

TRANSLATION TRANSLATION

Proceedings of the
**Society of Architectural Historians,
Australia and New Zealand**
Vol. 31

edited by Christoph Schnoor
(Auckland, New Zealand SAHANZ and Unitec ePress;
and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014).

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

Margaret Maile Petty, "Day and Night, Ladies, Watch Your Light: The Gendered Discourse and Aesthetics of Electric Lighting for the Domestic Interior, in the United States, 1900s-1950s," in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 31, Translation*, edited by Christoph Schnoor (Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress; and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014), 309-320.

Published in

*Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress [ISBN - 978-1-927214-12-1];
and Gold Coast, Australia: SAHANZ [ISBN - 978-0-9876055-1-1]*

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Day and Night, Ladies, Watch Your Light: The Gendered Discourse and Aesthetics of Electric Lighting for the Domestic Interior in the United States, 1900s-50s

This paper explores the translation of beliefs regarding women's agency and identity within the domestic interior into new, gendered applications of electric lighting in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. In this period the electrical industry drew upon cultural constructions of feminine beauty and interior decoration to market a variety of products and lighting applications for domestic interiors. Such narratives were translations of an older, more deeply entrenched cultural discourse on feminine beauty, its composition, and perfection. More than simply accentuating one's best assets, guidelines for feminine beauty in the latter nineteenth century and throughout the first half of the twentieth century encouraged the harmonizing of a number of elements, including individual temperament or personality, complexion and colouration, and interior décor. With the popular adoption of electric light around the turn of the century, appropriate lighting also was added to the female beauty regime.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century American women were encouraged to adopt electric lighting as a beauty aid and ally, receiving advice on such matters from a host of cultural authorities - from movie stars to beauty columnists to lighting industry experts. Across a variety of popular texts - from women's magazines to etiquette manuals - women were promised good looks and good fortune if only they attended to their lighting. Investigating the complexities of such translations, this paper examines the ways in which residential electric lighting was situated within established discourses of interior decoration and personal beauty, thereby situating artificial light as a mechanism useful in the composition and reconfiguration of a modern female identity and agency.

The formative role of gendered cultural expectations in the everyday lives of American women from the mid-nineteenth century onward is an established subject of scholarly debate today. Numerous historical and theoretical investigations of the formations and agencies of womanhood, and manhood for that matter, in the United States have demonstrated the centrality of gender in the construction and negotiation of cultural meanings and material relations.¹ For women cultural expectations of gender often focussed on domestic roles and responsibilities and notions of femininity. In this period women were inundated with domestic advice in newspaper columns, magazines, etiquette manuals, and advertisements about how to be better mothers, cooks, hostesses, housekeepers, decorators, and consumers. However, one subset of this advice literature that cut across spheres, private and public, young and old, single and married, was beauty. Like gender, feminine beauty was and is a social and cultural construction, long considered a primary constituent of female identity. In addition to hair dyes, powders, rouge, lipstick and other cosmetic aids, electric lighting, the subject of this study, was among the many tools promoted for enhancing feminine beauty in the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike other beauty aids however, electric lighting was the only one to be applied to the woman as well as her environment, aesthetically and psychologically linking the two in a spatialized personal expression.

While both the histories of feminine beauty culture and electric lighting have been examined by a number of scholars, there has been little or no scholarly attention given to the important intersection of these two cultural and historical trajectories.² Drawing evidence from a number of primary texts, including women's magazines, lighting and electrical industry trade journals, manufacturer-generated marketing materials, and popular home decoration and beauty advice literature, this study attempts to redress this omission, demonstrating how cultural beliefs about feminine beauty and domestic maintenance were correlated to appropriate lighting choices in the first half of the twentieth century. Shifting the focus away from lighting as a basic domestic utility or technological innovation, the following paper argues for recognition of an important aspect in both the history of the modern domestic interior as both a gendered and technological space.

Concerns about colour distortions caused by artificial light long predated the introduction of electric light, and indeed were common with the widespread use of gas and kerosene lamps in the

1 See for example Gillian Brown, *Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Joan W. Scott, "Some Reflections on Gender and Politics," in *Revisioning Gender*, 70-98; and Alice Kessler-Harris, "Ideologies and Innovations: Gender Dimensions of Business History," *Business and Economic History* 20 (1991): 45-51.

2 For example Kathy Peiss and Sarah Berry have examined the role of cosmetics in the formation and manipulation of feminine identity during the twentieth century, see, Kathy Peiss, "Making Up, Making Over: Cosmetics, Consumer Culture, and Women's Identity," in *The Sex of Things*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996): 331-36; and Sarah Berry, "Hollywood Exoticism: Cosmetics and Color in the 1930s," in *Hollywood Goes Shopping*, ed. David Dresser and Garth S. Jowett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 108-38. In terms of the history of electric lighting, and in particular the marketing and development of the electric lighting industry in the United States David Nye, John Jakle, and Dietrich Neumann have all produced seminal studies. See David Nye, *Electrifying America: Social meanings of a new technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); John A. Jakle, *City lights: Illuminating the American night* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Dietrich Neumann and Kermit Swiler Champa, *Architecture of the night: the illuminated building* (Munich: Prestel, 2002).

nineteenth century. Among the many etiquette manuals and home decoration journals that provided instruction for women on daily household and personal maintenance, such as *Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms* of 1888 and *The Decorator and Furnisher*, one may find descriptions of muddled colours and sickly complexions produced when personal attire and interior furnishings were not coordinated in relation to the effects of artificial light. Such warnings were typically included within general advice literature for women concerning colour-palette selection. Specifically *Hill's Manual* details the appropriate colours to be worn by the principal "complexion types" of white women. Describing the colours suitable to each type, Hill offered a detailed account of possible flattering and harmonious colour combinations. However he cautioned readers that while a dress of a given colour "may be beautiful by the day", under the illumination of gaslight at night it "may be lacking in beauty."³

Expanding upon such advice, Ashmun Kelly writing for *The Decorator and Furnisher* in 1895 described the difficulties of colour coordination stemming from gas lighting, giving particular attention to the domestic interior and the women within it. Like Hill, Kelly warned readers that significant colour shifts could occur under artificial lighting, so much so that one could experience the changing of "entire aspects of rooms" and a "very undesirable and displeasing hue to the skin."⁴ Kelly suggested that such conditions could be "greatly modified, or even removed altogether", if one was familiar with "the laws governing colour and its source - daylight."

Following Kelly's thorough analysis of the many potential colour combinations in relation to individual complexion types, interior palettes, and the effects of artificial lighting, it becomes apparent that this was no simple matter. Rather, Kelly's approach required a sophisticated understanding of the "principles of colours, their combinations, proportions, tints, shades, and hues" in order to "properly estimate the varied harmony or discordant effects upon each other when placed in juxtaposition". However, the new technology of electric light promised to simplify such calculations because of its similarities with sunlight in "appearance and effect", which, as he noted, greatly minimized colour distortions.⁵

Within the popular discourse on feminine beauty and women's social roles during the first two decades of the twentieth century *personality* quickly began to supplant character as the primary mode of self-expression. This is representative of a larger shift in the United States from a broad cultural belief in character as the basis of a moral and sound society in the nineteenth century to one largely organized around the secular and individualistic identification with personality in the twentieth century.⁶ Historian Warren Susman attributes this shift to the nation's transition from a producer-based to a consumer-oriented society. Susman also identifies the concomitant emergence

3 Thomas E. Hill, *Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms* (Chicago: Hill Standard, 1885), 176.

4 A. Ashmun Kelly, "Modifications in Colours Produced by Coloured or Artificial Lights Falling Upon Them," *The Decorator and Furnisher*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (January, 1895): 143-45.

5 Kelly, 144-45.

6 Simon J. Bronner, ed., *Consuming Vision: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920* (New York: Norton, 1989), 4.

of a “new modal psychological type” within the American middle class as a response to the nation’s newfound “culture of abundance.”⁷ As Susman argues, “The older culture - Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist - demanded something it called ‘character,’ which stressed moral qualities, whereas the new culture insisted on ‘personality,’ which emphasized being liked and admired.”⁸

The later characteristics of Susman’s culture of abundance are of particular relevance to this study. In the US in the first decades of the twentieth century, popular culture increasingly celebrated well-known personalities from theatre and Hollywood’s emerging star culture as models of female beauty. The cultivation of the right “look” was equated with the ability to make the right “impression”, get the right job, or capture the attention of the right man. In the twentieth century, personal beauty became a central means for American women to both express ‘personality’ and to access social acceptance, popularity, and admiration. Historian of Hollywood’s star culture Sarah Berry has identified the emergence of a “democratic” concept of beauty in the United States in alignment with Susman’s culture of abundance. Berry argues that this new model of beauty was predicated upon the logic of a consumer economy, particularly in its proposition that that every woman could be beautiful with “good grooming and makeup.” Berry proposes that beauty held a recognized value for women within the nation’s growing capitalist and service economy, and as such was commonly understood as a legitimate form of social capital. She writes, “Women’s cosmetic self-maintenance came to be seen as one of the requirements of feminine social values, rather than an unethical preoccupation with personal vanity.”⁹

In addition to popular discourse on beauty, the expression and embodiment of “personality” also became a primary theme within home decoration advice during this period. Emily Post, a prominent twentieth-century source on the application of a spatialized concept of personality to the domestic environment, helped popularise the term among the American public, first in her 1922 publication *Etiquette* and later with *The Personality of a House* in 1930.¹⁰ Post’s concept of personality was a refinement of gendered nineteenth-century notions linking the appearance and psychological spirit of the interior with the character of the female head of household.¹¹ In Post’s twentieth-century

7 Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), xix-xxi, see also chapter 14, “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-century Culture,” 271-90.

8 Also in chapter 14, Susman provides keywords most frequently associated with the notion of *character* in the nineteenth century, including: citizenship, duty, democracy, work, golden deeds, outdoor life, conquest, honor, reputation, morals, manners, integrity, and manhood. These are contrasted sharply in the keywords used when describing *personality* in the early twentieth century, including: fascinating, stunning, attractive, magnetic, glowing, masterful, creative, dominant, forceful. As Susman summarizes quoting a period author on personality, “character, he insists, is either good or bad; personality, famous or infamous.” Susman, xxii, 273-77.

9 Sarah Berry, “Hollywood Exoticism: Cosmetics and Color in the 1930s,” in *Hollywood Goes Shopping*, edited by David Dresser and Garth S. Jowett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 108-38; quote on p.111.

10 “Emily Post is Dead at 86: Ruled Etiquette Scene for Four Decades,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 27 September 1960; and Marion Rodgers, “The Woman Behind the Manners,” *Washington Times*, 2 November 2008; Emily Post, *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1922).

11 On the discursive construction of personality in Post’s *Personality of a House*, see Karen Halttunen, “From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality,” in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880-1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: Norton, 1989), 157-90, especially pages 178-87.

reinterpretation of this belief she posited that personality (like character in the nineteenth century) could be intuited through the psychic/aesthetic experience of the domestic interior.¹² The domestic environment was to be understood as a personalised “backdrop” for daily life, and as such, it should both embody and enhance the woman it framed. Outlining the ways in which a woman could create a charming and enchanting interior harmonious with her personality, Post ranked colour as a primary consideration. Post was not alone in her estimation of colour’s importance; from the 1920s onward colour was broadly considered a key mode through which to express or modify one’s personality.

Hardly surprising given the influence of light on colour perception, illumination choices figured prominently in advice literature concerning the decoration of the domestic interior. *Vogue* magazine advised its readers in 1925 that “‘Light is the first of the painters,’ and no room can be attractive unless it is adequately and charmingly lighted.”¹³ Calling upon Elsie de Wolfe, one of the founding figures of modern interior design and a celebrity in her own right, *Vogue* offered readers advice on the “perfect lighting of liv[e]able rooms”.¹⁴ One of the more significant challenges to fostering harmonious lighting in the home, according to de Wolfe and others, was the introduction and popularisation of coloured lampshades for electric lights. The use of coloured lampshades was widely criticised because of the difficulty presented in predicting and coordinating the effects of the light produced by tinted shades.¹⁵ Similarly the well-known English interior decorator and tastemaker Syrie Maugham also weighed in on the selection of light fixtures and shades for large rooms, advising *Vogue*’s readers: “In arranging the lighting of a drawing-room, there are many things to remember. First, there is attention to the colour scheme of the room. Lights can kill colour, or give it rebirth,” adding emphatically that, “strong colours for any lighting fixtures entirely destroy the fixed personality of a room.”¹⁶

Advice such as that offered to women on the lighting of domestic spaces by de Wolf and Maugham in the 1920s continued apace with the cycles of fashion until America’s entry into the Second World War. Wartime restrictions and the disruption of domestic life and routines in the United States shifted popular discourse away from such concerns, with greater priority given to personal restraint and contribution to the war effort. However, consideration of colour and electric light as a means of manipulating the experience of the domestic interior was far from neglected during the war. When the United States instituted blackouts as a defensive (and symbolic) measure, colour and light were enlisted to maintain national confidence and domestic harmony. The *Washington Post* reported in

12 Post, *The Personality of a House*, 1.

13 Frances Alexander Wellman, “The Perfect Lighting of Livable Rooms: Lighting Is a Science That May Be Turned into An Art,” *Vogue* 66, no. 7 (October 1, 1925): 82–83, 110.

14 On Elsie de Wolfe, see Penny Sparke, *Elsie de Wolfe: The Birth of the Modern Interior*, ed. Mitchell Owens (New York: Acanthus Press, 2005), and Penny Sparke, “The Domestic Interior and the Construction of Self: The New York Homes of Elsie de Wolfe,” in *Interior Design and Identity* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 72–91.

15 Helen G. M’Kinlay, “Service as Well as Beauty Factor in Lamp Selection,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 22 May 1927.

16 Syrie Somerset Maugham, “Lights and Shades in a Large Room,” *Vogue* 65, no. 6 (1 March 1925): 69–70.

1941 that mandated blackouts did not “mean that homes will be without cheer”.¹⁷ Rather, the *Post* argued that maintaining the quality of “home sweet home” was more important than ever during blackouts, urging readers to use colour and electric light to “maintain civilian morale”. While the men went to war, women were to employ personality, colour, and electric lighting to sustain an aesthetic and psychically harmonious environment within the home.

In the mid-1940s, with the end of World War II on the horizon, American government and industry shifted its focus from war production to the development and expansion of the consumer goods market.¹⁸ With residential construction and consumer spending as prime areas of economic growth in the post-war period, industry sharpened its focus on the domestic market, favouring narratives of domesticity and family life. In this climate, whether as the female heads of households or as wage earners, women had tremendous agency as consumers, contributing to the nation’s economic recovery through consumer spending.¹⁹

In the hopes of capturing the attention and patronage of post-war consumers, companies like Westinghouse, Sylvania, and General Electric (G. E.) increasingly focused on the American way of life, positioning electric lighting as an essential condition of modern living. Lobbying female consumers specifically, industry marketing encouraged women to integrate a variety of electric illumination applications into their domestic décor through a number of popular sources, including syndicate newspaper columns, residential lighting demonstrations, model home installations, and corporate literature. While domestic maintenance formed one theme within such popular advice literature, by the early 1950s increasing emphasis was being given to the beautifying, glamourizing potential of electric lighting.

As had been the tradition since at least the 1930s, the lighting industry called upon Hollywood’s starlets and artists as authorities on the cultivation of beauty, charm, and personality. In 1951 actress and beauty columnist Arlene Dahl interviewed MGM cinematographer John Alton for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. The topic of their discussion: the beautifying potential of electric lighting. Likely informed by the many hours he had spent behind the camera, Alton stressed the importance of proper illumination in controlling one’s own appearance, as well as its role in mediating the environmental performance of feminine beauty. He insisted, “[i]t’s too bad women today don’t realize that light can be a great factor in personal beauty. Too often we think of it merely in connection with seeing, not with being seen.”²⁰

Turning to bedroom as a case study, Alton provocatively described how a woman could achieve a similarly luminous effect to that used in the climax of the romantic ballet scene with Gene Kelly and

17 Martha Ellyn, “Home Cheer Need Not Bow Out to Blackouts,” *Washington Post*, 15 December 1941.

18 On the development of America’s postwar consumer culture, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), in particular chapter 3, “Reconversion: The Emergence of the Consumers’ Republic,” 111–92.

19 Penny Sparke, *As Long as it’s Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Pandora, 1995); Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 111–29.

20 Arlene Dahl, “Lighting Is a Factor in Beauty, Says Hollywood Cameraman,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 5 December 1951.

Leslie Caron from *An American in Paris* (1951), for which he had served as cinematographer. To create this desirable soft, rosy lighting in the “boudoir” Alton recommended translucent pink or peach lampshades. Furthermore, Alton advised that if a woman preferred to “emphasize the beauty of her figure rather than her face”, she should use indirect wall lighting in order to “be silhouetted as she moves about the room”.²¹ Rather than offering specific lighting techniques to make interiors more attractive, Alton challenged women to light their interiors as if cinematographers, manipulating the lighting to create a specific mood and to best accentuate their particular beauty assets.

Such domestic, social narratives as those put forth by Alton and others in this period complimented and supported the electric industry’s increasing attention on building the market for their domestic products. In the early 1950s General Electric introduced the nation-wide “Light-Conditioning” programme, which sought to unite utilities, developers and existing home-owners in their efforts to update and improve the American lifestyle by improving domestic lighting standards.²² G. E.’s programme was built around consumer education, providing a limited range of solutions to the most common residential lighting challenges in the form of “recipes”. The familiar format invoked well-rehearsed domestic tasks, naturalising both the technology of electric light and its integration into daily life.²³ G. E. published their “recipes” in a thirty-eight-page booklet, *See Your Home in a New Light*, distributing it to more than fourteen million readers by 1955. It included a range of recommendations for lighting ceilings, walls, and floors, as well as suggestions for a variety of daily tasks. It also offered an overview of numerous possible fixtures, diffusers, bulb types, and more, as well as a host of other task-specific guidelines (figs. 1, 2).²⁴ While intended to reduce user confusion, these booklets generalized prescriptions more than they simplified domestic lighting.

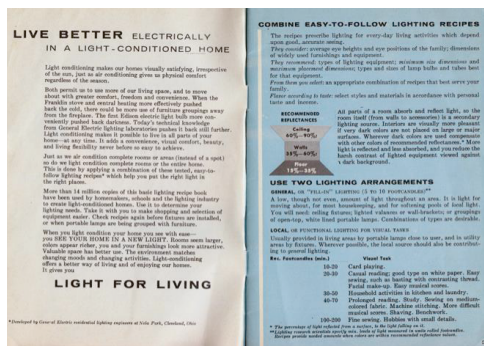


Fig. 1. Inside cover detail describing the advantages of a ‘light-conditioned home’. See *Your Home in a New Light: Tested Light-conditioning Recipes that Create Light for Living*, ca. 1955.

- 21 Dahl, “Lighting is a Factor in Beauty.”
- 22 Kaye Leighton, “Lighting Recipes Are for Existing Homes, Too,” *The Magazine of Light*, General Lamp Department, General Electric, 20, no. 2 (May, 1951): 24-31.
- 23 “These Recipes Are Different,” *Washington Post*, 8 September 1956.
- 24 General Electric Company, Lamp Division, *See Your Home in a New Light: Tested Light-conditioning Recipes that Create Light for Living*, 4th edition (Cleveland, Ohio: The Company, 1955).

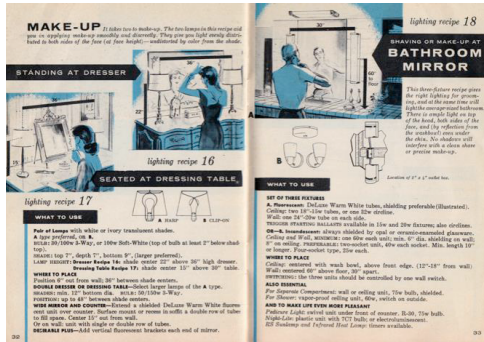


Fig. 2. Sample page "Make-up" describing specific lighting applications appropriate for applying make up while either sitting or standing, See *Your Home in a New Light: Tested Light-conditioning Recipes that Create Light for Living*, ca. 1955.

One of the more commonly cited problems in selling modern lighting to post-war consumers was the complexity of applications and the many elements necessary to realize a complete interior illumination scheme. While it was a straightforward marketing task to sell electric washing machines, dryers, dishwashers, and other domestic appliances, electric lighting was a complicated system of parts that could not be so easily wrapped up and sold as a self-contained unit. This problem was amplified further with the popular acceptance of indirect lighting as the most flattering backdrop for modern living. Indirect lighting required the integration of lighting fixtures into architectural features or the use of other masking or reflecting devices. Additionally, such background lighting, however pleasant, did not obviate the use of localised task and accent lighting. Beyond these considerations, there also remained the issue of control systems, including dimmers and switches. Certainly this must have been a daunting challenge for typical homemakers with limited knowledge of the standards and requirements of such lighting installations (fig. 3).

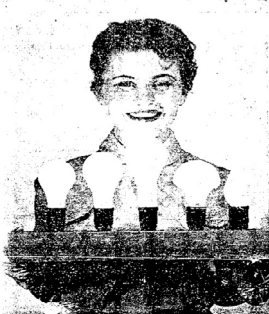


Fig. 3. Feature contrasting images of a middle class American parlour 'before' and 'after' modern lighting was installed, "New Life with New Light!" *The American Home*, 1949.

The challenge of simplifying residential electric lighting solutions continued well into the 1950s, exacerbated by an increasing proliferation of lamp types and applications. As the *Washington*

Post reported in 1956, "it is obviously impossible to arrive at a single lighting formula that can be applied to all situations."²⁵ In 1955, however, the industry turned a corner, with each major lamp manufacturer almost simultaneously introducing a singular product that promised a range of residential lighting solutions. These "miraculous" products - pastel pink ceramic coated incandescent light bulbs - were designed specifically for female consumers and were marketed with heavy emphasis on their beautifying and glamorizing effects. As Arlene Dahl described the flattering effects of a new pink-toned light bulb: "It's amazing how your complexion - and indeed your whole room - gets a beauty boost when you use these bulbs instead of ordinary white ones."²⁶

Photo: *Standard 20 - No Title*
The Quarterly Catalog (1952-1954), No. 11, 1955
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PINK LIGHT BULBS: A brand new idea from the laboratories of General Electric, designed to reduce glare, reduce shadows and add a comfortable relaxed atmosphere to every room in the house. Coated with permanent pink enamel, these new "glamour" bulbs will be available after the middle of the month in household types of 75, 100 and 150 watts, and in the 2-watt flame-etched bulb and the 50-watt bulb. They not only enrich warm colors in fabric and add luster to polished furniture, they do more for a woman's complexion than any lighting device since the candle!

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Fig. 4. A young woman's 'glowing' complexion in a General Electric "Glamour Pink" advertisement, *The Hartford Courant*, 1955.

Hitting the market with a flurry of media attention the new pastel coloured incandescent bulbs, were praised not only in advertising copy but also, as before, in newspaper advice columns for their ability to enable any woman, regardless of prior experience with electric lighting, to select a bulb to flatter her décor and complexion and easily install it into any standard fixture. Furthermore, the new bulbs provided indirect, coloured lighting without need of special architectural coves, niches, coloured shades or other masking devices - it was just a simple bulb that could be readily switched out if it was not pleasing. One of the first of these products was Sylvania Electric's "Softlight" incandescent bulb introduced in early 1955, and specially designed to "flatter home furnishings and occupants".²⁷ Coated with a pastel pink ceramic finish, the bulb produced a softer light than conventional frosted types and had the added benefit of altering the appearance of colours within its luminous reach.²⁸ Directly on the heels of Sylvania, General Electric released its "glamour pink" bulb in September 1955. Promoted nationwide, G.E.'s new product (fig. 4) was celebrated for doing

25 "These Recipes Are Different," *Washington Post*, 8 September 1956.

26 Arlene Dahl, "Simple Tricks of Lighting in Home will help to Enhance Your Beauty," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (3 August 1955): A1.

27 "A Bulb that Flatters," *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 January 1955, 7.

28 "Lamps Light at the Touch of a Finger," *New York Times*, 18 August 1955, 18.

“more for a woman’s complexion than any lighting device since the candle”.²⁹ The initial market success of the ceramic coated bulbs led to the release of families of coloured bulbs – including pale shades of yellow, blue, and green – from all three manufacturers, all of which again were promoted for their decorative and beauty-enhancing effects.³⁰ The general manager of Westinghouse’s lamp division, F. M. Sloan, described the sweeping benefits of the new products, stating, “The various tinted light bulbs can be used to cool or warm a room or a corner, to express taste and personality, to create a special atmosphere for an evening or a season, or to recast a colour scheme to accommodate new purchases or a change in furniture arrangement”.³¹ Such rhetoric was carried over into fashionable, full-colour, full-page advertisements for these new product that ran in popular, nationally distributed magazines, including *Better Homes and Gardens*, *The American Home*, *Life*, and *Look*. Regardless of brand, the marketing campaigns united discourses on female beauty and the decoration of the domestic interior with the personal satisfaction and fulfilment of a consumer lifestyle.³² An advertisement appearing in *Look* for G. E.’s “Coloramic” bulbs entices readers to “Give your home four ‘new looks,’” featuring a stylish modern living room divided into sections, each corresponding in hue to one of the four bulb shades (fig. 5). Rather than being limited to a single interior palette, the new coloured bulbs promised an easy reconfiguration of any room’s decoration, a transformation of light, and a glamorous new personality for the space and the woman wielding the bulbs.³³



Fig. 5. Demonstrating the decorative possibilities and adaptability of “Coloramic” bulbs, “Give Your Home Four New Looks,” advertisement, *Look*, 1957.

29 Photo Standalone, “Pink Light Bulbs,” *The Hartford Courant*, 11 September 1955.

30 “Pastel Tints are Developed in Light Bulbs,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 August 1956, N_A4.

31 “Pastel Tints are Developed in Light Bulbs.”

32 General Electric marketing materials, “Look What’s Behind Coloramic Bulbs,” ca. September 1956.

33 General Electric Advertisement, “Give Your Home Four New Looks,” appearing in *Look* (29 October 1957): 72.

The marketing of coloured incandescent light bulbs, in addition to appealing to traditional home decoration concerns, also capitalized on the intense interest in colour as a consumer lifestyle choice in the post-war period.³⁴ The ability to quickly transform a look through colour, whether personal or within one's interior, had been a primary means of expressing personality since at least the 1920s. Thus the ease with which a woman could switch a light bulb and change the entire colour palette of her environment was an obvious marketing advantage. General Electric's "Coloramic" advertisements boldly proclaimed that for just a little over a dollar a homemaker could "decorate a room." If colour trends changed with the seasons, women could keep pace with the fashions by simply "bulbsnatching" - an act facilitated by purchasing "Coloramic" bulbs in a convenient four-pack carton.³⁵

Whether Westinghouse, Sylvania, or General Electric, across the industry the marketing of such products gathered together a number of primary concerns regarding interior decoration and personal beauty, providing a simple solution, coalesced within a single pastel-tinted light bulb. For at least half a century women had been instructed through etiquette manuals, home decoration guidebooks, advice columns, and other popular literature to embody their personality type in their attire and interiors, to colour coordinate and harmonize themselves *within* these spaces, to select cosmetics that would flatter their complexions, all the while being conscious of the light in which they would be seen, and in all of these choices to appear attractive and charming. With the introduction of coloured incandescent light bulbs, women were promised a unified solution to these individual challenges. The soft-hued light suggested the possibility of instant transformation - harmonizing the colour palette of the interior, enriching and glamourizing textiles and furnishings, providing atmosphere and charm, and in so doing, beautifying both the homemaker and her guests.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the United States witnessed the emergence and steady growth of a heady consumer market, redolent of the promise of a way of life unlike anything anyone had ever seen - more of everything, and everything better, brighter, and more colourful than before. American popular culture prized 'personality' and personal expression through consumer choice. Likewise in this period popular media was suffused with ideas and imagery utilised in service of translating long-held beliefs and values into the consumer marketplace. In particular the marketing of electric lighting to women leveraged long-held cultural constructions of gender roles, behaviours, and beliefs to situate these products within the daily life of women and in the social performance of femininity.

The lighting industry's strategy for winning over women consumers was predicated upon a number of core values central to American female identity and agency - beauty, personality, charm, and hospitality. Whether the potent messages their marketing of electric lighting to women resonated with its target audience is difficult to ascertain, but by the 1960s the domestic lighting market was breaking sales records.³⁶ Surely there were numerous forces contributing to this growth, including increased residential construction, growing diversity and availability of electric lighting

34 See Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *The Color Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).

35 General Electric Advertisement, "Give Your Home Four New Looks."

36 "Bulb Sales," *The Hartford Courant*, 16 December 1961, 23; "Record Bulb Sales," *Chicago Tribune*, 27 January 1966, H8.

products for the domestic environment, and unrelenting pressure from the industry to raise lighting levels through regulations. The gendering of electric lighting with the intent of engaging female consumers is just one aspect of this bigger history. But it is an important part of this history and one that allows key insights into some of the ways in which cultural beliefs about beauty, identity, and domesticity were translated and reconfigured for female consumers through the modern technology of electric lighting during the twentieth century.