

While the presence of the classical world in cinema has drawn much scholarly attention over the last two decades, a comparably rich field of contemporary reception has been almost completely overlooked: the presentation of classical history, art, society, and archaeology in mass-circulation magazines. (Hartigan 2002 discusses magazine advertising only; Kitch 2005 does not discuss the classical past.) Features, photography, and artwork on classical subjects appeared frequently in the pages of iconic popular magazines like *Life* and *National Geographic*, periodicals that America's increasingly affluent middle-classes displayed on their coffee tables or browsed in the waiting rooms of their pediatricians and orthodontists. During the late fifties and early sixties, *Life* and *National Geographic* each could boast a circulation of between five and seven million. (On the demographic profile of *Life* and the *Geographic*, see Doss 2001 and Lutz and Collins 1993.) What this mass audience was learning about ancient Greece and Rome was heavily determined by the magazines' editorial positions and commercial strategies, which were themselves both shaping and shaped by the interests, appetites, and aspirations of the reading public. Therefore, to examine the classical past as reflected in *Life* or the *Geographic* is to explore how knowledge of that past was assimilated to the tastes and attitudes of the American middle-class in the post-War years.

*Life's* treatment of the ancient Greco-Roman world was in keeping with publisher Henry Luce's vision of the "American Century" (a term he coined) that endowed the United States with a destiny to be the exception among history's great powers, the one empire that brought freedom and prosperity to the peoples under its aegis. Where others had failed, America would succeed: *Life's* treatment of the Greeks and Romans, therefore, both celebrated the glories and anatomized the failures of these great predecessors. Americans were invited to survey the record of history and to avoid the fatal flaws of societies no less powerful and prosperous than their own. *Life's* writers, moreover, explained Greek and Roman history in the same "omniscient" tone that distinguished Time/Life publications from their competitors (Baughman 1987, 46–50). In *Life*, news was contemporary history, and history was yesterday's news. *Life's* writers sought to make both ancient history and today's headlines readily comprehensible to the busy professionals that formed the core the magazine's readership and advertising target audience.

If *Life's* coverage of history tended to emphasize the connection between past and present in terms of a journalistic "story" offering an explicable thread of who, what, when, where, and why, then the *Geographic's* stock-in-trade was an ahistorical collapse of distance between the past and present, reinforced by a photographic rhetoric of continuity and survival. This approach to the past represents a temporal application of an editorial style originally developed to overcome geographic distance, as the magazine's correspondents domesticated in words and pictures the otherness of remote locales and primitive peoples (Lutz and Collins 1993, 87–117). The *Geographic's* pieces on the ancient world abounded with text and photography that suggested the immediate, living presence of the classical past in the people, places, and customs of a contemporary yet timeless Mediterranean.

Different though the "attitudes to history" (Kenneth Burke's phrase) promoted by *Life* and the *Geographic* are, both fostered a confident sense of possession and entitlement that was compatible with the acquisitive consumerism encouraged by the advertising in both magazines. This harmony of content and commerce is especially evident in the way both magazines commodified readers' awareness of the ancient world in the form of travel to the Mediterranean. Stories on travel to Greece and Italy, advertisements whose images scarcely differ in style from those of the surrounding articles, and a remarkably consistent repertoire of photographic imagery—all of these helped to make the classical past seem available to leisured Americans as one more consumer option among many. In the pages of *Life* and *National Geographic*, the venerable allure of the classical past was being preserved even as it was being adapted to the demands of new patrons, the middle-class of the baby-boom years that saw itself as hard-working, deservedly prosperous, self-improving, and upwardly mobile.

Popular Magazines and the Classical Past in the Post-War Boom (1945-1970)

John V. Carlevale (Berea College)

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