

The Harper Magazines, Part Three

Harper's Bazar

In the mid-1860s a fashion magazine titled *Der Bazar*, published in Berlin, Germany, caught Fletcher Harper's attention, and he suggested that Harper & Brothers should launch an American version in partnership with the German publisher. Despite his brothers' initial reluctance, Fletcher's enthusiasm carried the day, and on November 2, 1867 the first issue of *Harper's Bazar* appeared. (Exman, 100, 121) The new weekly's subtitle was "A Repository of Fashion, Pleasure, and Instruction." It was 16 pages long and subscriptions were \$4.00 per year. (Rowell's 1869, 73)

Weekly frequency was one of several qualities that made the *Bazar* unique. The two Philadelphia magazines that had dominated women's magazine publishing for several decades, *Godey's Lady's Book* (1830) and *Peterson's* (1842), were both monthlies. The *Bazar's* size was another—it was a folio tabloid and its competitors were book-size octavos.

A third unique quality the *Bazar* offered was an immediacy that its competitors couldn't match. *Godey's* and *Peterson's* copied many of their illustrations from French magazines, but had to re-engage the plates. The fashions could be months out of date when they were finally pictured. (Bohleke, 120ff) Through their partnership with the German *Bazar*, Harper & Brothers received electrotypes of the original printing plates. (Peterson, 220) This allowed them to publish simultaneously with periodicals in Paris and Berlin. (Harper, 249) With direct access to European styles and trends, and the ability to picture the fashions immediately, *Harper's Bazar* provided readers with an up-to-date, broad, and worldly perspective. A contemporary journal referred to the *Bazar's* "brilliant illustrations and clever text." (in Exman, 121)

The new magazine was well received. Mary L. Booth, whom Fletcher Harper hired as founding editor, described it as "the most rapid success ever known in journalism."

A newspaper is generally expected to lose money in the beginning, until it gains an established footing. The *Bazar*, on the contrary, has paid handsomely from the very first number, a thing almost unprecedented in journalistic annals. This result is explained by the need that existed for just such a journal, and by the very liberal manner in which the efforts of the editor have been seconded by the wholly exceptional facilities possessed by the publishers for carrying out the designs of the paper. (Wingate, 259)

Circulation claims vary. The company boasted of having reached 100,000 in six weeks. (Exman, 121) More believable is Rowell's 1869 estimate of 70,000 (73)

Booth was a historian and translator, and a Harper & Brothers author. As editor she earned \$50 per week. (Exman, 122) Booth's fluency in German and French must have commended her to Fletcher Harper, but she had other valuable qualities as well, including a "masculine grasp of business and the quick decisiveness of a man of affairs," according to her successor, Margaret E. Sangster. (269) Booth stayed with the *Bazar* for 22 years, until her death in 1889, and put her stamp on the *Bazar* in much the same way that *Godey's* became an extension of Sarah Jane Hale's personality or *Peterson's* an extension of Ann Stephens's. Sangster said that Booth had a feminine reserve, was gracious and dignified, but very capable of holding her side of an argument (269f). Booth approached content with a healthy sense of realism, recognizing that not all her readers were beautiful or happy in marriage. (Exman, 122f)

When asked if she viewed fashion as the *Bazar's* principal subject matter, she replied:

I don't think that it is thus regarded by those who know much of the paper. It seems to me that a journal which numbers among its constant contributors the best writers of light literature,

both of Europe and America, which treats, in the course of each volume, of almost every subject that would be likely to interest the family circle, and which contains some of the finest art illustrations published in any newspaper in the country, can hardly be ranked by anyone as a mere journal of fashion. A considerable space is devoted to fashion, as a subject peculiarly interesting to women, but this is only one department out of many in a paper designed to interest men, women and children. (Wingate, 257)

And Booth did endow her magazine with first-rate literary content. Among the regular contributors were George Curtis, who wrote a column called “Manners Upon the Road” under the nom de plume of the “Old Bachelor.” He was later replaced by Thomas Wentworth Higginson whose column was called “Women and Men.” (Exman, 121) Beginning in 1888 John Kendrick Bang handled the humor department called “Facetiae,” which lasted through the 1890s, and William Dean Howells produced a popular series on “Heroines of Fiction” in the ’90s.

Mott called the *Bazar* “a ladies’ *Harper’s Weekly*... with fashions and patterns taking the place of politics and public affairs.” (III, 389) It included gossip from London and Washington DC, sewing patterns, serial novels, and, appropriately, plenty of illustration. (Exman, 122) The Boston *Transcript* said that dressing in styles featured in the *Bazar* was every American woman’s “aim and ambition.” (in Harper & Brothers, 5)

An 1882 advertisement for the *Bazar* touted the breadth of its contents:

The arrangements made for the treatment of embroidery and decorative needlework are unusually complete...

Novelties in every department of house-keeping are also regularly recorded in the *Bazar*, and articles on artistic house-furnishing convey to its readers practical information upon that interesting and popular subject.

Trustworthy decisions upon questions of dress, manners, and social customs are given each week in the column entitled “Answers to Correspondents...”

Occasional letters from Paris, London, New York, and other great cities give charming glimpses of society on both sides of the Atlantic. (*Critic*, xii)

Like the readerships of the *Monthly* and *Weekly*, *Bazar’s* audience was large, loyal, and solidly middle-class. Exman wrote that, if the contents reflected the audience, most readers “had servants and could live in houses costing from seven to ten thousand dollars.” (122)

The *Bazar* under Booth was an early, if covert, voice for women’s rights—one historian has described it as “subtly subversive.” (Bennett, 225ff). It was certainly designed to inform and assist women in ways that were more meaningful than simply picturing the latest clothing styles. Booth (and her successor, Sangster) recognized that women were just as capable as men in many professions, and they viewed mindless domesticity as an obstacle to personal development. (Sangster, 258ff ; Bennett, 236ff) In its editorial essays the *Bazar* profiled achievements of well-known women (including “Champions of Woman Suffrage” in 1869), took a skeptical view of “labor-saving” devices that in practice made women work harder, and described the combined role of wife, mother, and housekeeper as “absolute bondage.” (in Bennett, 237ff) In 1875 the *Bazar* said that women had proved their ability as ministers, doctors, lawyers, financiers, architects, artists, and authors, “vindicating their equal right with men to work, to live, to think, as complementary halves of the same creation.” (in Bennett, 239) And having seen the garment industry’s horrendous working conditions firsthand, Booth was well aware of how women of the working class were treated. On many occasions, including in a series of articles by Juliet Corson, the *Bazar* exposed and condemned the exploitation of mill workers, shop girls, and seamstresses. (Bennett, 240)

But Booth was resolute in denying that the *Bazaar* had a political agenda, often insisting that her magazine stood above the fray. She wrote Higginson,

It has been a cardinal principle with the *Bazaar*, as a home journal, conservedly to abstain from the discussion of vexed questions of religion, politics, and kindred topics, and, while maintaining a firm and progressive attitude, to endeavor to promote harmony at the fireside for which it was designed—to bring peace, and not a sword. (in Harper, 250)

The magazine's relationship with its readers was not one-sided. Booth noted her readers' interaction:

We have inquiries on all sorts of subjects, and plenty of friendly eulogies, with some intelligent criticism, and occasional advice from tyros, in illustration of the old adage that "editing a paper is like stirring up a fire; everybody thinks he could do it better than the one who holds the poker." (Wingate, 257)

As was the case with Harper's other magazines, the ability to leverage company resources was a significant factor in *Bazaar's* success. The *Bazaar* proved to be a useful place to promote the company's other books, and collected articles from the *Bazaar* provided Harper & Brothers with books on a variety of subjects. Examples include:

-*The Bazaar Book of Decorum: The Care of the Person, Manners, Etiquette, and Ceremonials*

-*The Bazaar Book of Health: The Dwelling, the Nursery, the Bedroom, the Dining-Room, the Parlor, the Library, the Kitchen, the Sick-Room*

-*The Bazaar Book of the Household. Marriage, Establishment, Servants, Housekeeping, Children, Home Life, Company*

In its first three decades the *Bazaar* took full advantage of the Harper & Brothers art department—many of the staff artists contributed, including Nast. (Mott III, 389) Halftones were introduced to the *Bazaar* in April, 1891, altering the magazine's appearance and its approach to fashion coverage. (Exman, 125)

When Sangster succeeded Booth in 1889, she brought experience gained at several other magazines, including *Hearth and Home* (where she had replaced Mary Mapes Dodge when Dodge left for *St. Nicholas*) and the *Christian Intelligencer*, where she edited the "Family Page" for years, corresponding diligently with young readers. (Exman, 124f ; Sangster 260) Sangster had a special interest in children's writing and had also run "Our Post-Office Box," the contributors' page at *Harper's Young People* before moving to the *Bazaar*. (Sangster 260)

Looking at today's *Bazaar*, it's hard to imagine that this worldly showcase of celebrities, hairstyles, cosmetics, with features like "Sexy Shoes" and "How to Hook Up," was once edited by a pious and sentimental Victorian whose literary heroes included Alfred Lord Tennyson, James Greenleaf Whittier, and Margaret Oliphant. In her writing, Sangster sometimes sounded like a diligent Sunday school teacher encouraging students to renounce fads and frivolities instead of embracing them. She admitted that she "had never cared very much about dress, had been indifferent to gowns and hats." (276)

Fortunately, Sallie G. Shanks, the *Bazaar's* first fashion editor, continued in her position under Sangster, who described Shanks as a "dark-eyed, graceful, low-voiced Southern woman." (278) One of Shanks's primary goals was to provide women with clear instruction so they could recreate the *Bazaar's* fashions for themselves. (Sangster, 278) Patterns became a common feature of women's magazines in the late 19th century, and

complexity must have been a common feature of the patterns, given the fashions of the time. J.W. Harper referred to “the large German pattern sheet, which looked like a railroad map.” (255)

Sangster left the *Bazar* when Harper & Brothers reorganized in 1899, and was succeeded by Elizabeth Jordan. (Exman, 126) In 1901 the *Bazar* became a monthly and reduced its trim size, economies motivated at least in part by the company’s financial struggles. (Mott III, 390)

Harper’s Bazaar in the 20th Century

In 1913 the *Bazar* was sold to William Randolph Hearst’s International Magazine Company, and it probably owes its longevity to the change in ownership and attitude. According to Mott, the *Bazar* “immediately became more sophisticated, gay, and ‘smart’ . . . it had been Harperish, but now it became Hearstian.” (III, 390) Magazine historian Theodore Peterson said that under Hearst it became “thick, glossy, chic, lavishly illustrated,”—which is still a good description of the magazine today. (220).

Following the transfer of ownership, three editors (W. M. Johnson, Hartford Powell, and J. C. Hilder) passed quickly through the editor’s office. (Mott III, 388) It was said that Mrs. Hearst took a personal interest in the magazine, and the position may not have been either secure or independent. (Exman, 126) Eventually Henry B. Sell took the reins in 1920. He was instrumental in establishing the *Bazar’s* tone and position in the ’20s.

Charles H. Towne succeeded Sell in 1926. It was Towne who added the third *A* to the magazine’s name in 1929, making it the *Bazaar*, which it remains. (Mott III, 390) Towne had previously worked at *Cosmopolitan*, the *Delineator*, and *Smart Set*. After retiring from publishing he took up acting and had a long-running Broadway role in *Life with Father*. (Douglas, 67)

Arthur Samuels became chief editor of the *Bazaar* when Towne left in 1929. His primary interest was the magazine’s written content—stories, essays, and verse—and he was in his third year in office when Carmel W. Snow joined the *Bazaar’s* staff as fashion editor in 1932. (Peterson, 220)

Snow was born in Ireland, moved to New York as a child, and began her publishing career in 1921 at Condé Nast’s *Vogue*, where she became editor of *Vogue’s* American edition under editor-in-chief Edna Woolman Chase. (Rubin ; Rowlands, 110) *Vogue* had larger circulation and more advertisers than its competitors, but Snow felt constrained both in her career aspirations—Chase had no intention of relinquishing the top spot, which she held until 1952—and by Chase’s formal and traditional approach to content, especially design. (Rubin)

When Snow arrived at the *Bazaar*, her hands-on energy contrasted with Samuels’s distant, closed-door approach to management, and within two years Snow had become chief editor and Samuels had resigned. (Tomkins ; Snow, 113) Snow had a gift for finding talent: among her hires were art director Alexey Brodovitch, fashion editor Diana Vreeland, and fiction editor George Davis.

Brodovitch has been described as “virtually the model for the modern magazine art director,” (Grundberg) and as someone who “changed the look of American magazines, advertising layouts, and graphic design.” He had a commitment to modern design in which simplicity and immediacy were primary. Known for his use of white space and innovative photography, Brodovitch employed (and in some cases mentored) a large group of talented contributors, including photographers Richard Avedon, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Horst P. Horst, Martin Munkacsi, and Irving Penn, and artists Marc Chagall, Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dali, Man Ray, and Andy Warhol. (AIGA)

While working at the *Bazaar*, Brodovitch helped launch a magazine named *Portfolio* in 1950, *Portfolio* was dedicated both to explaining and embodying principles of modernism, like Europe’s *Graphis*. Brodovitch,

founding editor Frank Zachary, and the investors decided to forego advertising on the grounds that it would ruin the new magazine's appearance. Instead, it was the absence of advertising that turned out to be *Portfolio's* ruin. It remains a landmark of graphics artistry, but lasted for only three issues.¹

Vreeland was every bit as much a legend as Brodovitch. Snow hired her in 1936, and her column, "Why Don't You?" quickly became one of the *Bazaar's* most popular departments. "Why don't you turn your child into an Infanta for a fancy-dress party?" "Why don't you put all your dogs in bright yellow collars and leads like all the dogs in Paris?" and "Why don't you have a furry elk-hide trunk for the back of your car?" were a few of her often-flamboyant suggestions. (Dwight ; NYT 8/23/89) Vreeland has been described as radically elegant... and as an "energetic, utterly disciplined, hard driving female professional." (Rowlands 194, 196)

Despite her flair for the dramatic, Vreeland also had a practical side. She promoted healthy diet and exercise well before these were commonplace in fashion magazines, and once said, "The body must stay fit. Fit people like themselves much better." (NYT 8/23/89) She believed that "you don't have to be born beautiful to be wildly attractive." (NYT 8/23/89)

Vreeland remained with the *Bazaar* for a quarter century, and then, in a reversal of Snow's path, moved to *Vogue* in 1962, where she was editor-in-chief until 1971. (Morris) After her retirement she worked with the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and her annual exhibitions were widely praised and extremely popular. (Morris). When Vreeland died in 1989, her exact age was still a mystery. (Morris)

George Davis joined the *Bazaar* as features editor in 1935 and a few years later succeeded Beatrice Kaufman, wife of playwright George Kaufman, as fiction editor. The *Bazaar* had a strong commitment to literature—Snow once described the magazine as targeting "the well-dressed woman with the well-dressed mind." (Rubin) Among the many writers that the *Bazaar* published under Davis were John Cheever, John Dos Passos, Ann Lindberg, Carson McCullers, Frank O'Connor, Dawn Powell, Katherine Anne Porter, William Saroyan, Rebecca West, and poets W. H. Auden, E.E. Cummings, and Dylan Thomas. (Rowlands, 250 ; Snow, 141) Dr. Benjamin Spock debuted in print with his article "Why Do Children Get So Many Colds?" (Snow, 141)

Davis had once been engaged to Gypsy Rose Lee, and in 1951 he married Lotte Lenya, Kurt Weill's widow. (Rowlands, 280ff) His home at 7 Middagh Street, Brooklyn Heights (christened "February House" by Anais Nin), became a kind of roost for geniuses. (Vaill) Between 1940 and 1945 its residents included Auden and his lover, Chester Kallman ; Paul and Jane Bowles ; Benjamin Britten and his partner, Peter Pear ; McCullers ; Colin McPhee ; and Richard Wright. The parties were legendary.

Snow spent a large portion of the late 1940s in Europe. She was the first American fashion editor to arrive in Paris after the city was liberated, and she was on hand as the postwar fashion revolution got underway. Snow is credited with coining the phrase "The New Look" at Dior's show in 1947. (Rowlands, 364)

Throughout the 1950s the *Bazaar's* influence continued to grow. Unfortunately, so did Snow's dependence on alcohol and her difficulty in functioning. In 1957 company executives told her that the coming year would be her last in office. Her appointed successor was her niece and goddaughter, Nancy White, who at the time was fashion editor of Hearst's *Good Housekeeping*. (Tomkins) Vreeland, passed over for the position, is said to have remarked, "We needed an artist and they sent us a house painter." (Rowlands, 478)

Snow died in 1961 at the age of 73. White was editor for 13 years, during which both the fashion industry and the publishing industry changed dramatically. She was replaced by James W. Brady, former publisher of

¹ It's interesting to consider what the word *portfolio* meant to the three major American magazines that have used that name. To Joseph Dennie (1802) a port folio was a case to carry writing, to Brodovitch (1950) a portfolio was a case to carry art, and at Conde Nast (2007) a portfolio was a group of investments.

Women's Wear Daily, in 1971. (Martin) When she first took the job, White jotted down what she hoped to contribute as editor: “authority, awareness, wit, spirit, surprise, curiosity, intelligence, timing, food for thought, vitality, balance and youth.” (Martin) She had inherited a magazine with all those qualities—and, as it turned out, so did Brady and his successors.

Of the qualities White listed one stands out. After more than 14 decades, the magazine remains as youthful than ever. Snow captured its spirit well:

We rocketed from success to disaster, skirted law suits by the skin of our teeth, and always came out laughing. (96)

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