarchies and categories, are given

material expression in their goods. Cultural categories of time, space, nature, class, status, gender and so on, create a system of distinctions that are used to organize and give meaning to the world of experience. This system of meaning guides actions, such as production and consumption, in such a way that the perceived world is made to match the conceived world. Meaning is, of course, hard to fix. Rituals act as conventions that create visible, public definitions and agreed meaning. Consumption is, the authors contend, "a ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events" (1979:65).

Douglas and Isherwood's argument suggests that material goods are a reflection of cultural, that is, cognitive structures. Because goods are cultural products, they embody and give fixed, durable form to the structures of the culture that produced them. This is an important and fruitful insight. In historical archaeology, several studies ranging from 18th century landscape (Leone 1984), vernacular architecture (Glassie 1975), to the Georgian world view (Deetz 1977) have used this same basic premise.

However, material goods can play a more active, generative role in culture. One such role has been suggested by Polly Wiessner for the stylistic attributes of goods. Wiessner, in a series of articles (1983, 1984) has argued for a common behavioral basis for style. Much formal variation in material goods has, she contends, its behavioral basis in the process of creating personal and social identity through comparison. Following work in social psychology, she argues that this is a fundamental human cognitive process by which individuals form their self-images. Self-concepts are formed by individuals evaluating themselves by comparison with others. People form a conception of themselves by looking for how they are the same as, and different from, others. This self-concept is then projected back at the world for the reaction, either confirming or rejecting, of others. Style in material goods is one method through which this negotiation takes place.

If self-concepts are to be presented to others to obtain self-esteem and social recognition, then some means by which a person's self-image can be communicated to others is necessary. Style is one of many channels through which a representation can be presented to others, either consciously or subconsciously. It is one means by which people, sometimes acting individually, sometimes within the context of group membership, can comment on other people, social groups, and institutions and their corresponding ideas, values, and practices. [1984:193]

Wiessner's proposal is particularly interesting when applied to the context of the development of 'consumer culture' in the 19th and 20th century US (Ewen 1976, 1988; Lears 1983). Two aspects are particularly important for understanding style in industrial artifacts. Recent scholarship suggests that, as would be expected with such a fundamental process, the development of a consumer culture in western societies has a long and complex history. The section that follows discusses only two aspects of consumer culture, mass industrialism and identity-focused advertising, that are of particular importance in understanding 19th and 20th century consumer culture. For a review of the fast growing field of the of consumption see McCracken (1988). First, beginning a few decades before the turn of the century and accelerating thereafter, American industry underwent a fundamental change. Prior to this time, industrial production in the US was relatively small, and focused on producing goods for a largely middle to upper class market. This was the period of the proletarianization of working people in the US. The life of the factory imposed new disciplines, new concepts of the relationship between people and the products of their labor. The issue of social control

dominated labor relations. For the developers of early American industry, profits were maximized by a labor force that was dependable, worked long and hard, and was cheap. This was the period of the classic logic of capitalism, pay workers as little as possible and work them for as many hours as possible.

This equation was changed by the development of techniques of mass industrial production. Techniques such as the assembly line allowed industry to produce new goods cheaply and in mass quantities, in quantities that far outstripped the ability of the well to do market to consume. From 1900 to 1930, for example, the population of the US increased 65 percent. In roughly this same period, from 1899 to 1929, the production of manufactured goods increased a phenomenal 208 percent (Lynd 1933:857). To maximize profits in the era of mass production required more than labor that worked hard. The working force had to be taught to be consumers.

The mechanism of mass production could not function unless markets became more dynamic, growing horizontally (nationally), vertically (into social classes not previously among the consumers) and ideologically. Now men and women had to be habituated to respond to the demands of the productive machinery. The corollary to a freely growing system of goods production was a "systematic, nationwide plan... to endow the masses with more buying power," a freely growing system of consumer production. [Ewen 1976:24]

The new realities of mass industrialism required that workers not only produce goods, but also be the primary consumers of those goods. In response, the objective conditions of working life had to change. Higher wages gave workers the extra income, and shorter hours allowed them more time to spend on consuming. Workers were no longer mere machines of production.

Changes in wages and working hours helped to make it possible for workers to buy the products of the new mass industrialism. These were joined by other changes in the national apparatus of marketing and distribution, such as consumer credit and brand marketing. But in addition to all this there was a change in attitude toward consuming. A change from the values of rural agricultural life; hard work, saving, civic responsibility and self-denial, to a set of values focusing on leisure, gratification in the present, spending and self-fulfillment (Lears 1983). How this change came about is a complex and still controversial subject, beyond the scope of this paper, but all agree that advertising was an important part of the process. Advertising was, and still is, used to create a market for the products of mass industrialism. Informational advertising that focused on the qualities of the product soon was overtaken by manipulative advertising that attempted to associate the product with certain ideas, to suggest that the needs of the consumer could be satisfied by buying the product. Producers realized, often on a quite discursive level, that they could use advertising to change the way people felt about the whole process of consumption. In order for the truly prodigious amounts of goods produced by mass industrialism to find a market, consumption had to be changed from the buying of utilitarian necessities, to something much more important in people's lives.

The specific needs addressed were determined by the breakdown of both self and symbolic structures at the turn of century. Advertising offered the ability to construct a self by consuming products.

The second important aspect of the history of consumer culture involves the breakdown of traditional sources of personal identity in the US around the turn of the century. Lears (1983), who has chronicled the changes during this period, argues that "the decline of

symbolic structures outside the self has been the central process in the development of a consumer culture". As people began to move away from the traditional sources of personal identity, the rural community and extended family, and into the impersonal context of the city and factory, Americans began to search for new ways to define themselves. This breakdown in sources of identity came at the same time that American industry was discovering the importance of advertising in creating a market. The convergence of these two trends formed the genesis of modern consumer culture. Advertisers soon discovered that they could offer their products as a source for personal identity. Advertising shifted from the qualities of the product to what consumption of the product would say about the consumer.

Consumption, then, came to be a way that individuals could, non-verbally, express qualities they associated with themselves. Or put another way, the breakdown in sources of identity and the rise of advertising that focused on products as expression lead to a context in which consumption made a statement, regardless of individual motivation. This had impacts not only on questions of self-identity, but also effected how Americans understood class membership. Ewen (1988:57-71), for example, has argued that beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, two distinct conceptions of class and status emerged in the US. One conception, following models from European philosophy and politics, defined class in the context of the social relations of power and production. This view saw the US as polarized between those who owned and controlled the means of production, the captains of industry, and those who lived in service of the industry they could not control, the workers. The competing conception, which was to become dominate in US culture, defined class in the context of the ability to consume. One's class position was determined by the ability to consume the goods associated with that class. The great middle class, which dominates the social reality of modern America, is a product of this conception. American industry, hungry for a market for its mass production, promoted the idea that individuals could rise into the middle class by purchasing the attributes of that class. Class then became a matter of appearances, rather than position in the structure of production.

In the modern US, as a legacy of these 19th century developments, the consumption of products has become like a 'language' through which Americans hold a dialogue on identity. The material products we gather around us, the clothes we wear, the car we drive, even the beverage we drink, make subtle declarations of how we see ourselves and how we would have others see us. Individuals do not consume randomly, but as part of a structured process of creating an ordered cognitive universe and declaring their position in this universe. To give a crude example, if an American man were to wear red flannel shirts and blue jeans, drive a pickup truck with a rifle hanging from a gun rack, and drink a lot of beer, these would not be isolated or unconnected acts. Rather they are structured by the same underlying process. The goods act as material symbols with which our hypothetical man presents an image of himself to the world.

But, since the symbols and meanings used by individuals are rarely entirely of their own making, the term 'presents' may be misleading. It may be more accurate to say that an individual recognizes himself in these material symbols. The process is similar to what Althusser calls the 'Hailing Effect of Ideology' (1971). Very briefly, Althusser's argument is that cultural ideology creates an ordered and meaningful cognitive world. This ideology 'hails' individuals and says "Hey you... this is how the world is structured, these are your roles, and this is what it all means." Individuals react by recognizing themselves as subjects being addressed by ideology, "yea, that's me, I exist." But by doing so, they implicitly recognize the

existence of the ordered world presented by ideology. By defining themselves in the context provided by ideology, their concept of themselves becomes, Althusser argues, subjugated to the meanings provided for them by the ideology. In a similar fashion, consumer goods offer a limited set of roles and identities for individuals in a consumer culture to recognize themselves.

However, creativity is possible. For example, Hebdige (1977) demonstrates how sub-cultures can combine elements of the material culture repertoire in novel ways to disrupt the usual meaning structure and set themselves apart from the larger group. The meanings associated with goods are used as part of creating and maintaining identity. However, these meanings are in no manner neutral or innocent. Indeed, manufacturers, for their own purposes, manipulate the meanings associated with goods through the medium of advertising (McCracken 1986).

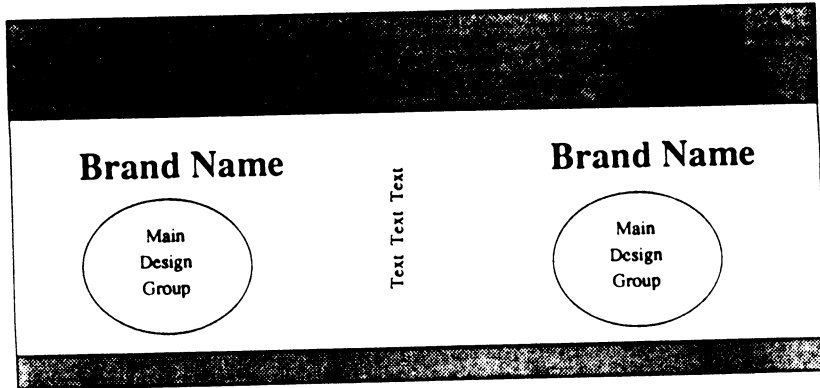
## **Beer and Soft Drink Can Design**

This section will describe a stylistic comparison between contemporary beer and soft drink cans. When studying the familiar and commonplace it is often difficult to 'see' important characteristics exactly because they are so familiar. An archaeologist examining the artifacts of his own culture often lacks the perspective that accrues naturally to those who study the exotic. This paper is primarily about the design of beer cans. The idea for comparing these cans to soft drink cans came from a can of 'generic' beer. Even though the elements of a 'normal' beer can eluded precise description, one competent in American culture could tell the generic beer can did not look like a beer can. In fact it looked like it belonged among the soft drinks. From this insight, it was clear that a precise formulation of the differences between the two types of cans could be used as a tool to discover what was characteristic to each. The difference between the two was like a crack in the uniformity of the familiar that could be pried apart to allow the investigator to see what he already knew.

### **An Average Can**

The beer cans studied (Table 1) were of two basic forms (Figure 1). The most prevalent form divided the can horizontally into three banded areas. The top band usually contains some abstract pattern or the brewer's trademark. The middle band contains the main design group. This typically includes the name of the brand and often some representational scene depicting brewing or nature. The bottom band is either blank or contains text describing the qualities of the beer and its ingredients. The other basic form does not have any explicit horizontal banding. In this case the brand name and the main design group take up the full height of the can. Both of the basic types are further divided vertically into two, or sometimes three, design panels. In each panel the design is repeated exactly so the can has equivalent sides. Vertical text listing the manufacturer and ingredients are often squeezed between the panels. All other text, including brand names, is oriented horizontally.

Type 1



Type 2

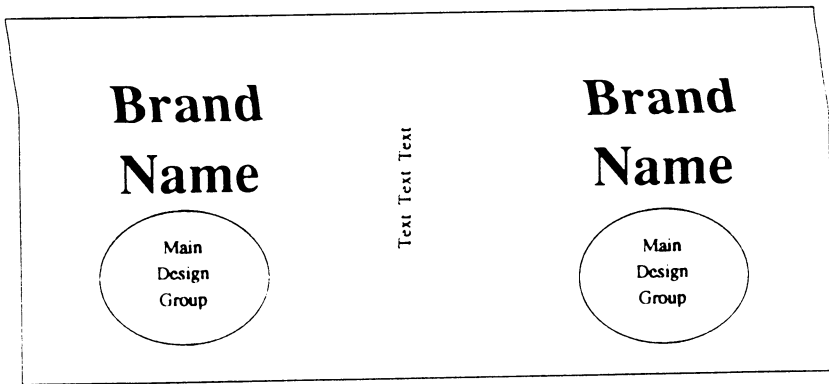


Figure 1: Beer can design structures.

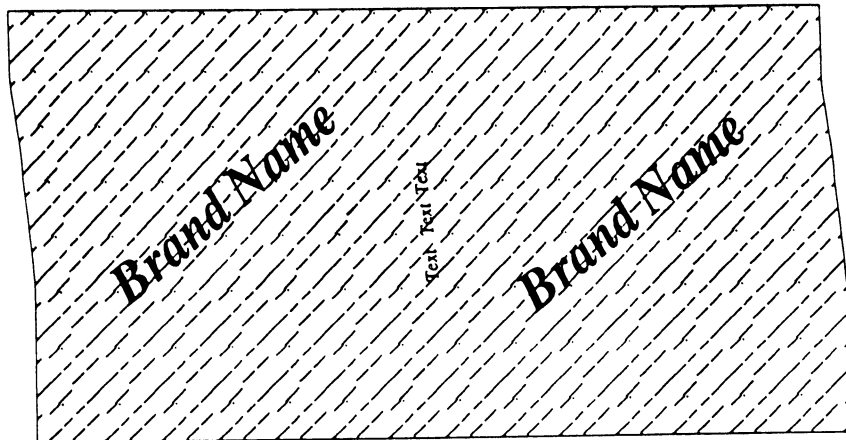


Figure 2: Soft drink can design structure.

**TABLE 1**  
**Beer Cans Studied**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Manufacturer</b>
Coors	Adolph Coors
Budweiser	Anheuser-Busch
Bud Light	Anheuser-Busch
Michelob	Anheuser-Busch
LA	Anheuser-Busch
Hamm's	Pabst Brewing
Olympia	Pabst Brewing
Miller Lite	Miller Brewing
Milwaukee's Best	Miller Brewing
Miller High Life	Miller Brewing
Miller Genuine Draft	Miller Brewing
Stroh's	Stroh Brewery
Schlitz	Schlitz Brewing

**TABLE 2**  
**Soft Drink Cans Studied**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Manufacturer</b>
Coke Classic	Coca-Cola
New Coke	Coca-Cola
Diet Coke	Coca-Cola
Pepsi	Pepsico
Diet pepsi	Pepsico
Mountain Dew	Pepsico
Jolt	Jolt
7Up	Seven Up

The soft drink cans (Table 2) also come in two basic forms (Figure 2). In the most common form, the design flows unbroken around the can both horizontally and vertically. Typically an abstract pattern forms the background. This pattern is repeated all around the can giving an impression of unbroken unity. Two vertical design panels are superimposed on the background. These usually are simple, consisting of just the brand name oriented vertically or at a forty five degree angle. The second basic form is similar to the un-banded beer cans. The main design group and the brand name, oriented horizontally, take up the width of the can, and there is no background pattern. On all cans a legally mandated listing of ingredients, and sometimes optional nutritional information, is inserted between the design panels.

## Colors

Table 4 shows the background colors used for each type of can. Beer can backgrounds are predominantly colored white, with a few gold, a color not found at all on soft drinks. In contrast, soft drink backgrounds are evenly divided between red, white, and green. Looking at

the use of colors on any part of the can (Table 3), red, white and blue are the most often used colors for both types of cans. However beer cans have two common colors, gold and black, that do not appear on soft drinks. Beer cans also tend to use more colors per can, an average of four for beer and three for soft drinks. In general, soft drink cans use color in a simpler and more dramatic fashion. They tend to be dominated by one color, with other colors used for text and other details. Beer cans, in contrast, give a more polychromatic impression, using color to highlight complex design elements.

**Table 3**  
**Colors Used on Cans**

<b>Beer</b>		<b>Soft Drinks</b>	
<b>Color</b>	<b>Times Used</b>	<b>Color</b>	<b>Times Used</b>
Red	12	Red	8
Gold	11	White	8
White	11	Blue	4
Blue	7	Green	2
Black	5	Yellow	2
Silver	1	Silver	1
Orange	1		
Brown	1		
Green	1		
Tan	1		
Mean number of colors per can	4		3

**Table 4**  
**Background Colors Used on Cans**

<b>Beer</b>		<b>Soft Drinks</b>	
<b>Color</b>	<b>Times Used</b>	<b>Color</b>	<b>Times Used</b>
White	8	Red	3
Gold	3	White	3
Silver	1	Green	2
Tan	1		

## Design Elements

Using the number of design elements per design panel as an index (Tables 5, 6), soft drink cans are much less complex than beer cans. The beer cans in the study have an average of ten design elements, while the soft drinks average just four. Design elements are used in a fashion similar to colors. Soft drinks are dominated by just a few simple elements that are repeated. The beer cans, however, have a number of design elements that are used to form several relatively complex design clusters that are discrete and do not repeat. In general impression, beer cans are 'busy' and complex, while soft drink cans are streamlined and simple.



**Table 5**  
**Number of Design Elements: Beer Cans**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Representational</b>	<b>Abstract</b>	<b>Total</b>
Budweiser	3	15	18
Bud Light	3	15	18
Miller Draft	2	11	13
Miller High Life	2	10	12
Coors	5	6	11
Olympia	4	6	10
Schlitz	1	8	9
Hamm's	3	5	8
LA	2	6	8
Miller Lite	2	6	8
Stroh's	1	6	7
Milwaukee's Best	3	3	6
Michelob	1	3	4
Mean number of design elements	2.5	7.7	10

**Table 6**  
**Number of Design Elements: Soft Drink Cans**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Representational</b>	<b>Abstract</b>	<b>Total</b>
Diet Coke	0	7	7
Jolt	1	4	5
New Coke	0	5	5
Classic Coke	0	4	4
Diet Pepsi	0	4	4
Pepsi	0	3	3
Mountain Dew	0	2	2
7Up	0	2	2
Mean number of design elements	0	3.9	4

Only one representational design element was found among the soft drinks. This was a lighting bolt on a can of Jolt cola. It emphasized the Jolt slogan "with real sugar and twice the caffeine." No other soft drink had representational designs. In contrast, all of the beer cans had at least one. The most common representational elements, present on nine of thirteen cans, were stylized depictions of the basic ingredients in beer, hops and malt barley. Six of the cans included are presentation of the American Bald Eagle as part of a corporate emblem. Three cans included depictions of lions, in two cases wearing a crown and carrying swords. The Olympia and Coors cans both had a scene showing a waterfall and pond. The tradition of brewing was

referred to twice. The LA can has a illustration of wooden brewing equipment, and the Milwaukee's Best can includes a depiction of a horse drawn beer wagon loaded with barrels.

The representational elements on beer cans visually represent two themes, the ingredients used in the beer and the tradition represented by the beer. The beer is visually presented as a natural product. The result of the union of hops, barley and water. The two waterfall scenes reinforce the connection to nature. In one case the waterfall is overgrown by luxuriant strands of hops and barley that dominate the scene and even spill over on top of adjacent designs. In the other illustration, the waterfall is part of a rock strewn wilderness with trees and snow capped peaks in the background. Beer is also presented as a traditional product. The reality of the industrial methods used by modern brewers is denied in the depiction of wooden brewing tools and horse drawn beer wagons. The corporate emblems, made to look like royal seals, refer back to the practice of royal sanctioning of brewing. The idea of royalty itself, at least for Americans, evokes ideas of past and tradition. This emphasis on royalty and the past occurs again in the use of lions, the traditional symbol of royalty.

### **Text on Cans**

The distinction between simplicity and complexity is seen again in the use of text as part of the main design structure. Table 7, which includes only words used as a integral part of the design, shows a marked difference between the two classes of cans. Beer cans average 54 words per can, while soft drinks average just fifteen. The three soft drinks that use the most text are all in some way special. The text is used to mark these products as distinct from other soft drinks. Jolt has real sugar and extra caffeine. The two diet colas contain a non-caloric sweetener.

The text used in the design, while not often read by consumers, gives an indication of the message put forward by the can design. The most common message is that the ingredients used in the beer are high quality and natural. Hamm's, for instance, is brewed "from purest water and choicest barley malt, grain and hops." The Michelob can states "every ingredient used is the very finest available." Several cans include the statement "contains no additives or preservatives." Both the Olympia and Coors cans emphasize the purity of the water used in brewing. The beer is presented as the product of tradition. Six of the thirteen cans explicitly mention that the brewers have been in existence since some date in the 18th or 19th century. Others, such as Schlitz ("our tradition of brewing excellence assures your continued satisfaction") or Budweiser ("brewed by our original process...") allude to a long history of brewing. Brewing itself is portrayed as a traditional craft rather than an industrial process. Olympia, for example, is the product of an "unsurpassed skill as master brewers...." Stroh's is "the result of over 200 years of family brewing experience," and Hamm's is "brewed in true family tradition...." The overall image presented by the text is that beer is the product of the finest natural ingredients and pure water brewed by skilled craftsmen as part of a long family tradition.

### **Beer and Soft Drink Advertising**

In order to discover some of the meanings producers are trying to associate with their products, a sample of television beer and soft drink advertising was analyzed. The sample consisted of thirty beer and ten soft drink commercials. The commercials were captured on video tape from commercial broadcast television from stations in the San Francisco Bay area

during the period 2/88-6/88. No systematic sampling techniques were employed. The sample represents the majority of the beer commercials at the time, and a small fraction of the soft drink ads. The following discussion will focus in depth on a few of the ads that are representative of the themes running through the sample.

Based on looking at all the beer advertisements, some general trends are evident. The beer ads are focused on men, and present beer drinking as a male activity. The majority of characters shown in the ads are middle aged, middle class men. The announcing voice is, in all cases, male. Those doing action in the ads are almost always males. When they appear, women are commonly portrayed either accompanying men or as objects of male desire. Young women, often clad in bathing suits, are shown in quick cuts interspersed into the main action of the ad. They also appear occasionally in tightly cropped shots that only show parts of their body, a fate that does not befall any of the male characters. Most of the ads take place either in a bar or outdoors. The bar scenes most often show men and women socializing, laughing, or dancing. Drinking beer is of course implied, but not shown due to FCC regulations. The outdoor scenes show men engaged in various outdoor activities such as fishing, golf and land sailing. There is a strong connection to sports. The ads are most often shown during Saturday and Sunday afternoon sports broadcasts. A series of ads for Miller Lite use male former professional athletes as actors. This emphasis on men and symbolically male activity indicates that the advertisers are targeting a largely male audience. We may expect, then, that the messages running through the ads will be of particular relevance to males, and, to the extent that identification through consumption is used as a technique, that these messages will address male self-identity.

An ad for Miller High Life presents some ideas already encountered in the stylistic

**TABLE 7**  
**Number of Words per Can\***

<b>Beer</b>		<b>Soft Drinks</b>	
<b>Brand</b>	<b># Words</b>	<b>Brand</b>	<b># Words</b>
Budweiser	134	Jolt	42
Hamm's	84	Diet Pepsi	28
LA	73	Diet Coke	20
Olympia	56	Classic Coke	12
Bud Light	52	Mountain Dew	8
Stroh's	52	New Coke	7
Miller Lite	50	Pepsi	3
Coors	44	7Up	2
Miller High Life	43		
Michelob	38		
Schlitz	34		
Miller's Draft	31		
Milwaukee's Best	10		
Mean number of words per can	54		15

\*Words used as part of the main design structure only. Legally required words, capacity of can, etc. excluded.

analysis of the cans. The ad consists of several scenes of men enjoying outdoor activities. The men in the ad, however, are dwarfed by the natural beauty of their surroundings. The shots in the ad include a mountain meadow with deer running by and snow capped peaks in the background, canoes in a wilderness lake, and the panoramic view of a river valley. The photography is gorgeous and warm, of nature pristine and beautiful. The men seem to revel in the simplicity of nature at the same time they enjoy their Miller High Life. The song in the background reveals the theme of the ad.

Stop and taste the high life, take a hard earned break every now and again, stop  
and taste the high life, kick back and drink it in, spend some time just finding  
out what you're working for..what its all about

The ad implies that what are really important are the simple pleasures of nature, not the mad rush of urban, industrial life. Indeed the beer itself is, by association, a simple natural product. Consumers who appreciate this can partake in nature by drinking Miller High Life, and thus affirm themselves as someone who knows what is really important in life, "what it's all about." This ad reinforces the idea that beer is a simple, natural, and traditional, that is, non-industrial, product.

Two other ads, one for Corona, the other for Coors Extra Gold Draft, play on a similar theme. The Corona commercial consists of just one scene of a fishing boat at sea. The shot shows two bottles of beer, one full and standing upright, the other empty, on its side and rolling gently as the boat rocks. Nearby is a fishing pole and a cooler filled with Corona. The shot is held on screen, without music or text, until just seconds from the end of the ad. At this point, text is added that reads "what you see is what you get." Two points are important here. First, the location on a fishing boat at sea again raises the idea of outdoors and nature. Second, and more important, the main stress is on simplicity and directness. The ad is just one shot. We are shown only the beer and a location where it can be enjoyed. The ad, and the beer, are honest and simple. This beer, the ad implies, is for consumers who appreciate a real beer without hoopla and hard sell.

The Coors Extra Gold Draft ad follows the same line. The commercial is a series of shots that focus on the product alone. Cans and bottles, for example, are shown being opened, tall glasses being filled with cold beer. The images are strong and simple. Often the shots are tightly cropped so that only hands holding the product or just part of a can are shown. The text and voice over emphasize that Coors Extra Gold Draft is BIG with FULL TILT taste for those who REALLY like to drink beer. The beer is portrayed as strong and bold, its presentation honest and direct. The message here is that this is a no-nonsense beer shown in a no-nonsense manner. This beer does not need partying dogs or dancing women. It is a direct and honest ad for consumers who appreciate these qualities.

Another theme that appears in the advertisements is that beer is for people who enjoy having fun. A Bud Light commercial, for instance, revolves around a play on the product name. A man in a bar asks for a light beer, and becomes a lamp, with 'light' coming out of his eyes. He finally turns himself off by pulling on his tie. A series of commercials for Miller Lite, featuring former athletes, highlight the mild joking and bragging relationship that often characterizes male to male relationships in American culture. One of these, for example, shows a former baseball player, known for his strength, playing golf with two friends. He hits the ball so hard it flies all the way to China, much to the amazement of several Chinese golfers who are almost hit by the ball.

The beer ad character best known for his fun loving attitude is, of course, Spuds MacKenzie the beer drinking dog. This spokesman for Bud Light is a fantasy figure who illustrates the hedonism often portrayed in the ads. In one ad in the sample, for example, Spuds is shown attending a party on a large yacht. He arrives, stylishly attired, in a small submarine. Along with his three young female companions, Spuds plays games, dances and enjoys himself. Beer, the ads suggest, is for consumers who want release from the strictures of everyday life. Like Spuds, they want to "party hardy" and experience the joy of the moment. The hedonism represented is not, however, venal or compulsive. What in a person might be construed as egocentric or decadent, in the figure of a dog, an innocent, becomes the uncomplicated joy for life.

Another ad, this time for Budweiser, also softens hedonism with fantasy. The ad takes place on the front porch of a house during a winter snow storm. A young man in a bathing suit saunters onto the porch and begins setting up for a day on the beach. He brings out a large radio for music, a cooler full of Budweiser, and a reclining beach chair. He then unrolls a towel that magically contains three beautiful young women. Satisfied with his preparations, he then leans back in his chair, points a bottle of Budweiser into the sky and transforms the storm into a brilliant sunny day.

## Discussion

As with most products in American culture, Beer has aspects beyond the utilitarian. It is of course a thirst quenching, intoxicating drink. But beyond this, it is imbedded in a web of culturally constituted meaning. By buying and drinking beer, a consumer, willing or not, consciously or not, also partakes of these meanings. It is argued here that because of the history of the development of mass industrialism in the United States, the meanings associated with goods have become implicated in the process of forming and maintaining a self-identity. In this context at least, consumption has become one of the basic rituals by which individuals form and project an image of themselves.

This process is in fact parodied in an advertisement for Heineken beer. The ad consists of two scenes in which two men, about 35 years old, talk about their upwardly mobile lifestyles. Both are shown as slaves to the latest fashions, buying clothes and other goods in an attempt to put forward a trendy image. One of the men is shown in an apartment with modern looking furniture. He points to his clothes and says "designer sweats", pointing to a wall rack filed with the latest in video and audio technology, "remote controls...everything." Then, with a self satisfied smile, he says, "VP at 28." The voice over ends the commercial with "when you're done kidding around...Heineken." This is a parody of the self-conscious over-consumption and fashion mania of the 'yuppie' lifestyle. The characterization is of men who desperately put forward a successful image by buying the latest fashionable goods, but whose values are empty. They are just "kidding around." By implication, Heineken is a beer for a man who knows himself, and does not follow the latest fad. A man who knows there are more important things in life than the latest clothes and expensive toys.

## The Image of Men in Beer Advertising

The beer ads provide a rich sample of the values producers are trying to associate with their products. These ads seem to be presenting a particular conception of male gender in American culture. A conception that denies the position of men in a modern industrial society.

Four themes are present. First, beer is presented as a product of nature, the pure union of hops, barley and water. This is in implied opposition to other food products, such as colas, and junk foods, whose industrial nature is all too evident. In reality, of course, modern brewing is an industrial process. But to sell their product, the advertisers offer the image of men enjoying the beauty of nature. Men doing what men did in pre-industrial society, before they were pulled from nature by civilization and industry. And this image sells, because in a significant number of American men, it strikes a responsive cord. For many men activities such as hunting and fishing, or even team sports in which men cooperate in the accomplishment of a goal, serve as a tonic for the artificiality of industrial life, of life in the factory, of life as anonymous member of the vast cooperate machine.

Closely related to the idea of naturalness, is the representation of beer as the product of craft. This theme again presents beer as a non-industrial product. In this case, however, the stress is on the social context of the production. Beer is presented as the result of the skill of master brewers, of craftsmen. A craftsman, unlike most workers in an industrial setting, is able to contribute something of himself to the products he makes. The quality of the end product is largely the result of the skill of the craftsman. In a craft context, each individual ego is important. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that in an industrial context each individual is totally interchangeable, it is clear that, when compared to craft based production, industrial workers are much less significant as individuals. Beer is presented as the product of a system of production that values the contribution of individuals, a system in which men have more power over their lives, and the conditions and end products of their labor.

The third theme that emerges from the ads is an emphasis on simplicity, directness and honesty. A number of the ads present their beer in opposition to exaggerated selling techniques and to pretension in individuals. These ads are presented as simple and direct. If the beer is good, there is no need for tricks in advertising. In some of the ads, this is extended to people. If men really know themselves and their values, there is no need for the latest fashions or expensive possessions. Such men possess an inner strength, an other quality often attributed to beer, that allows them to present themselves to the world honestly. And, the ads suggest, such men will appreciate an honest presentation of a beer.

The final theme revolves around the enjoyment of life and sensual pleasures. A good deal of the advertising focuses on beer as part of having fun. Beer is presented as an integral part of many different social gatherings. Sex is used in a number of the ads. Indeed one of the commercials, for Miller beers, is composed almost entirely of men admiring women on a beach, along with the slogan "it's hot, Hot, HOT."

This emphasis on having fun is related to one of the more important aspects of modern American ideology. This is the division of time into work time and free time, or work/professional life and personal life. Work time is sold to employers in return for money, while free time belongs to the individual. The individual exchanges a certain amount of time and labor for money that allows him to enjoy his free time. This ideology misrepresents reality in two ways. First, as Marx has suggested, the notion that time and labor is sold in a 'fair' exchange masks the basic principles of a capitalist system. Second, it represents work as separate and isolated, not part of the social whole. The wholeness of lived experience is disrupted. A certain part of a persons life is 'sold' to someone else. Its ok for work to be an unfulfilling, or even miserable, experience because that time 'belongs' to the employer, he owns that part of the employee's life and, within reason, can do with it what he will. The ideology is so powerful because it restricts the range of people's imagination. It will never

occur to someone who believes others can own part of his life, that it is possible to demand that all of life be meaningful.

Instead, the employee is offered non-work time as his 'own time'. In this time he is free to pursue enjoyment in life. Beer is presented as an integral part of men's enjoyment of their free time. After working hard, fun, enjoyment and pleasure are their due. Two well known beer ad campaigns (it's Miller time; for all you do, this Bud's for you) follow this track. The weeks of the month are divided into 'work days' (Monday-Friday) and a weekend of free time (thank god it's Friday). Beer ads are, appropriately, concentrated on the weekends as producers attempt to associate their products with free time and enjoyment. The hedonism seen in the ads is, then, an expression of this ideological division of time.

These ads, then, are selling a particular image of men. An image of men who understand the importance of nature, who are valuable as individuals, who have power over the product of their labor, who are honest and self assured, and who know how to enjoy life. They are, in short, selling a particular image of male empowerment in the face of an often emasculating industrial culture. The ads are saying, "hey, this is you isn't it?, Don't you recognize yourself and your values in these images?" "If you do recognize yourself, then our product is for you." The ads are attempting to associate themselves with a particular way of conceiving of the role of men in our society. If they can convince men that they see themselves in those images, then the product becomes appropriate for these men to consume and thus reinforce the image they have of themselves. The argument here is that when a man decides to buy some drink, one of the factors, besides taste, price and other equally important considerations, that goes into the decision of which drink to buy is whether the meanings associated with the drink are in congruence with how he sees himself and how he wants others to see him. It would, of course, be a mistake to overload the simple act of buying a beer with too much cultural significance. Such a purchase must be seen as a very small part of a much larger, and more complex process. However, it would be equally erroneous to overlook the fact that such complex processes as forming and maintaining self-identity are in fact made up of the accumulation of many small, seemingly simple acts.

In the context of modern United States industrialism producers play upon the process of forming a self-identity by attempting to manipulate the meanings associated with goods. In the case of beer the process is ironic. The image being used is of males resisting the disempowering aspects of industrial life. But this image of resistance to industrialism is being used by industry to sell industrial products. As Ewen (1988) has perceptively pointed out, anything, absolutely anything, can be stripped of its deeper meanings and used to sell products.

## **Meaning and Beer Can Design**

We have seen that producers attempt to associate certain meanings with beer. An important question for archaeologists is what, if any, connection is there between these meanings and the design of the beer cans. To answer this question, we need to again compare beer cans to soft drink cans. The main distinction between the two classes of cans is that beer cans tend to be relatively complex, while soft drink cans are simple and streamlined. The beer cans use more text, more colors and more design elements, including representational design elements. The soft drink cans, in contrast, are dominated by a few simple abstract designs that are repeated.

Within the context of the history of modern design these two patterns are associated with very different meanings. Rational modernism, the dominant design trend in the 20th century, emphasizes simplicity, honesty of form and lack of ornamentation. The soft drink cans are clearly part of this design history. As part of rational modernist design, they have been stripped of all ornamentation and reduced to a few simple, basic designs. In contrast, the beer cans are a part of an older, pre-modernist design ethic. Rather than lean and functional, they revel in ornamentation and complexity. In the context of 20th century design, the soft drink cans look 'modern', while the beer cans look traditional or old fashioned.

Here then is the key, at least for drink cans. The design of the cans has no inherent connection to meaning. However history, in this case the history of design, has associated certain meanings with certain design patterns. These meanings must be in congruence with the meanings that producers are trying to associate with their products. A beer can with a stripped down, modernist look would be in conflict with past oriented, anti-industrial meanings being associated with beer.

It seems that the producers are well aware of the connection between the meaning associated with their products and the design of the packaging. One of the commercials in the sample, for Michelob, was very different from the rest. This ad, unlike the others, was set in an explicitly urban context. The action revolves around a young man late for a date. There are several scenes of him rushing through the streets of the city, and of his date angrily waiting for him. The ad is shot at odd angles, with quick cuts, blue neon lighting and rock music in the background. These combine to give the commercial the impression of fast paced city life. The slogan used is "the night belongs to Michelob." Unlike the majority of beer ads which highlight nature, outdoors and tradition, this commercial is targeting young adults who enjoy the energy of modern urban life. What is particularly interesting is that the Michelob can is the most strikingly 'modern' of the beer cans. It consists of just the brand name with a black stripe above superimposed on a gold background. Only three design elements are used. It is unknown at this time if the Michelob can design was recently changed, but the congruence between the ad campaign and the can design is remarkable.

A small number of soft drink advertisements were analyzed. As might be expected the representation of soft drinks in advertisements is very different from that of beer. A commercial for Diet Pepsi, for instance, depicted a young man who had created a clone of himself. The action revolved around the idea that the clone was too good. Eventually, the man's girlfriend mistakes the clone for the real thing. The slogan used was "taste that's generations ahead." What is important here is that the emphasis is, not on past or tradition, but on the future. Having your girlfriend mistake your clone for yourself is a decidedly 'modern' problem. Another soft drink ad, this time for regular Pepsi, is set in the Soviet Union. The ad shows teenagers in the Soviet Union who dress stylishly, listen to rock music, are misunderstood by their parents, and drink Pepsi. Much of the ad centers on generational conflict. The young people are shown as forward looking and their parents as tradition-bound and old fashioned. The voice over implies that perhaps it is not a coincidence that so much change has occurred in the Soviet Union since Pepsi was first introduced. Again the emphasis is on change and modernity. Unlike the beer ads these commercials look forward and embrace the future. As might be expected, the modernist design of the soft drink cans is matched by a representation of soft drinks as products of change and the future.



## Conclusion

This study has focused on the relationship between stylistic attributes and meaning in a modern industrial context. In this context, 19th and 20th century consumer culture, it was argued that two points are critical in understanding this relationship. First, consumption has become part of how individuals form and maintain self identities. This phenomenon has its historical roots in the development of mass industrialism, which propelled the mass of working people into the new role of consumer of the industrial output, and the breakdown of the traditional sources of identity found in the pre-industrial, agrarian society, which left individuals in search of new definitions of self. The producers of goods offered, through the medium of advertising, the idea that individuals could become the people they envisioned themselves to be by consuming the material attributes of that ideal. This leads to the second major point, that in this context, the meaning associated with goods is not fixed, but dynamic. Producers have used advertising to manipulate the meanings associated with the goods they sell. Much of modern marketing is directed, not at the product itself, but to producing a unified image to associate with the product.

This dynamic between style and meaning, producer and consumer was investigated by a stylistic analysis of beer and soft drink can designs. It was found that beer cans, with complex, ornamental, multi-colored designs, refer to a pre-modernist design tradition. In contrast, Soft drink cans, with simple, streamlined and functional designs, are part of the modernist tradition. This was in concordance with the major theme of the associated advertising. Soft drink ads emphasized modernity, youth and the future. Beer ads put forth an image of male gender that emphasized pre-industrial lifeways and denied the position of men in the modern world. Thus, the ultimate link between the style of beer cans and the meanings associated with beer is one of history. In this cultural tradition, the designs used on beer cans look old fashioned and traditional, and the beer producers are trying to portray beer as a product for men who identify themselves with a traditional conception of male gender. This rather tight fit between style and meaning found in this case may not hold for all classes of modern material culture. It is most probably an artifact of the marketing process. A good deal of modern marketing revolves around making the fit between the product and the presentation of the product as close and direct as possible. Material culture that is not part of the competitive market, may exhibit more subtle or complex linkages between style and meaning.

## Notes

1. The original version of this paper was written for a seminar on stylistic analysis in archaeology conducted by Dr. Margaret Conkey, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. My thanks to Dr. Conkey and the other members of the seminar group for a stimulating and thought provoking discussion that encouraged me to see many new ways of understanding material culture.

## References Cited

Althusser, Louis

- 1971 Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, pp. 127-186. Monthly Review Press, New York and London.

Deetz, James

- 1977 *In Small Things Forgotten: the Archaeology of Early American Life*. Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, New York.

- Douglas, Mary, and Baron Isherwood  
1979 *The World of Goods*. Basic Books, New York.
- Ewen, Stuart  
1976 *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*. McGraw-Hill, New York.  
1988 *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*. Basic Books, New York.
- Glassie, Henry  
1975 *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: a Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts*. University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.
- Hebdige, Dick  
1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Methuen, London.
- Lears, T. J. Jackson  
1983 From Salvation to Self-realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930. In *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, edited by R. W. Fox and T.J.J. Lears. Pantheon, New York.
- Leone, Mark P.  
1984 Interpreting Ideology in Historical Archaeology: Using the Rules of Perspective in the William Paca Garden in Annapolis, Maryland. In *Ideology, Power and Prehistory*, edited by D. Miller and C. Tilley. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Lynd, Robert S.  
1933 The People as Consumers. In *Recent Social Trends in the United States*, Report of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends. McGraw-Hill, New York.
- McCracken, Grant  
1986 Culture and Consumption: a Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods. *Journal of Consumer Research* 3:71-78.  
1988 *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Wiessner, Polly  
1983 Style and Social Information in Kalahari San Projectile Points. *American Antiquity* 48:253-276.  
1984 Reconsidering the Behavioral Basis for Style: A Case Study among the Kalahari San. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 3:190-234.
- Wobst, H. Martin  
1977 Stylistic Behavior and Information Exchange. In *For the Director: Research Essays in Honor of James B. Griffin*, edited by C. E. Cleland, pp. 317-342. Papers of the Museum of Anthropology No.61. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.