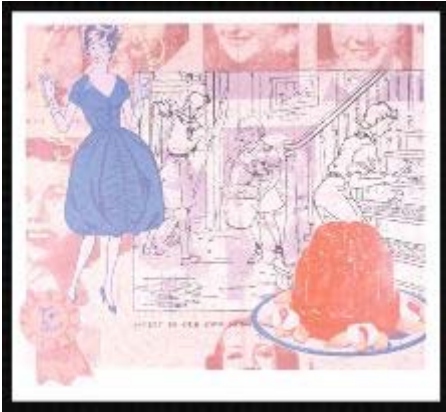


## Artist frames the 'traditional' housewife



The image of the '50s housewife, along with her presumed values, are more en vogue than ever, with increasing numbers of women choosing to stay at home and raise children rather than pursue high-powered corporate careers.

**Melissa Harshman / Special**

"The 1950s homemaker was less stressed and not ambivalent about her role as center of the family, like the fixed point of a compass," said Debbie Mandel, a stress-management specialist, radio show host and author of self-help books.

**By Melissa Harshman / Special**



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When Melissa Harshman creates her artistic prints, she makes it a point to incorporate strong female figures. Recently, her favorite silhouettes have included traditional 1950s housewives.

It's a nostalgic image to her and one that embodies an unachievable yet positive ideal, showing "strength, dignity, innovation and the power of women," she said.

At the same time Harshman, a University of Georgia art professor, sees the image as a contrast to today's woman.

"She did represent our ideal. That idealized woman doesn't exist anymore," Harshman said. "She is a foil, the ideal woman of yesteryear and how far we've come."

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Whether used in artwork, replicated in logos for domestic products or depicted as characters/experts on television - "Mad Men" and "Desperate Housewives," for instance - both vintage and modern caricatures of housewives in action are plentiful.

How the 1950s icon, in particular, is judged by experts in style or historical studies remains as controversial as ever. Ask experts where the full-skirted domestic divas of the post-war fit into the context of American women's history, and answers will vary.

"The women, housewives in the '50s, in many ways are misunderstood," said Rachel Weingarten, a pop culture and trends expert as president of New York-based GTK Marketing Group. "This was coming off of World War II. All the GIs were (going) off to war. Rosie the Riveter took off, she was supposed to personify the image of the women at home, building bombs and taking care of things while her husband, brother were off at war."

For many women, their role transitioned into the home when the men returned, married and became parents. Makers of commercial products swooned to this new demographic of women by developing goods such as nylon stockings and beauty products, said Weingarten, who wrote the book "Hello Gorgeous! Beauty Products in America '40s-60s."

"Women were expected to be decorative. It became an art form," Weingarten said. "(There was a) birth or a resurgence of products related to women. It was a fascinating financial time, creating and advertising women."

Today's home gurus are also to thank for the unrealistic emphasis on domestic perfection.

Weingarten said media pundits and advertisements today are still pushing women into the home.

Michelle Nickerson, assistant professor of historical studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, goes so far as to credit home gurus such as Martha Stewart with helping fuel this "revival over the past 10 years."

But not all women strive for the ideal of Martha at home, Nickerson said. They may look to Martha as ideal for the boardroom, instead, pushing the vintage housewife persona back to its place in time.

"The other thing that comes to mind about the '50s housewife is how she has, over the past 40 to 50 years, served as something of the whipping boy for the feminist movement," Nickerson said, "something against which a lot of feminists and professional women, any women who want to make themselves other than a homemaker, defines herself against." As a result of how feminists pit themselves against housewives, the likenesses of moms in the 1950s are one-dimensional and not necessarily accurate.

"For that reason, we've kind of in our minds, flattened her (and our) understanding of who she is as a person, a group of historical women and actors," Nickerson said. "We've been left with these kinds of pictures in our head, June Cleaver, 'Ozzie and Harriet.' I think that's one reason why this '50s housewife has become more of an icon than an actual living, breathing historical actor of real significance."

Real women of that time were engaged in more than feeding their kids and spouses, Nickerson said. They were involved in peace demonstrations, rallied against nuclear proliferation and lobbied against communism. They were also very active in their children's schools and child rearing. "Parents became really embroiled in schools, school politics, there was a surge in political battle within schools, over progressive education, what kinds of methods would be use to educate children, high-pitched battles over school board politics and choices for superintendents and deputies at schools," she said. Women in the '50s also worked. They moved from war industries into other fields. One thing they did not do was multitask to the degree moms do today. Because they couldn't.

"The 1950s homemaker was less stressed and not ambivalent about her role as center of the family, like the fixed point of a compass," said Debbie Mandel, a stress-management specialist, radio show host and author of self-help books. "She was interested in creating a positive and relaxed environment. She was not a multi-tasker; rather, single-minded in her goals which she achieved."

She appears to "sway" back and forth. She appears smiling. She appears happy. She is not strapped to a computer or Blackberry. She's not over-scheduling her kids. She is not frazzled.

"We can work 24-7, you know. Women take their Blackberrys when they go on vacation, (they're) navigating families, navigating work. In the '50s, they were a lot simpler," Mandel said.

Today, Mandel said, stay-at-home moms and working moms are more at odds than ever.

"This creeping dissatisfaction, desperation housewife vs. the desperate executive," Mandel said. "Each one wants what the other one has. ...You can have it both. But they won't be in (equal) balance. One thing will control the other."

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