

WESTERN LIVING SUNSET STYLE IN THE 1920S AND 1930S: THE MIDDLEBROW, THE CIVILIZED, AND THE MODERN

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In the 1920s and 1930s, Sunset Magazine created images of the West and westerners that exerted considerable social power. By imbuing depictions of the civilized and the modern with prescriptions about social order, this middlebrow lifestyle magazine offered the white middle-class components for fashioning a collective identity that reinforced their regional dominance.

En los años veinte y treinta, Sunset Magazine creó imágenes del Oeste y su gente que llegaron a tener un poder social importante. Por llenar sus descripciones de lo civilizado y lo moderno con recetas sobre el orden social, esta revista de la clase media ofreció a sus lectores blancos los componentes para construir una identidad colectiva que fortaleció su dominio regional.

DURING THE 1920S AND 1930S, *Sunset Magazine* emerged as a regionally significant middlebrow journal. Its experts—engaged in the middlebrow mission of educating its readership in good taste in literature, art, design, and architecture—exported trends from the preserve of high culture and fitted them to a broadened audience and new domestic spaces. More often than not, acquiring good taste in the terms laid down by *Sunset* meant being able to deftly maneuver through the modern world of consumer goods to purchase the right books, hue of paint, curtains, dining-room set, or home. Much more was at stake, however, than simply the selection of the correct rug that coordinated with the correct sofa in a way that properly brought together a harmony of line, form, color, and texture in both interior and exterior design. In *Sunset*, the middlebrow mission also mobilized the interrelated discourses of civilization and modernity and the particular configurations of race, class, gender, and social order that those terms implied. Through their didactic efforts, *Sunset's* editors and experts contributed to the development of ideas about what constituted civilized,

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modern western living and who constituted a civilized, modern westerner. At a time of accelerated white migration to the Pacific Slope and Southwest, *Sunset* produced a vision of western living that simultaneously defined whites' place in the region and offered components that could be used to fashion a collective identity for white, middle-class westerners that was both distinctively western but also recognizably within the American mainstream. Reading *Sunset* magazines from the 1920s and 1930s facilitates an exploration of middlebrow culture on the familiar terrain of literature as well as the less well-traveled terrain of the domestic space of the modern home. It reveals a compelling story of how visions of social order and aesthetic sensibility constructed and reinforced one another in the early-twentieth-century American West.

The first three decades following World War I saw the proliferation of an unprecedented range of activities directed toward making various forms of high culture available to a broader audience. The Book-of-the-Month Club, university extension programs, radio programs that aired literary criticism, affordable collections of "Great Books" and encyclopedias, the production of outlines that broke complex works into easily digestible bites of knowledge, and book review sections in newspapers all came into being during this time. Correspondence courses, night schools, women's study clubs, the lecture circuit, and public libraries were reinvigorated by a new interest in what was initially given the innocuous and generally positive label of "voluntary education." Books like *The Meaning of a Liberal Education*—published in 1927 and reviewed in *Sunset's* pages—probed and praised this "growing interest of the people in education as a gospel of self-improvement and social salvation."¹

By 1933, in an essay for the *Saturday Review*, Margaret Widdemer—mobilizing a term first used by Van Wyck Brooks in the early years of the twentieth century—had identified the consumers of these novel kinds of cultural products as "middlebrow." According to her definition, the middlebrow consisted of the "men and women, fairly civilized, fairly literate, who support the critics and lecturers and publishers by purchasing their wares." Situated between the "tabloid addict class" and the "tiny group of intellectuals," in Widdemer's schema the middlebrow stood simply for "the majority reader."² Middlebrow defenders applauded its popularizing and democratizing tendencies. They appreciated the careful intervention of critics as guides not only to steer the average American in the direction of the best in arts and letters but also to explain the ways in which such products should be understood. Yet not everyone saw middlebrow culture as such a positive development. A bevy of critics derided the products of middlebrow culture on both aesthetic and economic grounds. They situated middlebrow culture in the vanguard of a rapidly advancing "bastardization of taste"

¹ See Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1992), xi–xii and Joseph Henry Jackson, "Speaking of Books," *Sunset Magazine* (March 1927): 6.

² Van Wyck Brooks, "America's Coming of Age," 15–35 and Margaret Widdemer, "Message and Middlebrow," 433–4, as cited in Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, xii–xiii.

in light of what they saw as the often diluted quality of its products and because of its connection to a market-driven, mass consumer culture.³

Sunset, however, aligned itself firmly within the camp of the middlebrow defenders because it was, in the 1920s and 1930s, a middlebrow journal. Like the Book-of-the-Month Club, through its reviews of recent literary works and its fiction and verse offerings, *Sunset* carefully advised its readers about what was worth reading and what was good writing. Its sections, features, and special issues about interior decoration, architectural planning, and exterior construction of homes in the West sought to educate readers in the basic concepts of art and architecture and to guide them in fashioning an appropriately tasteful and modern domestic space for western living. In good middlebrow form, *Sunset* employed a coterie of experts—literary critics, interior decorators, and architects—to aid its readers in the selection of products that would best suit them and convey the desired image of tasteful, artistic modernity to others. *Sunset's* editors also encouraged readers to write to the magazine for advice and ran a regular column, “Sunset Home Consultation Service,” that featured expert answers to readers’ questions.

Sunset's influence even extended beyond the scope of the printed page. In 1926, readers could tune-in to radio broadcasts of *Sunset's* “Book Chats” on Monday evenings. In 1933, they could visit the Sunset Home Institute’s Charm House, located on the third floor of San Francisco’s grand department store, The Emporium, and view models of modern, tastefully decorated homes. Similar hands-on advice could be received at the model home at Barker Brothers in Los Angeles and at H. C. Capwell Company in Oakland. Not only could visitors examine the contents of *Sunset*-style western homes, they could also attend the monthly lectures given by *Sunset's* editors and contributors. Edgar Harrison Wileman, *Sunset's* interior decorating editor, in addition to presenting lectures at each of these sites, also offered “short practical lecture courses (both day and evening classes) in interior decoration . . . in connection with the extension division of the University of California” that “stressed color and design in the home; selection of home furnishings; [and the] correct arrangement of furniture.”⁴

By the 1920s, *Sunset* had been an established periodical for just over twenty years. Launched by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1898, *Sunset* had initially been designed to publicize and promote the West to eastern tourists and businessmen.⁵ By

³ Janice Radway, “On the Gender of the Middlebrow Consumer Culture and the Threat of the Culturally Fraudulent Female,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93 (Fall 1994): 871 and Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, xiii.

⁴ On radio broadcasts, see Joseph Henry Jackson, “The Book Corner,” *Sunset* (March 1926): 47. On model homes and demonstration centers, see H.C. Banks, “Charm House: A Discussion of Its Scheme of Decoration,” *Sunset* (September 1933): 19 and Edgar Harrison Wileman, “We Furnish a Living Room in American Chippendale,” *Sunset* (October 1933): 16. On courses offered by Edgar Harrison Wileman, see advertisement, “Join My Classes in Interior Decoration,” *Sunset* (March 1933): 40.

⁵ Paul C. Johnson, ed., *The Early Sunset Magazine, 1898–1928* (San Francisco, 1973), vii and 11–3.

1912, its ownership and emphasis had shifted and under the direction of Woodhead, Field, and Company, *Sunset* began to follow the model of popular national periodicals like *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Enhanced literary offerings, as well as articles addressing political and social issues in the Progressive spirit, graced the magazine's pages and it became increasingly directed toward westerners—with regular sections, for example, on “Western Homes and Gardens” and “Interesting Westerners”—although it continued to see itself as a national publication. In 1923, it added the subtitle, *The West's Great National Magazine*.⁶ Its February 1926 issue bore this mantle and was also the magazine's yearly special “Western Homes Number.” As evidenced by its cover, it featured F. Roney Weir's short story, “The Saving House,” an announcement proclaiming “Cash prizes for the best western home designs!” and an article on “Divorce and the American Home” by California journalist and regular *Sunset* contributor Gladys Johnson. Maurice Logan, noted California painter, committed modernist, and member of the Fauvist influenced Society of Six, created the cover's art. (See Figure 1.) In 1928, the Lane Publishing Company purchased *Sunset*, and under Laurence W. Lane's direction, the magazine's emphasis on literature, social issues, and politics gave way more fully to an emphasis on homes, their construction and decoration, family life, gardens, travel, and food in the West, particularly the Pacific and southwestern regions.⁷ Its May 1933 cover carried a proud statement of the magazine's financial success and popularity despite the hard economic times: “In the Pacific West—SUNSET has more subscribers than all national home and garden magazines combined.”⁸ According to Proctor Mellquist, *Sunset's* editor in 1973, “It was the conviction of L.W. Lane, Sr. that life in the West was different enough from the rest of the nation to justify and sustain a magazine designed to serve Western differences.” The magazine's numerous readers, it would seem, agreed.⁹

“And so you are trying to improve the Indians,” said Jane, peering at me over her glasses in the manner of one looking at a person who has mistakenly espoused a hopeless cause. No need to say she was horrified to find that I had broken away from everything natural and normal, and was earning my living by being a Home Demonstration Agent on an Indian Reservation!” So began Freda Sperling's article, “Better Homes among the Klamath Indians” featured in *Sunset's* June 1930 issue. In it,

⁶ Ibid., 11–3 and Kevin Starr, “*Sunset Magazine* and the Phenomenon of the Far West,” in *Sunset Magazine: A Century of Western Living, 1898–1998* (Stanford, CA, 1998), 31–75.

⁷ See Starr, “*Sunset* and the Phenomenon of the Far West” and Johnson, ed., *The Early Sunset Magazine*.

⁸ *Sunset* (May 1933). While data on exactly how many or what kind of Americans regularly read *Sunset* during these years is not readily available, according to Kevin Starr, “the 1930s witnessed the emergence of *Sunset* [as] one of the most successful regional lifestyle magazines in the country.” Starr, *The Dream Endures: California Enters the 1940s* (New York, 1997), 6. The front cover of the January 1934 issue read: “This Issue Goes to More Than 200,000 Western Homes.”

⁹ Johnson, ed., *The Early Sunset Magazine*, uncited quote on p. vii.

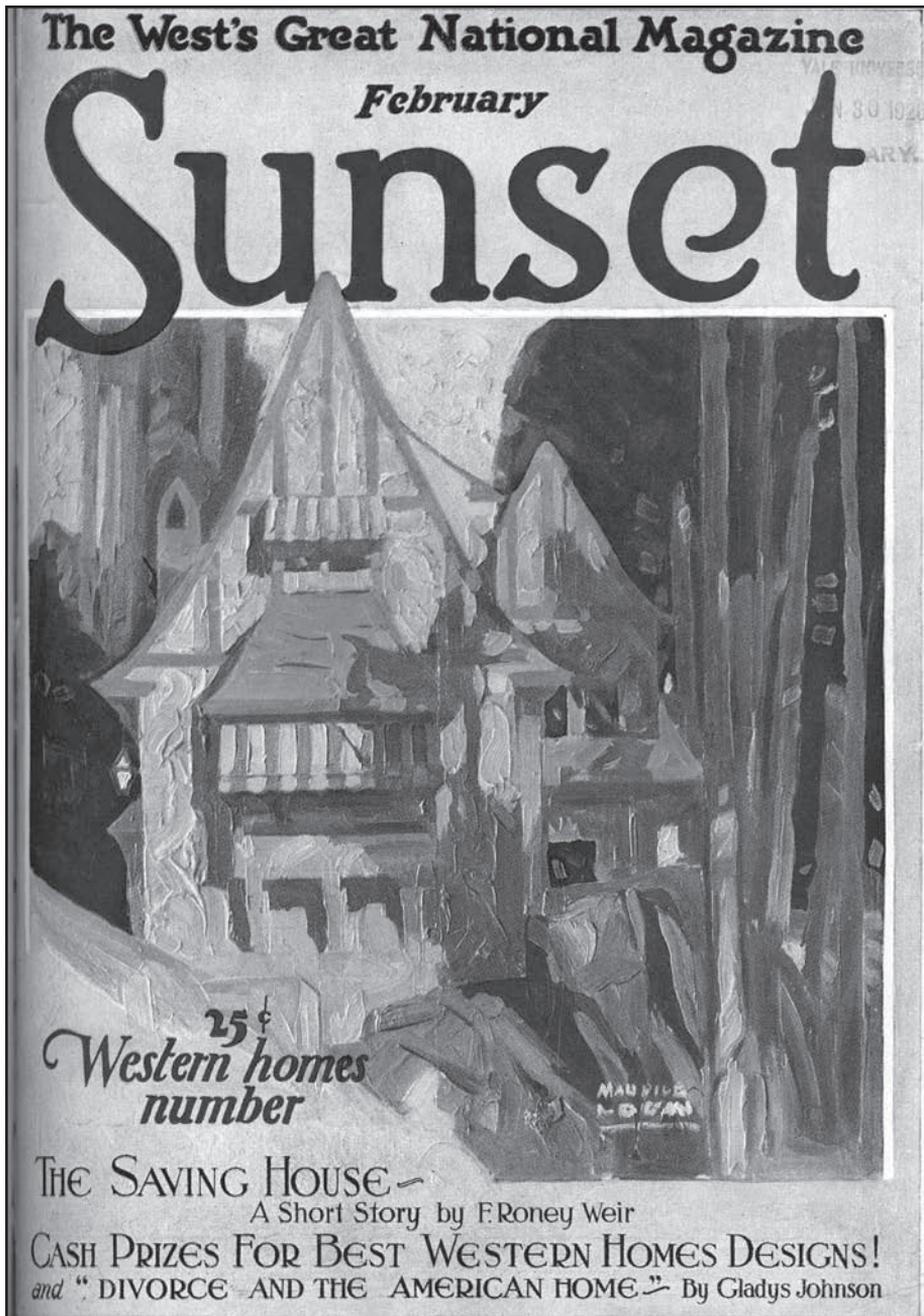


Figure 1. Cover of *Sunset's* February 1926 "Western Homes Number." Illustration courtesy of *Sunset Magazine*.

Freda told her friend Jane—a kind of skeptical everywoman, “bent on asking just the same questions that everyone else asks”—of her work among the “Indian Homemakers” at the Klamath Indian Reservation in Oregon. Right off the bat, Freda corrected a few of Jane’s misperceptions about Indians. She assured her of the Indians’ ability to communicate in English and assuaged Jane’s fears that Freda might be “stabbed in the back or scalped any time.” “These Indians are all civilized,” she explained. “To be sure, I have heard that some of the older men had a record for killing white men in their young days, but now they are very peaceful.”¹⁰

Yet while Freda emphasized that the Klamath Indians had been “civilized” to the point where they could communicate in the dominant culture’s language and were no longer violent towards whites, she also made sure that her readers understood that, in other respects—“homemaking and home improvement” in particular—the Indians remained evolutionarily retarded and required the aid of the Indian Service to raise them from barbarism to civilization. Freda’s efforts to remedy this situation revolved around forming women’s clubs on the reservation, one of which featured “a skit on dishwashing and a carbohydrate game”, staging meat-canning and salad-making demonstrations, helping with the selection of furniture and draperies for homes, urging residents to better manicure their yards and to plant lawns, working to involve girls in the “modern Indian 4-H club”, and advising families on how to properly integrate modern appliances such as washing machines and radios into their homes. Without proper guidance and uplift, Freda’s article implied, the Klamath Indians would fail to get civilized modernity quite right. She explicitly illustrated this point with a picture of a cottage that an “Indian family built without any advice.” “It is very attractive and nicely arranged,” her caption explained, “but it has no closets in the bedrooms!”¹¹ (See Figure 2.)

Like many reformers of her time, Freda’s sympathy for the Indians’ plight, her desire to help, and her sincere appreciation of aspects of Indian culture existed within a framework of widely held societal beliefs in the superiority of white civilization. Roughly coterminous with *Sunset*’s beginnings, the late-nineteenth-century’s variant of the discourse of civilization emerged as an explicitly racial concept that drew upon popularized Darwinism to assert white, especially Anglo-Saxon, supremacy. Adherents posited that human races moved up an evolutionary scale from savagery through barbarism to a state of advanced civilization. Yet since it was believed that only the white races had evolved to the civilized stage, civilization was often spoken of as if it were a racial trait possessed only by middle class and elite whites.¹² By the

¹⁰ Freda Sperling, “Better Homes among the Klamath Indians,” *Sunset* (June 1930): 18–20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For links between women’s reform efforts and white racial superiority, see Louise Michele Newman, *White Women’s Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York, 1999). For an explication of civilization discourses, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995), 24–6.

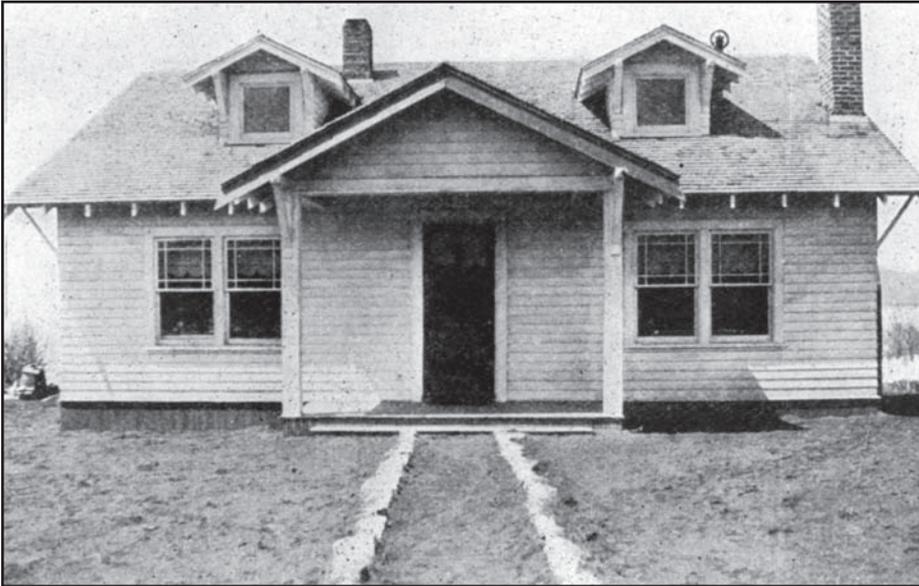


Figure 2. Modern home on the Klamath Indian Reservation built by Indians without white supervision. Since they built it without closets, *Sunset* used it as an example of how, despite their best efforts, without proper guidance Indians continually fell short in accurately recreating the trappings of civilized modernity. "Better Homes Among the Klamath Indians," *Sunset* (June 1930): 18. Photo courtesy of *Sunset Magazine*.

early decades of the twentieth century, the beliefs about white superiority at the core of the civilization discourse fused with emerging concepts of "the modern." In *Sunset*, claiming a modern self was inextricably tied to claiming whiteness as an identity. Just as the civilized white was defined against the non-white savage, the white modern was juxtaposed with the non-white primitive as well as the old-fashioned. Freda's emphasis on the lack of civilization among the Klamath Indians and their fumbling attempts to adopt some of the trappings of modernity, despite her earnest intentions, thus ultimately worked to draw cultural boundaries and elucidate race-based differences. Her article fit perfectly with the component of *Sunset's* middlebrow mission that involved its representation of people of color in the West in ways that functioned to separate and distinguish them from whites, in the process presenting uncivilized "others" for whites to define themselves against.

As Freda Sperling's story attests, *Sunset* not only served western differences in a regional sense, as its editors had hoped, it also defined social differences within the West, especially those rooted in race and ethnicity. One of the reasons why the emergence of middlebrow culture was so threatening to the gatekeepers of high culture was that it had the potential, through the market driven, yet democratizing, impulse of mass culture, to present a challenge to understandings of supposedly natural, biologically-based class and racial differences by making a commodified variant of good taste

widely available through purchase. By displaying a particular kind of taste, one also displayed the status that inhered in the level of civilization that such taste represented and accessed, theoretically at least, the social power that came with the deployment of that cultural capital.¹³ Yet middlebrow cultural products could just as effectively work to solidify difference and hierarchy. Although initially targeted to a national middle-class audience, *Sunset* increasingly became oriented towards the white middle class of the American West and it was this West that *Sunset* represented in its pages. The homeowner, the decorator, the architect, and the reader were all implicitly represented as white in the text and literally as white in illustrations. Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans might make appearances in special feature stories or as “Interesting Westerners,” but they stood outside the normative constructions of both American-ness and western-ness that *Sunset* prescribed. While images of people of color in *Sunset’s* pages told white westerners who they were not, representations of civilized, modern westerners in the magazine’s pages presented white readers with images of people they could identify with and a lifestyle they might aspire to obtain. In *Sunset*, throughout its various incarnations, civilizing the West meant prescribing particular aesthetic standards designed to highlight certain social features of western living and downplay and contain others.

One of the reasons for the appeal of *Sunset’s* representation of a West ordered according to the racial hierarchies dictated by the intertwined discourses of civilization and modernity was that it assuaged the social anxieties of white westerners—both long-time residents and the many newcomers arriving at this time from areas like the Midwest.¹⁴ The West outside the pages of *Sunset* was a richly diverse and complex place. As a region, it was built on conquest, populated by significant numbers of Asian and Latino immigrants as well as African Americans, haunted by the remaining members of decimated Native American populations, and regularly the target of new groups of Euro-American migrants. During the 1920s and 1930s, this diversity was the source of heightened anxiety—exacerbated by war-related fears—that expressed itself in increased nativism and racism. Since *Sunset* existed in a reciprocal relationship with the real West, the well-ordered West it created can be seen as a response to these tensions. The National Origins Act, passed in 1924, mandated new restrictions on immigration that conveyed a decided preference for northern and western Europeans—effectively halting immigration from Asia, a matter of particular significance for the Pacific Coast, by adding Japanese immigrants to the already excluded Chinese. A related product of this overall climate was the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, whose message of nativism

¹³ For the politics of taste, see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford, ENG, 1994) and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA, 1984).

¹⁴ Such newcomers helped boost the population of greater Los Angeles by a million and a half between 1920 and 1930. See Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920s* (New York, 1990), 211.

and hate had considerable appeal among ordinary people in the West, as chapters in Denver, Salt Lake City, El Paso, Anaheim, and Eugene attest. Mexican Americans, although spared from immigration restriction in the 1920s, faced forced repatriation in the 1930s. Moreover, communities throughout the region practiced discriminatory housing practices such as red-lining and restrictive covenants to keep people of color from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods so that the fantasy prescribed in *Sunset* of a homogenous West could be realized to a limited extent through residential segregation.¹⁵

However, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have astutely pointed out, “what is *socially* peripheral is . . . frequently *symbolically* central.” One of the ways *Sunset* worked to construct a collective sense of white western-ness was by delineating how the otherness of people of color in the West could be safely incorporated and appropriated through the purchase of goods such as Navajo rugs, Oriental ornaments, and Spanish-style architecture and furnishings.¹⁶ *Sunset’s* advocacy of the use of Chinese wares in interior decoration provides a prime example of the appropriation of the consumable aspects of the culture of a group that occupied the lowest rung on the racial ladder in many parts of the Pacific West. Edgar Harrison Wileman, “Los Angeles Authority on Home Furnishings,” advised readers that Chinese art was particularly adaptable and could be used “in any home, large or small.” “For finer homes,” he explained, “many beautiful and costly articles are available, such as antique porcelain, jade and crystal figures, intricate ivories and semi-precious stones.”¹⁷ In a similar vein, although Native Americans themselves had been forcibly removed to reservations, Lillian Ferguson saw fit to suggest appropriating Indian home-making practices, intimating to her readers that “home-makers in the desert Southwest . . . [had] recaptured an idea which . . . was sent winging through space by some beauty-loving Indian home-maker centuries ago.” In a passage notable for its language of appropriation and the presentation of mythology as history, she continued:

When, after the rainy season had passed, that ancient home-maker tossed her blankets out upon the wall to dry in the desert sun, she doubtless discovered, as the damp heavy folds settled in colorful array against the

¹⁵ For evidence of the social climate of the American West in 1920s and 1930s, see Richard White, *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman, 1991), 423–95.

¹⁶ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: 1986), 5. For discussion of this process in the California context, see Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1949), 36 and William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley, 2004). For the workings of racialization, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York, 1994).

¹⁷ Edgar Harrison Wileman, “What About Bric-A-Brac?” *Sunset* (September 1930): 20–1.

earth-colored surface, that there is nothing quite so fetching as a gay Indian serape hung against a plastered mud wall. Her white sister, having recaptured the idea, is now using it over and over again in an interesting number of ways with ever increasing attractiveness.¹⁸

The related styles of Mission and Spanish Colonial were given particular prominence in both *Sunset* magazine and the architecture of the Pacific Slope and Southwest.¹⁹ These styles were not only thought to be especially appropriate to warm climates, but also especially fitting in regions that had Spanish colonial histories. This was despite the fact that in California, for example, where entire communities were designed in these styles in the 1920s and 1930s, the few original missions offered little in architectural instruction. Rather than reflecting the state's actual history, in California, Mission and Spanish Colonial styles created what David Gebhard has called a "mythical architectural past" that echoed an equally mythical social history.²⁰ Mainstream histories of the region represented conquest as an act of generosity, if not heroism, in which civilized Anglos lifted the allegedly lazy, tribal, yet colorful Californios out of the semi-barbaric state in which they had languished. Throughout the Pacific Slope and Southwest, while white westerners embraced "Spanish" styles in everything from architecture to civic celebrations, they generally ignored the actual history of Mexican Americans. As Carey McWilliams, who coined the term "Fantasy Heritage" to describe this state of affairs that "permeated the social and cultural life of the borderlands," pointed out in 1948, "None of this would really matter except that the churches in Los Angeles hold fiestas rather than bazaars and that Mexicans are still not accepted as a part of the community."²¹

Visions of civilization and modernity were also operative in *Sunset's* literary recommendations. *Sunset's* book review sections carefully advised readers about what was worth reading and buying from among selected new publications. "When a book

¹⁸ Lillian Ferguson, "Native American Murals: Their Decorative Value on Walls of Desert Homes," *Sunset* (November 1928): 50.

¹⁹ See, for example, Lillian Ferguson, "Modernizing the Adobe," *Sunset* (October 1920): 68; Marion Brownfield, "A Type of Spanish Renaissance," *Sunset* (February 1921): 64; Margaret Craig, "A Spanish Casa," *Sunset* (May 1923): 64–6, 80; Mira Maclay, "Reviving the Early California Type," *Sunset* (August 1925): 64–5. The following are from unknown authors: "The Pueblo and the Padre Influences on Stucco Homes," *Sunset* (June 1926): 64–5; "A Spanish House Designed for a Western Hillside," *Sunset* (October 1929): 36–7; "You will Like this Early California House," *Sunset* (June 1931): 23; "Spanish Furniture for California Homes," *Sunset* (April 1933): 21.

²⁰ David Gebhard, "One Hundred Years of California Architecture," in *Architecture in California, 1868–1968; An Exhibition Organized by David Gebhard and Harriette Von Breton*, ed. David Gebhard and Harriette Von Breton (Santa Barbara, 1968), 7, 16. For California communities designed in Spanish and Mission styles, see Starr, *The Dream Endures*, 20–2.

²¹ McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 36.

is reviewed in *Sunset Magazine*,” readers were told, “it means that we editors have placed on it our thumb prints of approval.” Such books, although available at libraries and bookstores, could also “be ordered through *Sunset* Book Department at the prices quoted.” If *Sunset* readers actually read the recommended books, the majority of their reading material would have centered on works with western themes. At the prompting of a letter from a reader, Joseph Henry Jackson devoted the entire April 1923 “Book Corner” to works on the West. By 1930, A. Marshall Harbinson, *Sunset*’s book review editor at that time, began featuring reviews solely of “books written by westerners or about the West.” Even if *Sunset* readers merely read the reviews, they would have been regularly inundated with ideas about the contemporary West and especially about the historic “wild” West of the nineteenth century. Renditions of this aspect of the past could easily figure into the construction of a particular sense of regional identity for white westerners since the vast majority of the historical themes covered centered around the Euro-Americans who began peopling the West en masse in the 1840s and 1850s. Moreover, while the version of western history offered in *Sunset*’s book reviews was, on the surface, everything that civilization was not—rough, untamed, and wild—beneath the surface and between the lines, much was being said that was absolutely about civilization and the ideas about race and gender that term implied. After all, part of the story of the “wild” West has always been its giving way to a civilized, modern social order.²²

The primary subjects of the brand of western history presented and glorified by *Sunset Magazine* were hardy pioneers, noble cowboys, outlaws, gamblers, miners, stage-coach drivers, and railroad tycoons. These stock-in-trade figures provided the “action, thrills, sportsmanship, and historical significance” as well as the “heroic adventure” for which works reviewed in *Sunset* were praised. Of concern to the reviewers, however, was not simply that a story was enthralling, but also that it conveyed a certain amount of authenticity. The story contained in Frank J. Taylor’s *Pathfinders*, for example, was described as “a record of historical adventure told in such a way as to present a true and living picture.” Similarly, Joseph Henry Jackson enthused that an especially valuable feature of Gordon Young’s *Days of ‘49* was his appendix, in which he “[set] down the authorities that he consulted: The historians, diarists, memoir-writers of that early day who helped him weave the rich tapestry of historical background against which his story is told.” Jackson was also not shy about taking on a book when it did not meet his standards for historical accuracy. He slammed Blaise Cendrars’s *Sutter’s Gold*, reporting that although it was “a dramatic and forceful thing, it had nothing much to do with history.” *Sunset*’s Westerns needed to convey the “real” West since the representations

²² A. Marshall Harbinson “The Western Bookshelf,” *Sunset* (April 1932): 44; Joseph Henry Jackson, “The Book Corner,” *Sunset* (April 1923): 39; “Blossoms from the Garden of Prose: A. Marshall Harbinson Reviews Four Books of Current Fiction Well Worth Reading,” *Sunset* (April 1930): 48.

of the West contained in the books reviewed in its pages needed to be strong enough for white westerners to build a collective identity upon.²³

The books reviewed in *Sunset* that were not about Euro-Americans in the West still worked to reinforce a collective sense of white, regional identity by reinforcing notions of racial difference. For example, Louise Jordan Miln's book, *Ruben and Ivy Sen*, was described "as an appealing a story you've ever read, irrespective of how you feel about Orient-Occident marriages." In his review of Takashi Ohta's and Margaret Sperry's *The Golden Wind*, a story about "a Japanese youth of a prominent family who is banished from the empire and takes refuge in China," A. Marshall Harbinson blithely noted that this might not sound like "an intriguing theme for a novel"—especially "to typical westerners and particularly Californians." "To be sure," he added, "we have all laughed over the accounts of Japanese school boys that have found their way into periodicals, and have gnashed our teeth at the villains, but bona fide Japanese heroes have left us cold." Yet, in this case, he explained "the adventures of the little brown hero . . . held us enthralled." Joseph Henry Jackson deployed similarly derogatory language when he described the subject of Jeff Poindexter's *Colored* as a "southern darky in New York." Reviews like these not only betrayed the racial arrogance of whites, but also their racial anxiety. For example, a brief, three-line review of a book by I. A. R. Wylie called *Black Harvest* summed up the plot and the reviewer's sentiments: "The next war. A fantastically plausible story of a defeated nation's revenge and a negro superman who is to lead his African brethren under the German banner. Of course, the thing doesn't quite come off, which is some satisfaction!"²⁴

Reviews of books about Native Americans were more contradictory in the ways they treated their subject, indicative of the paradoxical attitudes Euro-Americans have had about indigenous people since earliest contact. In the 1920s and 1930s, with many

²³ Harbinson, "Western Bookshelf" (April 1932): 44 and (May 1930): 48. For examples of these kinds of themes and descriptions, see Joseph Henry Jackson, "Speaking of Books" *Sunset* (January 1928): 66–7 and Joseph Henry Jackson, "The Book Corner," in all of the following: *Sunset* (January 1923): 37, (February 1923): 47, (June 1923): 68, (January 1924): 54, (May 1924): 50, (July 1925): 46–7, (August 1925): 43. Taylor is reviewed in "Those Were the Days, A. Marshall Harbinson Reviews Nine Books of the Old West," *Sunset* (March 1930): 40; Young is reviewed in Joseph Henry Jackson, "The Book Corner," *Sunset* (January 1926): 52; Cendrars is reviewed in Joseph Henry Jackson, "Speaking of Books," *Sunset* (December 1926): 6.

²⁴ Miln is reviewed in A. Marshall Harbinson, "The Western Bookshelf," *Sunset* (July 1930): 43; Ohta's and Sperry's book is reviewed in A. Marshall Harbinson, "The New Year's Counterpart in Literature," *Sunset* (January 1930): 42; Jackson, "Book Corner," 37; *Black Harvest* is mentioned in "The Book Corner By Joseph Henry Jackson," *Sunset* (April 1926): 45. See also, "A Chinese Close-Up" in which a joke is made about the "Oriental slant" of the eye (perspective) of the writer in Jackson, "Book Corner," 54; a positive review of a book with chapters titled, "That the Advanced Races are going backward," and "The Duty of Eugenics," in Jackson, "The Book Corner," *Sunset* (March 1924): 51; the decrying of the "mixture of races in South Africa" which "curses alike the dark and the light descendents of such mixed marriages in Jackson, "The Book Corner, *Sunset* (April 1925): 39.

Native Americans ensconced on reservations and faring the worse for it, some Euro-Americans re-activated a vision, buried since the early-nineteenth century, of Indians as noble, endangered beings worthy of admiration and in need of protection. Part of this image's resurgence was related to the onslaught of modernity and the anxiety that accompanied the increasingly automated and bureaucratic world. This would not be the first or last time Native Americans served as a convenient screen for Euro-Americans to project longings for a purer, more natural, less civilized existence.²⁵

In this spirit, in the early twenties, *Sunset's* contributors aired and debated various Indian policies. John Collier—an activist for Pueblo land rights in the 1920s who in the 1930s, as commissioner of Indian Affairs, worked to put an end to forced assimilation through the Indian Reorganization Act—even penned a number of articles. Yet even in its most sympathetic treatments, *Sunset* represented Native Americans as passive and acted upon—as a problem to be solved, not as architects of their own futures. This stance was evident in Joseph Henry Jackson's 1926 review of Zane Grey's *Vanishing American*. Jackson identified the book as both “a readable yarn and a propaganda novel . . . written with full intent to focus for his thousands of readers . . . the picture of the American Indian—‘moving on, diminishing, fading, vanishing—vanishing!’” He continued with tempered acceptance of the book's agenda, which also bespoke the potential political power of the middlebrow: “The Indian is with us yet. . . . And he is not getting a square deal—far from it. But there's a difference between political repetition of the Indian's grievance . . . and the simple method of putting the question before some hundreds of thousands of American fiction readers through the medium of the popular novel.” The difference, according to Jackson was that, “Mr. Grey's way of doing the trick is likely to be several thousand per cent more effective . . . if his book might only turn out to be the ‘Uncle Tom's Cabin’ of the American Indian.”²⁶

Yet at the exact same time Native Americans were being romanticized, often patronized, and sometimes defended by white Americans, they could still be held up as the inferior, savage foil to superior, civilized whites. In reviewing Leo Crane's *Enchanted Desert*, Jackson praised the way this “Indian agent” had captured the “mysterious rites” and the “simple psychology” of the Hopis and Navajos. Offering a hint at his readers' attitudes, he also admonished them not to “dismiss the volume with half a glance as ‘another one of those Indian books.’” When A. Marshall Harbinson came across Frank Linderman's book, *American*, he admitted to his readers that “somehow or other the title . . . did not particularly interest me.” Possibly this was because Harbinson could not fathom why an autobiography of Chief Plenty-Coups would be given such a title.

²⁵ See Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, 1998); David Rich Lewis, “Still Native: The Significance of Native Americans in the History of the Twentieth-Century American West” *Western Historical Quarterly* 24 (Summer 1993): 203–27; Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* (Minneapolis, 1980).

²⁶ Grey is reviewed in Jackson, “Book Corner,” 47.

“Soon,” however, Harbinson knew that the book would “carry the thumb print of [his] approval.” Clearly this was because Linderman’s book—at least as it was interpreted by Harbinson—presented a view of Native Americans that, despite the title, constructed them in a way that left them outside of the circle of American-ness. Linderman, having lived in “a cabin in the woods at Goose Bay on the shores of Flathead Lake, Montana, where he had been intimately associated with the Crow Indians and other Indian tribes of that section” was able to induce Chief Plenty-Coups to tell him the story of his life. “And what a story it is,” Harbinson intimated to his readers, “War whoops, arrows singing through the air, naked Indians creeping toward their enemies, scalping, hand-to-hand encounters, fights to the death.” Harbinson lauded Linderman’s work for its authenticity and for the way it provided the reader with “a peep into the Indian mind.” Yet given the above description and the overall tone of the review, readers were encouraged to embrace its veracity based on something besides the actual quality of an ethnography that sought to capture what Linderman believed to be a disappearing way of life. In his review, Harbinson continually tapped into prevailing beliefs about Indians that simultaneously romanticized them and cast them as savage and inferior. This was especially evident, for example, in the way Harbinson related and emphasized the method Linderman used to extract his story. As he explained, “Mr. Linderman does not take a maudlin, be-kind-to-dumb-animals attitude toward Indians; he does not set out to make a hero of the Indian nor to make a villain of him; he merely sets down with intelligent interpolations an account, given by his friend Plenty-Coups in sign language.”²⁷

In 1926, *Sunset’s* editors told their readers: “We want to make the magazine even more representative of the West—the up-to-date *modern* West, the West of today. . . . We must always represent the West; that’s what we’re here for.” Throughout the 1920s and 1930s “modern” was one of *Sunset’s* buzzwords. The flip-side of *Sunset’s* images of non-white westerners in ways that highlighted their difference from whites was its mobilization of the modern as a key component of its construction of a positive image of and for white westerners. While the terms “modern,” “modernity,” and “modernism” have long been used differently in various contexts and disciplines—as part of its middlebrow mission, *Sunset* deployed its own variant of the discourse of modernity in four interrelated ways. Taken together, *Sunset’s* version of the modern was domesticated spatially as well as ideologically. Located in the domestic space of the home, instead of advocating radical social transformation, *Sunset’s* modernity was a powerful yet conservative force. This component of *Sunset’s* middlebrow mission involved representing an image of white western-ness expressed through the modern self, articulated in the modern home, through the consumption of goods produced in the modern fashion.²⁸

²⁷ Crane is reviewed in Joseph Henry Jackson, “The Book Corner,” *Sunset* (March 1925): 50 and Linderman is reviewed in Harbinson, “Western Bookshelf” (July 1930): 43.

²⁸ “Across the Editors Desk,” *Sunset* (December 1926): 8.

First, as we've seen, the ideas and practices that constituted "the modern" in the 1920s and 1930s resonated with beliefs about race, class, and gender that often had much the same ring as those that constituted "the civilized" around the turn of the century. Second, *Sunset* used "modern" to designate the style of the 1920s and 1930s, which demanded simplicity and harmony of line and form in contrast to the cluttered, old-fashioned Victorian aesthetic. Here *Sunset's* embrace of the modern often championed stylistic concepts drawn from the realm of high art reformulated for middlebrow consumption. *Sunset* had little directly to do with the advocacy of the work of modern artists, architects, or designers. *Sunset's* experts, in fact, counseled westerners not to be too artistically modern, since they generally labeled anything smacking of modern art as extreme, but still just modernistic enough to be in step with the times. Relatedly, a third way *Sunset* used "modern" was to designate that which was "up-to-date." This kind of usage referred to contemporary circumstances—as in "modern life"—often represented in positive terms as increasingly mass-produced, efficient, and scientific. It also implied a penchant for newness that was generally translated into needs for consumer goods. As Edgar Harrison Wileman, *Sunset's* interior decorating editor, advised: "Just as we change our automobile every few years, so should we change the old style sofa and out-of-date furnishings, so that we may show ourselves mentally alert and keenly alive to the psychological effect of modern equipment."²⁹ This attitude was closely tied to the fourth way that *Sunset* utilized "the modern"—to articulate a vision of progress made manifest through the consumption of modern things. Since industrial capitalism signified increased civilization, consumer goods—evidence of systems of mass production—were likewise viewed as a progressive force. Modern things, in *Sunset's* schema, helped to create and articulate the modern self—the apex of human progress in the world—through a process of commodity-centered self-realization.³⁰

The home was at the nexus of *Sunset's* mobilization of the modern and the civilized. In the 1920s and 1930s, the home emerged as an important register of the shift from a culture of character, which emphasized issues of morality, the virtues of self-control, and a uniform, fixed standard of conduct to a modern culture of personality that was more concerned with emotional temperament, the techniques of self-expression, individual idiosyncrasies, and personal needs. This shift in the concept of the "modal self" has been identified, by Warren Susman and Karen Halttunen, as "essential to the

²⁹ Edgar Harrison Wileman, "Common Errors in Household Furnishing," *Sunset* (March 1930): 27.

³⁰ For *Sunset's* embrace of the modern, see, for example, the following, all in *Sunset*: "Seven Rooms and Simplicity" (March 1920): 64; Addie G. Evans, "Modernizing a Ranch House" (February 1924): 67; Faith Holmes Hyers, "Where Simplicity Means Beauty" (December 1926): 17; "Harmony Means Beauty" (July 1929): 26–7; "Modernizing An Ugly Living Room" (February 1931): 26–7; "A Little House With Too Many Decorations and What Might Be Done About It" (January 1932): 20; Edgar Harrison Wileman, "Your Home Building Questions Answered" (August 1935): 28–9; "Planning the Western Home" (October and November 1936): 16–8.

transformation of a producer-oriented society which rested on the virtues of self-denial, into a mass consumer society, with its new reliance on demands for self-fulfillment." In *Sunset*, this move in the direction of the modern, modal self was expressed through domestic designs that emphasized simplicity, efficiency, and personality and that derided the formal stuffiness of the Victorian parlor but celebrated the living room and the novel relations among family, self, and society that it expressed.³¹

Yet while *Sunset* served as a vehicle for articulating a vision of self and society during this time of transition, its conceptualization of the modern was not the only available option. In 1932, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held the Modern Architecture International Exhibition and that same year published a catalog to record the exhibit and its contributors. The catalog closed with an essay by urbanist and architectural critic, Lewis Mumford, simply titled, "Housing," that set about leveling a scathing critique of typical American homes. Mumford's vision of the modern was everything that *Sunset's* was not, and *Sunset* embodied everything that Mumford reviled. Despite their differences, however, both *Sunset* and Lewis Mumford employed a relatively similar language of art and design. Both also saw the design of housing as crucial to the processes of civilizing and modernizing and thus tied to politically charged visions of the proper social order.³²

Lewis Mumford's ideas about what constituted livable, affordable, and aesthetically pleasing housing were tied to the social vision he saw promoted by modern architecture. Modern architecture, he believed, provided a vehicle that would enable Americans to transcend the unhealthy fetish of individual home ownership and step into "the new physical and communal environment that modern life demands." Modern housing along the lines of J. J. P. Oud's work in Rotterdam, Sunnyside Gardens in Long Island City, New York, or the planned town of Radburn, New Jersey, not only integrated "the land itself, with human beings, and their needs" and thus laid the ground work for new communities containing healthful doses of sunlight and air, efficient design, large living rooms, room for outdoor recreation, privacy, and basic hygiene, but also avoided what Mumford termed "the fake romanticism of the American suburb." Mumford was particularly concerned about the fact that as mass produced housing increased, the availability of affordable housing had decreased for the majority of Americans. Part of the problem, as he identified it, was that Americans had "treated the house as an abstract symbol of safety, patriotism, citizenship, [and] family stability . . . and

³¹ Karen Halttunen, "From Parlour 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, 1989), 187 and Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984).

³² Lewis Mumford, "Housing," in *Modern Architects* exhibit catalog by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. et al. (New York, 1932), 179–89.

failed to deal with the house frankly as primarily a place to live in.”³³ He contended that “modern architecture, with its strong lines, its disdain for the ‘quaint’ and the ‘pretty’ . . . is not a poor substitute for our abandoned heaven of the individual romantic house, built according to the heart’s desire; on the contrary, it is far superior.” A crucial point for Mumford was that in modern architecture, “the unit is no longer the individual house but the community.”³⁴

Sunset agreed with Lewis Mumford about the need to construct homes that were light, airy, spacious, and hygienic and provided space for outdoor activities, privacy, and sociability. *Sunset* defined “a *home*, in the best sense of the word; [as] not a show place but one where the daily art of living is carried on and where friends like to linger.”³⁵ Privacy though, in *Sunset*’s schema, was not the need Mumford referred to for private bedrooms and baths (a given) so much as it was a concern for clearly demarcated space that made one house and its yards separate from the others around it. “Our modern trend of thought,” wrote Ralph Cornell, one of *Sunset*’s landscape architects, “says that the home grounds should be secluded and planned for the special use of the owner instead of the passing public.”³⁶ In 1924, when *Sunset* published a series of articles on the cooperative Rio del Llano Colony fifty miles from Los Angeles, the magazine’s editors cast the “universal longings” that provided its impetus in distinctly anti-modern terms. “At one time or another all of us have grown tired of the strife, the strain, the uncertainty involved in the job of making a living under the strenuous modern competitive conditions,” they explained. “We’ve longed for a different order of existence, for more leisure, less strain, hurry, bustle and throat-cutting.” While the editors did not necessarily advocate cooperative living, they did note that it offered “one way of escape” from modern pressures. Yet this attitude was very different from Mumford’s; he envisioned cooperative living as a way of both reconfiguring and embracing modern life.³⁷ *Sunset* was also only concerned with affordable housing in a very narrow sense—affordable for the middle class—and, with the exception of the articles on Llano, not at all concerned with any kind of new, planned community beyond that of the traditional suburb. Instead, it extolled the virtues of

³³ *Ibid.*, 183–9, quotes, in order given, on 184, 189, 188, 183.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 184, 186.

³⁵ Edgar Harrison Wileman, “Sunset Decorator’s Own Home,” *Sunset* (September 1932): 12.

³⁶ Ralph Cornell, “Making the Ordinary Lot into a Modern Garden: Third in a Series on Good Taste in Western Gardens,” *Sunset* (April 1933): 24–5. See also, Lillian Ferguson, “Western Homes and Gardens: A Small House Can Be Distinctive,” *Sunset* (May 1926): 65.

³⁷ See Ernest S. Wooster, “They Shared Equally,” *Sunset* (July 1924): 21–3, 80–2. For quotes, see inset by unnamed editors on p. 21. For Wooster’s series on Rio del Llano, see also “Bread and Hyacinths,” *Sunset* (August 1924): 21–3, 80–5 and “The Colonists Win Through,” *Sunset* (September 1924): 30–3, 56–8.

the privately owned, single-family dwelling—whether villas, cottages, bungalows, or ranch homes—designed and planned for the nuclear family.³⁸ For example, an article subtitled “A Plea for Playgrounds” did not campaign for more public playgrounds but more private, backyard ones.³⁹

The suburban architecture boom that occurred nationally between 1890 and 1930 and nearly doubled home ownership in many communities was, in many ways, on *Sunset*'s side. In 1923, permits for new construction in the Los Angeles area totaled \$185 million—a record-breaking figure that was not surpassed until 1945.⁴⁰ The very act of building suburbs reinforced, promoted, and made possible, for some, the American dream—actively advocated in *Sunset*—of individual ownership of single-family dwellings. The ready-cut housing industry saw in the simplicity of modern architecture's new minimalist aesthetic the same sort of efficiency and cost effectiveness that Mumford had recognized, despite the fact that the communities these builders designed served very different social purposes. Their subsequent modified appropriation resulted in house plans that were simple in form and compact in layout—decidedly modern in contrast to Victorian alternatives—and were exactly the types of homes that so frequently appeared in *Sunset*'s pages.⁴¹

Not surprisingly, *Sunset* gave considerable attention to designing modern, single family homes with an eye to the most efficient uses of space.⁴² Such a house was described in *Sunset* as “one of a number of inexpensive houses shown recently in a small homes exhibition [that] won many favorable comment [sic].” It was of a “very simple design” that followed “no recognized tradition.” Its floor plan consisted of “a living-room, dining-room, two bedrooms, kitchen, breakfast room, bathroom, and back porch.” The result was extremely simple: a cube with a roof coming to a point on top, two windows on each side, back and front windows showing a door placed

³⁸ See, for example, the following, all in *Sunset*: Lillian Ferguson, “Variety in Bungalows” (December 1920): 68–70; Charles Alma Byers, “A Cottage with a Cement Exterior” (January 1921): 64; Persis Bingham, “Cottage and Villa Types” (March 1923): 66–8; Marjorie M. Mohler, “A Mediterranean Home in A Modern Setting” (April 1929): 20–2; Walter Webber and Summer Spaulding, “A Bungalow Built around the Garden” (September 1930): 26–7; Breo Freeman, “A Colonial Cottage in a California Setting” (March 1934): 12–3; “Modern Ranch Homes in the Old Tradition” (April 1938): 48–9.

³⁹ Gerald O’Gara, “The West May Be a Land of Great Open Spaces, But Where Do *Your* Children Play: A Plea for Playgrounds,” *Sunset* (June 1929): 27–9.

⁴⁰ Starr, *Material Dreams*, 211–2.

⁴¹ See Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York, 1981).

⁴² For this type of single-family home construction see, for example the following, all in *Sunset*: Lillian Ferguson, “A Small House for a Warm Climate” (May 1920): 64; Marion Lay Davis, “A Little House of Brick” (November 1929): 14–5; “For the Small *Sunset* Family” (May 1933): 18; E. P. Van Leuven, “A Little House In Bakersfield California” (January 1934): 14–5; “Small Houses” (August 1936): 20–1; “3 Low Cost Houses” (August 1937): 30–1; “Four New Small Houses Designed for Western Living” (January 1938): 18–9.

SUNSET'S Western Home Design Contest

You don't have to be an architect or a professional designer to win a prize in this contest, which is

OPEN TO AMATEURS ONLY

All you have to do is to submit your ideal home in the form of a drawing (floor plan only is required) similar to the one below, which is given not as an ideal design, but merely to indicate the general manner in which your floor plan should be drawn and lettered.

The contest closes March 15, and the prize-winning designs, with the names of the winners, will be published in the May issue of SUNSET.

CASH PRIZES ARE OFFERED AS FOLLOWS: First, \$25; Second, \$15; Third, \$10

THE JUDGES WILL BE

E. Geoffrey Bangs, San Francisco, architect and former Director of Housing of the California Immigration and Housing Commission

Harris Allen, Oakland, architect and editor of the "Pacific Coast Architect"

Ernest Coxhead, San Francisco, Fellow of the American Institute of Architects

DETAILS OF THE CONTEST

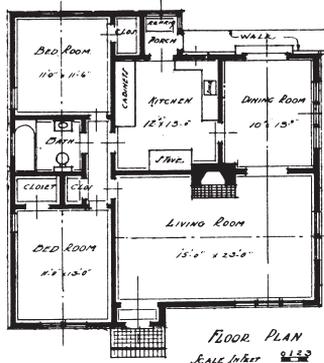
THE house is to contain five rooms, and is to cost not over \$7500, exclusive of land, walks and gardens.

There is to be no basement. The five rooms shall include a living-room, dining-room, kitchen, two bedrooms and bath. (The living-room and dining-room may be combined, but will count as two rooms.) The house is to be designed for an inside lot 50 feet wide by 120 feet deep, with no alley. The lot is level and faces the South. The lot itself is not to be indicated in the drawing.

THE general character of the house and the size of rooms is left to the discrimination of the competitors. As a basis of cost allow \$4.50 per square foot of floor space. This figure will provide for a house to contain not more than 1665 square feet.

THE work must be presented on one sheet of white drawing paper measuring 13 by 20 inches, and must be done in black ink (drawing ink preferably) on a scale of one-fourth of an inch to one foot.

TO insure absolute fairness in judging, the drawings must bear no name or mark which could serve as a means of identification, nor must any such name or mark appear on the wrapper of the drawings. With each drawing must be inclosed a plain, opaque, sealed envelope without any superscription or mark of any kind, containing the name and address of the competitor. These envelopes will be opened by the judges after their final selections have been made.



This is merely to indicate the general manner in which your plan should be drawn and lettered, and is not to be taken as an ideal plan for imitation. Show doors and windows from 2 1/2" to 3" wide; walls and partitions 6" thick; chimney 4 1/2" deep and 5" wide. Double lines around walls are not required.

All drawings must reach SUNSET by the evening of March 15th, and must be addressed: Home Contest Editor, Sunset Magazine, 460 Fourth Street, San Francisco, California

Figure 3. 1926 advertisement publicizing *Sunset's* "Western Home Design Contest." This quintessentially middlebrow enterprise sponsored yearly from 1926–1928 encouraged amateurs to design the floor plan for a small single-family home. *Sunset* (April 1926): 33. Illustration courtesy of *Sunset Magazine*.

between. It was composed of “face brick painted white, shingle roof, and woodwork painted green.”⁴³ *Sunset*’s April 1937 article, “Homebuilding,” featured the floor plan of Mr. and Mrs. Traverse Clements of Los Gatos, designed by the architect Michael Goodman. Its “noteworthy features” included “compact room arrangement,” “charm at low cost,” and “everywhere a modern feeling.”⁴⁴ *Sunset*’s “Western Home Design Contest,” a quintessentially middlebrow enterprise that was open to amateurs only, required that participants design the floor plan for a small, single-family home. The contest was quite popular—it attracted over one hundred entries in 1926—and was held for three years, 1926–1928. Entry regulations stipulated the following requirements: “The house is to contain five rooms, and is to cost not over \$7500, exclusive of land, walks and gardens.”⁴⁵ (See Figure 3.)

Sunset was as concerned with the design and decor of domestic interiors as with the architecture of domestic exteriors and floor plans. Just as *Sunset*’s support of architectural plans of single-family homes reinforced a social order in the American West built upon private property and the nuclear family, its prescriptions in the arena of domestic interiors delineated specific ideas about the interior lives of nuclear family members—the husbands, wives, and children of middle-class whites in the 1920s and 1930s. In *Sunset*, modern domestic spaces implied certain domestic arrangements. During these years, there were significant alterations underway in ideas and practices regarding the home, family, and marriage that had important societal ramifications, especially for the white middle class. Families were becoming smaller—a change was particularly noticeable among the middle classes—who were likely to limit their families to one to three children and adhere to a more affectionate, child-centered model of family relations. Also, as the family’s primary economic activity became consumption rather than production, many of the social and educational functions of the family were absorbed by various external agencies and institutions. Ideas about the institution of marriage were also shifting from the Victorian ideal of marriage as a social duty to a companionate ideal in which marriage became increasingly associated with personal fulfillment. With these new developments came new kinds of emotional demands on

⁴³ Edgar Harrison Wileman, “We Furnish an All-Western Home,” *Sunset* (November 1930): 12–4.

⁴⁴ “Homebuilding,” *Sunset* (April 1937): 26–7.

⁴⁵ “*Sunset*’s Western Home Design Contest,” *Sunset* (February 1926): 33. As part of its mission to educate its readership in good taste, *Sunset* also often profiled architect-designed homes of the elite. See, for example, “Homes of Distinction,” *Sunset* (February, 1926): 17–8; Lillian Ferguson, “Palmdale: The Country Estate of O. L. Starr,” *Sunset* (December 1928): 40–3, 64; William I. Garren, A.I.A., “Before Designing Your Western Home: *Sunset*’s Consulting Architect Tells How Beauty And Romance May Be Built into Your Home. Illustrated by the Patio House Designed For Mrs. R.W. Blaine,” *Sunset* (August 1930): 15–8; Ron Mackie, “Town House of Distinction,” *Sunset* (January 1936): 10–1.

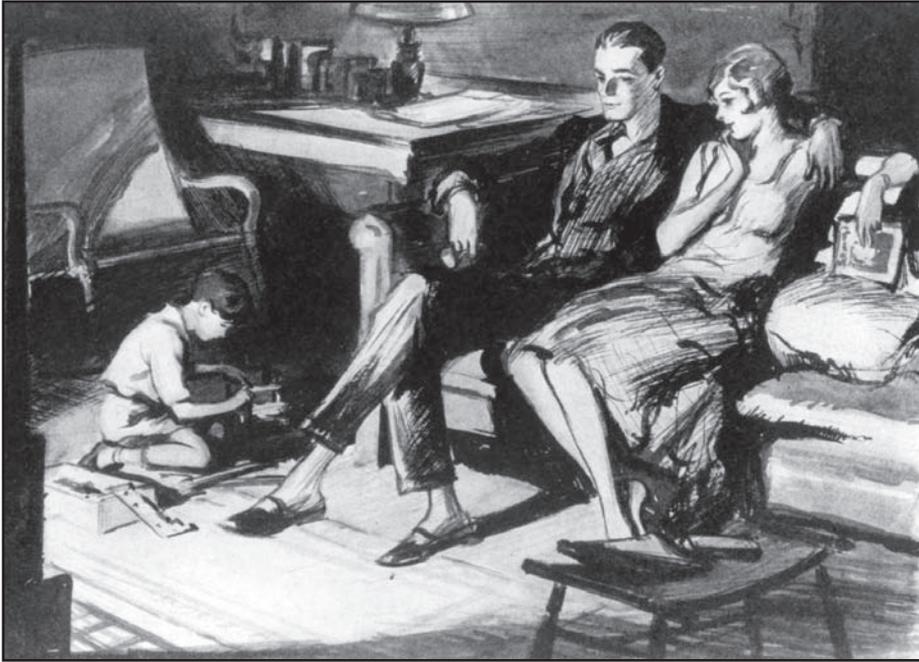


Figure 4. Illustration of the ideal modern *Sunset* family. "Sunset Gold," *Sunset* (April 1929): 6. Illustration courtesy of *Sunset Magazine*.

marriage and the family. For some these changed expectations were a positive force; for others they contributed to the period's rising rate of divorce.⁴⁶

Sunset embodied these modern ideals as well as many of the tensions they generated. It also helped its readers mediate the demands of this new relational ground. For part of 1929, *Sunset* announced its expertise in these matters by adopting the subheading *The Western Magazine for Western Families*. In an editorial that same year, it simultaneously extolled the virtues of women as homemakers, companionate marriage, the child-centered affectionate family, and hinted at concerns about divorce. "Every child has a father as well as a mother," the piece informed, "and every household that can be called a successful home has a husband and wife working together at the job of homemaking." The editorial then went on to celebrate the desegregation of household tasks. "Rare is the man who does not go with his wife to help select the new rug or davenport; who does not on occasion tuck the youngsters into bed. . . . Just as rare is the wife of today who cannot manage a furnace and a car with dexterity equal to [her husband's] own." "Remember," *Sunset* cautioned, "that newspapers make headlines of the failures, never of the successes along this line." This article was

⁴⁶ See Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago, 1980).

accompanied by an illustration of a white man and woman, ostensibly husband and wife, posed as a united couple sitting on a sofa in a modern, middle-class living room while a young boy plays contentedly on the floor. The husband's arm is wrapped affectionately around the wife's shoulders and the wife, holding what looks like a copy of *Sunset* in her hand, gazes lovingly at the child. According to *Sunset*, this represented the model western family at the height of domestic bliss.⁴⁷ (See Figure 4.)

Although *Sunset* espoused a companionate ideal in which husbands helped their wives select home furnishings, it nevertheless fortified the idea that a woman's place was in the home by directing its articles about interior design and decoration primarily to the western housewife.⁴⁸ By the 1920s, housework was far less arduous than it had been for earlier generations of women. Even with fewer servants or none at all, technological developments such as electricity and central heating, as well as appliances like irons, toasters, washers, and sewing machines eased numerous domestic tasks. Despite the fact that housework was easier, however, it was not necessarily less time-consuming. With new technologies and appliances came dramatically heightened standards of cleanliness and, with the help of magazines like *Sunset* and various experts in the domestic arts, the elevation of homemaking to a glamorous, modern, even scientific profession. Through their careers as housewives, modern women were expected to nurture their families and secure their self-worth. That they were also designated as the primary consumers in the family unit was a fact not lost on *Sunset's* editors or advertisers.⁴⁹

Through a characteristically middlebrow mobilization of the language and concepts of art, *Sunset's* frequently-male experts helped their female readers, in their roles as housewives and consumers, navigate the slippery slope of personal decorating to give successful expression to the modern, civilized western self through domestic consumables. The sure-fire way to success required the possession of a plan. Without one, Edgar Harrison Wileman warned, the result would undoubtedly be "a terrible 'hit and miss' effect" in which there was "no relationship between one article and the other either in color, style, texture, or scale, so that the whole house has no continuity of idea whatsoever."⁵⁰ Not just any plan would do, however. The proper plan required a certain amount of education in some basic artistic principles. While successful home furnishing and decoration did not require "the highly specialized training in design demanded of the architect" it did require "taste, energy, and knowledge." Devising

⁴⁷ See *Sunset: The Western Magazine for Western Families* (October 1929) and "Sunset Gold," *Sunset* (April 1929): 6.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Bernard C. Jakway, "Some Aspects of Interior Decoration: A Discussion of the Principles Governing Beauty and Harmony in the Furnishing of the Home," *Sunset* (February 1926): 30 and Wileman, "Common Errors," 26.

⁴⁹ Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York, 1995), 127–30.

⁵⁰ Wileman, "Common Errors," 27.

a plan that would result in “the necessary harmony between the architecture of the house and its applied decorations; for suave relations in style and color among rooms . . . and for the beauty of each room and of the house as a whole” the decorator/housewife needed to learn “three aspects of decorative practice . . . very imperfectly understood by most women.” As outlined by Bernard C. Jakway, and found reiterated again and again throughout the pages of *Sunset*, these were: “the emotional or expressive side of interior decoration; . . . the nature, or rather the conditions of beauty; and the . . . road to real economy in expenditures.” “Everything used in furnishing a house,” Jakway told his readers, again combining the language of art with that of the modern self and personal decorating, “is resolvable into its elements of color, form and texture; and colors, forms, and textures affect the emotional states of all normal people in pretty much the same way.”⁵¹

Interior decoration was serious business in *Sunset* because it had serious social implications. As readily as *Sunset* solidified and celebrated the housewife’s role, it equated being remiss in one’s housewifely duties with being a bad wife and mother—a failing with dire consequences. It had the potential to result in “matrimonial failure,” “misfit children,” and wandering husbands, thus threatening the foundation of social order—the white middle-class nuclear family—in the American West. In fact, Mary McDuffie Hampton placed the blame for the “degeneracy of the modern generation” squarely on the parents’ choice of furniture. She wrote:

Everything and everybody from preachers to cigarettes have been blamed for the theoretical degeneracy of the modern generation. Without entering into argument as to whether or not this generation itself is any worse than any other older generation’s younger one, I do feel that many things such as genuine happiness of a deep but simpler sort have become an illusion rather than a reality to too many youngsters. But I have something new to blame this time, and this is their parents’ choice of furniture!⁵²

In a new twist on nature versus nurture, Hampton argued that the mode of interior decoration was causally related to the kind of family life in the home. She contended that old-fashioned nineteenth-century-style home décor—personified in the home of Mrs. Staid—resulted in spaces that were formal and cluttered rather than comfortable and livable. This, in turn, led to sad children who took up social activities outside the home. For them, the home was not a place they could be proud of, that they wanted to bring friends, or one that offered space that facilitated recreation or

⁵¹ Jakway, “Some Aspects of Interior Decoration,” *Sunset* (February 1926): 30. For similar planning strategies, see also, *Sunset* Home Consultation Services, “We Want A Beautiful Home,” *Sunset* (February 1930): 50.

⁵² Mary McDuffie Hampton, “Are Your Children Proud of Their Home?” *Sunset* (March 1929): 27–8.

family togetherness. The exact opposite was true of modern home-decor and child-rearing practices—expressed in the home of Mrs. Livewell—that took into account the developing style-consciousness of modern adolescents. Hampton defined a home appointed in a more modern fashion as a place where “frequently there are people within, particularly on week-ends, and there is then much laughter, and perhaps dancing.” If music were played, one might even hear some jazz. Similarly, just as the responsibility for functional families and well-adjusted children was laid at the feet of the modern housewife, so was the happiness of the man of the house. If a home was too fussy, formal, and generally uncomfortable for evenings of reading and smoking, the housewife was warned that her husband might well prefer the “gentlemen’s club” to the familial hearth.⁵³

In charting a way for white, middle-class westerners to define themselves, *Sunset* typically mobilized and reinforced national trends in modern family life, gender relations, community formation, and social ordering in general. That white westerners were represented as almost identical to other white Americans in these arenas rather than as glaringly regionally distinctive during this period is not really surprising. Speaking of the 1930s, and applicable to the later twenties as well, Warren Susman has shown that it was during these years that the phrases an “American Way of Life” and “The American Dream” came into common usage—both representative of nationally unifying visions in times where participation and belonging took on great importance. This was accompanied by “a redefinition of the promise of American life,” which foregrounded “cultural visions: questions of life-style, patterns of belief and conduct, special values and attitudes that constitute the characteristics of a special people.” This was the very stuff of which *Sunset* was made. The matter at hand was how to define America as a culture and to generate a meaningful way of life from an industrial society. While this idea of an “American Way of Life” could be critical of industrial society, it could also reinforce conformity and promote exclusionary practices. The narrowness of *Sunset’s* vision of what and whom constituted a westerner, and for that matter an American, during these years, was, in part, the result of precisely such practices. Likewise, the shift to the culture of personality, while holding out the promise for increased tolerance to individuality, could just as readily be translated into a middlebrow mantra of conformist self-improvement: “Make people like you; fit in; develop habits and skills that interest and serve other people.” Such a stance allowed little room for difference or diversity.⁵⁴

During the 1920s and 1930s, *Sunset’s* goal was to correctly influence the built and domestic environments, as well as the mindset, of white, middle-class westerners by prescribing a potent depiction of a particularly ordered West. Through its espousal of the consumption of literature, home furnishings, architectural styles, and other

⁵³ Ibid. and “The House a Man Calls Home,” *Sunset* (February 1929): 24–5.

⁵⁴ Susman, *Culture As History*, 150–83, quotes on 154, 155, 165.

modern commodities, *Sunset* advocated a social vision that constituted particular things and people as both American and distinctively western. The civilized, modern westerner presented in *Sunset* was white, middle class, heterosexual, and enamored of a romanticized, aggrandized, and racialized version of the conquest of the West. This westerner most often lived in a suburban neighborhood, in a home containing the nuclear family and patriarchal gender relations, in an artificially homogenous West. In *Sunset's* West, people of color were conveniently marginalized, but the representations of their cultures offered the potential for uniquely western decorating motifs and provided whites with the material for constructing identity-bolstering social foils. Yet while western living *Sunset* style was a deeply exclusionary and mythical construction, the white cultural dominance promoted in *Sunset* reinforced the very real social and political control middle class and elite whites exercised in the American West. Seen in this light, although *Sunset's* stances might not be unusual for their time, it would be dangerous to dismiss them as simply relics of a particular historical moment. For far too long—owing perhaps to a combination of both the magazine's ubiquity and belovedness in the West—the power this cultural form wielded through the social relations it naturalized has gone largely unscrutinized. But it is *Sunset's* very centrality to western living—evident by its presence in kitchens and on coffee tables across the region for generations to this day—that makes it essential to grapple with how the aesthetics it prescribed existed in interaction with the West from which it was produced and in which it was consumed.

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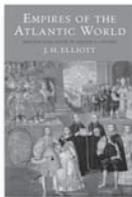
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