It is only the modern that ever becomes old-fashioned. —Oscar Wilde

Modernism is one of the most slippery terms in our cultural lexicon. Its root, modern, means new, fresh, or of the moment. When the M is capitalized, however, it signifies revolutionary developments in European art and design in the early 20th century. As graphic design, Modernism was codified in 1918 and called the New Typography. Asymmetric composition, sans-serif letterforms, and photographic images replaced archaic type design, central-axis page layout, and realistic illustration. After World War II, this movement evolved into a strict design canon known as the International Style, which in the 1950s evolved further into Corporate Modernism, a clean, economical, and rational design system applied to business. Today, this is generally viewed as American Modernism. But back in the 1920s, modernism with a small m was emerging as an alternative to both conventional and radical approaches. This style spread via France throughout Europe and

Asia, and in 1925 made its way to this country, where it was adapted by American business, particularly in advertising, to help spur the American consumer boom. Because this “commercial modernism” was a marriage (though some critics considered it a sordid affair) of radical art and strategic merchandising, it is historically overshadowed by revolutionary Modernism. This article, therefore, will shed light on an often overlooked and fascinating stage in American design.

The story begins in 1925, in Paris. The Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes was laid out in pavilions adorned with geometric ornament and neoclassical friezes incorporating functional and decorative designs. The world’s leading clothing, furniture, and houseware manufacturers and many grand retail emporia exhibited their latest products and designs. But one player was noticeably absent. The U.S., the world’s largest industrial nation with the most expansive consumer culture, at the urging of its industrial leaders, declined an invitation to participate. In 1923, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover apologetically announced to the Fourth Annual Exposition of Women’s Arts and Industries that although America produced “a vast volume of goods of much artistic value...[it could not] contribute sufficiently varied design of unique character or of special expression in American artistry to warrant such participation.”

The leaders of American industry believed that they could not match the French
designers "either in making a stripped [down] Arts and Crafts modernism (with its threat of becoming a new 'universal' style) or by boldly countering with a national style," explains Terry Smith in *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1993). Although by 1923 America had become the world's foremost manufacturer, distributor, and marketer of machinery and consumables, their quality did not match their quantity. American industrial products were made to last forever, but they looked cold, commonplace, and curiously old-fashioned. By the early '20s, American industry had not developed a national design esthetic, as did France or England, but rather accepted appearances determined by the limitations of engineering and materials. If design entered into the operation at all, it was imported. Terry Smith adds that "buying designs" was cheaper than investing in the design process, cheaper than importing already trained designers. American products were either nondescript or laden with Beaux-Arts ornament to camou-

1.3. Storefront modern. These proposals for drugstore fronts, c. 1929, were designed to evoke the modern spirit through architectural details and signage.

2. Ernest Elmo Calkins, advertising genius, design reformer, and inventor of the concept called "style obsolescence," wanted to spur the economic boom of the 1920s by creating demand for new, improved products.

4. The Calkins and Holden advertising agency shingle, designed around 1905. This was the first time an ad agency used its initials as a logo.

5. This self-promotional ad for Calkins and Holden, c. 1910, was designed to interest business in the agency's integrated art and copy approach to advertising—at a time when most ad agencies simply functioned as space-buyers.
flage a mass-produced look. Although mass production was the foundation on which the modern American economy was built, many contemporary cultural critics felt that items coming off the assembly line lacked good taste. The Bauhaus, Constructivism, and other European Modern design movements had already sought to integrate art and industry, yet American industrialists, who could easily have afforded to improve the look of their products, saw no need to do so. What interested them, however, were marketing strategies that would inspire greater profits. So, following a brief economic downturn in the early '20s and subsequent boom, industry zealously sought a new means of stimulating sales. It was the profit motive, not any utopian ethic, or any esthetic ideal, that paved the way for commercial modernism in the U.S., which was introduced to American advertising in 1925 by Ernest Elmo Calkins (1868-1964), an advertising pioneer, design reformer, and founder of the Calkins and Holden advertising agency. Like other American advertising and marketing executives, he had visited the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes and had come away inspired.

Describing the array of cubicist and futuristic graphics, packages, and point-of-purchase displays that he discovered in the pavilions for department stores like Bon Marché and Galeries Lafayette, Calkins wrote to his staff in New York: "It is extremely "new art" and some of it too bizarre, but it achieves a certain exciting harmony, and in detail is entertaining to a degree. Everything is arranged with an eye to display, a vast piece of consummate window dressing.... It is not always beautiful, but it is diabolically clever." What was so different from most American advertising art was the preference for abstraction over realism. Illustration was not representational but exuded a "magical" atmosphere through symbols, metaphors, and allegories. Boxes and bottles were no longer mere utilitarian vessels, but symbols of their contents. In an article called "The Dividends of Beauty" (Advertising Arts, 1933), Calkins summarized the development of this way: "Modernism offered the opportunity of expressing the inexpressible, of suggesting not so much a motor car as speed, not so much a gown as style, not so much a compact as beauty."

If this had a similar ring to one of F.T. Marinetti's Futurist manifestos, it was because Calkins studied and borrowed heavily from the European avant-garde. "What seemed to be a new method for transfiguring commonplace objects became for Calkins a means of disconnecting form and content, thoughts and things," states Jackson Lears in Fables of Abundance (Basic Books, 1984).

Modern art, or what the leading advertising trade journal Printer's Ink in 1928 called "foreign art ideas," elevated advertising art to a higher esthetic level. For most advertising art directors, modernism was a "bag of tricks the artist could use to set an ordinary product apart," continues Lears. And advertising artists were indeed quick to appreciate the possibilities of modernism since realistic art had reached what Calkins termed a "dead
6-9. The modern look was introduced to female consumers through American department stores in their window displays and advertising. The stylized ad for a Macy's 1928 housewares sale (designer unknown), the store's 1927 back-to-school campaign and 1928 kitchenware promotion (both designed by Leo Reckow), and the 1928 Christmas issue of Altman Magazine (designer unknown) use the stripped-down, drawing style and decorative typography characteristic of commercial modernism.

10-12. Starting around 1926, hundreds of cans, boxes, jars, and tins were given new shapes and graphics that evoked modernity—including the classic 1931 Bon Ami container designed by Egmont Arens, the 1930 Oiltzum motor oil can (designer unknown), and the late-20s Constructivist-inspired, gold-and-black box for the Cine-Kodak Eight movie camera designed by Walter Dorwin Teague.
level of excellence." It was no longer possible to make an advertisement conspicuous and attractive using still pictures and realistic groupings. Spearheaded by Callkins and Holden, and later adopted by such progressive agencies as N.W. Ayer (which opened its own galleries to display and promote the agency's own modern advertising art), and Kenyon and Eckart, commonplace objects—gazebos, refrigerators, coffee tins—were presented against new patterns and at skewed angles; contemporary industrial wares were shown in futuristic settings accented by contemporary typefaces with contemporary names like Cubist Bold, Vulcan, Broadway, and Novel Gothic. Layout inspired by the European New Typography also became more dynamic in its asymmetry. Modernism offered what Jackson Lears calls the "aura of cosmopolitan culture and avant-garde style" and signaled the spread of an aesthetic coming of age of American advertising. In an essay titled "Cavalcade" (Advertising Arts, 1935), René Clark, a leading advertising artist, recalled the years between 1925 and 1931 as the "golden age of advertising . . . merchandise sold easily . . . clients spent freely and gave us wide latitude of invention and experiment."

Callkins, who went into business with Ralph Holden in 1903, and with him co-authored Modern Advertising (D. Appleton and Company) in 1905, early on proposed that fine typography be a component of successful advertising rather than an afterthought of job printers. The first man to specialize in advertising typography was Benjamin Sherbow, whom Callkins had hired as a copywriter in 1919 but who soon began to experiment with display and text type (the later published a manual titled Sherbow's Charts, which Callkins touted as a "must" item in agency production departments). Around 1920, Callkins introduced the job of "type man," later called "type director," to counter the clichés of the average printer with innovative solutions. Integrating good typography and art was "a more subtle way of suggesting beauty in the products than baldly stating the fact in the text," wrote Callkins in his autobiography, And Hearing Not (Charles A. Scribner's and Sons, 1946). Using a graphic design style to indicate a special relationship between advertisement and product was something Callkins called "atmosphere"; ultimately, he believed, the atmosphere would permeate the product itself. "Improving the physique of advertising had a twofold result," he explained. "It directly influenced the taste of the picturesque, and indirectly conditioned the production of goods." Callkins was inked when he had to produce a good-looking ad for something that did not lend itself to attractive pictorial treatment. This dichotomy between artistic advertising and humdrum product design sparked the engines of commercial modernism; by 1926, packages were being redesigned, and form and color given to old, commonplace articles. "The styling of manufactured goods," Callkins wrote in "Advertising Art in the United States" (Modern Publicity, 1930), "is a byproduct of improved advertising design. . . . The technical term for this idea is obsolescence. We no longer wait for
things to wear out. We displace them with others that are not more efficient but more attractive.” Although clothing manufacturers had for decades been changing styles annually to increase consumer interest, industry had not adopted this strategy until Calkins made it his mission. He also noted that the majority of consumers were women, who were accustomed to changes in fashion and were susceptible to the sleek new designs. Although Calkins and Holden's clients included car, cereal, and men's hat manufacturers, the majority of their advertising accounts were for products targeted at women, such as appliances, housewares, and detergents.

Commercial modernism was introduced to the American public not only through print advertising but behind glass. Influenced in 1925 by the Parisian style of Cubist patterns and ornament (pioneered by Paul Poiret), managers for the largest American department stores experimented with window designs. In Chicago, Marshall Field placed stylized manikins in front of surreal

13-16. American typography of the late '20s freely borrowed elements of the New Typography developed in Europe. Layout artists copied asymmetrical compositions to give their ads more flair and dynamism. Such interpretations of orthodox Modernism eventually degenerated into a mishmash of novelty types and anarchic layouts that one critic described as a “dark cloud.”

17, 18. Fashionable typefaces, such as the 1929 motion-line-enhanced Vulcan, were promoted as the easiest way to make a layout look modern. Huxley House, one of New York's larger type houses, sent out specimen sheets promoting its quirky, contemporary faces as if they were trendy new tags.
backgrounds as if they were three-dimensional paintings. In New York City, Macy's created windows with layers of moderne ornament framing the latest fashions. Macy's design department also devoted floor space to the 1928 International Exposition of Art and Industry, which introduced European-inspired modern wares to the American public. Outside on the street, many storefronts were also designed with modern veneers. The department store had become such a showcase for modernity that contemporaries called this early phase "Department Store Modernism." In 1927, Alfred Barr, the first director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the first curator to promote revolutionary Modernism in America with an exhibition of the Bauhaus, wrote in a somewhat disapproving account of Saks Fifth Avenue in New York, "Through its advertisements and show windows...has done more to popularize the Modern Mannerism in pictorial and decorative arts than any two proselytizing critics." Window design, like advertising, had historically relied on the "untutored intelligence of the outsider—the lithographer—who ordinarily knew little about advertising, less about the unique functions of the window display," wrote Herschel Deutsch in "Today's Trend in Window Displays" (Advertising Arts, 1931). But one of the key offshoots of Department Store Modernism was a need for trained designers to do the work. Deutsch further asserted that the designer tutored in Modern methods made window display a complex and individual form of advertising that called for careful study of the manufacturers' and retailers' needs: "The truly modern design," he wrote, "will be backed by a thorough understanding of every phase of its use and the manner in which its beauty can be built around that use rather than in denial of it." He went on to say in a somewhat obtuse reference to the Modern ethos, "If this be functionalism the new trend in window display design is making the most of it." In fact, what the orthodox Modernist regarded as functionalism was a pared down, essential form, while the commercial modernist did not subscribe to such asceticism.

Color, which was comparatively rare in magazine advertisements in the mid-1920s, was another aspect of Department Store Modernism introduced to enliven window displays. The new windows borrowed primaries from De Stijl and the Bauhaus and combined them with bright purples, greens, and oranges. In addition, "Modernism to the general public came to mean silver and black," explained Frederic Ehrlich in his book The New Typography and Modern Layout (Frederic A. Stokes, 1934), one of the most astute critiques (posing as an instructional manual) of Modern practice published in America at that time. Ehrlich was referring to the metallic silver papers and black silhouettes often used in window displays as well as later in magazine ads and other graphics. A new alloy, aluminum, symbolized the Machine Age as vividly as did crucibles and gears. It suggested the commercial modern spirit just as F. T. Marinetti's Futurist book of poems, Parole in Libertà (1934), with its shiny metallic covers, sym-
19-21. Commercial modernism appropriated the icons of American industry, which were then graphically stylized and fit into layouts. Photomontage was one of the tools used, as in an early '30s spread from a Ford Co. bulletin (Fig. 19). A children's book cover from 1929 is the essence of contemporaneity, with its emphasis on streamlined shapes (Fig. 20). The catalog cover for the Museum of Modern Art's 1934 "Machine Art" exhibition (photograph by Ruth Bernhard) exemplifies the orthodox Modern reverence for industrial form.

22, 23. The automobile became the everyday symbol of modernity. Earnest Elmo Calkins said that cars represented, not transportation, but speed, and that speed signified progress. These early '30s ads, presenting an overhead view of speeding vehicles, are examples of how Calkins and Holden introduced abstraction to advertising art to enhance the symbolic power of the product.
bolized the revolutionary Modern spirit.

Department Store Modernism was employed both by those who believed they honestly understood European Modernism and by those who simply practiced excess. Raymond Loewy, the designer of Bonwit Teller’s stylish advertisements, wrote in the company’s promotional magazine: “Modernism, in its every phase, is in a state of evolution . . . which accounts for the fact that many atrocities as well as singular beauties are committed in its name. True modernism is good taste!” (Quoted in Making the Modern.) And here is the key distinction between the radical forms of European Modernism that are romanticized today, and the commercial application introduced in the 1920s: The former was intended to disrupt the status quo and improve the visual environment, while the latter had no loftier purpose than to alter the buying habits of the American public and stimulate the economy.

In this sense, this early phase of American modernism was not always favorably received by design critics. Frederic Ehrlich referred to commercial modernism as a “dark cloud” because of the decorative excesses in type, layout, ornament, and package designs created in the reflexive zeal to be modern. “Modernism . . . got off on the wrong foot in America,” asserted advertising and industrial designer Walter Dorwin Teague in Advertising Arts (1931). “It had been developing as a school of design for many years in Europe, outgrowing its absurdities and cutting its wisdom teeth. But it burst on America as a full-fledged surprise, and we’ve never quite recovered from the shock.” He further argued that designers untutored in honest Modernist principles merely exploited the trend for its novelty: “They figured that the queerer they made their stuff, the better. . . . Such was the penalty we paid for barging into a full-grown movement, instead of growing up with it. We had measles late in life.”

The hostility to tradition and espousal of a utopian universal spirit that underscored the European Modern schools were not present in the modernity that American business embraced. Although certain visual traits of revolutionary Modernism influenced American designers, commercial modernism smoothed out the edges, reintroduced ornament, which had been banished with the rise of functionalism, and accentuated a decorative rather than a purely utilitarian sensibility. Orthodox Modernists disparagingly called this modernistic, a vulgarization of experimental form—a false or perverted Modernism. Commercial modernism actually came in two distinct waves: The first, inspired by European Modernism, was epitomized by geometric decorative veneers that echoed the setback silhouettes of skyscrapers; this style, wrote Frederic Ehrlich sarcastically, was welcomed as “a new force” by business “and hailed with the same enthusiasm as the discovery of a new scientific formula.” The second wave, which hit around 1931, introduced streamlining to industrial, product, and graphic design and was based on the principles of science and engineering as a determinant of form. According to Walter
Dorwin Teague, a pioneer of the second wave, it represented "the finest school of design, in contemporary manner, the world has yet seen." But although streamlining extolled the virtues of engineering, like the first wave, it quickly evolved into a purely surface style exuding what Jackson Lears calls "the cachet of modernism."

Today's Corporate Modernism bears little resemblance to American commercial modernism of the 1920s and '30s. Then, even the most utilitarian product was subject to intense styling. The goal of commercial modernism was first to increase consumer interest and then to make the world beautiful (or more accurately, stylish) through design. Though the U.S. did not participate in the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décорatifs et Industriels Modernes, an indelible impression was made on American marketers, promoters, and commercial artists who understood the practical benefits that could be reaped by promoting merchandise and styling products that were what the French expatriate advertising (and later pioneer industrial)
designer Raymond Loewy called “Most Advanced Yet Acceptable,” or modern within prescribed limits. Loewy’s so-called MAYA principle proposed rejecting the austere, non-ornamental aspects of avant-garde design and preserving the primary colors and rectilinear forms that signaled modernity yet would not repel a mass audience.

Calkins was a missionary of acceptable modernity, who in his fervor to establish advertising as the agent of progress turned his attention to pseudo-science, and was instrumental in such modern marketing concepts as “consumption engineering,” “forced obsolescence,” and “styling the goods.” These were the core concepts of an advertising strategy that introduced Modern art to a devoutly conservative profession whose primary responsibility was purchasing ad space from magazines and newspapers. Combining perceptual psychology with market research, Calkins proposed ways to control consumers’ behavior by feeding them new mouth-watering styles. Consumption engineering was essentially a trick that encouraged redundancy and artificially stimulated growth. “To make people buy more goods,” he wrote in the essay “Advertising, Builder of Taste” (The American Magazine of Art, September 1930), “it is necessary to displace what they already have, still useful, but outdated, old-fashioned, obsolete.”

Calkins further believed that Modern art was, in today’s argot, value additive. “When the uglier utilities of business cannot be beautified, art is used to make them disappear,” he continued. “Gasometers are being painted according to the principles of camouflage... The bottles, jars, tubes, boxes and cartons of hundreds of foods, drugs, toilet articles, perfumes, powders, pastes and creams are in the hands of artists working solely to produce a container pleasing to the eye to add color and form to the shop win-

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28-31. Commercial modernism in all its manifestations was promoted through trade magazines, exhibitions, and books. Advertising Arts, the bible of the modern, depicts the power of advertising in a 1931 cover designed by Alexey Brodovitch, a 1934 Federal Art Project exhibition presented work by artists who were influenced by modernist/Modern approaches; the cover of a 1933 issue of Westvaco Inspirations for Printers offers strictly moderne designs; and a 1929 edition of Commercial Art, a handbook of contemporary design practice, advertises the decorative excesses of this form.
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dow, or toilet table and kitchen shelf.” This was one of innumerable pronouncements Calkins made in trade journals, newspapers, magazines, and lectures before business and civic groups. He was an advocate who believed that Modernism was beauty, and beauty was the key to economic health and well-being. Like the revolutionary European Modernists, he fostered “the undeniable affinity that exists between some aspects of modern industrialism and some aspects of modern art.”

Industrial art—commercial modernism—was as natural and logical an expression of Calkins’ age as was religious art of the 15th century. “Business can and may be as stimulating a patron of the arts as the cardinals, prelates and popes who represented the church,” he wrote in his autobiography. But even he cautioned against the excesses of the Modern spirit and the “distressing results in suddenly attempting to make over a thousand products in new shapes and shades... that did not harmonize with our ideas of luxury.” Indeed, Calkins, who spent his life attempting to raise advertising from hucksterism to social science, argued as early as the 1930s that advertising and product design should not exaggerate or falsify the product. Yet that is exactly what happened when commercial modernism reached its zenith in 1929. “[I]nstances existed—and still exist—of advertising in which the product was lost sight of in preoccupation with creative technique. Even today we... see advertisements so ‘fancy,’ so ‘arty’ and artificial, that they neglect to sell the goods,” wrote Harry A. Batten, vice-president, N.W. Ayer & Son, in a 1931 essay in Modern Typography.

The trade magazines touted the fact that modern advertising increased sales, which triggered greater production, which stimulated the economy. Advertising executives perpetuated this idea through self-promotional ads in trade and business magazines. And advertising artists insisted they were contributing to social progress. Wrote René Clark in “Cavalcade”: “For fifteen years I’ve seen this stylish idea coming closer and closer to the thing that really counts... a low priced package... a container that millions of hands stretch out to buy because it says something to them that they can’t resist!” But by 1929, merely four years after the introduction of commercial modernism, business and industry were producing too many goods to sustain such high levels of continuous sales. Calkins’s style engineering and obsolence were being applied to the most trivial items, such as razor blade wrappers, soap packages, and hat boxes, which received frequent makeovers. This practice kept designers occupied, factories busy, and retailers ordering more stock until the Crash of 29. Overzealous advertising and product manufacturing in the bull market did not cause this catastrophic economic downside, triggering America’s Great Depression, but they were symptomatic of what N.W. Ayer’s Harry Batten describes as economic overconfidence, “a sort of gambling fever [which] spread into every level of society.”

After 1929, Batten reported that business leaders complained “advertising... had become effete; it was no longer practical. ‘Let’s have something with punch in it,’ they chorused. ‘Let’s get in there and sell.’” Good appearance was not considered an asset, and businesses began to clamor for a return to hard-and-sell methods. Modernist design styles could impart a magical aura to a product but that was not enough to tempt penny-conscious consumers to buy. In Advertising the American Dream: Making the Way for Modernity 1920-1940 (University of California Press, 1985), Roland Marchand writes that “Depression advertising was distinctively ‘loud’, cluttered, undignified, and direct.” He asserts that advertising’s leaders interpreted the Depression as a “deserved chastisement for follies and excesses of the boom years” and condemned styles of prosperity for being too abstract, too self-indulgently beautiful, too sleek and opulent. Some advertising men proclaimed what the trade journal Printer’s Ink called a new “shirt-sleeve advertising,” which intentionally imitated tabloid newspaper and pulp magazine layouts, and introduced comic strips as a frequent attention-grabbing device.

Despite pressure to lower esthetic standards, the modern agencies, particularly Calkins and Holden, N.W. Ayer, and Kenyon and Eckart, struggled to maintain high levels of taste. Yet the Depression created strictures for the creation of ads, many of which were produced on short notice, allowing little time for elaborate illustration. “Owing to lack of time... photography came into increasing favor,” Batten noted. “The art director found that... he could get a good modern page by using photographs.” In the manner of European Modernism, the photomontage soon replaced illustration, and as a further concession to business’ criticism of “effete” advertising, a new New Typography, adhering to the original European ethic, more functional and less decorative, was introduced. “Type is becoming simpler every day,” wrote Batten, comparing it with what he called the “modernistic movement” of 1929, which often failed to take into account that “advertising is primarily to be read.” Similarly, layouts were inclined to be economical. “There was a noticeable lack of fussiness, an increasing cleanliness and crispness of line... Fewer rules and type ornaments were used than in the first flush of Modernism.” This new phase of American Modern graphic design is what Frederic Ehrlich referred to as “a return to typo-graphic sanity,” and “a glorious sunrise [that] dispelled the cold gray sky that overshadowed the real modernism in typography.” He prophetically added: “If, or when, Post Modernism appears to take the place of the Modern Typography, it cannot fail to incorporate the salient features of what we now know as modern.”

By 1931, commercial modernism was on the wane. Advertising was practiced in either the hard-sell “shirt-sleeve” manner or as a more austere version of the once popular style. By 1933, streamlining, the new industrial modernism aimed at reinvigorating the depressed American economy, had begun to rise, peaking in the architecture and displays at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. And by 1938, the confluence of European émigrés who had escaped the Nazis and young homegrown acolytes began to forge the new American Modernism that become the standard for postwar corporate communications. “Late Modernism,” as it might be called, characterized by strict grids, generous white space, and limited typographic variation, was the design canon until the early ’80s and the high-water mark of Modernism itself. But today, when Modernism is scrutinized and harshly reevaluated, it is useful to understand the complexities of this evolutionary process and the role of individuals like Calkins. Commercial modernism was a misinterpretation, indeed a perversion, of the European Modernist ideal, but hardly a crime against it. Orthodox European Modernism could never have taken hold in America in the 1920s in the same way it did in the politically and socially troubled Germany and Russia. Despite its superficialities, commercial modernism played a role not only in stimulating the consumer culture through advertising, which ultimately filtered into other forms of graphic design, but in encouraging American industry for the first time to adopt a design ethic.