

Exhibit Highlights Selling of Suburbia

By MARC MYERS

The American Dream was born in the suburbs of the late 1940s and early '50s. Back then, the GI Bill and prefabrication made new homes affordable, and with each house came the promise of convenience and leisure. Even today, we imagine those years as a golden age of kids racing out front doors to greet fedora-clad dads arriving home from work, mothers doing the weekly shopping in white day gloves, and sparkling new cars sitting proudly on driveways as neighbors look on admiringly.

Mac Conner:
A New York Life
Museum of the City Of New York
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with its cult of modernity, manicured lawns and new schools—was overpowering and quickly seduced a generation of young families eager to escape cramped and noisy cities. For American businesses, the unfolding suburbs meant a gold mine of consumer spending and the key to economic growth.

The job of selling the virtues of suburban life and the rewards of new products fell to people like McCauley “Mac” Conner, a prolific commercial artist whose work appeared regularly in the pages of *Cosmopolitan*, *Woman’s Day*, *Colliers* and other mass-market magazines. Influenced by Norman Rockwell and Al Parker, the deans of illustrators, Mr. Conner played both sides of the fence—illustrating the optimistic ads that ran in magazines as well as the steamy short stories they published to enthrall housewives.

“Mac Conner: A New York Life,” at the Museum of the City of New York, features 70 of Mr. Conner’s original illustrations and assignment correspondence, and sheds light on a craft that cast the suburbs as a commuter Shangri-La. Billed by the museum as “artworks by one of New York’s original ‘Mad Men,’” the exhibit is really much more than a joy ride back to advertising’s Brylcreem years. Instead, it unveils a conspiracy, of sorts, between clients, ad agencies, copywriters and the artist to juice suburban desires and ensure that homeowners kept keeping up with the Joneses.

Accompanying many of Mr. Conner’s ads are letters from advertising-agency art directors (known then as “art buyers”) instructing him on what clients wanted to see in his illustrations. In one for dungarees, the agency stresses the need for conformity, asking that the outfits worn by the boy and girl be the same. On the fiction side, the exhibit includes the headlines and decks for the magazine short

In truth, of course, the Truman and Eisenhower years were much more complex and a lot less tidy for many Americans. But suburbia—



Illustration for Martha Gellhorn’s ‘The Good Husband’ (1955). *Collier’s*

stories that Mr. Conner illustrated, providing a sense of the creative challenge he faced when distilling a tale down to a single dramatic image.

Mr. Conner, who turns 101 in November, grew up in Newport, N.J., and began his career as a sign painter. He studied at the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art, developing his illustration skills in the Navy during World War II. After the war, he moved to New York and studied under Harvey Dunn at New York’s Grand Central School of Art. By 1950, he teamed with William Neeley, a salesman, and Wilson Scruggs, another illustrator, to form their own studio—Neeley Associates. The *Saturday Evening Post* became a steady client, and other magazines soon followed.

Throughout the exhibit, one can see how magazines built vast circulations by publishing arousing prose (“The Trouble With Love,” “Bachelor’s Choice” and “The Good Husband: He urged her to have a hobby, an interest outside of their marriage. And so she decided to try collecting men”). For these, Mr. Conner used noir-ish images, furtive glances and cinematic perspectives. At first, Mr. Conner favored an innocent approach. In an illustration for *Colliers* in 1949, we look down from the rafters on a living room of about 30 people standing around watching a new television. The story headline reads: “Veni, Vidi, Video: Peter was lonely, and when the blonde wouldn’t speak to him he bought a television set. Then everybody came to see him, even the blonde and her boyfriend.”

But by 1957, Mr. Conner’s work grew more suggestive, in keeping with the story themes. For “The Pilot’s Wife” in *Woman’s Day*, Mr. Conner opted for a close-up of an attractive flight attendant shooting a jealous glance back at a handsome airplane captain embracing his blond spouse: “A pale and shaken stewardess stood to the side as the reporters went wild.” Infidelity and plane travel had merged.

On the ad side, Mr. Conner’s illustrations playfully teased out the

pleasure and benefits of ownership, from cars to appliances. In a 1953 ad for Blue Bell coveralls (“It’s autumn time, it’s Blue Bell time!”), a preteen clad in the client’s tough denim gleefully hangs upside down by his legs from a tree limb while his sister below rakes leaves. This type of film-still perspective is what set Mr. Conner apart from many of his peers. A couple conversing on a fire escape for *This Week* in 1950 was illustrated from the landing above, while a woman in a red coat for Redbook in 1958 rushes up the hill of a snowy country road toward the viewer as a man runs toward her.

In the early 1960s, magazines changed. Advances in print technology and the proliferation of photo agencies made photography more affordable and prevalent, reducing the need for realism in illustrations. Magazine art and ad styles also began to relax, featuring humor, abstraction and line drawings—all of which seem to have been outside of Mr. Conner’s stylistic approach. Ever the nimble dream-weaver, though, Mr. Conner began yet another successful career in the late ‘60s—illustrating the covers of romance novels.

One quibble with the exhibit is the organization of the material into six micro-sections that include “Anxieties” and “Process.” The narrative might have been stronger had the works simply been divided into “Advertising” and “Fiction,” and then arranged chronologically, so the material showed an evolution of Mr. Conner’s style and how his works reflected shifts in suburban culture.

As for Mr. Conner’s convincing depictions of suburban family life in the 1950s, they came largely from the imagination of an urban bachelor. Mr. Conner spent that decade living in New York and didn’t marry until 1959.

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