Cultures of Commerce

Representation and American Business Culture, 1877-1960

EDITED BY

ELSPETH H. BROWN, CATHERINE GUDIS, AND MARINA MOSKOWITZ
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In memory of
Clark Davis
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Introduction

Elspeth H. Brown, Catherine Gudis, and Marina Moskowitz

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the United States experienced the birth of a nationally integrated business culture. Through both horizontal and vertical integration, as well as the development of the modern corporation, the size of many manufacturing companies increased dramatically. As the second industrial revolution ushered in an era of mass production, modern practices of sales and distribution were developed to stimulate consumption, generating new tiers of managerial, clerical, and sales staff.

These newly minted businessmen and -women turned to cultural forms as a means to enhance the market. A generation of applied psychologists had successfully shown that both workers and consumers were motivated as much by subjective desires and inchoate emotional longings as by rational appeals. If this was the case, how might managers, art directors, retail architects, and other business brokers best reach and persuade the workers and consumers upon which the economy depended? Culture emerged as a key aspect of business strategy in boosting production, planning distribution, and ensuring sales.

While many Americans learned of this new market culture by taking part in it, an even larger sector became familiar with the new force in the American economy through its reflection in a variety of cultural productions. Short stories set in businesses appeared in popular magazines; comic strips of office life played out in the daily newspapers; films and photographs portrayed an emerging corporate culture. The second industrial revolution dovetailed with an emerging mass culture to join mass production and cultural production. The image of American commerce, as well as its participants, the business­man and “office girl,” took hold in everyday life.

The editors of this book use the term “culture” to refer to the innumerable productions that a group creates to express and recognize itself, its values, its aesthetics, and its organizing principles. In the case of this book, these productions include dress, film, fiction, printed matter, graphic and product design, and the built environment. Of these many possible components of culture, those characterized by representations are at the core of this book. The term “representation” connotes both the sensory form (the end
product if you will) as well as the active process of re-presenting the material world through a set of semiotic conventions denoting, say, socioeconomic distinctions, or those of race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. This volume examines the ways in which cultural representations are harnessed, often deliberately but sometimes unwittingly, to promote business as a fundamental American concern.

Buyers, sellers, and those who mediated between them used these representative mechanisms to draw attention to, understand, and ultimately agree upon the value (economic and otherwise) of particular commodities. When the daily exchange of goods and services became no longer based on a personal agreement of value and the terms of trade, market relations grew increasingly mediated by mass culture, including massively distributed representations. While industrial production continued to accrue the benefits of improved technology and newly designed organizational and managerial systems, these developments were matched by innovations in distribution and marketing. Those who conceived of, designed, depicted, promoted, and sold commodities and professional services made up a burgeoning sector of the white-collar American workforce. American consumers, whose ranks crossed all classes and grew immeasurably in the middle, in turn had widening choices in the ways in which they could engage in the market.

While there is a strong tradition of historical scholarship on the structural changes in American business and their impact on workers and consumers, the broader impact of business on other cultural forms, and vice versa, is a burgeoning field of study. Historians of American culture have increasingly explored the role of commerce in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century history; historians of business are increasingly turning to the realm of culture to explore the fuller influences on and implications of decisions made within the business community. On the first of these two axes, Cultures of Commerce builds on the growing literature that explores commerce and consumption as one thread in the creation of a modern American culture. On the second axis, the current generation of business historians is answering recent challenges to incorporate broader cultural perspectives into their studies.

The following essays are linked by the argument that the structures and perspectives of American business both influenced and reflected American culture during the country’s shift to mass production and consumption at the end of the nineteenth century through the postwar economic boom of the 1950s. Images of production processes, consumer goods, or the workers and managers who created these goods, whether in fiction, photographs, architecture, art, or film, reflected the tensions of American attitudes toward business, as the impulse toward economic and technological “progress” clashed with an older set of American ideals based on financial independence and individual freedom. By looking at the broader meanings of these business representations, as well as the mechanisms by which these images were produced, distributed, and often sold, this collection explores both the culture of the market and the marketplace of culture.
The essays presented in this book focus on the intersection of culture with modern market relations, with a focus on the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States. The chapters overall raise themes such as the relationship between commerce and culture; the role of design and aesthetics in the production and distribution of goods; how ethnic, gender, and racial difference intersect with market economies; the design of the built environment in relationship to both production and retail sites; and the representation of postwar organizational culture. The essays overall stress the centrality of culture in structuring modern market relations.

The volume is divided into four parts that are organized chronologically and thematically. Part I, “Designing Markets,” explores how culture brokers central to the creation and distribution of commercial aesthetics, such as art directors, photographers, and color consultants, drew upon design principles to build markets for commodities.

Marina Moskowitz’s “Broadcasting Seeds on the American Landscape” analyzes marketing material relating to the nineteenth-century seed trade, which produced a visual culture inspired by botanical illustration in the natural sciences, still-life painting in art, and advertising ephemera in commerce. These visual representations reinforced the promise of the variety and abundance of the American landscape, while also depicting the increasing industrialization of the trade itself, through commercial “self-portraits” of warehouses and factory-like spaces devoted to packaging and exchange.

Regina Lee Blaszczyk’s “The Importance of Being True Blue: The Du Pont Company and the Color Revolution” examines the use of color styling (a precursor to industrial design) as a prime marketing effort of the 1920s. In doing so, Blaszczyk considers the product itself as a marketing tool. In “The Popular Front and the Corporate Appropriation of Modernism,” Shannon Clark explores a range of ambitious cultural initiatives conducted by members of the leftist avant-garde in the 1930s to promote visual modernism as a means of furthering radical social transformation, including collaborations with liberal allies at the sites of mass cultural production. He finds that these collaborations unintentionally abetted the assimilation and appropriation of modernist aesthetics by business in order to legitimate corporate capitalism.

Two of the essays in “Designing Markets” focus on early twentieth-century commercial photography. Elspeth H. Brown’s “Rationalizing Consumption: Photography and Commercial Illustration, 1913–1919,” investigates early commercial photographic practice in order to understand the role of photography in negotiating the implicit cultural tension caused by increased rationalization of work, the standardization of consumer goods, and the psychology of “individual” desire. The major figure for this essay is Lejaren à Hiller, a photographic illustrator who, in the World War I years, invented photographic illustration for print advertising in its modern form. Patricia Johnston’s essay “Art and Commerce: The Challenge of Modernist Advertising Photography” demonstrates how the conceptualization by modernist theory of art and commerce as separate enterprises obfuscated a more
complex historical record. While modernist theory tried to draw clear lines between fine and applied arts (and between culture and commerce), interwar advertising and high culture practices blurred and overlapped the boundaries of artistic and commercial photography.

The essays in Part II, “Business and the Politics of Difference,” show how gender, racial, and ethnic differences have been depicted and deployed by business boosters and entrepreneurs to further a range of social, political, and economic goals. In “‘New York is Not America’: Immigrants and Tourists in Post–World War I New York,” Angela Blake examines urban tourism in postwar New York City, when the city’s large immigrant population presented a challenge to city boosters, who still struggled with ongoing perceptions that New York was not “America.” By the 1920s, boosters and tourism promoters used the image of the city’s diversity for their own purposes, transforming an older fashion for “slumming” in the city’s “foreign” quarters to attract middle-class tourists.

Tiffany M. Gill’s “‘The First Thing Every Negro Girl Does’: Black Beauty Culture, Racial Politics, and the Construction of Modern Black Womanhood, 1905–1925” shows how black beauty culturists found financial stability as entrepreneurs, as well as means of personal expression. Gill also illuminates how the industry allowed its practitioners entry into the arena of Post–World War I racial politics. Woody Register’s “The Sentimental Work of Play: Manhood and the American Toy Industry, 1900–1930” considers the marketing schemes of men in the American toy business who were faced with the problem of how to present their own work as constructive and masculine while marketing their products as suitable for play. Their work helped broaden the leisure class.

Part III, “Commerce and the Built Environment, 1900–1940,” focuses on the implications of the market on architecture and the built environment, as well as the influence of the increasingly conquered American landscape on the market. Roberta Moudry’s “The Metropolitan Life Tower: Architecture and Ideology in the Life Insurance Enterprise” examines the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and their building program in New York City in the first half of the twentieth century. Moudry’s study of the Met Life building traces the three-dimensional impact of a corporation and its culture on the spaces of the city. Jill Fields’ essay, “Architectures of Seduction: Intimate Apparel Trade Shows and Retail Department Design, 1920–1940,” explores retail interior design and wholesale promotions concerning the merchandizing of corsets in the interwar period. The essay argues that corset merchandizers relied upon idealized associations with feminine elegance, romance, and heterosexuality to promote shopping and commerce itself as a sexually alluring, yet respectable, activity. Catherine Gudis’ essay, “The Architecture of Mobility: Outdoor Advertising and the Birth of the Strip,” examines how the desire of advertisers to address mobile audiences fostered new architectural types, urban decentralization, and an increasing sense of placelessness, while it unhinged the market from geographic borders.
Part IV, “Representation and Organizational Culture in Post–World War II United States,” concerns the fictional representations and material culture of postwar corporate America. In “Postwar Sign, Symbol, and Symptom: ‘The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,’” Anna Creadick analyzes the material culture of the icon of the twentieth-century business world: the gray flannel suit. Drawing on fashion journalism, popular literature, and film, Creadick traces the rise of the business dress in the twentieth century. In his essay “‘Girls in Gray Flannel Suits’: White Career Women in Postwar American Culture,” Clark Davis questions the myth of the suburban housewife in postwar America by exploring the increase in paid work for middle-class white women. Davis juxtaposes an economic history of the female labor force with the representation of the working woman in postwar American film.

Andrew Hoberek’s essay “Ayn Rand and the Politics of Property” analyzes the author and philosopher Ayn Rand’s 1957 novel Atlas Shrugged (1957) in relation to contemporary critiques of conformist culture. Hoberek argues that Rand’s portrayal of heroic owner-operators served to conserve a middle-class agency in a period when entrepreneurial autonomy had given way to a new definition of the middle class based on white-collar, managerial employment.

The volume’s concluding essay is Jean-Christophe Agnew’s “Advertisements for Ourselves: Being and Time in a Promotional Economy,” a meditation on the history and historiography of commercial culture. Agnew traces the increased diffusion of promotional culture over the course of the twentieth century and the ways in which the acts of buying and selling have become harder to separate into discrete practices. Agnew suggests that looking to the cultural form itself may help provide some interpretive cohesion to the difficult range of phenomena that comprise the contemporary market.

Although all of the essays touch on different aspects of the intersection of culture and commerce, a number of topics and concepts appear and reappear throughout the essays. A prominent thread is the centrality of design, in both two and three dimensions, whether in product advertising, color forecasting, or corporate and commercial architecture. The essays also seek to bring into dialogue relations of production, distribution, and consumption—aspects of market economies that historians often treat separately. These essays demonstrate the importance of considering the market cohesively, in which individuals play different roles: we are each of us producers, distributors, and consumers, sometimes at different times, sometimes simultaneously. As a whole, the authors interrogate the relationship between markets and cultures, emphasizing the use of representation both in organizing business and in training Americans for this range of overlapping roles.

As a final word, the editors hope that the historical moments explored by this scholarship will provide enough clarity of distance to enable readers to fathom our own times.
Part I

Designing Markets
Chapter 1
Broadcasting Seeds on the American Landscape

Marina Moskowitz

Prior to the nineteenth century, whatever planting was done by Americans (first colonists and then citizens) originated with seeds that were saved from previous plantings, traded informally both on the North American continent and across the Atlantic, or received as small gifts. By the end of the nineteenth century, over 800 companies had been formed (and some had already disbanded and merged into larger ones) to supply growers of all sorts with seeds. What changed? How did an object that farmers and gardeners could well produce themselves from year to year by letting a few plants reach maturity become a commodity? The answer to this question was, of course, a multifaceted narrative, but at the heart of that narrative were not words, but images. The prolific illustrated broadcasts of the seed trade were central to this complex process of commodification.

While it could be argued that all businesses benefited from developments in print technology over the course of the nineteenth century, there does seem to have been a special relationship between, or even overlap of, seed sellers and the printing trade. Several early American seed sellers were also trained as printers and published their own catalogues, while the larger seed companies that flourished in the late-nineteenth century often included on-site printing works to produce their marketing materials. Over time, this printed matter incorporated copious illustrations, from wood engravings to chromolithographs and electrotypes. Covers of seed catalogues and the color plates tipped in between their pages, seed packages, trade cards, and other promotional materials proliferated over the course of the nineteenth century. Still, many industries produced the volume of printing that the seed trade did, and in similar forms of ephemera. What set the seed trade apart from other businesses was not the medium but the content of their promotional materials.

The seed trade offered more individual items for sale than perhaps any other industry, packaging the variety of nature enhanced by the science of hybridization. Each new plant strain or species, whether found or created,
was an opportunity for illustration, and the possible combinations of these specimens were, literally, countless. More unusually, in the seed industry, illustrations in advertisements, catalogues, or on packages did not represent the actual object sold. Seeds themselves were not depicted, but rather the promise of what those seeds might produce. This may seem quite an obvious point, but it set the seed trade apart from many other businesses that employed various forms of printmaking, and later photography, to represent their merchandise. Seed companies did not represent what they themselves produced, but rather what purchasers of their seeds could produce. While concerns with accuracy of representation did still come into play, this one step remove from the product sold allowed for greater artistic license to depict the ideal outcome of planting. Even if the companies claimed that a given image was accurately based on an actual specimen grown from a particular type of seed, the temporal, perishable quality of the plants made that accuracy impossible to measure. It is both this abundance of possible images and the ability to paint and print them in creative ways that lent visual culture its particular importance to the seed trade.

The pictorial tradition of the seed trade both documented and itself helped constitute the process of commodification that allowed for such rapid growth of commercial exchange. The graphic materials allowed potential purchasers to envision the end results of consumer goods that were, in their own right, difficult to evaluate. Seeds became saleable in part because of the visual identifications offered by companies for flowers and produce. Whether the graphics depicted newly developed strains that literally had not been seen before, or served as reminders of what the best culture of common varieties could produce, they were increasingly considered a necessary component of the description of a firm’s seed list to the point where many seed catalogues contained illustrations of every flower and most vegetable seeds for sale. While verbal descriptions were still useful for quantitative information, such as the length of time to the bearing of fruit or flowers, their communication of more qualitative information—what a flower looked like or what size a specimen of vegetable was—often depended on comparison to other plants, relying on some degree of horticultural literacy. Graphics made such information more easily accessible to a wider potential market by not requiring specialized information and by tapping into familiar visual conventions of the time. The vibrant horticultural imagery, and the processes by which they were produced, sat at the intersection of a number of trajectories, including still-life painting in fine art; botanical illustration in the natural sciences; and advertising ephemera in the realm of commerce.

**Representation**

There is no question that the commercial engravers who contributed to the depiction of horticultural commodities were familiar with the artistic currents of their day. The broad range of their subjects, and especially the varied settings of farms, gardens, and domestic interiors in which they situated the
plants, allowed for numerous approaches to the art of illustration. Particularly in the lush chromolithographs of American landscapes, first offered as premiums or tipped into catalogues and later incorporated into designs for catalogue covers, artists and the managers for whom they worked had great leeway in determining how best to reach the ever-widening market for seeds.

For example, those charged with producing specifically agrarian images may have been particularly drawn to the work of the Barbizon School, mid-nineteenth-century French landscape painters such as Jean Francois Millet and Theodore Rousseau. The cover of the Spring 1907 catalogue of the Farmer Seed Company, of Faribault, Minnesota, featured a direct copy of Millet’s 1857 painting, *The Gleaners*, a well-known image in the United States by that time. At the same time, artists such as James McNeil Whistler, Edgar Degas, and Claude Monet passed along to others on both sides of the Atlantic their fascination with Japanese art, particularly wood block prints; the popularity of *Japonisme* extended as far as garden design, with the introduction of what was deemed appropriate plant material for Japanese style gardens, such as lily bulbs, as well as the stylized depiction of such plants. Because much of commercial illustration relied on printmaking, this influence of Japanese wood block prints had more prosaic applications as well, such as the Rochester-based firm Briggs Brothers and Company’s illustration of the Boston small pea bean from an 1890 catalogue (figure 1.1).

While these images show an awareness of specific artistic schools or styles, the ephemera of the seed industry is perhaps most closely related to a specific genre, that of still-life painting. While catalogues did contain numerous images of isolated plants, they also suggested how those plants might be incorporated into domestic settings, such as a vase of flowers or bowl of fruit on a sideboard with domestic furnishings in view. They also showed arrangements of plant material, carefully composed as one might find with other inanimate objects. However, if the overall effect of these illustrations called to mind contemporary still lifes, the process of producing the images might be quite different from the tradition in the fine arts. It is clear from correspondence between the companies and their engravers that issues of composition or arrangement of the specimen to be depicted were carefully negotiated and the final image did not result from the artistic exercise of capturing a small scene in its entirety.

In fact, the commercial still life was often as much of a hybrid as its subjects might be. In some instances, artists were asked to paint specific elements separately, and the elements were even gathered from different sources, and then composed together on the final printing plate. In one instance, a company commissioned representations of three different flowers, explaining, “We expect to make up the flower plate of these three subjects together with a pansy the painting of which was made in Germany.” On another occasion a company manager wrote to an artist, “our idea is to have the colored plate of flowers represent one or two of our large Petunias with 3 or 4 of these Balsams and if possible to work in the flower of the canna.”
Figure 1.1 The “Boston” Small Pea Bean, marketed by Briggs Brothers and Company, of Rochester, New York, in their 1890 catalogue, *Flower, Garden, and Field Seeds*. The illustration suggests the artist’s familiarity with Japanese wood block prints, while also incorporating horticultural information about the states of the bean’s growth and the size of pods and individual beans.


These commercial still-life images emphasized both the perfection of particular specimen (and hence the perfection of the seeds on offer) and an overall sense of abundance.

Similarly, the graphics produced by the seed trade were reminiscent of the traditions of botanical illustration, but were sometimes achieved by quite different processes than the direct observation of specimen expected of natural scientists. One of the common tropes of botanical instruction, translated into horticultural tuition by the seed companies, was to show the different states of a particular plant within one image. Hence, flowers were often depicted on stems going all the way down to their roots, and with blossoms in bud, perfectly open, and already dried and containing seeds. For produce, plants might be depicted showing blossoms, the fruit or vegetable, and the seeds that it contained. Both artists and companies seemed aware of these conventions of botanical illustration, and offered their catalogues as a means of both consumer and horticultural instruction. A representative of the Burpee company, founded in 1876 outside of Philadelphia, issued engraver A. Blanc instructions for catalogue illustrations, writing “Please select the best spray of Dolichos and draw it showing 3 or 4 open flowers, a few buds and 3 or 4 of
the small seed pods as per specimens.”10 Showing the varied states of growth might be all the more important with vegetables, where at least for peas and beans, the seed pods were also the crop to be physically consumed. The Burpee company directed the artist W.M. Momberger, in painting a new species of pole bean, to “show the distinct character of the leaf, the prolific habit of bearing which you will notice by examining the cluster sent you, and a natural size pod showing size of beans and for this purpose we placed in basket enclosed in an envelope a very good pod.”11 Indeed, peas and beans were often shown as a cutaway drawing, depicting the pod with part of one side torn away to expose the bean.

Companies instructed their customers not only on states of cultivation, but also plant variety, either between or within specie. Illustrations could show the many different types of any given product; for example, catalogues might feature up to thirty varieties of pea, or even one hundred varieties of popular flowers such as sweet peas and pansies. Companies might also wish to show the variety available even to those purchasing one type of seed. Issues of variety were instructed through visual means more easily than verbal descriptions would allow; the artist Momberger was asked to paint a few Balsam flowers all from the same species but with noticeably different markings; his contact at the Burpee company said to him, in a statement that might apply all the more to the potential consumer, “it will no doubt surprise you when we state it is not an unusual thing to find on one plant as many different marked flowers as we have sent you” (figure 1.2).12

Although the end result of the illustrations might have been informed by these botanical traditions, the processes of observation were often quite different. The images found in catalogues and chromolithographs were often manufactured; not only depictions of arrangements, but even an image of a single plant might be drawn as a composite of a number of specimens. In 1891, Howard Earl of the Burpee company wrote to the Stecher Lithographic company of Rochester, New York about some plants they had sent for illustration: samples of platycodon, mignonette, and petunia. Of the platycodon, Earl requested an image twice the size of the flower sent; for the mignonette, he requested an image of “a first class Mignonette of great substance with bright red individual flowers,” adding the instructions “where the seed pods occur in specimens please fill in with florets.” A few days later, Earl sent one beet specimen each to a few different artists; to each one he wrote that the sample “remained in the ground too long and has lost its evenness of form so you will please bear this in mind when painting same.”13 Frequently, the company would send photographs and specimen together, suggesting that an artist, for example, copy the shape of a cabbage depicted in a photograph, using a real cabbage as a guide to color. Despite these manipulations, the companies might also ask engravers to add the words “Painted from Nature” to their plates. Liberties could be taken with the representation of a product's end result, because that image could not be expected to be exactly reproducible—no two plants are ever exactly alike. This natural variety was a benefit, allowing companies to depict
idealized plants that would inspire potential consumers to try their hands at growing them.

Reproduction

At the heart of the seed trade lay a tension between the variety of nature and the need for reliable—if not reproducible—products to sell. The seed trade was an early and widespread business in the United States, and yet one that defies what are now stereotypical notions of factories and industrial work. While many nineteenth-century entrepreneurs turned to mechanized processes in order to produce uniform goods, the seed trade still had (at least) one foot planted firmly in the soil, and could not seek to overcome the rhythms and range of the natural world. The vibrant horticultural imagery distributed by the trade was used to temper this tension: to promote the
natural abundance available from any given company while also assuring consumers of the ideal that could potentially be grown from the product on offer. The relationship between the unique design of nature and the large-scale horticultural production that enables its broad dissemination is paralleled by the unique design of the artist and the mechanical reproduction that allows that design widespread circulation.

The issue of reproducibility, in this case not of consumer goods, but of the illustrations that hold the promise of those goods, was recognized by the trade and addressed in several different ways. “The first natural inquiry is, what in the world does electrotyping have to do with the seed trade?” Briggs and Brother, a seed company based in Rochester, New York, posed this rhetorical question to readers of their 1875 promotional series, Briggs’ Quarterly Floral Work. Here, they raised a technical question: what form of printmaking was most suited to the scale of the market that the company sought to address? As Briggs and Brother answered the question they had raised: “The engravings are made on wood, and labels cannot be printed from the wood by thousands, so a cast is made from a block and the surface is then plated with copper, ready to go to the press.” Briggs outlined the primary use of electrotypography for catalogue illustrations and seed packet labels by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, although chromolithography was used extensively for color plates and catalogue covers.

Seed companies put advancing print technology to good use, seeking to win over not only the ultimate retail consumer but also whatever wholesale mediator might lie in between. Providing eye-catching marketing materials, as well as reliable seeds, was an essential part of the business. In 1895, the Burpee company advertised for agents to sell collections of their flower seeds; they offered as part of their promotional kits what they called an “elegant lithographed hanger, painted in fourteen colors,” stating that with such striking advertising matter, the collections would be “easy to sell.” Similarly, several companies promoted their decorative seed packets, as well as the seeds within them, essentially advertising their advertisements. Competition over the best seeds might be played out through competition over the best illustrations. The Burpee company gave one commercial artist the direction, “We . . . send you one spike Canna Emile le Clerc of which we want you to paint one of the best single flowers and please try to improve upon the painting which is on the front of Henderson’s catalogue for 1890,” suggesting that even the choice of flower to paint was influenced by the competition between companies.

Commercial artists clearly played an important role in creating and projecting the image of the trade, but interestingly, despite the intense competition between firms, this image could be a collective one. While catalogue covers and tipped in color prints were clearly points of pride, many companies used identical engravings in the interior pages of their catalogues. Of course, there was a tradition of the use of stock images in advertising materials, growing out of the incorporation of certain visual symbols in newspaper advertisements. But this practice of reproducing illustrations not just from
one catalogue to another, but from one firm to another, raises the question of who actually distributed the graphics: individual artists, engraving companies, or the seed companies themselves. Copyright information, if it appears on the illustrations, is inconclusive, because it can appear under a variety of individual and corporate names; rather, one must rely on correspondence, printed discussions of the illustrations, and indeed, the patterns in which they appear. Relationships between companies and artists were fluid, and took on a variety of forms. What is clear is that some commercial artists and engravers specialized in the horticultural drawings valued by the seed and nursery trade.

One model of commercial relations was the artist working independently for a variety of companies, perhaps sparking competition between them. An obvious example for the student of the trade in the 1880s and 1890s is an artist whose signature “A. Blanc” jumps out from page after page of seed trade catalogues. Blanc was based in Philadelphia and it does appear that his or her earliest images were commissioned by the W. Atlee Burpee Company. Other companies based in Philadelphia also used Blanc as a supplier of images, as did some of the concentration of firms centered on Rochester, New York; specific images of plants were used continually over a couple of decades from about 1885 to 1905. In the middle of this time span, Blanc issued catalogues of horticultural engravings, and became one of the world’s experts on cactus plants, owning one of the largest American collections of cacti. Whether horticultural interest led to a specialization in horticultural printmaking, or vice versa, is unclear, but Blanc’s work certainly adds to our knowledge of how information was disseminated by visual means. Blanc apparently tried to retain the engravings used by the Burpee Company, perhaps to promote and re-sell; the company offered to sell Blanc back the original woodcuts at 75 cents per square inch. This exchange occurred just at the time that Blanc issued a new series of catalogues in 1895 and 1896. Whether purchasing images from stock catalogues or not, seed firms would certainly have had enough familiarity with one another’s catalogues to recognize Blanc’s images; the illustrations were valued highly enough that firms were willing to reproduce them, even if it meant sharing with competitors.

While Blanc was selling engravings to different companies, clearly companies were also selling them from one to another. When companies developed new hybrids, they would generally sell them to other distributors, looking for the widest possible access. The Burpee company might retail the Bliss company’s Abundance Pea, quite a different idea from the exclusivity of brand-name products that we might think of as the norm today. Distributing electrotypes was clearly part of this process of dissemination. An advertising leaflet for the new Cupid sweet pea flower developed by the Burpee company was geared to the seed trade, and offered “electrotypes of any of the illustrations” shown in the leaflet to any company that wanted to incorporate the new species into their own catalogues. Often these engravings included the name of the plant, which in turn often included the company’s name, so offering these engravings was also a means of maintaining credit for new hybrids.
In addition to the same image being used by different firms, there are also instances of almost, but not quite, identical, images appearing, suggesting that engravers noted one another’s work, or were encouraged to do so by their sponsoring firms. The seed companies clearly fostered competition between various artists. Artists were pitted against one another, perhaps unknowingly; records of the Burpee company show numerous instances of the farm manager sending out identical sets of specimen to different lithographers at the same time, asking for images, clearly to choose the best one upon their return. At a time when the Burpee Company had been commissioning the engraver W.M. Momberger, based in New York City, on a regular basis, they sent balsam samples to both Momberger and George Browne of Rochester, New York. The manager later evaluated that the Browne drawings were “fair but I don’t think they are anything extra as the coloring on most of them is quite poor” and continued requesting illustrations from Momberger. A similar competition ensued over a color plate of sweet peas.19 The Burpee company was developing a reputation for the popular plant, and the farm manager wanted to foster this specialty through a decorative color plate showing several varieties; due perhaps to the skepticism of his boss Burpee, who did not believe that a resemblance to nature could be achieved, Earl approached at least three different commercial artists for their work.20

Other firms did seek unique representations of their wares, employing engravers to work full time for them exclusively, for both financial and promotional reasons. After explaining their use of electrotypes, as quoted above, a Briggs and Brother pamphlet continued the Socratic dialogue: “The next question would naturally be, why is not this work sent to a regular electrotyping establishment to be done? This is easily answered. We have enough work of this kind to keep two men busy, and find that it pays better to do our own electrotyping as we want it and when we want it. We have facilities that few electrotypers have.”21

In another promotional pamphlet, Briggs and Brother advertised not only seeds but also the decorative chromolithographs of the flowers they sold and gave away as premiums. They touted their design team: “Mr. Lockhart devotes his entire time to putting upon canvas the many beautiful flowers grown by Briggs and Brother, and his sanctum in one corner of our Seed Establishment is filled with rare copies . . . Mr. Leadley has charge of Engraving for this house, and his work bespeaks his skill.”22 In a later publication, Briggs and Brother even visually depicted these artists at work, in what might be considered a self-portrait:

As a center piece of this engraving will be found our artist, copying flowers upon the canvas which he has arranged upon his easel. All of the floral chromos we issue are painted by one of the best artists in this peculiar line in the country, and from flowers grown in our own gardens. His duties are confined to sketching and copying flowers or vegetables from nature, designing and painting the original for the chromo, and designing the ornamental labels and show cards, millions of which we print annually, and in furnishing the designs for the
engravings that adorn the various publications of the house of Briggs and Brother. The design is transferred to box wood and the engravers ply their tools until the engraving is perfected. Two men are constantly employed at this work the year round.23

This artist’s self-portrait was only one of the many instances in which the seed trade promoted not only its products but also its processes through visual culture.

Commodification

The tradition of heavily illustrated marketing materials meant that engravers and writers of advertising copy were on hand to depict not only the botanical plants that grew from seeds, but also the physical plants in which the seeds were grown and from where they were distributed. The artists employed by the seed trade drew not only portraits of themselves at work, but also what might be considered commercial self-portraits of the firms, documenting the trade’s work throughout the phases of production, or planting, and distribution. The trade took the seeds from their growing fields and added value to them by preparing, packaging, and distributing them. In the varied facets of its production processes, the seed trade bridged the distinctions between agricultural and industrial settings, rural and urban work sites, and even, though to a lesser degree, manual and mechanized labor. These processes of commodification were captured in print and publicized along with the commodities themselves.

Many nineteenth-century industries developed mechanized production processes that, while replicating and replacing earlier craft-based work, could not themselves be replicated on a domestic scale or without significant capital investment. Seed growers, however, shared their work processes with the farmers and gardeners who would eventually buy their goods. Though the scale of seed growing might be considered typical of the industrial realm, the methods of tending plants were not. Farmers and gardeners needed to be persuaded that it was worthwhile to buy seeds, when they could harvest them from their own fields and plots. In their attempt to influence the hard-fought debate between seed saving and seed buying that played out in the agricultural and horticultural press, the seed trade capitalized on the processes that separated them from the home or farm grower. Natural products were transformed into commercial products by sorting, categorizing, storing, weighing, packaging, mailing, and offering of advice, all of which made seeds sold by firms more convenient, and perhaps even more valuable, than those saved from last year’s plants. If seeds were produced in the fields, they were manufactured, and commodified, in the warehouses where these ancillary activities took place.

All of these work sites appeared in seed trade ephemera, although they were portrayed in somewhat different ways. The agricultural and horticultural fields in which plants were allowed to “go to seed” (in this case connoting
productivity rather than decline) might be considered the primary sites of production in the trade, but the structure of the trade was such that these fields might not be owned by or associated in any way with the firm eventually selling the seeds. The companies that sold seeds to the retail and wholesale market varied in how they themselves obtained the seeds they sold. Small firms might act solely as distributors, of seeds bought from other firms or from growers, while the larger firms did grow some of their own stock, while also buying from both American and European growers. The larger firms also held extensive testing grounds, where they ensured the quality of the seeds they had not grown themselves. No firm grew all the seeds it sold, as, in the words of the Burpee Company, “this would be a physical impossibility.”

Whether because these fields were not the best emblem of a firm’s contribution, or because of the consumer’s familiarity with this phase of the production cycle, depictions of growing fields tended to be somewhat generic landscape images, with little or no sign of human endeavour. Even sites that were strongly associated with specific companies, such as the Burpee Company’s Fordhook Farm in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, might stress the plants rather than active engagement with them. A verbal description of the Farm from the 1890s relates the almost passive quality with which the work there is presented: “The Farm Annual is written at Fordhook Farm, where we live among our growing crops and have thousands of field trials under our daily observation.”

Graphic depictions of Fordhook Farm, first in prints and later in photographs, often showed the growing fields themselves, with no humans among the plants, or just a few doing unspecified tasks.

If the landscapes where seeds were grown and tested were often depicted as rural idylls, by contrast, the interior sites of processing were portrayed as busy hives of work (figure 1.3). The emphasis on these spaces of sorting, storing, and sending, which mediated between the producers’ and consumers’ fields, showed the processes of distribution to be as significant to the growth of the seed industry as those of production. Trade catalogues, themselves symbols of the act of distribution, might devote several pages to the different sectors of the interior workspaces, both graphically and verbally depicting the work that occurred within them—ranging from opening mail, sorting seeds, designing and printing marketing materials, packaging, and mailing. The companies used these representations to give a sense for the scale of their business, in terms of both production and consumption. In narrative descriptions of their physical plants, they enumerated the vast quantities of exchange: the millions of seed packets stored; the millions of paper bags cut and sealed; the thousands of letters bringing orders each day. The accompanying engravings also showed the increasing magnitude of trade, by illustrating the increasing numbers of both workers and products within the warehouses. These portrayals of work in the seed trade echoed representations of other, usually more mechanized, industries, commonly found in nineteenth-century business ephemera and also popular periodicals such as Scientific American or Appleton’s Journal.