# PEEPING IN

**SEX AND DESIGN'S LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP HAS BEEN SULTRY AND TUMULTUOUS. THROUGH VINTAGE EXAMPLES, EXPLORE HOW GRAPHIC DESIGN HAS USED SEX TO GET WHAT IT WANTS.**

**BY STEVEN HELLER**

Bikini-clad women have helped sell products galore, even the likes of the late 1940s KOOBA Cola, which needed all the help it could get.

**PILLOW TALK BETWEEN SEX** and graphic design has been going on almost as long as commercial art has existed—well over 150 years. Strange bedfellows? Not really. Sex is practiced and sexuality is shown in virtually every conceivable art form dating back to the Egyptians' more risqué hieroglyphics. So this is no sordid affair. Sex is endemic to the very definition of graphic design.

Type and type casting are imbued with sexual innuendo—including the impression or "kiss" of a type slug of metal on paper—oooh la la. There are also promiscuous relations between a matrix (mom), produced by a punch (dad) that gives birth to the typeface (kid), which are all part of a family. There's even something called a hickey, when a spec of dust adheres to the printing plate and creates an imperfect outcome. (Makes you wonder, what came first? The term for this printing flaw or the adolescent's make-out blemish-of-honor?

Graphic design's sexuality is oft times veiled in nuance—left to the eye of the beholder, as it were—but aspects of it are far from pure and innocent. If we widen the peephole to see how graphic design has been intertwined with sexuality, we'll find that it ranges from implied to explicit.

The theme of this issue of Print is sex and graphic design, but I believe our focus should be more precisely on sex *in* graphic design—and even more definitively on sex in advertising. Sex in design is a communication tool that provides eye-grabbing solutions to certain content demands and design problems. Sex is bait that lures the viewer into the message. What sex isn't is a typeface or other formal design element alone. There are plenty of sexy images produced by hard-core illustrators, photographers and designers each year, but graphic design is actually neuter, neither male nor female, a clean slate. A designer can inject sex appeal into design through word and picture, but unlike a piece of clothing, for instance, a piece of graphic design is never inherently sexy.

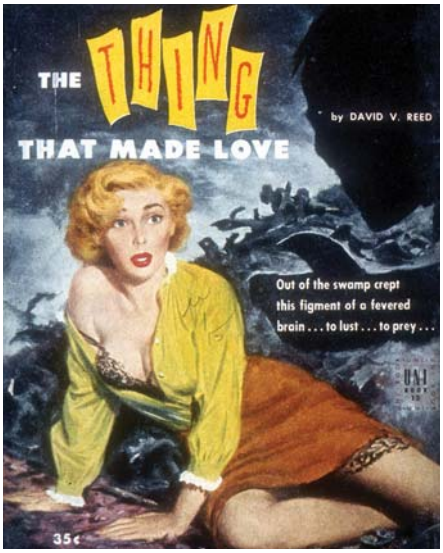
What is sexy in this context, anyway? Let's be honest, until recently what we called "sex" was primarily the depiction of women in wanton and alluring poses,

wearing sensual garments or nothing at all, strategically employed to capture the audience's attention. In fact, and it's no surprise, the recurrent and widespread exploitation of women has long been a major feature of advertising, marketing and publishing (ads, packages, and book and magazine covers), with hints of eroticism and a bit of masochist menace at its core.

The depiction of sexuality in design media has nonetheless radically changed after decades of pushing boundaries: Once the most risqué image a publication or advertisement could show was a woman's bare ankle. As designers slowly worked their way up the leg, thighs and hips became acceptable; then other titillating parts of the human body were exposed for all to see. Not too long ago, nudity of any kind was prohibited from American print, TV and films (Europeans had much fewer Puritan hang-ups). Then, one by one, antiquated prohibitions vanished overnight. First came cheesecake, the quaint term used to describe artsy frontal nudity. From there, mores changed quickly yet simply: First backside nudity was revealed, then frontal nudity and ultimately, genitals were exposed in both males and females. There was even a time when women modeling bras were prohibited from being shown on TV, forcing adolescent young men to scour *The New York Times Magazine* for its generous selection of print ads. Eventually, public opinion (at least the opinions of people I talk to) accepted that which was once considered pornography as daily media fare.

Try this new definition on for size: Sex is now anything that surrounds, supplements, compliments, leads up to and/or finalizes a sexual act—whatever the various imaginative options may be. Even mass advertising (witness those sex-enhancing drug ads and contraceptive commercials) has taken prurience by the horns, pandering to society's fixation with sex.

Still, it's worth repeating that graphic design is no more inherently sexual than it is overtly political or religious. To be even clearer, graphic design is an objective frame in which a range of tropes, from sexual suggestion to outright hard-core pornography, is presented. There is, for instance, no typeface or typography that's sexy enough to trigger lust or desire—not even the oft-tried trope where naked people are arranged to make individual letters. Yet, when type is set into words, and layouts are filled with soft-core, erotic or even lewd drawings or photographs, graphic design enhances the sexuality by telegraphing meaning and message. In this case, sex is in the eye of the maker. Only when the intent of a designer is to inject sex into an ad, for example, does graphic design actually become sexual.




The epitome of sexy: A woman in danger with just a hint of flesh and lace showing.

But who can deny there has been, and still is, a surfeit of sex *in* graphic design. Some eras have enjoyed more sexual license than others. This is arguably a libertarian age for overt sex in media. Yet during the "Victorian" 1950s, when television husbands-and-wives were required to sleep in separate beds, sex could only be implied, if at all. Take the "Hello, handsome" Vitalis hair treatment for men advertisement (page 35): The headline is a come-on that implies a sexual proposition but leaves the rest to the imagination. In today's-almost-anything goes era, this ad might have shown a hipster guy and cool chick passionately interlocking tongues.

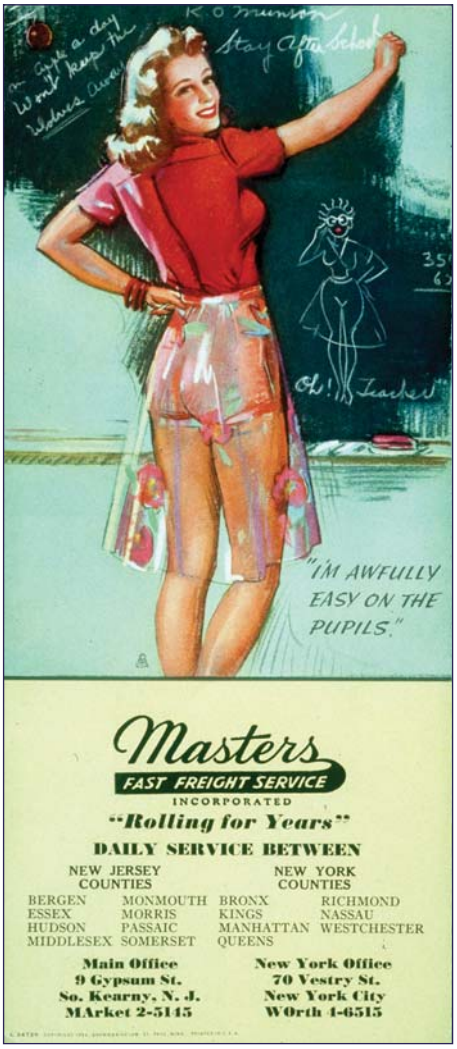
Sex in graphic design has obviously evolved, but from what? Was there an original sin, a moment when some printer, layout person or art editor combined apples and oranges and created nasty mojo? If so, it's not chronicled. Over the past 150 years, roughly the span of what we now call graphic design, there have certainly been various questionable images sent off as trial balloons, testing the mores of the day. Some have been banned as unbefitting or distasteful to proper society. However, censorship doesn't only occur in matters of overt or implied sex; most times the censor's scissor cuts words for political or religious blasphemy and words with sexual messages can be too hot to handle.

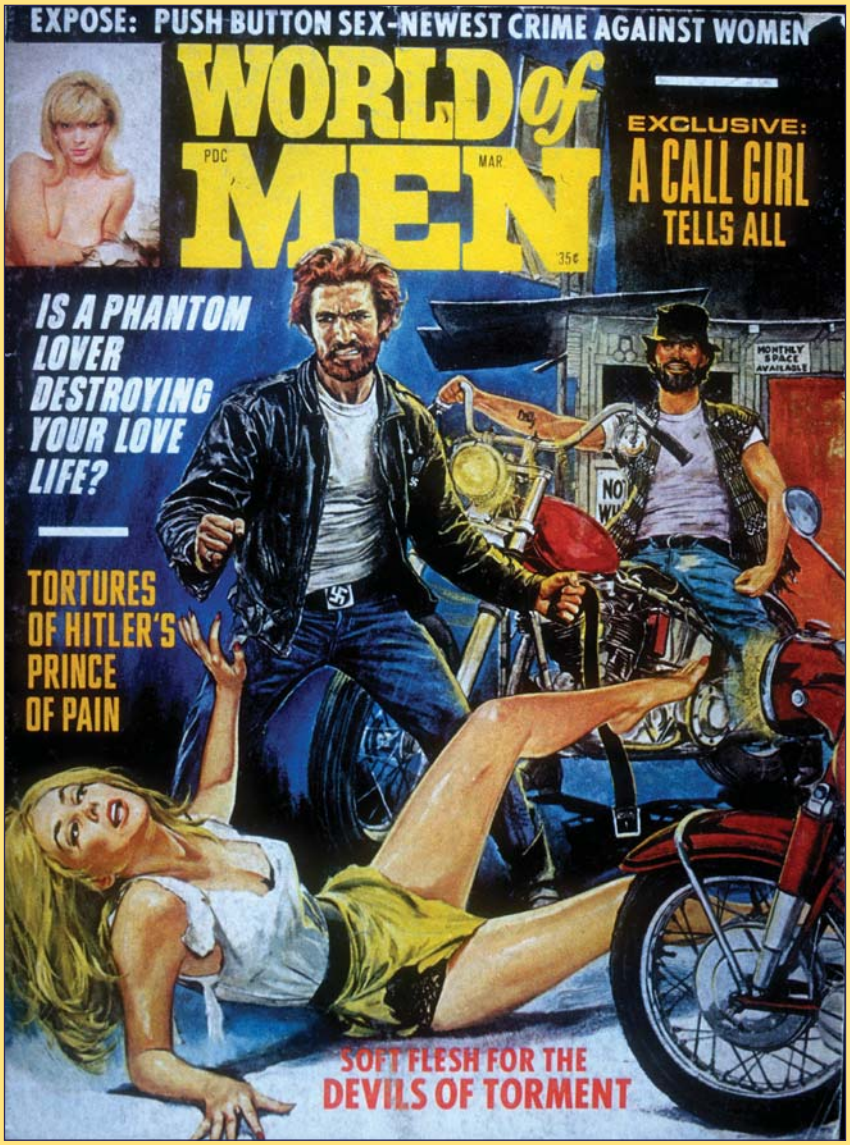
Here's a personal example: In 1968, I was the "art director" for an underground sex tabloid called *Screw*. The original masthead or logo, which I did not do, was amateurishly scrawled and plain ugly. Although a novice myself, I wanted to change it, so I selected a typeface from the Photo Lettering Inc. catalog and ordered SCREW in big bold, slab serif letters. A day later, when I arrived to retrieve the proof, I was told they wouldn't typeset obscenity (even though the typesetters all read the magazine). I later learned the decision-makers were afraid of being arrested simply for setting a word that ended up in a pornographic publication. This is probably the only time that a type house refused to set five letters citing pornography as a reason.

"We've come a long way baby!" to paraphrase the 1968 Virginia Slims advertising campaign that exploited women's liberation to sell cigarettes specifically to female consumers (sex objects by any other name). There are still a few virgin areas of art and design that remain untouched by sexual tropes; however, graphic design, advertising, and industrial and product design are driven more by sexual concepts, metaphors and symbols than ever before. Chastity isn't always a virtue. The following vintage examples reveal how sex has been used not simply to titillate through overly literal methods but as nuanced gestures, too. Let the peep show begin.

## PIN-UPS

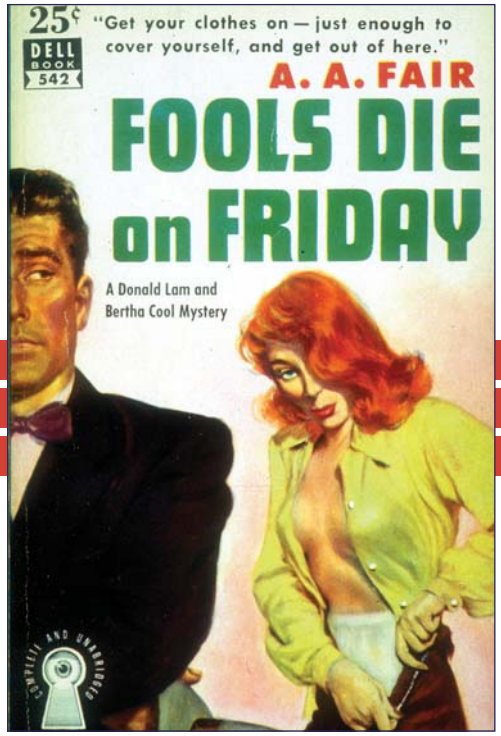
Throughout the 20th century, the pin-up, a painting or photograph of a sexy, beckoning woman, was the voyeur's personal window into the ideal sex object. Well-crafted, realistically rendered, the pin-up has a venerable place in commercial art and direct-sales advertising. Calendars, blotters, posters and other "designed" ephemera, aimed at men, were very successful as "keepers."




## PULPS

This type of printed entertainment prevailed in the late-19th to mid-20th centuries. Pulp magazines covered lots of themes—love, science fiction, home repair—but the so-called "men's magazines" were bathed in overt, often brutal, wantonness. Sexy semi-nude women, clothing torn or ripped off, were menaced by men with whom the male reader might unfortunately relate to as fantasy. Men's pulps were similar to heroes and villains in certain video games. Violent sex was bait, content and *raison d'être*.




## PAPERBACKS

A large percentage of mass-market paperbacks targeted at men were designed to maximize their sexual urges. Like pulps, the formula was simple: A beautiful woman, either menaced, distressed or embraced, is partially clothed, usually a hint of dainty underwear peeks through with as much flesh as sanctioned by the publishing industry. Limitations as to the ratio of skin to garment seemed to prevail. Yet the artists were skilled enough to ensure an arousing impact.

## LABELS

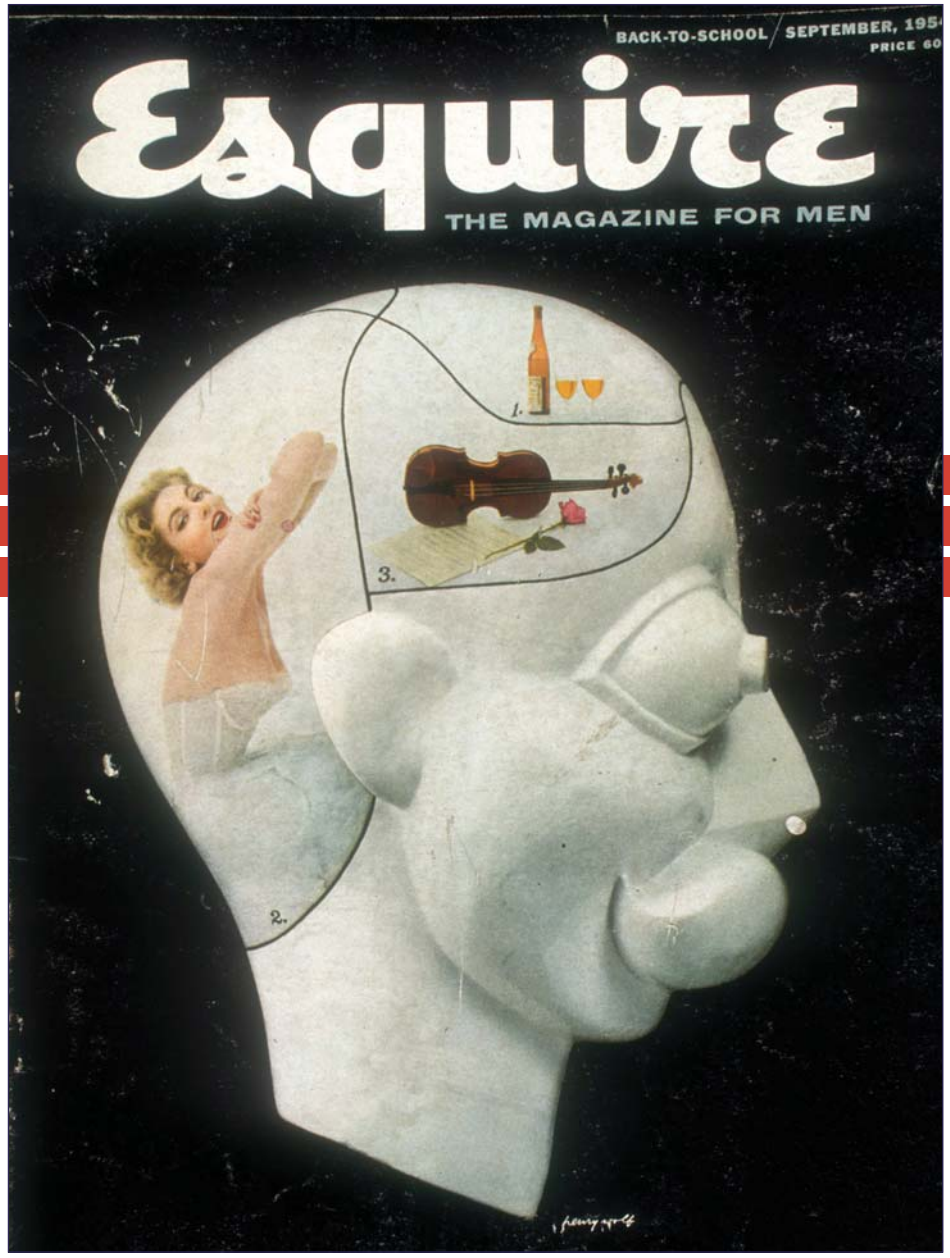
The "branding" equivalent to pulps and paperbacks were a genre of fruit box labels. This genus of graphic design was typographically and visually awash with colorful and fanciful styles, and it also comically engaged in "sexploitation." Buxom Melons, for example, doesn't require any explanation or interpretation.

## ANGELS AND SHE-DEVILS

Women were once portrayed as two distinct stereotypes: The vamp or tramp and the innocent or proper (aka the Working Girl vs. the Housewife). Popular culture was quick to make this distinction in everything from novels to films to advertisements. The codes were clear: Housewives were asexual and devoted to their children, and vamps made up for the frigidity of their counterpart as entirely sexual servants.

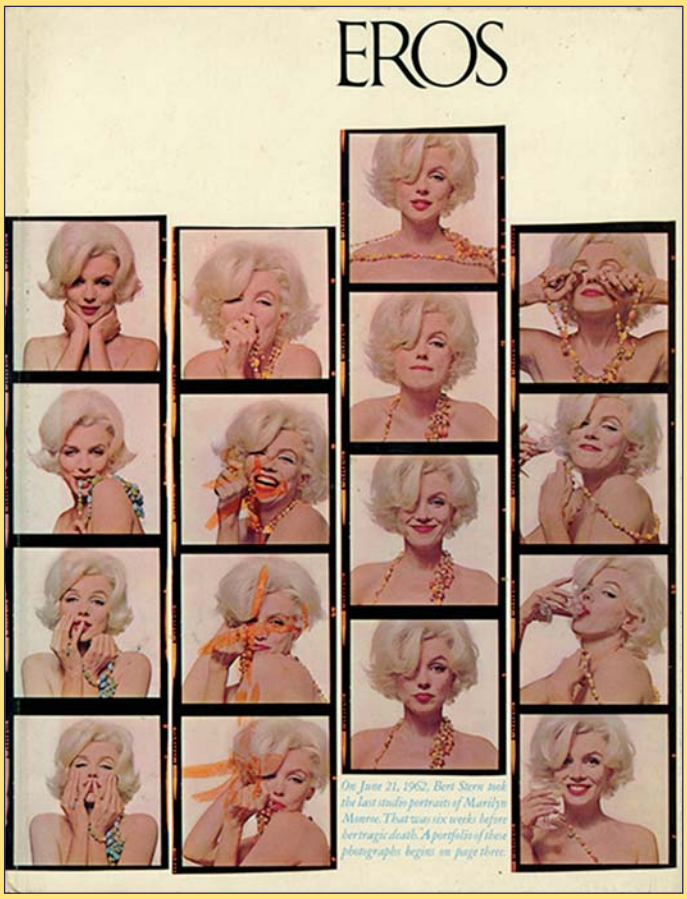
## HEY, HANDSOME

Using the vernacular of prostitutes, this ad for Vitalis hair products suggests that a little dab of the stuff will serve as a virtual aphrodisiac. Women of upright and dubious moral standing will be waiting in line to get to that well-oiled head of hair.




## THE MIND OF MEN

Who conceived the majority of the sexual stereotypes? Why men, silly! This cover of *Esquire*, designed by Henry Wolf, speaks volumes about what constituted male consciousness—at least those who made up the large *Esquire* circulation.

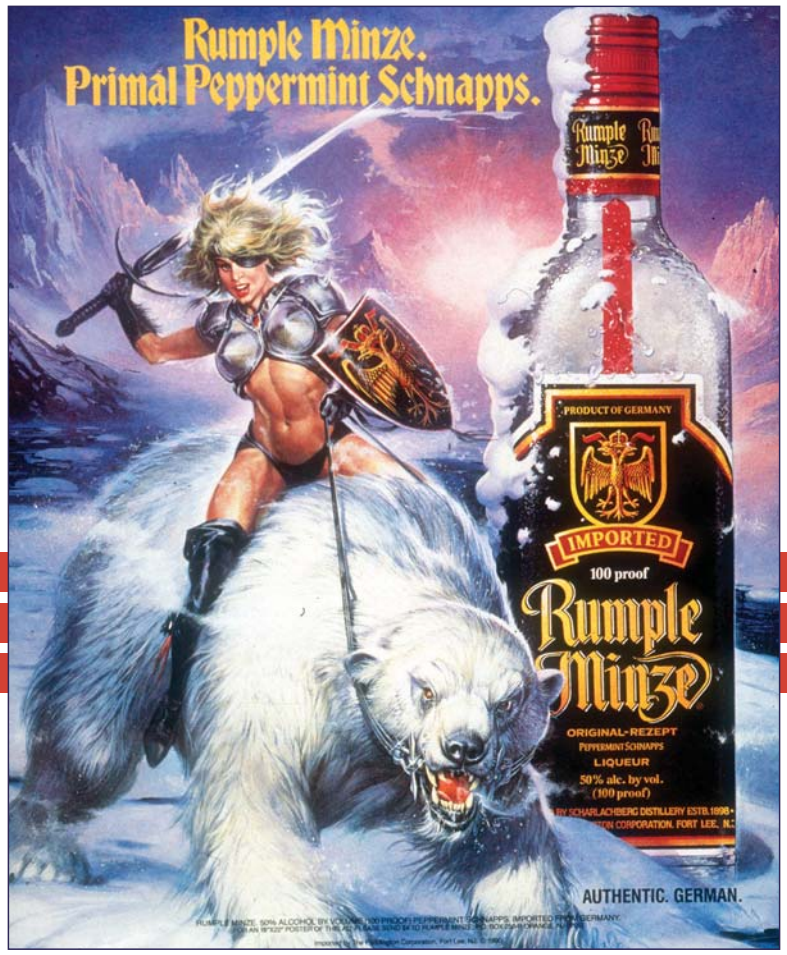



## EROTIC VS. SEXY

*Eros* magazine, designed by Herb Lubalin, may be tame by today's erotic standards, but it was a slap in the face to American propriety when it published four issues in 1962, veritably launching the sexual revolution of the late '70s. The magazine, aptly named for the god of love, rejected the crass design of men's pulp and the various nudie magazines that were sold under the counter. From the evocative logo with the suggestive "o" to the sensitive combination of journalistic and studio photography, the hardcover magazine put the most elegant spin on erotica (rather than sex).

## RED LIPS

White Flame by Helena Rubinstein is a perfume represented by a heavily retouched photograph in which sex appeal oozes out of the model's perfect, blemish-free features. Peering knowingly through the curtain, with the heart above her breast, an echo of her shimmering red lips, she says, "Come hither." Not specifically aimed at men (although they're not excluded from its charms), the ad says to women that White Flame will give them an added dose of allure to secure their desires.




## DOMINATRIX

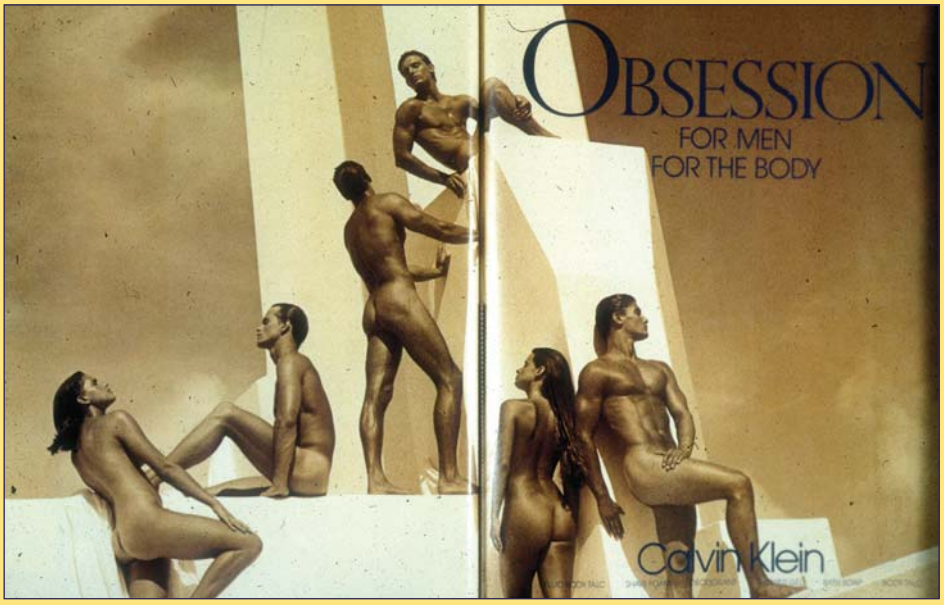
There's a subset of men that for one Freudian reason or another yearn to be dominated. The superwoman in fantasy and sci-fi art, exemplified by Frank Frazetta in the 1960s and emerging with such TV series as "Wonder Woman," triggered a fashion for this kind of incredible sexuality and subsequent parodies thereof.

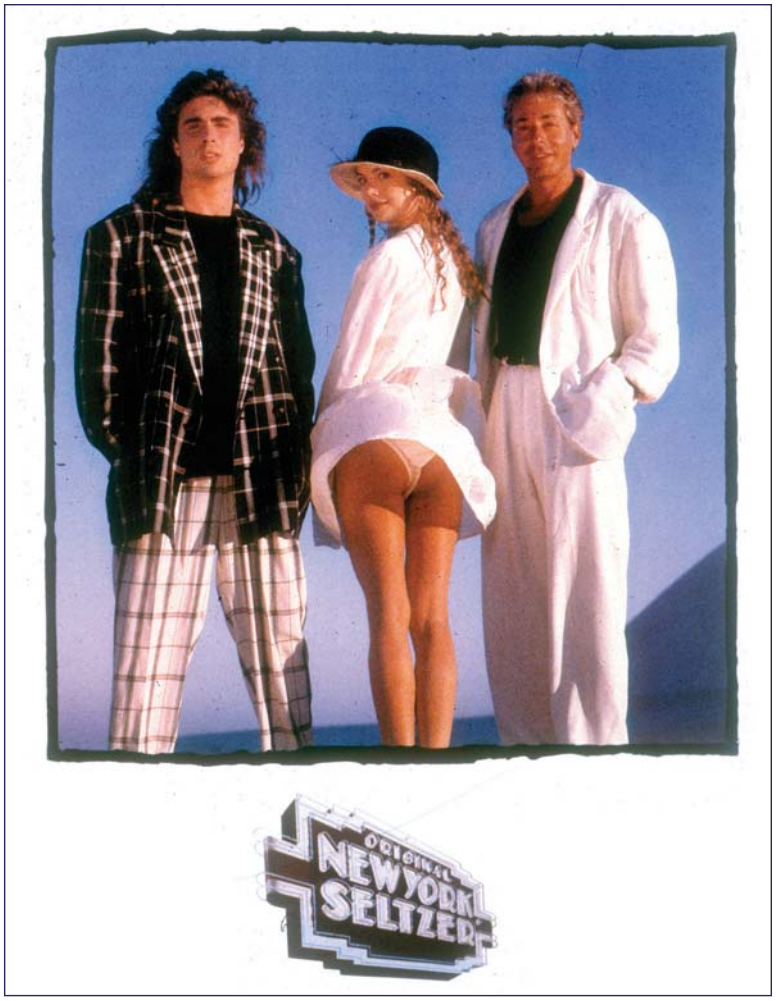
## SMOKING

Public relations pioneer Edward Bernays sold suffragettes' on the idea that smoking cigarettes in public was a symbol of rebellion. Since then, tobacco companies have sold smoking to women as a sexual accessory. In the '30s and '40s, female movie stars were spokespersons; in the '60s, '70s and '80s, the claim was that smoking made attractive women even more sexy.

## GODDESS AND GODS

Calvin Klein's 1990s ads for Obsession fragrances for men and women took a page out of German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's heroic playbook. Sex was less about acts between men and women, as it was a celebration of perfection. This particular magazine ad takes the sex out of nudity, which is nonetheless still somewhat taboo in American media. Rather than sensual, these statuesque humans are reduced to mannequins.




## MATTER-OF-FACT

Today, most media organizations still retain "standards and practices" officials who determine what is or isn't appropriate for its audience. But using sex as a marketing tool or as editorial content isn't necessarily a target of censorship. Nor is sex looked upon as terribly harmful to a product's reputation. This advertisement for New York Seltzer inverts the notion of sexual spectacle—and the teenage boy's obsession with looking at forbidden fruit—and appears to make it matter of fact, proving that the sexual revolution has been a sexual evolution to where sex is less about prurience than pragmatics. ■

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