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Advertising Among the Ancients

By LYNN BOAL MITCHELL

IN forming a conception of advertising among ancient peoples, it will be necessary to picture in our mind a world which lacked newspapers, illuminated billboards, electric signs, the radio, and sky-writing.

Even before the art of writing was known, the human voice was available and was used for advertising purposes. The public crier, an institution not yet entirely extinct, existed among the Greeks and the Romans, and doubtless, among other ancient peoples. Plautus in his *Menaechmi* ends the comedy with instructions that an auction sale be cried.

In Athens the hawking of wares was confined by law to the Agora (Market Place). A writer states that the crying of those hawking wares sounded as if all the demons had been gathered into one place. Thus the word "pandemonium" came to birth.

Trade signs were rather common. Shops in Pompeii used terra cotta signs, e.g., a goat signified a milk depot. Such picture advertisements were common down through the Middle Ages and even into modern times, so that persons, unable to read, might be able to find the required dispensary. The diminution of illiteracy has largely sounded the passing of such picture signs, but we still have the striped barber pole, and, until recently, drug stores indicated their nature by the display in their windows of large flasks filled with liquids of various colors.

The trademark, not protected then by law but respected by common consent, was in common use. Such marks are seen, not only on *objets d'art*, but also on loaves of bread in Pompeii, on bricks from the kilns of Marcus Aurelius, and on ancient lead plumbing in Rome. The Romans seem to have developed a loyalty to "nationally advertised goods."

Another use of the trademark is that which appears

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on coins. Athenian coins showed an owl, Tarentine coins, a dolphin, and Carthaginian coins, a horse with braided mane. Coins struck in honor of the Scipio family bore an elephant, because the most famous member of that family learned how to deal successfully with the elephants used in the Carthaginian army. The ancient mind associated elephants with the Scipios or dolphins with Tarentum as readily as modern Americans associate codfish with Boston or smoke with Pittsburgh.

There has lately been a revival of interest in the trademarks of localities. State highway signs in Nebraska, Kansas, and New Mexico display, respectively, the covered wagon, the sunflower, and the Zia sun symbol.

The advent of writing naturally gave a great impetus to advertising. The oldest written advertisement belongs to Egypt, and is, perhaps, 3000 years old. It describes a run-away slave.

The billboard was known to the Romans in the form of letters, two to twelve inches high, on a whitewashed wall. Signwriting became an established profession, and such writers had a guild of their own. In Pompeii the company of Infantio, Florus, Fructus, et Sabinus signed their work and added "They do this kind of work here, there, and everywhere."

About 1500 political notices have been found on Pompeian walls, constituting appeals to support, or reject, various candidates for office. A typical appeal states that So-and-So has the support of the farmers, bakers, fullers, fishmongers, dyers, barbers, porters, ball players, and even of the priests of Isis. A program of economy in government was promised in the words "He guards the treasury." Mudslinging was resorted to by the opposition, taking the form of such derisive statements as "Cerrinius Vattia has the support of thieves and heavy drinkers."

Advertisements of contests in the amphitheatres are also found, promising twenty or thirty pairs of gladiators,

fighths to the finish between the champions of Thrace and of Gaul, and for the comfort of the spectators perfumed water was to be sprayed upon them. The champions are spoken of as *puellarum suspirium* (The man for whom the maidens sigh) and *dominus puparum* (The master, or sweetheart, of the dolls). Incidentally, we see here a little of the language of lovers. "He's my *dominus* (or *suspirium*) now" and "She's my *pupa* (doll baby) now." Our recently popular song, "Yes, Sir, She's My Baby," would have been recognized by Pompeians under such title as *Verum Tamen, Illa Nunc Est Mea Pupa*.

Scribonius Largus, a Roman physician, has left a large number of prescriptions, among them one for a dentifrice which he advertises thus: *Dentifricium quod splendor facit dentes et confirmat. Hoc Octavia Augusti soror usa est.* (A dentifrice which whitens and strengthens the teeth. Octavia, the Emperor's sister, has been using it). The modern incarnation of Scribonius pays for whole page advertisements in the *Ladies' Home Journal* featuring the endorsement of a commodity by a prominent society woman or Hollywood actress accompanied by her photograph. What a boon the radio would have been to Scribonius!