

BLUE NOTES

A PEEK INSIDE THOSE PLAIN BROWN WRAPPERS

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

"Pleasure's a sin," wrote Byron,
"and sometimes sin's a pleasure."

Adam & Eve, Evelyn Rainberg, Xandria—the names may conjure up exotic and fashionable boutiques, but, in fact, these are three of the most successful companies in the burgeoning adult-entertainment industry. Because the names sound so soothing, it's all the more surprising when you open their catalogues and discover exactly what it is they're selling—like stepping into Bloomingdale's and finding Plato's Retreat. Laden as they are with voluptuous ladies in various states of undress—just viewing them is an X-rated experience.

But if the illustrations get an X, the products get a Z. A single page of the Adam & Eve publication, for instance, would make even a satyr's eyes pop. More gadgets and lotions have been designed to stroke, shimmy, buzz, tease, lather, oil, coddle, and otherwise provoke one into a state of arousal than the Marquis de Sade

could possibly imagine. Indeed, these catalogues offer compelling proof that Darwin was wrong—species couldn't possibly exist just to procreate. *Homo sapiens*, at least, has to be coaxed into it; apparently all he or she really wants to do is sleep.

BUT LOSING THE WAR

Because so many of the companies that distribute this ammo in America's battle of the sexes rarely stay in place long enough to deliver the merchandise they've promised, let alone write up any financial reports, it is difficult to determine just how well such "love" items are selling. One estimate puts the annual sales at a whopping \$30 billion, a figure comparable to that of the entire soap industry. A much lower (and more likely) total of under \$1 billion is provided by Dennis Sobin, publisher and editor of the *TAB Report*, an industry newsletter. He also estimates that between 400 and 500 companies are in the business. By all accounts, however, the adult-entertainment industry is rapidly expanding, and, partly due to an increasing number of female buyers, the trend is toward what is generally termed "ro-

mance." This does not mean the merchandising of candlelit dinners and strolls under the stars, but that mail-order sexual aids are moving away from such traditional staples as gadgets toward classy lingerie and sweet-smelling body lotions.

ANOTHER ANCIENT PROFESSION

Practitioners like to point out that their industry has an honorable tradition that can be traced back at least as far as the glory days of Greece and Rome. The *Pleasure Chest Compendium of Amorous and Prurient Pleasures* goes even further, offering as evidence cave artifacts depicting what might be the first sexual aid, carved out of bone by a caveman. While it is widely agreed that sex goes back to the Garden, Adam might be surprised to see the welter of products now in the mail-order marketplace.

Cornucopiae of concupiscence, these catalogues offer something for everyone: pills and unguents, gadgets, erotic (and not so erotic) lingerie and swimwear; pornographic books, films, comic books, greeting cards, and records (one features Ravel's *Bolero* of 10

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fame); hypnotic tape cassettes; rabbit's fur massagers; and a hundred other things whose names one dares not speak.

Selling many of these items, TAB's Sobin admits, “would have gotten you chucked in jail not long ago.” After perusing these catalogues, this no longer seems an extreme idea, though legal styles have changed considerably since the days when a handlebar-mustachioed walrus of a man named Anthony Comstock first showed Americans what they could do to eliminate filth and depravity. Curiously, before Comstock got to work in 1873, there weren't any federal laws at all against obscenity, probably because there was no need for them. Well into the nineteenth century, after all, polite society was still primly covering the legs of its drawing-room grand pianos and separating the works of male and female authors on its bookshelves. (Lest, one supposes, they should get together and produce children's books.) . . . The obscenity issue, however, heated up in Comstock's day after prostitutes, trailing the Union soldiers home, flooded into the cities of the Northeast and stirred up a small-scale pornography industry.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF WITCH HUNT

Comstock, then only in his twenties, rose to squelch it. Aided by soap manufacturer Samuel Colgate and other dignitaries, Comstock bullied Congress into passing a law against the mail-order distribution of books “of questionable taste.” Then, in his capacity as self-appointed head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, an organization he founded, he set out to enforce it. In his 40-year campaign, Comstock is said to have destroyed 50 tons of books, 30,000 pounds of printing plates, 4 million pictures, and 17,000 negatives. He made almost 4,000 arrests and secured 2,500 convictions. Proud of his record, he once boasted that he'd nabbed enough purveyors of filth to fill 60 coaches of a passenger train—all of them, presumably, bearing one-way tickets to perdition. Like many self-righteous crusaders, his methods weren't always just. He once paid a prostitute \$14 to strip naked before him and when she complied, he pulled

out his gun and arrested her for indecent exposure.

“BANNED IN BOSTON”

Impressed with Comstock's “accomplishments,” other cities around the country heeded the call and founded similar antivice societies. The most famous was probably Boston's Watch and Ward, which, in one eight-year period around the turn of the century, purged 323 books and gave rise to the famous phrase “Banned in Boston,” always a guarantee of hot sales elsewhere. In their eagerness, the Bostonians even bagged a scholarly text, *The Sexual Life, Including Anatomical Illustrations and Obstetric Observations*, as it was headed quietly toward its ninth edition. And a Harvard professor who had arranged to import a priceless Latin manuscript of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* was horrified to discover that the work had been seized by Boston customs officials. Only speedy intervention from the State Department kept them from burning the parchment as smut.

Comstock died in 1915, having never fully recovered from being booted downstairs by a Connecticut doctor he was attempting to arrest for sending improper materials through the mails, but Comstockian attitudes lived on through the two world wars until the Fifties and early Sixties. Then, as Sobin explains it, a series of liberal definitions of obscenity by the Supreme Court under Earl Warren culminated in the “utterly without redeeming social value” edict of 1965. This combined with the sexual revolution of the Woodstock generation to cause a notable shift in moral attitudes.

UNDER THE COVERS

One of the first consequences was the legal distribution of such previously forbidden books as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. Later, less reputable books began to emerge, as did their cinematic equivalents. And, finally, in the late Sixties, the new standards resulted in sexual items (which for some time had been sold only on the sly in selected “adult” bookstores) being dispatched freely around the country in mail carriers.

Once liberated, these mail-order companies and their pornographic brethren in other fields started to inundate the country with a quantity and type of sleaze that President Nixon, for one, found alarming, and in 1970 he empowered a commission to study the problem. To his distress, the commissioners reported that there was no great danger; in their view, such free expression was most likely therapeutic, harmlessly discharging sexual energies that could otherwise prove explosive. Outraged, Nixon ordered another study, which proved to be properly condemnatory. And, as if to prove Nixon's contention that things had indeed gotten out of hand, one pornographic publisher, William Hamling, responded by printing the full text of the commission's report—with the significant addition of 546 illustrations, many of them full-color, gleefully and graphically detailing all the sexual abominations against which the commission was so thunderously railing. As Gay Talese relates in his much-maligned *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, the government was not amused, and, although Hamling fought all the way to the Supreme Court, he received a four-year jail term and an \$87,000 fine for his little joke.

MUCKRAKING?

That case was settled in 1974, by which time Hamling was sailing dangerously into the wind. For in 1973 the Burger Court had started to crack down on the porn parade by establishing a “local community standards” approach to obscenity. At first this hit mail-order sex suppliers where it hurt, forcing them to fly all over the country defending themselves, not only paying legal and travel expenses, but also taking time away from the direction of company operations. But as the Seventies wore on, the most aggressive attitudes faded away, partly in response to judicial decisions that began to place the burden of proof on local prosecutors to show that community standards had indeed been violated. And now, as the plethora of sex catalogues attests, the adult-entertainment industry is riding higher than ever. Says Sobin, “It's almost impossible for prosecutors to take on obscenity cases and win.”

Sex always sells, of course, but

mail order sells it best. At least it beats those stores in local red-light districts, which are still the main alternative. To begin with, in many parts of the country, such districts aren't readily available. This explains why mail-order eros actually does best in supposedly chaste places such as the Southern Bible Belt and the Midwestern heartland: it has no competition. Also, by slipping the wares inside a tidy brown wrapper and popping the package discreetly in the customer's mailbox, mail order removes the stuff from its unnerving red-light surroundings. It also eliminates the possibility of discovery by an acquaintance.

A PRISTINE IMAGE

For their part, mail-order sellers can save themselves the expense of running hundreds of retail stores to reach a national audience. Aided by the latest computer techniques, a company can go national quite profitably with no more than a half-dozen employees. All it takes is a good list of potential buyers. At the current rate of around \$60 per thousand, such a list can be more valuable than the merchandise, which varies little from firm to firm anyway. With as many as 500 companies altogether, the market is now so large that individual firms have been able to do very well for themselves just by getting a tiny slice of it. One distributor, for instance, sells nothing but pre-1920s sex postcards; another deals exclusively in go-go dancer costumes for home use.

Despite the widespread lowering of obscenity standards, the guilt factor remains. Although none of the catalogues admits that customers might be feeling a bit embarrassed about obtaining sexual goods, all of them expend enormous energy trying to put potential buyers at ease by disguising the whole nature of the enterprise. This, presumably, is what industry observers are referring to as the trade's new "sophistication." What's interesting, though, is the variety of approaches the different mail-order companies take to make clear that they, unlike the others, aren't selling smut.

By providing scientific-style illustrations, instead of the more typical lurid photographs, the Xandria Collection draws a physician's white coat around its products, as if to say that

these items are important for your health. As its name suggests, Stamford Hygienic, another mail-order company, takes the same approach. Evelyn Rainberg, Ltd., by contrast, has by far the slickest packaging—as you can tell by the gratuitous "Ltd." in the name; it lays out the crudest wares with all the grace and elegance Tiffany might lavish on the Hope Diamond. Adam & Eve lays out its extensive collection of love goods in what looks like a year-round Christmas catalogue, brimming with the yuletide gift-getting spirit. The heavily illustrated catalogue could easily be adapted for the sale of golf clubs or toy trains.

APPLE PIE VS. FORBIDDEN FRUIT

Remarkably, one attitude does pervade all these catalogues, regardless of their style: the extremely ironic idea, flatly contradicted in every photo and line of copy, that eros somehow isn't American. Like cognac and pastry, the best sex, these catalogues indicate, can only be found abroad; all we Americans can do is import it. Hence the endless supply of items with foreign origins implied. The Indian god of love, Kama (as in Sutra), is our inspiration—he's done plenty for the Indians.

The Europeans Don Juan and Casanova are heroes in these catalogues. Obviously Byron was right: "What men call gallantry and gods adultery/Is much more common where the climate's sultry."

Forgetting their provenance, many of these erotic goods are patently useless, and that's probably just as well. Compelled by federal truth-in-advertising standards, many of the supposedly remedial products actually proclaim their ineffectuality right on the label.

Seeing the full range of state-of-the-art sexual equipment, though, one begins to wonder how humankind ever managed to get this far without it. Indeed, the catalogues make gadgetfree love seem quaintly old-fashioned, like a one-speed bicycle. From the looks of these brochures, it seems that it would be easier to fly to Mars than to achieve satisfactory relations unaided. Actually, the two aspirations are not so dissimilar: they both require a lot of time, considerable electronic equipment, and a special outfit. Viewing this panoply, readers can be forgiven if they'd just as soon skip the rocket trip to love heaven and take a nap. ©

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