

Selling the Sewing Machine in America and Japan

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The premise of using these two advertisements for Singer sewing machines as a teaching tool is that mistakes can be productive. As it is reworked into a stronger understanding, an initial misinterpretation can offer an effective lesson. When I discuss these ads with students, I try to replicate my own initial misunderstanding of the Japanese illustration, then set it against the American illustration to arrive, with the students, at a better interpretation.

The Japanese ad dates from 1922. It postdates the American postcard, first printed by Singer in 1913. I saw the Japanese ad first, while researching the history of the sewing machine in Japan. The illustration depicts an extended family, kimono clad, in a tatami room with a formal alcove, gathered round a mother giving her child a lesson in sewing. I start by giving the students background: Singer was the leading global maker and seller of sewing machines from the late 19th century through WWII, and the dominant player in the Japanese market by this time. I ask them to interpret the family tableau and draw from it Singer's marketing strategy. My own initial reading of the ad was that Singer was selling its modern machine by indigenizing it. It was placing the sewing machine in a traditional setting in dress, architecture, women's hairstyles, and the presence of a three-generation family, where a young woman was learning a time-honored feminine skill. I find that students generally arrive at this interpretation on their own, without need for much prompting.



Figure 1.

Even as I made this initial interpretation, I felt some unease, because the same brochure included a different illustration as well: a young girl in a fashionable Western-style school uniform, with a text which promised women they could “repay” the machine’s cost (implicitly by saving money by not hiring a dressmaker) while enjoying the “freedom” of Western dress. I read *that* panel to mean that Singer in the 1920s marketed the sewing machine in Japan as an emblem of modernity in two senses: that of rational investment on the one hand, and of freedom, style, and the pursuit of Western-linked pleasure on the other. To find this modern appeal in the same brochure that also “traditionalized” the machine felt off, but it seemed the only way to make sense of the family scene. I figured the company was trying to have it both ways.

Some months later, I explained my understanding of the family tableau to the head of the Japan Antique Sewing Machine Association. Mr. Kobayashi said, “you know, there may be a different way to look at it.” He pulled a history of the sewing machine in America from his bookshelf and showed me a reproduction of Singer’s 1913 American postcard. It presents the machine being used by an early 20th-century bourgeois American family of three generations, where the mother is offering her daughter her “first [sewing] lesson” (the title of the postcard). Here, the machine and the family are both fully modern.



Figure 2.

After the students have discussed the Japanese illustration, I show them the American one. I explain that it predates the Japanese illustration, and was produced by the same company. I ask them to interpret the American scene and consider whether it changes their understanding of the Japanese family tableau. Before the class, I have the students read about the ideology of “good wife and wise mother” and the emergence of new ideas about the importance of a close-knit “family circle” in early 20th century Japan. These ideas were modern ones, according to the reading they will have done. A Japanese “good wife and wise mother” of that era needed to be well educated. She had a modern civic obligation, as much as a traditional family one, to teach sons and daughters to be disciplined subjects of state and society.

Armed with this background, I hope the students will come to see that Singer's Japanese ad places a modern woman at its center. Read alongside the American postcard, the Japanese tableau shows the good wife and wise mother to be a modern global figure. Also, the father sports a Western hairstyle and facial hair. In a comparably high-status family of the Tokugawa era, in an elegant home with art on the walls, it would have been unusual for a father to be watching while a mother supervised a daughter's education. The new ideal of the "family circle" served to promote a modern middle-class life of education and discipline.

It often takes a good bit more hinting and cajoling to bring students to understand this interpretation that the Japanese illustration "translates" modern American society into a modern vision of Japanese family life. That is, Singer is exporting both a vision of a modern family along with its export of a modern machine. They do not always accept this perspective. But the discussion helps them understand the challenges of interpreting visual material, the need for context in the form of knowledge of the era and its trends, and the fact that what strikes us today as "traditional" (both the American and Japanese scenes) was in its day "modern."