

Clean Cuts

Procter & Gamble's Depression-Era Soap-Carving Contests

Jennifer Jane Marshall

In the 1920s and 1930s, Procter & Gamble popularized the art of soap carving through a series of annual competitions, which explicitly promoted handicraft as a therapeutic alternative to the machine age. However, soap sculpture in fact offered a way to accommodate the changes associated with commercial modernization. A do-it-yourself hobby that relied on mass production, turned the household chore of shaving soap into an art form, and produced compact works of art that reflected the demands of factory production, soap sculpture is an example “antimodern modernism”—assimilating and aestheticizing the very processes of modernization it otherwise appeared to oppose.

ON EASTER SUNDAY 1937, New York City policemen reported to an especially unfortunate crime scene: three wasted bodies found in the small confines of a modest Beekman Hill apartment. A middle-aged woman and her grown daughter, an aspiring model said to pose for artists (reputable and otherwise), had been strangled and shoved under a bed in the front room. Another corpse bloodied the mattress in the back bedroom: the women's boarder, an older British gentleman known to be hard of hearing, had been stabbed to death in his sleep. In reconstructing the tragic events, police detectives determined that the typical order of such matters had been reversed. Instead of a murderous intruder surprising the women through an open win-

dow or flimsy front door, the women arrived home to find their killer already there, patiently awaiting his opportunity for ambush. That he had been waiting for some time was evidenced by a particularly eerie detail. A small sculpture, carefully carved in ordinary bath soap, was found at the scene, causing police to surmise that the killer had “whiled away his time carving the statue as he waited.”¹ This telltale calling card led detectives to identify their culprit, a so-called mad sculptor, whose earlier exploits had included employment in a waxworks studio in Los Angeles, an apprenticeship to the eminent sculptor Lorado Taft in Chicago, and a brief incarceration in a New York state hospital for the insane. In the manhunt that ensued, police were dispatched to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where they believed the killer carver was likely to seek solace. Instead, months passed before the amateur artist surrendered himself and confessed.²

Any triple homicide on Easter morning would have had plenty to recommend it to eager readers of true crime, but the deranged-hobbyist-as-killer conceit gave this story its exceptional appeal. Reporters relished the blurry distinction between virtuous self-dedication and nefarious obsession, and the incriminating evidence—that carefully worked

Jennifer Jane Marshall is acting assistant professor of American art history at Stanford University.

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¹ “Chicago Center of Search for Triple Slayer,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 9, 1937, 1.

² Newspaper accounts of the period vary widely as to the specifics of the case. The details presented here as to the murders of Mary and Veronica Gedeon and their tenant, Frank Brynes, are

piece of sweet-smelling sculpture—only heightened the story’s creepy fascination.

Readers of this mad sculptor story, which reemerged occasionally well into the 1950s, would certainly have been familiar with the killer’s chosen pastime. Indeed, soap carving boasted a kind of ubiquity at the time of the murders, satisfying the creative impulse of adults and children alike with its yielding ease, its affordable accessibility, and its nostalgic appeal to the folksy crafts of a bygone era. But this clean-cut hobby, like the mad sculptor himself, was not quite what it seemed. If the soap-carving killer captivated readers by inverting the typically wholesome associations with homespun handicraft, close examination reveals that soap carving itself was already marked by a number of similar reversals.

The craft’s many proponents explicitly embraced soap carving for its quaint, almost primitive simplicity and recommended it as nothing less than a therapeutic alternative to the alienating effects of mechanized mass production. However, the fact that the hobby’s most vociferous proponent was none other than Procter & Gamble (P&G) hints not too subtly at the sort of commercial accommodations that the art of soap sculpture afforded. Corporate sponsorship, in the form of annual nationwide contests, came with a series of smaller ironies, too. What had once been a tedious aspect of housekeeping—cutting up a bar of soap for use in cleaning—was transformed into an artistic act. And the top prize winners in P&G’s contests—creating absolutely unique works of art by hand—were rewarded with the chance to have their pieces cast in bronze or porcelain and reproduced for mail-order sale. Contradiction and irony even suffused soap sculpture’s formal aesthetic, which, in accordance with the contemporary ideals of both abstract modernism and Depression-era frugality, centered on the values of simplicity and restraint. Carving’s procedural and formal insistence on subtraction thus ventured—simultaneously—a critique and a reinforcement of machine age modernization. Contradicting the assembly line’s multiplications and duplications in singular handmade objects, carving ironically also

culled from “Slain Model’s Father Held,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 1, 1937, 1; William Fulton, “Hunt Sculptor in 8 States as Slayer of Trio,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 6, 1937, 1; “Sought in Gedeon Slayings,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1937, 2; “Irwin Hunt Goes on Here,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1937, 48; “Victims of a Sex-Crime Wave,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 2, 1937, G7; “Irwin Confesses 3 Gedeon Murders: Seized in Chicago,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1937, 1; Ellery Queen, “The Strange Case of the Mad Sculptor,” *Washington Post*, March 10, 1957, AW15.

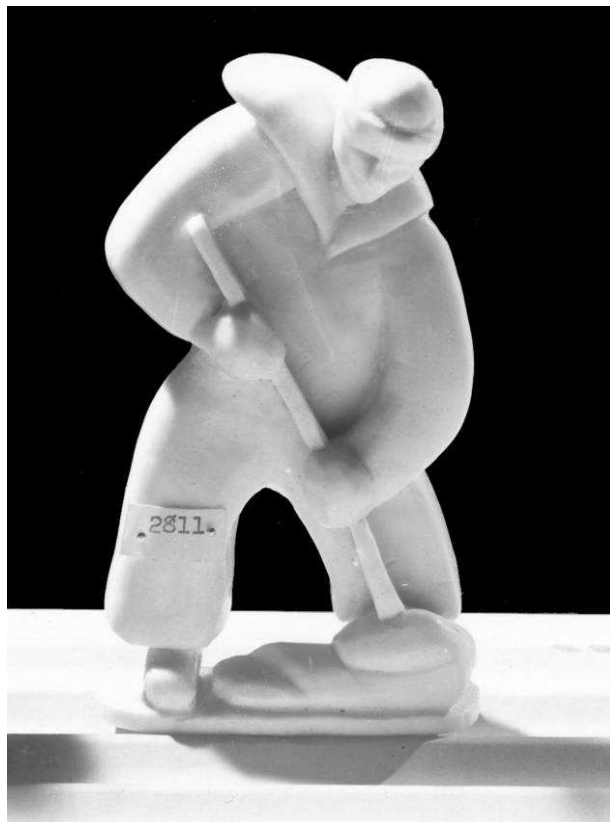


Fig. 1. Frank Balkovec, *The Swabbing Gob*, second quarter of the twentieth century. Soap sculpture. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

advanced a style perfectly suited to efficient standardization and rationalized reproduction: smooth, plain, compact, and uncomplicated (fig. 1).

In his influential work *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture*, T. J. Jackson Lears examines how the earnest activities of “antimodernism”—the craft revivals, back-to-nature movements, and primitivist celebrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—actually accommodated corporate capitalism by reinforcing its values of individual self-expression and fulfillment.³ As a hobby that so expressly laid claim to antimodern values, soap carving offers itself to Lears’s interpretive rubric, and its internal contradictions would seem further to support it. Moreover, and specifically because it was a hobby, soap carving also aptly illustrates the fundamental inversion at the heart of modern leisure, namely, that the activities used to pass the

³ See T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

time off the job so often reinforce the work ethic values that the job requires.⁴ Leisure historian Steven Gelber calls this effect “disguised affirmation” and suggests that America’s industrious, good-for-you hobbies (from fancywork to furniture building) all amount to so much “ideological spillover,” extending the imperatives of the workplace, even while seeming to offer compensatory respite.⁵

Both Lears and Gelber take a sober view of these covert expansions of modernity’s governing norms, and indeed soap sculpture seems to offer an especially instructive example of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. An important model to Lears’s analysis (and one devised in response to the same processes of mechanization that provided the backdrop for soap sculpture), hegemony accounts for how dominant ideologies, including corporate capitalism, maintain their dominance by reproducing themselves as the cultural values held dear by society. With its claims to art, beauty, and populist accessibility, soap sculpture discursively operated above the crass concerns of the marketplace and so offered a particularly potent opportunity for unwitting cultural participation in business interests.

However, to the degree that soap carving accommodated many of the cultural forces it appeared to resist, this effect was not so simply a case of corporate villainy or top-down deceit. For one, soap carvers were not so easily duped. They knew the hobby was a marketing stunt (some even submitted entries that directly referenced P&G’s advertising themes), and they were likely aware of the compromises that came with the pastime’s nostalgic refusal of mechanization. Having to purchase a bar of factory-made soap just to enjoy “actually making an object,” in the words of one how-to guide, would certainly have offered an early clue.⁶ The fact was that the hobby’s many internal contradictions, which so perfectly demonstrate the maneuvering of hegemony, apparently did not interfere with its promise to provide curative respite from the growing pains of modernization, at least not to the thousands of enthusiastic American soap carvers. Instead, the contradictions themselves may well have been the very basis for its curative effects, offering the chance to begrudge modern life, while adjusting to its demands, in a “process of evasion”

⁴ See Steven M. Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ National Soap Sculpture Committee, *The Simple Craft of Carving Soap* (n.p., n.d.), content ID Y-591, Procter & Gamble Corporate Archives, Cincinnati (hereafter P&G Archives).

that Lears describes as “half-conscious” and a matter of “self-deception rather than deliberate duplicity.”⁷ While perhaps not as spine tingling as the tale of the soap-carving killer, the social art history of this popular American pastime thus has its own twists: a complex web of internal contradictions and ironic inversions spun to deflect and ultimately adjust to the particular challenges of machine age modernization.

Carving in the Machine Age

In the midst of the Great Depression, one newspaper pundit observed, “Less cash, more leisure and an urge to do something that will endure are a combination that is restoring the arts and crafts to the American home.”⁸ The dramatic resurgence of do-it-yourself hobbies, well documented by social historians of the period, offered a number of practical benefits to Americans strained by unemployment and anxiety.⁹ Not only did hobbies in the workshop or garden pass the time, they also resulted in tangible, usable benefits, like bookshelves and bar stools and carrots and beets. Indeed, many enthusiasts explicitly identified instrumentality as their primary motivation, speaking in terms that fairly substantiate Gelber’s thesis of “ideological spillover.” One California housewife professed that she had found purpose in the art of hand carving, which put her hands to the “useful” task of making something; another chalked the recent craft renaissance up to “America’s philosophy” that “even leisure must be worthy.”¹⁰ In the exceptional case of the Depression, however, leisure’s “disguised affirmation” of a normative work ethic was far from covert. Leisure very often was work, and the more that pastimes could reinforce traditional values, the better.

⁷ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 17.

⁸ Gerald B. Burnett, “If You’re Modern, Here’s Your Hobby—It’s Wood Carving,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1934, H6.

⁹ For more on the history of American hobbies during the Depression, see Gelber, *Hobbies*; Susan Currell, *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Anne D. Williams, “Leisure in the Great Depression: The Many Pieces of the Jigsaw Puzzle Story,” *Ephemera Journal* 6 (1993): 99–115; and Joseph J. Corn, “Educating the Enthusiast: Print and Popularization of Technical Knowledge,” in *Possible Dreams: Enthusiasm for Technology in America*, ed. John L. Wright (Dearborn, MI: Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, 1992).

¹⁰ Burnett, “If You’re Modern”; Charles W. Duke, “Perennial Youth—Where to Find It,” *Washington Post*, July 16, 1933, 49.

In this climate, hand carving achieved special status. In addition to providing the usual sort of uplift associated with all hobbies, carving was further distinguished both by the durability of its output and by the manual and mental discipline it enforced. In every sense, carving was hard work. The sturdiness of hand-carved objects formally suggested the kind of artistic and moral solidity that crafters tended to associate with the work of making something by hand. In the same vein, carving's practical challenges were said to foster a very specific set of mental and manual skills: skills that emphasized creative thrift and procedural parsimony. Making something through the process of elimination required logical concentration and preparation: envisioning the object and then rationally deducing what had to be stripped away in order to reveal it. Throughout the process, the carver balanced mental labors with manual exertion, and both were ultimately kept in check by the stubborn resilience of the material itself. Assuming an inherent relationship between the carved object and the disciplined mind, many advice columnists of the era promoted carving as a good way to "keep a keen edge on mental abilities" during the search for employment and to banish any of those "job hunters' jitters" in the meantime.¹¹

There was some irony to this last endorsement. As the procedural opposite of assembly-line mass production, carving was much more than a hobby: it was the very refusal of just those processes of modernization that many people viewed as the Depression's root cause. The mechanization of American industry, once a source of pride and optimism, had lately become the target of resentment, as the era's new time- and labor-saving devices started to displace blue-collar workers from their manufacturing posts. Economists and cultural critics of the era dubbed this "technological unemployment," an unintended consequence of industrial modernization and one that gave many Americans more free time than they knew what to do with.¹² Indeed, as historian Susan Currell has shown, the early twentieth-century leisure movement centered

on the assumption that increased free time was to be a fixture of modern American life and that it was in the country's best interest to manage, control, and even profit from this new surplus of personal downtime.¹³ "Overproduction" was the other bogeyman of Depression-era commentary, as experts and laypeople alike indicted the additions and multiplications of assembly-line manufacturing for the market's volatility and collapse. Thus, with carving, hobbyists ironically found a diversion that filled the spare time of technological unemployment while also performing the reversal of its causes: making by hand, instead of by machine, and making one unique thing, instead of millions.

Carving's implicit critique of mass production repeatedly emerged as a leitmotif in its discourse, particularly in many of the era's human-interest stories about "expert amateurs." *Popular Mechanics* had a special penchant for working stiffers who divided their time between the factory floor and the home workshop. Ernest Warther of Dover, Ohio, a steel mill employee since age fourteen, was one such hobbyist. Carving whole train sets from wood, including every last nut, bolt, and bearing, Warther brought the nostalgic work of handicraft to bear on an icon of modern technology. His day job, which required handling upward of thirty thousand pounds of steel every day, ten hours a day, was "not particularly kind to hands," in the understated words of the article, but the "utmost precision" that carving demanded offered Warther a curative antithesis to his repetitive and trying industrial labors.¹⁴ In Canada, "cowboy-rancher" W. G. Hodgson turned carving against mass production in another way. Whittling figurines of Voltaire, Gandhi, and Salome out of juniper roots collected on the prairie, Hodgson used knives he made himself, crafted from "discarded Ford automobile parts," which he had picked up as discerningly as he did his scrap wood.¹⁵ Hodgson's creative procedure thus reclaimed the detritus of Ford's famous assembly lines for the opposite sort of work: creatively carving away instead of routinely adding to.

While "expert amateurs" like Warther and Hodgson flourished with the challenges of wood carving, most Americans were more modest in their whittling attempts. Cheaper than wood or stone, and much easier to work, ordinary bath soap

¹¹ "Job Hunters' Jitters—and How to Banish Them," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 6, 1937, B3.

¹² For more on how this phenomenon affected the cultural climate of the Depression in the United States, see Amy Sue Bix, *Inventing Ourselves out of Jobs? America's Debate over Technological Unemployment, 1929–1981* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press and Hagley Museum and Library, 2000); and Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

¹³ See Currell, *March of Spare Time*.

¹⁴ "Master Carver," *Popular Mechanics*, April 1932, 588.

¹⁵ "Rancher's Hobby Wins Favor in Art World," *Popular Mechanics*, April 1934, 502.



Fig. 2. Bovine soap sculpture, second quarter of the twentieth century. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

emerged as the public's favorite medium for carving, attracting enthusiasts from across the traditional boundaries of race, gender, age, and class. Softly yielding to any household knife, soap promised sculptural satisfaction to even the most impatient novice (fig. 2). One expert amateur in the hobby, high school sophomore Doug Pickering, boasted that he could duplicate the ivory sculpture of ancient China in forty minutes flat.¹⁶ Not only easy and gratifying, the craft also fulfilled the goals of constructive leisure, encouraging both manual dexterity and keen observation and providing the thrill of being able "to point to your work and say, 'There is something I have done,'" as one writer enthused.¹⁷ Accordingly, soap carving was a staple of local community centers and Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCAs) across the country, providing tinkering adults and children with a wholesome way to connect with their creative sides. Although his personal favorite was the poster-painting class, artist Jacob Lawrence later recalled that soap carving had been among the many activities available to him at the Utopia Children's Settlement House in Harlem in the 1930s.¹⁸ During the same years, a

New York City radio station offered a half-hour how-to program on the topic of soap carving; meanwhile, at a Chicago-area YMCA, "the Raider gang might go to soap carving and the Cougars to shop work."¹⁹ By the later years of the Depression, soap carving managed to reach the pinnacle of leisure-time activities. In 1938, a newspaper headline proclaimed the triumph: "Soap Carving Ousts 'Jigsaws' as National Leisure-Spender."²⁰

Soap carving was not just for children and amateurs. Students at both the Chicago Art Students' League and the Corcoran Art School used soap for sculpting exercises, and both schools featured the medium in their student exhibitions of the late 1920s and early '30s.²¹ When the National Sculpture Society staged its ambitious state-of-the-medium show in San Francisco in 1929, its publicity material took pains to draw attention to a handful of works cast from models originally carved in soap.²² The sculptor Brenda Putnam included a section on soap carving in her instructional art book, *The Sculptor's Way* of 1939, and professional artistic magazines like

¹⁶ "Soap Is Used to Aid Study of Literature," *Washington Post*, March 7, 1937, P2.

¹⁷ National Soap Sculpture Committee, *Simple Craft of Carving Soap*.

¹⁸ Online transcript of tape-recorded interview with Jacob Lawrence by Carroll Greene, October 26, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lawren68.htm>.

¹⁹ "Today on the Radio," *New York Times*, June 20, 1931, 22; "Boy Gangs Find It Pays to Play at Division 'Y,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 26, 1936, NW1.

²⁰ Rae Lewis, "Soap Carving Ousts 'Jigsaws' as National Leisure-Spender," *Washington Post*, January 16, 1938, S7.

²¹ Eleanor Jewett, "Art and Artists," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 20, 1926, E4; Ada Rainey, "Corcoran Art School Show Called Best," *Washington Post*, June 8, 1930, S7.

²² "Public Curious over Sculpture Exhibit Here," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 14, 1929.

the *American Architect* also covered the art form, assuming their readers would find soap carving “desirable and valuable in studying certain details of ornament.”²³

Among all the advocates of soap carving, Putnam had actually been its earliest, extolling its democratic accessibility well before the Depression made this a crucial selling point. In 1925, she observed: “Everybody cannot afford to experiment in marble, nor have they the strength to handle the heavy blocks, but white soap is available to everyone.”²⁴ Adding to this point, and countering any snobby skepticism, Putnam observed, “It is hard work, mentally if not physically.”²⁵ Admitting that she had first turned to soap as a cheap way to get some practice in carving, Putnam, an elected member of the National Academy of Design, said that what happened next was an “inspiration.”²⁶ “Carving in soap has shown me how far I had gotten from sculpting,” she said, adding that the oddball medium had helped to refocus her mind on the distinctly sculptural values of volumes and voids, forcing her to create the former by cutting away the latter.²⁷ As it happened, she relished the challenge and credited this exercise in mental discipline for returning her to the noble work of what she called “essential sculpture.”²⁸

With strong appeals to the “essence” of sculpture, Putnam began to plot a course for what would become the aesthetic ideology of soap carving: a commingling of moral, economic, and artistic values that potently combined a strong work ethic with parsimonious frugality and artistic restraint. These would become crucial terms in the moral and aesthetic economies of the Depression and, at the time of Putnam’s remarks in 1925, were already ascendant in the American modernist vocabulary of paring down and laying bare. But, aside from all that, Putnam’s approval was just good publicity. Her lofty ideas, reprinted widely, were issued as the proud sound bites of one of the earliest prize winners in P&G’s new national soap-carving contests.

²³ “Small Sculptures in Soap,” *American Architect*, June 20, 1929, 823.

²⁴ “The Prize Winners in Soap Sculpture,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1925, 27.

²⁵ Brenda Putnam, *The Sculptor’s Way: A Guide to Modelling and Sculpture* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1948), 299.

²⁶ “The Prize Winners in Soap Sculpture,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1925, 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

The National Soap Sculpture Competition in White Soap

Early in the case of the mad sculptor, puzzled detectives called in some unusual expertise: a young advertising executive named Henry Bern. Police hoped that Bern would be able to identify the killer, perhaps by discerning some distinctive style in the soap statue left behind. At the time, Bern was probably the closest thing there was to a soap sculpture expert, as the primary publicity manager for P&G’s annual soap-carving competitions. While it would take the tough times of the Depression to turn soap carving into a bona fide craze, the national fad got its initial start with a little self-serving nudge from P&G. In 1924, the prominent soap manufacturer announced a National Soap Sculpture Competition in White Soap, and it drew so many submissions and so much attention that the company made it an annual event, repeating the stunt regularly until the early 1940s.²⁹ Little wonder, then, that Bern denied any recognition of the soap carving left at the New York City crime scene. So what if he felt certain that it was the work of last year’s contest winner (as he later admitted)?³⁰ It was not worth risking any bad publicity for the hobby he had worked so hard to establish. Why mess with anything that was otherwise such good, clean fun?

No stranger to clever promotional ploys, P&G had long been a leading innovator in American advertising. It was among the first companies in the country to market its product directly to the consumer, among the first to recognize the value of brand identification and loyalty, and among the first to offer free samples, premiums, and rebates.³¹

²⁹ With the outbreak of the Second World War, leisure-time activities fell to the wayside as pocketknives were traded in for carbine rifles, and manicure sticks (commonly suggested as an aid for sculpting soap) were exchanged for rivet guns. Although some soldiers would return to soap carving while convalescing in Red Cross centers and military hospitals, for the most part the craft was to be relegated to summer camps and kindergartens in the decades after World War II. “Sailors Learn New Skills in Navy Hospital,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 12, 1944, N1.

³⁰ Henry Bern to A. H. Perrin, April 30, 1959, Public Relations Department, the Procter & Gamble Company, P&G Archives. Bern’s memory of the murders does not exactly match up with the newspaper coverage, and so it is subject to doubt whether the killer, Robert Irwin, actually was a prizewinner in the competition of 1936. I have not been able to verify either way.

³¹ Advertising history reserves a special place for hygiene product manufacturers, which have long been industry leaders in promotional innovation. See Davis Dyer, Frederick Dalzell, and Rowena Olegario, *Rising Tide: Lessons from 165 Years of Brand Building at Procter & Gamble* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004); Ellen J. Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen, and the*

It was also the first in the industry to sponsor a radio serial drama, with *Ma Perkins* making its debut as America's first soap opera in 1933. Moreover, throughout P&G's promotional history, contests had always been a central feature.³² Initiated in the early 1890s by Harley Procter (son of cofounder William Procter), P&G's first contests invited consumers to write poems about one of the company's newest products, an affordable approximation of Europe's famous castile-style soaps, called Ivory.³³

In addition to their obvious promotional value, these competitions also furthered Harley Procter's insistence that P&G's products be endowed with an air of artistic distinction. Defending against any association with the hoax and humbug that had long characterized the personal hygiene trade, P&G developed a promotional culture of its own, crafting a public image founded on civic virtue and moral uprightness. In the early days, this effort manifested itself in various ways: in frequent retellings of how Harley Procter named Ivory soap after an inspirational passage from the book of Psalms, in a print campaign concentrated first in the Christian press, and in Ivory's famous claim to be "99 ⁴⁴/₁₀₀ per cent pure."³⁴ Such Victorian-tinged overtures to piety and purity were nicely matched by P&G's self-conscious attempts to incorporate art into its publicity material, where it could be leveraged as a mark of cultural decency and, by extension, a kind of moral, personal cleanliness. Prominent illustrators, including Maxfield Parrish, Alice Barber Stephens, and Jessie Wilcox Smith, fulfilled com-

missions for the company's full-page ads, which came to be coveted collectibles in their own right.³⁵ The contests fit right in with these self-conscious attempts to imbue P&G's product line—Ivory in particular—with the social capital of artistic merit. Not mere lotteries, such contests enrolled consumers (usually female) as creative partners in developing brand identity, while also honoring the genteel tradition of a literate and imaginative lady of the house.³⁶

Under the leadership of William Cooper Procter, Harley's brother and company president from 1907 to 1930, P&G rose to near-monopoly status. Building new plants to the north, east, and west of its home base in Cincinnati and making ambitious strides toward vertical integration and horizontal acquisition in an international market, the soap maker was a multimillion dollar industry leader by the end of the 1920s. At that point, even the Depression had a hard time getting in its way. In 1939, *Fortune* magazine reported that few years had "been more congenial than the last ten" to P&G's bottom line.³⁷ Over the course of what proved to be one of the most difficult periods for American business, the manufacturer sold more than 1.6 billion dollars' worth of soaps, shortenings, and detergents to a hardscrabble public, intent on scrimping and saving on most everything else.³⁸ Indeed, while some of the old domestic chores reappeared during these lean years (e.g., home canning, which put a noticeable dent in the prepared foods market), there was no significant return to household soap making.³⁹

Although consumers were willing to keep buying factory-made soap during the Depression, other issues caused concern among its manufacturers, thus perpetuating the need for aggressive marketing strategies. The primary concern was soap's perilously low profit margin. A low-priced commodity that cost next to nothing to make, soap depended on marketplace overconsumption for its profits, relying on exceptionally high levels of demand that, even by the 1920s, were not a foregone conclusion. The mass market for sanitary products was only yet in its infancy, and mechanization itself

Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination (Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1992); *Procter & Gamble: The House That Ivory Built* (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Business Books, 1988); Oscar Schisgall, *Eyes on Tomorrow: The Evolution of Procter & Gamble* (Chicago: Ferguson, 1981); Juliann Sivulka, *Stronger than Dirt: A Cultural History of Advertising Personal Hygiene in America, 1875–1940* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001); Vincent Vinikas, *Soft Soap, Hard Sell: American Hygiene in an Age of Advertisement* (Ames: Iowa State University, 1992).

³² P&G continues to use folksy, nostalgic hobbies in their promotional strategies. Recently, the company has been instrumental in revitalizing Bunco, a simple game of chance popular among middle-aged women, the target demographic for heartburn remedies. Shrewdly, P&G currently sponsors a number of local and regional Bunco tournaments under the banner of its heartburn remedy, Prilosec. Ellen Bryton, "An Old Dice Game Catches on Again, Pushed by P&G," *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2007, A1, A13.

³³ Substantial monetary prizes encouraged submissions, which were only valid when accompanied by Ivory wrappers as proof of purchase. The top-ranking rhymes could draw \$300, while winning ideas for another contest, the most Unusual Uses for Ivory Soap, could rake in up to \$1,000. Schisgall, *Eyes on Tomorrow*, 35.

³⁴ Harley Procter, desperately seeking a name for the company's newly developed soap, was said to have received divine inspiration from Ps. 45:8, read one Sunday during his regular Episcopal mass. See *ibid.*, 26; and Dyer, Dalzell, and Olegario, *Rising Tide*, 27. For more on the fear of association with patent medicine peddlers, see 28–29.

³⁵ Schisgall, *Eyes on Tomorrow*, 35.

³⁶ The highly gendered nature of P&G's early contests prove a point of distinction with the company's later more equal-opportunity soap sculpture competitions. Judging from the available list of submissions and prize winners, there were nearly as many male contestants as female contestants in the P&G soap sculpture contests.

³⁷ "99 ⁴⁴/₁₀₀ Pure Profit Record," *Fortune*, April 1939, 78.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Recent Trends in the United States: Report of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), 908.

proved a threat. As historian Vincent Vinikas has shown, all the modern conveniences that saved time and labor also tidied up the work of daily life, thus decreasing demand for soap.⁴⁰ Finally, the promotion of soaps like Ivory as an all-purpose wonder product ran aground of a wildly diversifying marketplace, awash in deodorants, mouthwashes, perfumes, and detergents: all of which challenged bar soap's security as the silver bullet for universal cleanliness. "The soap maker weeps," wrote one sympathetic analyst.⁴¹

In response to these challenges, P&G, Palmolive, Colgate, and Lever Brothers overcame their usual competitive enmity and formed the National Association of Soap and Glycerine Producers, with the so-called Cleanliness Institute serving as its public voice starting in 1927. The council, which certainly did not lead to any collegial swapping of trade secrets, energetically devoted itself to cultivating an automatic association between "health and wealth" and "soap and water."⁴²

In the early 1920s, and just in advance of the soap-carving contests, P&G matched this industry-wide assertiveness with renewed attention to its own corporate identity. It took a significant step in this direction when it brought an external consultant on board, hiring Edward Bernays, one of the era's most prominent publicity gurus, as its PR (public relations) director.⁴³ During his tenure, which coincided with the activities of the Cleanliness Institute and the start of the Depression, Bernays was successful in furthering P&G's ambition to join the ideals of cleanliness and cultural distinction together in a corporate identity founded on social virtue. Art would prove useful to this effort, just as it had for many other companies that had lately discovered the worth of "art-in-industry": a formula Bernays himself had been instrumental in developing. As the PR director for Jacques Seligmann and Company, a Manhattan art dealer, Bernays came to understand that the artworks everyone called the "most important," were really just those that the art-collecting

coterie had made "fashionable."⁴⁴ From this lesson, Bernays realized not only that "art served upward social mobility in America" but also, and more significantly, that "the dealer who knew how to project art symbols effectively reaped the profits."⁴⁵ This maxim, Bernays would soon discover, applied to marketing challenges far removed from art dealing.

As PR consultant for the silk manufacturing firm Cheney Brothers during the 1920s (a post he held concurrently with his P&G commission), Bernays sought to leverage the cultural associations between art and "upward social mobility" by establishing the company as a trendsetter in avant-garde style. He mounted textile exhibits at the Louvre, commissioned paintings from Georgia O'Keeffe to use in ads and window displays, introduced a line inspired by the works of Marc Chagall, and staged an Egyptian-themed fabric design contest, timed to capitalize on the recent discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb.⁴⁶ The calculated use of "art symbols," as Bernays called them, was an important ingredient in his complex recipe for promotional success. With Bernays, the point was not so much hawking an individual product as developing corporate brand identities around the distinct and desirable lifestyle markers their products were said to promote. He brought this philosophy to bear on his work for P&G in the early 1920s, even though it meant bringing high cultural values to a product that was known for being cheap, ubiquitous, and middling. There would be no O'Keeffe flowers for the soap maker and no gala events at the Louvre, but there would be soap sculpture: an art symbol mobilized to unite the contemporary ethic of modern artistic "purity" with P&G's chief hallmarks: clean purity, strong moral fiber, and refined cultural distinction (fig. 3).

In the few pages of his autobiography that Bernays dedicated to his activities at P&G, he remembered that it had been Brenda Putnam, the sculptor and soap enthusiast herself, who had inadvertently sparked the idea for a soap-carving contest. Struck by an impulse to carve cheap sculptural "sketches" on a monumental scale, Putnam wrote to P&G and asked whether they would be willing to send uncut blocks of oversized Ivory directly to her studio. They obliged without comment. Soon after, however, reports of the unusual request began to spread through the Cincinnati offices, bringing some levity to what was otherwise an "exceedingly well

⁴⁰ Vinikas, *Soft Soap*, 79, 82.

⁴¹ Walter B. Pitkin, *The Consumer: His Nature and His Changing Habits* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1932), 45-47, quoted in Vinikas, *Soft Soap*, 83.

⁴² Quotes taken from an advertisement issued by the Cleanliness Institute in 1928 and reprinted in Sivulka, *Stronger than Dirt*, 231-45.

⁴³ P&G's recently hired advertising agency, Blackman Company, was directly responsible for Bernays's hire, after the company specifically requested that a PR expert be brought on board. Edward L. Bernays, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel Edward L. Bernays* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), 342.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 299-309.

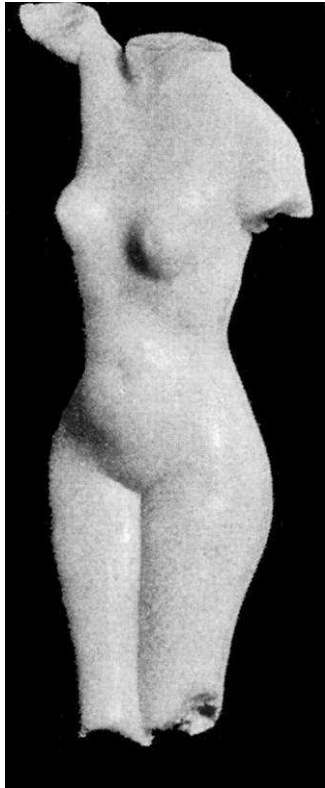


Fig. 3. Juniata Leonard, *Torso*, 1925. Soap sculpture. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

regulated” and “formal” corporate atmosphere, distinguished only by its unusually quiet, “yoga-like calm.”⁴⁷ Eventually, the story wound its way to Bernays, whose experiences with Seligmann and Cheney Brothers had primed him to see Putnam’s letter as an unexpected gift of pure PR gold.

Winners of the first National Soap Sculpture Competition in White Soap were announced in January 1925. The fuzzy institutional records and scant public reporting of this inaugural contest make it hard to nail down the specifics of the contest’s early formation, even though this lacuna also suggests the tentative way in which P&G first approached the idea. However, Bernays’s instinctive sense that soap could be promoted successfully as an art supply—adding just one more application to Ivory’s long list of boastful claims—proved to be cannily astute. Restoring a little creative ingenuity to P&G’s contests (which by then had become mainly chance drawings), the soap sculpture competition boasted a double-edged advantage. A popularizing admixture of high and low, advanced in the interests of publicity, the contest appealed simultaneously to sculpture’s fine art associations and to craft’s popular

⁴⁷ “99 ⁴⁴/₁₀₀% Pure Profit Record,” *Fortune*, April 1939, 77.

appeal. It conjoined the edifying potential of art with the purifying potential of soap, and—like the Cleanliness Institute’s guide to social advancement, “Kit for Climbers”—it presumed to offer the socially uplifting benefits of both to everyone, regardless of class, age, race, gender, or skill level.⁴⁸

Chiefly an “idea man,” Bernays was only minimally involved with the contests themselves. Just as he was not lakeside in Central Park for the Ivory soap “yacht” regatta he dreamed up for young boys, Bernays deferred the soap-carving contests to a publicity management team after the initial plan was in motion (fig. 4).⁴⁹ This was where Henry Bern came in. Dispatched with the task of coordinating the event, his limitless energy would prove equal to the mounting tasks that lay ahead. While initiated with caution, P&G’s soap-carving contests grew boldly and consistently throughout the latter half of the 1920s, with submissions increasing from around 500 for the first contest to about 2,000 in 1927 and to well over 5,000 in 1931.⁵⁰ Moreover, these numbers were said to represent only a fraction of the hobby’s prodigious popularity. Not only were some amateurs too shy to enter, but many of the entries came prescreened: winners of locally run contests that had advanced to the national competition, sent by school board panels and community organized councils. This ad hoc system of unofficial semifinals reflected the contest’s wide geographic coverage, spread more or less evenly across the continental United States. Bern later remembered the breadth of the contest’s appeal. As was typical for the adman, he boasted through anecdote: “As far as we know our youngest and oldest contestant was 6 and 86 years respectively—the youngest was in New England, the older in Portland, Oregon. They both entered the same contest; they both chose as their subject a whale; they were unknown to one another.”⁵¹ Nor did soap carving stop at the border:

⁴⁸ The era’s popular commentary on soap carving suggests a wide range of practitioners: from out-of-work men to craft-inclined women, from Anglo-American honors students to underprivileged African American youth, and from professionally trained sculptors to absolute novices. Likewise, the existing lists of submissions and prize winners from the P&G contests would also seem to indicate a relatively high degree of diversity, at least as far as can be deduced from names and geographic location and certainly by comparison to the contestant pools for P&G’s earlier competitions.

⁴⁹ Bernays, *Biography of an Idea*, 344.

⁵⁰ “The Prize Winners in Soap Sculpture,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1925, 27; “Soap Sculpture,” *American Magazine of Art*, August 1932, 128; Ernest Bruce Haswell, *The Development and Use of Soap Sculpture* (New York: National Soap Sculpture Committee, 1932), 9, content ID Y-561, P&G Archives.

⁵¹ Henry Bern to A. H. Perrin, January 19, 1959, Public Relations Department, Procter & Gamble Company, P&G Archives.



Yachtsmen of the future compete with boats made from cakes of Ivory Soap.

Fig. 4. Central Park, New York. From Ernest Bruce Haswell, *The Development and Use of Soap Sculpture* (New York: National Soap Sculpture Committee, 1932), 25. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)



Unpacking and classifying thousands of entries in a National Soap Sculpture Competition.

Fig. 5. New York, second quarter of the twentieth century. From Ernest Bruce Haswell, *The Development and Use of Soap Sculpture* (New York: National Soap Sculpture Committee, 1932), 9. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)



Fig. 6. Judges of the National Soap Sculpture Committee Annual Competition for Small Sculptures in White Soap, New York, second quarter of the twentieth century. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

submissions came in from the territories, Canada, Britain, Europe, and Asia. Indeed, a special Foreign Committee had to be established in 1930 to provide adequate international representation and, of course, to underscore the contest's worldwide viability.

After all the entries arrived in their tiny crates from all over the world, a distinguished committee of artists, critics, art museum directors, industrial leaders, and education experts systematically appraised them, picking out nearly one hundred entries each year to receive prizes (figs. 5 and 6).⁵² The jury's collective expertise was impressive. In addition to art world leaders like John Cotton Dana of the Newark Museum and Alon Bement of the National Alliance of Art and Industry, a number of quite prominent artists also served as regular judges, constituting a roster that fairly reflected the diversity of American art at the time (fig. 7). Charles Dana

⁵² During the 1920s, the jury awarded between thirty-five and forty-five prizes per contest. Beginning in 1930, this number jumped to over one hundred and was maintained during the decade at the advertised ninety-six prizes and four special awards.

Gibson, an illustrator best known for his ubiquitous Gibson Girl of the 1890s, was an obvious choice since he—like Dana and Bement—had considerable experience in the cooperative labors of merging art and industry. Bessie Potter Vonnoh (a sculptor best known for her genre scenes in bronze and the first woman to be elected to the National Academy of Design) and Lorado Taft (erstwhile mentor to the murderous mad sculptor and author of the comprehensive *History of American Sculpture*) joined Gutzon Borglum, Harriet Frishmuth, and Leo Lentelli in representing the academic wing of contemporary sculpture. Jury duty, however, was not relegated just to the big wigs of the old guard. Two of the most prominent figures of sculpture's youthful cutting edge, Alexander Archipenko and Robert Laurent, also served time as contest jurors. Both men were émigrés to the United States and brought with them radical new ideas for plastic expression, including a renewed emphasis on formal simplification. For Archipenko, simplification meant figuration through abstraction and the ironic activation of concave and negative spaces as the positive terms of



Fig. 7. "Accomplished Sculptors Judge Soap Carvings," New York, second quarter of the twentieth century. Panel from left to right: Hayworth Campbell, Paul B. Hoeber, Bessie Potter Vonnoh, A. Stirling Calder, Chester Beach, and W. S. Conrow. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

three-dimensional composition. For Laurent, simplification was a procedural directive as much as a formal one. Like the hobbyists whom he judged in the P&G contests, Laurent had adopted the subtractive method of carving, which he explicitly embraced—in terms not far off from the official contest literature—as a way to “seize forms as they gradually appear while working.”⁵³ By and large, the list of prize winners did not include such art world notables; only a young Eero Saarinen now stands out among the commended. Saarinen, who competed in the Senior Group (ages fifteen to twenty-one), won several awards over the years, including first place for a piece called *Sorrow* in 1928 (figs. 8 and 9). However, Saarinen was still decades away from the tulip chairs and airport terminals that would earn him fame (and which, it must be said, bear a certain resemblance to the chalky purity of carved soap). So,

⁵³ Robert Laurent, handwritten notes, reel 2066, frame 1152, microfilmed “Robert Laurent Papers, 1869–1973,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

it was left to the jury to supply the contest with its star power and “glamour,” which Bern often stressed as crucial for garnering press attention.⁵⁴

The coverage was indeed considerable, focused each year mainly on the exhibitions that capped off every contest. Beginning in New York in venues such as the Art Center, the Anderson Galleries, and Alon Bement’s National Alliance of Art and Industry, the shows included every entry that was submitted and came accompanied with a series of attention-getting events: including a press preview, a special lunch or dinner honoring the winners, and a public conferral of the awards. As Bern remembered it, “Winners who came to the New York ceremonies . . . experienced the same handling that glamorous Hollywood Stars [*sic*] get when they come to New York” (fig. 10).⁵⁵ After closing in Manhattan, the show was then divided into smaller units for national travel, circulating among department stores, schools,

⁵⁴ Bern to Perrin, January 19, 1959, P&G Archives.

⁵⁵ Bern to Perrin, April 30, 1959, P&G Archives.



Fig. 8. "Some of the Prize Winners in the Fourth Annual Contest," 1929 National Soap Sculpture Committee contest, including *Sorrow* (top right), by Eero Saarinen. From Margaret J. Postgate, *Carving Small Sculptures in Ivory Soap* (New York: National Soap Sculpture Committee, 1928), 8–9. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

and museums across the United States, along with screenings of P&G's instructional film on the hobby (figs. 11–13). These were the busiest days of the contest year for Bern, setting up blocks of tickets for schoolchildren, inviting high society notables to "host" the show on special days, drafting profiles of the contest winners for the syndicated press: just generally practicing the "ballyhoo" and "exploitations" of what he called his "publicist's art."⁵⁶

An added advantage of the soap-carving contests, from the PR-minded vantage point of Bernays

and Bern, was that P&G only surfaced in public reports as the event's generous benefactor, not its string-pulling mastermind. In order to enter, contestants had to send away for guidelines and submission forms, which were available from an obscure organization known by the name of the National Soap Sculpture Committee. This sounded very official, indeed, and its New York City address only punctuated the authenticity of the committee's art world credibility. All aspects of the contest were handled publicly under this name. The committee published every contest announcement and exhibition catalog, and it was also responsible for an informative

⁵⁶ Ibid.



Fig. 9. Eero Saarinen holding his soap sculpture, ca. 1926. (Cranbrook Archives.)

series of books by soap carvers on the how-tos and wherefores of their chosen art form (fig. 14). Because of the calculated prominence of the committee, P&G appeared to have got involved only secondarily. News reports always identified P&G as the sponsor of the contests, usually mentioning the exact dollar amount of the donated prize money, but the company was never identified as the contest's sole originator and coordinator (thus "donating" money only to its own PR programs). This way, P&G was able to avoid the appearance of impropriety, an important measure of decorum in an era when advertising gimmicks—and exasperation with them—ran high.⁵⁷ The ploy worked, if the opinion of the critic for the *New York American* can be taken as any indication. Comparing the contest's soap sculpture exhibition to a similarly lowbrow show at John Cotton Dana's Newark Museum, *Nothing Takes the Place of Leather*, held in 1927–28, the writer concluded, "It is all very well for the shoe industry to hold to the ancient belief that 'there is nothing like leather,' but it would be hard to

⁵⁷ See Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).



Fig. 10. Presentation of award for Third Prize in the Student Senior Group to Faustina Monroe for her soap sculpture, *Mother Love*, New York, second quarter of the twentieth century. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

convince hundreds of young sculptors in these United States that there was anything to equal white soap."⁵⁸ In other words, some commercial interests had more persuasive claims to Bernays's art symbols than others.

In part, the soap-carving contests dodged accusations of crass self-interest by virtue of the quality of the works themselves. To the surprise of many art critics, many of the sculptures were remarkably fine pieces of work. In their formal simplicity, technical precision, and artistic sophistication, they held their own in the pages of *Art and Archaeology* and the *American Magazine of Art*. The write-up in *Art and Archaeology* concluded: "Messrs. Procter and Gamble are to be congratulated" for sponsoring a movement that brought hope to anyone concerned with the future of American art. This piece, titled "The Classics in Soap," drew attention specifically to

⁵⁸ *New York American*, June 10, 1928, quoted in Margaret J. Postgate, *Carving Small Sculptures in Ivory Soap* (New York: National Small Sculpture Committee, 1928), 15, content ID Y-596, P&G Archives. For more on Newark's populist exhibition program of the 1920s, see Nicolas Maffei, "John Cotton Dana and the Politics of Exhibiting Industrial Art in the US, 1909–1929," *Journal of Design History* 13, no. 4 (2000): 301–17.



Fig. 11. “Sculpture in White Soap,” window display advertisement for Gimbel Brothers exhibit, eighth annual competition, 1932. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

those works that demonstrated the ideals of classical sculpture. Under the masthead of *Art and Archaeology*, two illustrations of works from the P&G contest appear to demonstrate serious artistic refinement (fig. 15). In the context of the full page, the figurines lose their diminutive scale and so seem more formidable than the inches-high pieces really were. As a result, they credibly lived up to the high praise of the critics, which submitted these homemade nudes as proof “that many of the oncoming artists . . . have a love for the fine and not too common things of life.”⁵⁹

The approving mention of soap carving in the national art press—particularly in terms that alluded to the exalted purity of classical sculpture—suggests that the contests were more or less successful in brooking the divide between popular hobby and high art distinction and, as a result, also successful as a publicity stunt that did not feel like publicity. “It is no trick,” wrote another writer, soap carving “is an authentic art that has come to stay.”⁶⁰ Still, ingenuous testimonial and calculated publicity were ever hard to

disentangle. This latter assertion of authenticity came from the pen of Ernest Bruce Haswell, an artist contracted by P&G to write pamphlets for the National Soap Sculpture Committee.

The name of the so-called National Soap Sculpture Competition in White Soap was, in effect, another dodge. Although the brand name itself was left out of its title, the contest offered a clear opportunity to promote specifically Ivory soap as the exclusive medium for soap carving. For one thing, Ivory was the only white soap then available on the market. Called “Procter & Gamble’s White Soap” before it was called Ivory, the soap’s opaque whiteness remained one of the product’s most distinguishing characteristics in the early twentieth century, setting it apart from the waxy yellow stuff then available from grocers in bulk.⁶¹ Writers continually admonished eager amateurs to restrict their efforts to the white variety, which, as one expert soap carver explained, has “a fine, even texture that will allow you to carve the most delicate details.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Dyer et al., *Rising Tide*, 26.

⁵⁹ “The Classics in Soap,” *Art and Archaeology* 33, no. 4 (July–August 1932): 221.

⁶⁰ Haswell, *Development and Use of Soap Sculpture*, 8.

⁶² Lester Gaba, *Soap Carving: Cinderella of Sculpture* (1935; repr., New York: Studio Publications and the National Soap Sculpture Committee, 1940), 16.



Fig. 12. Production shot of Procter & Gamble instructional film on soap carving, second quarter of the twentieth century. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

While the emphasis on whiteness corresponded to P&G's promotional investment in hygienic purity and to the art critics' neoclassical comparisons, it is difficult to avoid noticing its implicit overtures to racial superiority, particularly given both the overwhelming tendency toward figurative work among soap carvers and the era's fascination with eugenics, a racist pursuit not a little bit obsessed with the aesthetics of cleanliness and hygiene, as art historian Christina Cogdell has shown.⁶³ Indeed, Clarence J. Gamble, a grandson of one of P&G's founding partners, was an active supporter of eugenicist causes in the 1930s, mainly devoting his energies (and inheritance) to the cause of promoting birth control for poor communities in Puerto Rico and

Appalachia.⁶⁴ However—and however unconsciously operative this connection between pure, white soap and pure, white bodies may have been—the literature on soap sculpture outwardly staked its idealist claims not on racial purity but on technological purity: on the quaint innocence of making something by hand.

Ivory's brand name alone went far in strengthening the association between the modern craft of soap carving and the preindustrial tradition of handicraft: an association that only furthered P&G's overall attempt to link soap with the values of wholesome innocence and timeless purity. The ivory analogy was an obvious one: "A carving made from a

⁶³ See Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁶⁴ Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 103–8.



Fig. 13. Production shot of Procter & Gamble instructional film on soap carving, second quarter of the twentieth century. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

soap like Ivory,” one pamphlet explained, “has the clear, translucent illusion of real ivory.”⁶⁵ Sure enough, claims to the visual similarity between commercial Ivory and its natural namesake ran rampant through P&G’s literature. In his many booklets for the National Soap Sculpture Committee, Haswell usually began with a brief look at carving’s role throughout human history. In this narrative, carving appeared as the most primitive and natural way to create art in three dimensions, the oldest “folk art” known to every generation of “humble craftsman,” and a “continuous line” of technique that ran throughout sculpture’s history. Animal ivory suited this narrative perfectly. “Ivory carving, from the first scratched lines on the mammoth tusk to the more recent work of the moderns,” he wrote,

“is the history of art and of civilization.”⁶⁶ Suggesting that aspiring soap sculptors would do well to examine prehistoric artifacts in actual ivory, and also drawing upon the growing contemporary interest in Native American scrimshaw (fueled in part by the official sponsorship of New Deal arts programs),⁶⁷ Haswell’s booklets only furthered the premodern, even primitivist, associations that P&G fostered for the act of carving a bar of soap by hand.

Drawing a straight line between “the first scratched lines on the mammoth tusk” and “the more recent work of the moderns,” Haswell acknowledged the current state of interwar American sculpture: tending definitely toward formal simplification and accompanied by some rather strident calls for

⁶⁵ National Soap Sculpture Committee, “12th Annual Competition for Small Sculptures in White Soap for the Procter & Gamble Prizes, Closing May 1, 1936,” announcement, P&G Archives.

⁶⁶ Ernest Bruce Haswell, *A Little Book about Small Sculpture* (New York: National Soap Sculpture Committee, 1930), 4, content ID Y-583, P&G Archives.

⁶⁷ My thanks to Emily Moore for pointing this out to me.

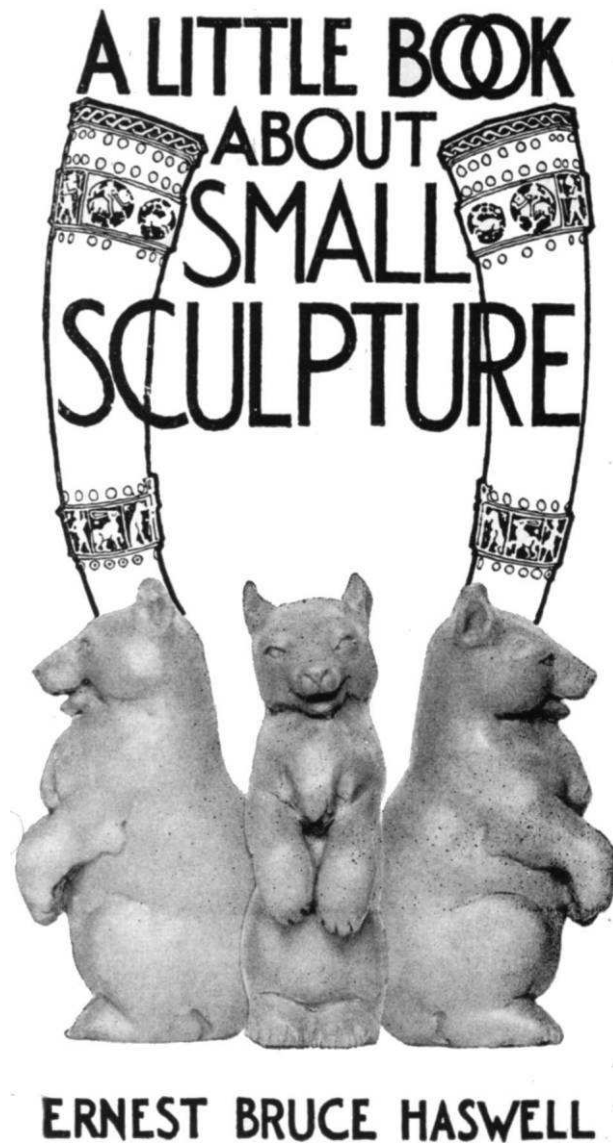


Fig. 14. Cover of Ernest Bruce Haswell, *A Little Book about Small Sculpture* (New York: National Soap Sculpture Committee, 1934). (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

sculpture's return to carving. In fact, when Brenda Putnam claimed that carving in soap had returned her to the essence of sculpting, she was making a rather pointed dig. Within the internal debates of early twentieth-century sculpture, to celebrate "direct carving" (as it was called) was to take sides against modeling and casting: essentially additive and reproductive procedures, against which both the subtractive technique and singular products of carving could offer defiant critique.⁶⁸ Indeed, artists and

⁶⁸ For more on the direct carving movement in modern American sculpture, see Roberta K. Tarbell, "Direct Carving," in *Vanguard American Sculpture, 1913-1939*, ed. Joan M. Marter,

critics often embraced carving explicitly because of its apparent antimodernism: its honest simplicity and singular uniqueness fitting nicely into a prescribed course away from excess and toward essence.

With increasing regularity through the late 1920s and early 1930s, art critics came to the conclusion that American sculpture had reached a point of crisis. Not unlike the American economy, sculpture seemed a victim of its own success: suffocating under the weight of its excessive details, overrun by decorative multiples, and guilty of meaningless decadence. Indeed, commercialism and mechanical duplication haunted the reception of cast bronze, and it was because of the distaste for these modernized modes of artistic production that carving could emerge as many critics' sole "hope" for the future of American sculpture.⁶⁹ Just as hand carving was said to offer Americans a therapeutic hobby (and useful model of restraint) during the hard times of economic crisis, so, too, was its art-world revival embraced as a way to resuscitate the declining art of fine sculpture.

The official discourse on soap sculpture reiterated many of the key terms in this debate between direct carving and bronze casting. P&G's literature urged amateurs to rebuke all "non-essentials" and dedicate themselves only to the most basic of art's "underlying principles."⁷⁰ The first trick in this exercise was to "differentiate between the technique[s] of modeling and carving" and then to modify one's goals and approach to match the latter's more modest aesthetic economy (fig. 16).⁷¹ One instructional guide, issued by P&G for classroom use, cautioned that frustration awaited any youngster who hoped to simulate the detailed realism of bronze sculpture—its fluttering leaves, manicured fingernails, and quivering muscles—in a small bar of soap. But the writer went on to suggest that this failure was a necessary step toward personal and artistic growth. In fact, these ambitious students should be allowed to fail, forcing them to respect carving's regulating limitations and so absorb valuable lessons in self-discipline and moderation.

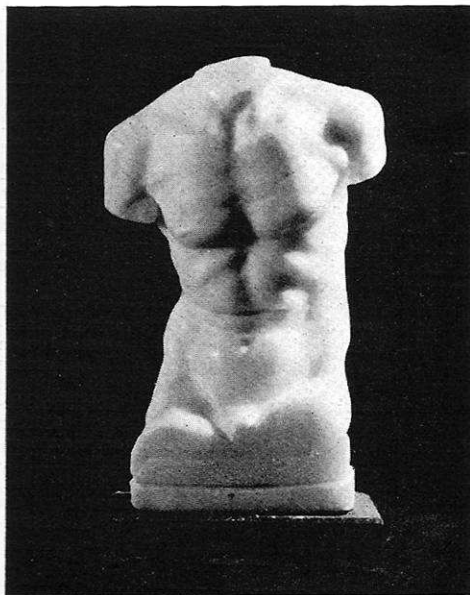
Roberta K. Tarbell, and Jeffrey Wechsler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1979), 45-66; and Judith Zilzer, "The Theory of Direct Carving in Modern Sculpture," *Oxford Art Journal* 4, no. 2 (November 1981): 44-49.

⁶⁹ Arthur Millier, "Nation's Sculpture Show," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1929, C11.

⁷⁰ Postgate, *Carving Small Sculptures*, 3.

⁷¹ Cincinnati-area sculptor Mary L. Alexander, as quoted in *Catalogue: Small Sculptures in White Soap, Sixth Annual Competition for the Procter and Gamble Prizes* (New York: American-Anderson Galleries, 1930), n.p., P&G Archives.

ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY



TORSO, BY TOM ROBERTSON.

"WHERE IS TROY?"

The revival of interest in Troy during the past year and the feeling of uncertainty in many quarters that the Tell of Hissarlik could have been the site of the Homeric city, has impelled ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY to ask the distinguished French archaeologist, Dr. Charles Vellay, who is the Editor of *L'Acropole* and the *Revue des Etudes Homériques*, to discuss the matter at length, and reopen the whole question. Dr. Vellay has courteously agreed to do this, and it is hoped that his article "Where Is Troy?" will be ready for publication in the November-December issue of ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY. All students are urged to watch for this contribution because of its unusual interest and importance.

In the consideration of so difficult a subject, Dr. Vellay has written the Editor: "The question of method is extremely important, and first of all it seems necessary to dispose of the negative side. When after having taken account of all the historic and philological testimony, of all the topographical arguments, and finally of all the considerations of an archaeological nature, the impossibility of the Hissarlik hypothesis will be perfectly evident. Then only, the second part of the problem can be developed. This will consist of seeking out by the same methods—philological, topographical and archaeological—the true emplacement of Homeric Troy.

"Without wishing to enter prematurely into the question, it seems to me that the site of Hissarlik is not the only one in the Plain of Troy which may be questioned to possess the characteristics of a pre-Mycenean or Mycenean site. Further, if one wishes to admit that a Mycenean town was at Hissarlik, it must be evident that there existed in the topographical

radius of the Plain other contemporaneous towns. What are they, and where are they? By a comparison of the emplacement and of the superficies, anyone may determine for himself whether one or another of these sites is more in conformity with Homer than is Hissarlik."

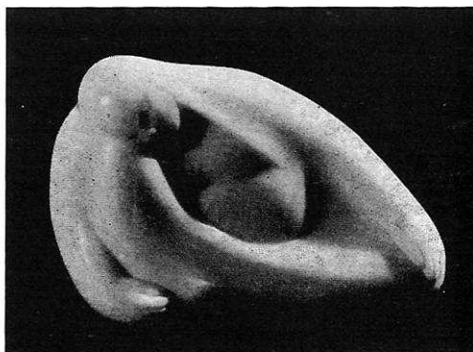
Since the foregoing was written, a newspaper dispatch by United Press reports from Istanbul, Turkey, that Professor Blegen's expedition, which is again in the Trojan field, announces the discovery of primitive houses and ceramics in the "first level" of the disputed city. The finds are stated to date the community back to about 3,500 B. C.

PHILADELPHIA'S OPEN-AIR SCULPTURE EXHIBIT

As usual for several years past, the city of Philadelphia is enjoying its annual exhibit of sculpture, this time placed in the courts and gardens of the Art Museum under the joint auspices of the Fairmont Park Association, the Art Alliance and the Art Museum. International in scope, the exhibit includes works by Maillol, Carl Milles, Mestrovic and Despiau, as well as by many of the foremost American sculptors. The exhibit was arranged with the object of assembling representative works by contemporary artists as a guide to the committee charged with selecting sculptors to execute works for the Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial. ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY hopes to be able to use illustrations in the September-October issue showing several of the outstanding pieces.

"THE LATEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN ITALY"

Under this title, the Italian State Railroads have recently issued in English an exceedingly handsome and well illustrated brochure of convenient size, containing many illustrations and more than an hundred pages. While it is obviously impossible for anyone to keep pace with the astonishing archaeological work being done day by day by the Government unless one reads the Italian newspapers and technical publications, this little book is valuable because of its comprehensiveness and the idea it gives of recent discoveries. The foreword says:



MOHAMMEDAN BEGGAR, BY ELLEN BEZAZ.

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Fig. 15. Tom Robertson's *Torso* and Ellen Bezaz's *Mohammedan Beggar*. From "The Current Ivory Soap Sculpture Awards," *Art and Archaeology* 33, no. 4 (July-August 1933): 218.

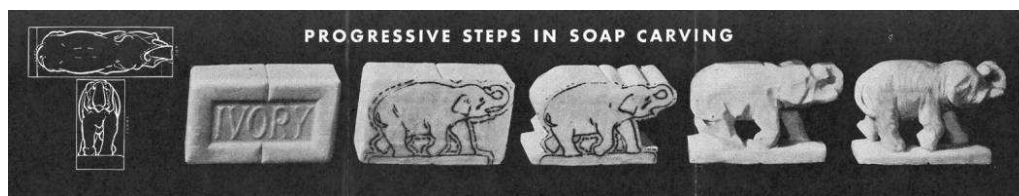


Fig. 16. "Progressive Steps in Soap Carving." From *Soap Sculpture: A Digest of Soap Carving* (New York: National Soap Sculpture Committee, ca. 1937). (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

The unanimous support for carving among the nation's art writers likewise tended toward the moralistic, tending to raise the process to an orthodoxy, in spite of the fact that many of the sculptors identified with the "carve-direct school" warned against making a fetish of technique. In fact, many carvers, including soap sculpture judge Robert Laurent, often cast copies of works that they had initially carved. That they could do this without much interruption to the critical embrace of carving suggests the degree to which process, rather than product, was the prized term in the rhetoric on carving. A similar hierarchy was active in the literature of soap sculpture, even in the analogy between bath soap and animal tusks. "A well-carved piece of soap," Haswell wrote in an especially encouraging passage, "is of more artistic importance than a poorly carved bit of ivory," adding, "Art is not a matter of material, but of execution."⁷² Here, Haswell alluded to the leveling capacity of soap's affordability, but, in doing so, he also placed the burden of aesthetic virtue on the process of making, rather than on the thing that is made. In some sense, this was a necessary move. For one thing, many of the works submitted were not as formally simple or conceptually original as devotees of carving might have hoped. For another, directing attention to the premodern labors of carving by hand had the benefit of drawing attention away from the many ways in which the soap-carving contests actually worked to opposite effect, demonstrating a deeper, self-contradicting complicity with commercial, industrial modernity.

Soap Sculpture's Accommodations

The very idea of making a work of art out of a bar of soap was itself unthinkable without the success of automation in the first place. In fact, Depression-era whittlers, busy making elephants and portrait busts from bars of soap, were not actually reviving an old craft tradition so much as they were ignoring

one. While, by the mid-nineteenth century, city dwellers were able to buy bulk soap from local grocers, the majority of rural-dwelling Americans were obliged to make their own, a practice they continued through the last decades of the century.⁷³ Ivory was among the earliest prepackaged soaps to be marketed and distributed nationally. It was an instant success, adopted by hundreds of thousands of families in its first year on the market and so auguring an end to the once "commonly practiced household art" of home soap production, as the company frequently bragged.⁷⁴ Soap carving thus did not really recover a lost art for the modern era so much as it ignored the craft heritage of soap production itself, traceable to myriad family recipes and countless hours spent working in the backyard. Developed directly out of a soap manufacturer's promotional gimmick, soap carving emerged as a "revival" of craftsmanship, only given an initial and paradoxical disregard for the mass production of its medium.

Cutting up bars of soap was not some new thing. Indeed, carving soap had once been quite common, not for the creation of a solid piece of sculpture but instead for the shavings it left behind. In 1910, P&G published a housekeeping advice booklet that introduced newlywed women to their fictitious counterpart, "Elizabeth Harding, bride." In an early chapter, Mrs. Harding looks ahead to her first house cleaning with trepidation.⁷⁵ However, with the help of a bar of Ivory, she quickly learned to make her refined home—graced by a dwarfed copy of the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*—dazzle (fig. 17). Even with her delicate hands, Elizabeth could easily cut useful flakes from the bar, and these soap shavings, mixed with a little water, could serve any number of her considerable housecleaning needs. A separate home economics textbook of the same period called this shaved-soap-and-water paste "soap jelly" and advised

⁷³ Dyer et al., *Rising Tide*, 19.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 39; Herbert Feis, *Labor Relations: A Study Made in the Procter & Gamble Company* (New York: Adelphi, 1928), 4, 7.

⁷⁵ Procter & Gamble, *Elizabeth Harding, Bride* (Cincinnati: Procter & Gamble, 1910).

⁷² Haswell, *Little Book about Small Sculpture*, 7.



Fig. 17. "First House Cleaning." From Procter & Gamble, *Elizabeth Harding, Bride* (Cincinnati: Procter & Gamble, 1910). (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

women to supplement those "bits and ends of soap which have been left" in the bath, by "shav[ing] up as much more as is necessary" from a larger, unused bar.⁷⁶ Thus was carving soap, at the turn of the twentieth century, a necessary part of keeping house. The P&G booklet helpfully provided recipes for a variety of such soap jelly concoctions, those appropriate to cleaning silverware, floors, and linens, as well as those useful for maintaining Elizabeth's bridal

beauty. A little lemon added to the soap-and-water paste, for instance, would reduce the appearance of freckles got in the honeymoon sun.

By the time of the soap-carving contests, Mrs. Harding was no longer the blushing bride, and the habit of shaving soap to make soap jelly was quickly becoming a thing of the past. Prepackaged boxes of flaked soap, soap granules, and soap chips were among the many threats to Ivory's dominance in the 1920s, offering housewives another time-saving convenience to go along with that other looming threat to old-fashioned laundering: the washing

⁷⁶ Juniata L. Shepperd, *Laundry Work for Use in Homes and Schools* (St. Paul, MN: Webb, 1909), 18, 26.

machine. P&G introduced its first product for washing machines, Chipso, in 1921, which joined Ivory Flakes as the company's only two boxed soaps. But even these chips and flakes were fleeting marketplace contenders. Eventually, it was granulated soap that took off as the most competitive terrain for soap manufacturers during the interwar period. While projecting a unified front of health and hygiene to the American public through their Association of Soap and Glycerine Producers, P&G, Lever Brothers, and Colgate were simultaneously embroiled in a fierce patent fight, each one attempting to corner the market for granulated soap, which was growing steadily in proportion to the rising adoption of home washing appliances. Ultimately, each company clamored to market with their own slightly different formula: Chipso for P&G, Rinso for Lever Brothers, and Super Suds for Colgate. By the first National Soap Sculpture Competition in White Soap in 1924, the days of carving a bar of soap to get the wash done were only a distant memory, if one perhaps not too happily recalled. P&G's soap-carving contests thus introduced whittling soap as a means of artistic expression, only once whittling soap (much less making it) had ceased to be a practical domestic activity.

Just as Ivory had its Camay (a tinted, perfumed cake for more feminine tastes), Chipso had its Ivory Snow, a granulated boxed soap advertised as "dainty pearls of Ivory" and "the newest, kindest way to take care of fine woolens and delicate silks."⁷⁷ The ironic connection between the end of soap shaving as a chore and the rise of soap carving as an art was made vividly apparent in the Ivory Snow ad campaign, which featured lively figurines carved from Ivory but frolicking alongside depictions of industrially (not manually) produced powder (fig. 18). The scenes were carved by Lester Gaba, who made a name for himself during the 1920s and 1930s carving soap sculptures for photo ads and in-store displays and even authoring his own lengthy tome on the intricacies of the hobby. His works appeared in the pages of *McCall's* and *House and Garden*, and he fulfilled commissions for Saks Fifth Avenue, Bonwit Teller, and other prominent department stores, including a Mother's Day miniature reproducing *Whistler's Mother* in soap (fig. 19).⁷⁸ All these commissions surely produced piles and piles of soap scraps. Unlike earlier days, when these shavings constituted an important product in themselves,

⁷⁷ Procter & Gamble, Ivory Snow advertisement, *Good Housekeeping*, December 1931, 122.

⁷⁸ Gaba, *Soap Carving*, 49–50.



The Perfect Pair
for washing woolens —
IVORY SNOW
and lukewarm water

Ivory Snow—tiny fairy-thin pearls of pure Ivory Soap—gives extra protection to all fine fabrics. Every tiny pearl is so very thin that it turns into gentle Ivory suds the moment water touches it. Even lukewarm water!

No waiting for hot water. No fussing with suds. No cooling to the safe faintly warm temperature. Now you start with lukewarm water, add Ivory Snow, and you'll have foamy suds in a single swish. No unmelted soap left to cling to your silks and woolens.

So quick! So handy! So very, very gentle! A big box for 15¢.

New! 99⁴⁴/₁₀₀ Pure



Fig. 18. Lester Gaba, "The Perfect Pair for Washing Woolens." Soap carvings for Ivory Snow advertising campaign. From *Good Housekeeping*, May 1941, 13. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)



Fig. 19. Lester Gaba, *Whistler's Mother*, second quarter of the twentieth century. Soap sculpture diorama. From his *Soap Carving: Cinderella of Sculpture* (1935; repr., New York: Studio Publications and the National Soap Sculpture Committee, 1940), 49.

Gaba was more likely to have tossed his in the dustbin. After all, products like Ivory Snow had made shaving soap an unnecessary task.

In the exhibitions P&G staged for their competitions, hundreds upon hundreds of palm-sized

figurines were on view: devotional icons, mythological characters, nude torsos, sentimental genre groups, and portraits of illustrious Americans (figs. 20 and 21). Each small piece, pure white in accordance with the no-painting rule (and with the soap maker's thoroughgoing emphasis on purity), was distinguished only by a tiny number, pinned directly to it and corresponding to the catalog's long list of names, titles, and hometowns. Glass-topped vitrines and glass-fronted bookcases were full of diminutive works in soap, and although this plenitude served to demonstrate the relevance of soap carving through sheer proof of numbers, it also undermined carving's oppositional rhetoric of singularity. After all, if the idiosyncrasies of carving by hand were alleged to produce objects of matchless singularity, the P&G displays embarrassed this very idea, presenting a goggle-eyed public with a limitless multitude of carving after carving, each one claiming the same pride of individuality as the next.

The *Art and Archaeology* write-up of the soap-carving contest, replete with its illustration of a headless, muscle-bound torso, offered explicit analogies



Fig. 20. Installation of an exhibition for the National Soap Sculpture Committee Annual Competition, second quarter of the twentieth century. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)



Fig. 21. Installation of an exhibition for the National Soap Sculpture Committee Annual Competition, second quarter of the twentieth century. (Procter & Gamble Archives.)

between soap sculpture and classical sculpture. However, even this praise—meant to flatter soap carving’s pretensions to high art distinction—indicates soap carving’s tendency toward self-contradiction. While the similarity was no doubt intended by the artist, the analogy also designated the piece of carved soap as nothing more than a copy. What made the work artistically remarkable was not its originality or its irreducible singularity but quite the opposite: its notable success in replicating art history’s greatest masterworks. Imitation, not originality, was what earned these soap figures respect. Likewise, the popularity of soap carving as a medium for rendering miniatures—all those department store displays—suggests how it was just as often simulation and multiplication, rather than singularity and uniqueness, that contributed to the craft’s success.

As an elegy for simpler days made poignantly ironic both by its necessary reliance on machine production and by its simultaneous appearance with mechanized household cleaning, Depression-era soap carving thus betrayed its collusion with the very processes it was imagined to counterbalance.

Nowhere was this more plainly in evidence than in two of the special prizes offered to entrants of the soap-carving contests. A few years into the contest, the National Soap Sculpture Committee began to advertise an extra pair of awards, supplemental to the usual string of first-, second-, and third-place prizes doled out in each age category and open to any competing entrant. Named for their sponsors, the Gorham Prize and the Lenox Prize went to those carvings that the judges deemed most appropriate for commercial duplication and sales. In addition to paying the winner a cash prize, the Gorham and Lenox companies also extended contracts to the winners in order to secure reproduction rights.

One such soap-carving-turned-paperweight was a piece by Margaret Postgate, a sculptor who also wrote several how-to guides for P&G’s National Soap Sculpture Committee. Her work, *Conventional Elephant* (so named for its abstract, schematic style) was the most unusual bronze offered in the Gorham sales catalog of 1928 (fig. 22). A bit of prefatory text remarked that, while the small paperweight appeared



Fig. 22. Margaret Postgate, *Conventional Elephant*, ca. 1928. Cast bronze from a soap sculpture original; H. 2 ½", W. 4 ¼". From the Gorham Company, *Famous Small Bronzes* (New York: Bronze Division of the Gorham Company, 1928), 71. (Gorham Company Archive, John Hay Library, Brown University.)

either like an “ultra-modern” invention or the work of “some artist of ancient Babylon,” its notable “absence of detail” instead was more pragmatically explained: it had everything to do with the “medium in which it was originally carved.”⁷⁹ In these comments, the Gorham Company upheld

⁷⁹ The Gorham Company, *Famous Small Bronzes* (New York: Bronze Division of the Gorham Company, 1928), 70.

much of the rhetoric surrounding carving: a simple and simplifying means of expression, which produced works that were simultaneously ancient and modern in their formal straightforwardness and loyalty to process and medium. However, by promoting the tiny elephant as a commodity, and one “unusually decorative in its vivid blue patine” (a superficial effect of age simulated in the process of casting), the catalog signaled just how far

Gorham had removed carving from its erstwhile resistance to the multiplying effects of commercial mass production.⁸⁰ The Gorham Prize and the Lenox Prize (the latter promised to reproduce winning works in porcelain) were just more promotional ploys for P&G: more of Bernays's legitimating art symbols. Associating the competition with these luxury brand names also served to attract new contestants, enticed by the faint promise of national celebrity and the chance to see one's modest little carving transformed into a lasting work of art. However, and ironically, the prize also necessarily submitted the singleness and simplicity of carving—key terms in the craft's antimodern lexicon—back to the commercial logic of mechanical duplication.

The Mingling of Soap and Art

Leo Lentelli, an academic sculptor and occasional juror for the P&G contests, celebrated soap carving as a useful reminder that “the artistic spirit should not dwell in towers of ivory” but should instead be allowed to suffuse all areas of human life: a nice pun and one that points to the obvious appeal of soap carving's democratic populism.⁸¹ Indeed, soap carving attracted so many enthusiasts precisely because it yielded remarkably satisfying artistic rewards for such a simple and tenaciously unpretentious hobby. Lester Gaba called this its “Cinderella” effect and promised: “Without the aid of magic powers you, too, can change something drab and ordinary into a thing of beauty.”⁸² The democratizing effects of the “mingling of soap and art” served P&G's promotional efforts well, as Edward Bernays was keenly aware.⁸³ Here, his art symbols worked in two directions: a quotidian product was elevated by its association with artistic pursuits, while the art of sculpture was popularized by its realization in cheap household soap.

This funny reciprocity between artistic values and populist, democratic values, while certainly a timely gimmick for the era, also achieved something else. In 1939, *Fortune* magazine commented

on the difficulties of trading in “a universal commodity like soap.”⁸⁴ Having achieved ubiquity through mass production and distribution, soap threatened to become so cheap as to become economically valueless. By cultivating art symbols in its advertising (and *Fortune* cautioned that it was “death not to advertise” in the soap business), P&G successfully linked soap's precarious economic value, its near valuelessness, to the absolute value of art.⁸⁵ By carving works of art from bars of soap—a fairly wasteful hobby, after all—enthusiasts transformed an essentially worthless object into a work of art and so also an object beyond the pale of normal economic valuation. They took something cheap and made it priceless. For admen like Bernays, this was a colossal success, marking soap's apotheosis as an unquestionable human need and achieved by associating the commodity with art's seemingly extraeconomic (and so unimpeachable) value.

For those who championed carving as an antimodern opposition to the means and effects of commercial mass production, this was soap carving's unhappy irony. Although ostensibly an antimodern return to bygone modes of authentic, handcrafted production, soap carving actually accommodated—even aestheticized—the very procedures of mechanization it appeared to abhor. It did this in three ways. First, soap carving relied on mass-produced soap (and mass-market promotion) for its very existence and popularity. Second, soap carving was an invented craft revival: a cultural innovation that appeared only once modern technologies had rendered making soap, or cutting it up for domestic chores, obsolete. Finally, and most significantly, although the rhetoric of soap carving preached a line of subtractive simplicity, its official sponsors rewarded this by offering its exemplars the apotheosis of mechanical reproduction. Thus, while harkening back to simpler times and pleasures in its small gestures of slow-paced subtraction, soap carving ultimately served the demands of industrial modernity, complicit both with the marketing schemes that promoted its popularity (and soap consumption) and with the modern aesthetic of formal simplicity, an artistic ideal that transformed the look of commercial standardization into a cultural virtue.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Leo Lentelli, as quoted in Mary Graham Bonner, “Artistry in Soap,” *St. Nicholas Magazine*, August 1927.

⁸² Gaba, *Soap Carving*, 9.

⁸³ Bernays, *Biography of an Idea*, 344–45.

⁸⁴ “99 ⁴⁴/₁₀₀% Pure Profit Record,” *Fortune*, April 1939, 154.

⁸⁵ Ibid.