

The Portrayal of Female Figure on Greek Interwar Cigarette Packs as a Form of emancipation, Allure and Sexism

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Johannis Tsoumas¹ & Evangelia Diamantopoulou²

¹Art and Design Historian, Faculty of Interior Architecture, School of Applied Arts and Culture, University of West Attica/Hellenic Open University. Email: itsoumas@uniwa.gr ²Assistant Professor, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, School of Economics and Political Sciences, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Email: evadiam@media.uoa.gr

Abstract

The Greek interwar period is indicative of the formation of the social class and moral profile of women in the rest of the twentieth century. It is the period during which small, but significant changes were observed in the personal and social status quo of the hitherto oppressed women in the province, but also in the large urban centers of the country. At the same time, many innovative changes took place in several mass production fields, rendering thus the interwar period an important experimental, but also pioneering era. One of these changes was the decision of the local tobacco companies to expand the sale of their products to the female consumer audience, following the promotion and sales model of western markets. The depiction of the female figure on Greek cigarette packs constituted a bold business initiative, as it was believed that in this way women would initially become familiar with and later would fervently adopt a product that was traditionally addressed to a male market. This research focuses on the dual interpretation of the use of sensual female figures in cigarette packets of the Greek interwar period both through the concepts of emancipation and liberation on the part of female consumers and through the concepts of sexism and gender inequality on the part of male consumers.

Keywords: Greek interwar period, cigarette packaging, depiction, erotic women, consumption, emancipation, sexism

Introduction

The period after the liberation of many areas of Greece during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) after, about four hundred years of enslavement under the Ottoman Empire, was a time during which many cities of the country sought their Europeanization either in important infrastructure, such as the construction of new buildings, the lighting of public and private spaces and the construction of a modern sewerage system, or in less important areas related to their customs and everyday habits and practices (Maniatopoulos, 2002, p. 6, 7). One of the many daily habits that were then considered 'progressive', 'modern' and 'European', was *smoking* and this was helped by industrially produced cigarettes which had already begun to replace the traditional ways of

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smoking, that is the use of bulk tobacco with hookahs and pipes, since the first years of the 20th century.

In the early 1900s, tobacco was one of the most popular goods for export and its production was the most advantageous crop, especially in areas of the Balkan Peninsula and the US, until World War II, at least. Globally, the tobacco industry was gradually developing into one of the most lucrative, but highly competitive industries, with major companies adopting clever advertising methods to maximize their sales.

Of course, technological developments also played an important role at the time. Among them was the invention of the cigarette-making machine which led to a gradual reduction in the price of cigarettes. This boosted their ever-increasing production, catalyzed a drastic reduction in their price, and so smoking industrialized cigarettes soon became a popular habit even among the poor across the world, both for men and women (Aggeli, 2019).



Figure 1. Papasthathis' tobacco industry poster advertising cigarette brands, 1897. © Wikimedia.

The role of advertising had proved to be decisive for the development of mass production over the years. The first ads in the press and posters to promote tobacco products appeared, by the late nineteenth century. In particular, in the Greek newspapers and periodicals, in the 1890s, but mainly in the 1900s and 1910s and also during the interwar period, there were many advertisements for smoking products. However, there was no mention at all of the harmful effects of smoking, an issue that began to be highlighted by various social and health bodies from the 1950s onwards. In the 1930s, popular almanacs began to be published and host entries of cigarette brand advertisements of the most productive and successful companies of the time such

as 'Matsaggos', 'Karelia' and 'Papastratos'. Many of the posters, as well as the illustrated advertisements of cigarette brands, had a wide thematic variety that included images that mainly related to the concerted effort of Greek artists and designers of the time to highlight Greek history and develop the concept of Greekness. Thus, they began to depict figures of ancient gods, demigods and heroes, landscapes with archaic ruins, scenes from the daily life of modern Greeks, heroes of the 1821 Greek Revolution, characteristic figures of the Greek countryside and their traditional activities, such as shepherds and farmers, but also figures of beautiful, attractive women, which, however, constituted a completely separate thematic field (Aggeloudi-Zarkada, 1997, p. 12). Characteristic is the poster of the 'Papasthathis' tobacco industry which was based in Munich due to its collaboration with a corresponding German unit, painted by the great Greek artist Nikolaos Gyzis, a fanatical smoker himself (Papaioanou, 2006, 28). The poster depicts a beautiful woman holding a cigarette in one hand and at the same time supporting her head which is gracefully tilted to the side, while her other hand rests on a terrace where a cigarette box is left open. This poster is one of the first cigarette advertisements in which female femininity seems to be perfectly combined with the enjoyment of smoking which was then an almost male privilege for Greek society.

The female figure, however, prevailed much more as a characteristic pictorial representation on cigarette packages which in themselves constituted a form of advertising. This inventive approach to the promotion of cigarettes in the conservative society and market of the Greek interwar period will be commented and analyzed in our attempt to understand and reveal the importance of the social/erotic role of women, as it was at least shaped by the manufacturers, advertisers and artists involved. But how did the charm and beauty of these alluring female figures become the motive of commercial success for the particular brands of cigarettes? Also how negatively did this ultimately affect the identification of this type of woman with the levelling male chauvinism that took for granted the erotic use and perhaps abuse, but also the social degradation of women? These questions will be answered through specific examples and corresponding annotations and analyses.

Women and smoking

Smoking, a clear and entrenched manifestation of masculinity in the collective consciousness, was a forbidden habit for women until the 20th century. However, in many areas of Europe, but mainly in the US many women smoked since then despite having been labelled as lewd and immoral. It is true that after the start of World War I and the changes that took place in social attitudes, smoking was also allowed for women, but this was only a conquest brought about by the pain, deep sadness and mourning for the loss of their loved ones. In fact, it was society itself that abolished these prohibitions, as there were significant social reactions and claims on the part of women regarding the equality of their rights with the corresponding rights of men. Specifically, the post-war 1920s, the renowned 'Roaring Twenties', was the era in which women began their emancipatory revolution against social discrimination of all kinds, but mainly against their traditional oppressive role as illiterate and incapable housewives, their exclusion from sociopolitical events and education, even their sexual restraint. The previously rigid and conservative American society was forced to appear progressive and accept, albeit gradually, these radical changes, as women already constituted a significant part of the country's total workforce. The *flapper girls movement*, according to which young middle-class girls through

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fashion, smoking, and also their love life tried to confront the American conservative establishment, had already started thriving (Simon, 2017, p. 57). Thus, its fervent followers started using heavy make-up, adopting eccentric hairstyles, wearing shorter dresses, flirting without guilt, appearing unaccompanied at social events and being able to talk openly about their sexual desires. The *flapper girls* clashed with the social propriety of the time and were loved by magazines and the cinema that were overwhelmed by their liberated social image. Radio programs began to focus on women's issues, a groundbreaking subject for the time, while women's magazines began to be published across the country (Papadopoulos, 2018). The women of that time bluntly stated that 'equality for the two sexes' was a useful and desirable good, symbolized by the adoption of the habit of smoking, a symbolic victory in their struggle against the patriarchal establishment.

On the other hand, in interwar Greece the vast majority of Greek women were under the traditionally dominant will of men, usually the father, brother or husband. We are referring to the interwar era in which women had not secured the right to vote, had very limited access to education in most cases were trapped in the needs of daily routine, while their right to sexual self-determination was non-existent. According to local tradition, their future as spouses often depended on a mostly commercial transaction: the degrading institution of *dowry*. Thus, the parents of each girl tried from her early years until the time of her marriage to collect as much clothing, jewelry, money, land and as many animals and houses as they could to give as 'compensation' to the prospective husband, believing that, in this way, the new family could ensure a good and prosperous life (Ploumidis, 2008, pp. 43-46).

In general, the social norms, morals and customs were very strict for the Greek women of the interwar period. According to them, both in the large urban centers and in the province, those women who would go outside the domestic space, either leaving their villages or their homes, but mostly those who spent much time on the street, even for objective reasons such as lack of transportation or their inability to pay a ticket, they were taken for prostitutes, as the street was considered the main area of action of women with libertine morals; even attending school ran counter to prevailing notions of honor and morality. In this category of women, smoking was also considered a derogatory habit inextricably linked to the laxity of the morals and values of 'marginalized' female artists, such as cabaret and rembetika singers, dancers, actresses, and even prostitutes. We can therefore understand why women, mainly from the lower social strata, but also from the Greek provincial areas, which were away from the urban lifestyle, were more respectful of the unwritten and inviolable rules of honor and morality.

At the same time, however, the two decades of the interwar period were decisive for the progress of women in the public sphere. After all, the right to leave the house to go to school or work began to be claimed and contested at that time. For a small group of women, education combined with work was an important opportunity to gain their desired financial independence (Leontidou, 2012, p. 43). As far as politics is concerned, the appearance of these few women who acted with the aim of social change was important because, despite all the prohibitions and exclusions of the traditionally male-dominated political arena, they were prepared to participate actively. Mark Mazower in his book *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430-1950* states that modern interwar women who "questioned old notions of what was 'proper' and what was not"

were mainly young women who lived in the city, freed from the pretentiousness that limited their social behavior or even their physical appearance, while many of them had already begun to become financially independent as they worked as maids, seamstresses, tobacco workers, etc. As the author explains, this change was not so much due to political or ideological reasons as was the case in the U.S. and Europe, as to economic ones (Mazower, 2006, p. 44). In these cases, smoking was often a daily, pleasant habit as, inter alia, it was a new symbolic way of reacting to the conservative and narrow-minded Greek society, but also a punch to the centuries of gender oppression they had suffered from the phallocratic regime.

The seductive female figures of Greek cigarette packets

At the time, when smoking was linked with women of 'dubious morals', many cigarette brands in paperboard packets or tin boxes with impressively illustrated tops or lids respectively with female figures appeared on the Greek market. These figures were usually indolent bourgeois ladies in turbans smoking, but mostly sensual, enchanting female figures who, at the same time, looked emancipated, liberated and ostentatiously indifferent to the mixed feelings and the reactions they could cause in the Greek conservative society of the interwar period. All these graphic masterpieces slowly began to construct a myth that, although it was based on the culture of consumption, nevertheless fit perfectly with the atmosphere of the interwar period, which is why it was heavily advertised. Besides, the main motive of the big tobacco companies of the time such as the large tobacco industry 'Turmac' founded in 1910 in Kavala, Eastern Macedonia by the Ottoman tycoon Kiazim Emin Bey (Tsitsopoulos, 2015, p. 15), the 'Matsaggos' tobacco industry founded at the end of the 19th century in Volos, Thessaly (Adamakis, 2009, p. 47), the Konstantinou brothers' company founded in 1931 and based on Lykourgou Street, Athens, although its products were made in the public tobacco factory on Lenorman Street (Keratzaki, 2016) and other lesser-known and successful companies, was the attempt to create a new target group whose main consumers would be young women. This rather ambitious and extremely 'risky' idea of Greek companies was formed on the basis of the feminist ideology that dominated in the US and later in Europe and had as its main goal the personal and social rehabilitation of women, as it has already been stated. In other words, the companies believed that the interwar era was a golden opportunity for the expected changes in the traditional role of women in Greece, with smoking being the ideal emblem for their social and personal liberation. After all, the strong reactions of a small number of Greek women towards the breaking of traditional gender stereotypes encouraged even more the undertaking of this commercial initiative.

On the other hand, the very same marketing policy of tobacco industries and companies had another commercial target and perhaps an opposite sociological interpretation. These female figures were an important incentive to attract the interest of a broad male target group, as they seemed to personify the beautiful, seductive, but marginal women who were associated with the ephemeral male lust.



Figure 2. Jean Harlow posing as a fatal, alluring female figure on Turmac's tin cigarette box lid, 1930's, © www.athensvoice.gr

The design of the tin cigarette box *Aparto*, one of the most tasteful and popular products of 'Turmac', was truly radical and pioneering and when it was first released, clashed with the market and society stereotypes causing both surprise and embarrassment. The lid of the box depicted a blonde, erotic woman with an angelic gaze, staring into the void, wearing white clothes and smoking seductively. This black and white female figure was none other than the American actress Jean Harlow, famous for her 'bad girl' characters in the 1930s classic pre-Code era cinema films and also a universal sex symbol (LaSalle, 2000, p. 1). The choice to use this particular female figure as the main feature of the 'Turmac' advertising campaign was not accidental as Harlow was an already well-known person who could be easily recognized. On the other hand, Harlow's image was associated with the female liberation that was dominant in American society, but also with the men's sexual fantasies that haunted their daily routines.

A special example is the classic packet of the company of the Konstantinou brothers, which was first released on the market in 1931 under the paradoxical and contradictory brand name *Santé*. This name was chosen to convince people that it was a healthy smoking product, since it comes from the word *sanitas* which stands for health in Latin. When this challengingly red pack of cigarettes was first released, it was called the 'most beautiful pack on the market', as everyone was struck by the beautiful, enchanting female face portrayed in its center. The company had commissioned an artist to decorate the packet with the image of that woman whose identity was sought by almost all of Athens, as she was thought to be either the painter's beloved one, or some lady of the Athenian aristocratic circles who did not want to reveal her name. None of this was true, however, because it was revealed that the portrayed lady was Zozo Dalmas, a famous actress, dancer and operetta diva who had just started her artistic career, scandalizing at the same time, the public sentiment with the sexually liberated way she lived (Bitolas, 2019).



Fig. 3. *Santé* was one of the best-selling cigarette brands of the interwar period, with the beautiful figure of the famous actress Zozo Dalmas on its pack, 1939, © private archive.

The attractive woman with the beautiful, wavy blond hair, arched eyebrows, intense gaze, alabaster, pale skin and the bright red burning lips, who was rumored to have been the mistress of Turkish President Kemal Atatürk, soon began to dominate the imaginations of male consumers and to motivate them to purchase that particular brand of cigarettes. At the same time, she became, as in other cases, the symbol of female coquetry, beauty, self-confidence and glow, passing the message of self-awareness and liberation to the country's female, would-be consumer audience. In postwar years this brand continued to be popular, while it soon became legendary, stood the test of time like no other and continued to be released by Papastratos, a Greek subsidiary of the Philip Morris international company. Shortly before its definitive cessation from the Greek market at the beginning of 2000, the *Santé* cigarette brand had far surpassed the image of a product and had already become a timeless symbol in the tobacco trade.

The same seductive beauty, eroticism and charm can be seen in the female figures used for some brands of cigarettes by the 'Matsaggos' company, as well as by the lesser-known 'Dimitrios Stefanis' tobacco company in Vathy, Samos. The latter's *Omega* brand packet portrays a female figure who wears loose clothing, and lots of jewelry on her arms and neck and lies lazily on thick, comfortable cushions, possibly in an Ottoman interior, to enjoy smoking, creating thus an oriental than the western atmosphere. The way in which the woman is represented here is perhaps more eccentric and challenging than in most of the cases already commented. Here, the female independence and emancipation messages seem to be more intense and possibly subversive, since the traditional, oriental womanhood that had always been under the control of male will, is profoundly questioned.



Fig. 4 & 5. Dimitrios Stefanis' *Omega* cigarette brand pack, 1930s (left), Kyriazi Frères Cairo brand pack, 1930's (right), © private archive.

Particularly interesting is the composition depicted on the tin cigarette box of the *Cairo* brand produced by the Greco-Arab tobacco industry 'Kyriazi Frères' which nevertheless supplied the Greek market with its products during the interwar period. In this case, too, we can discern the strong oriental influence in the depiction of the alluring female figure who nevertheless looks dynamic and completely sure of herself, as she tries to calm down and perhaps tame the king of animals, the lion. The strong symbolism of this image leads us to the logical reasoning of the lion's association with patriarchy which signifies male dominance and power that can be neutralized by the lures of a charming and independent woman.

Broader commentary on interpretations

Of particular interest is the dual interpretation of the female depictions on cigarette packets, that is, on products which hitherto constituted the prominent symbol of male supremacy. As stated before, the big tobacco companies did not accidentally choose the use of beautiful and attractive female figures to decorate some of their product packaging as they aimed not only to expand their sales to a female consumer audience, but also to entice even more male consumers by symbolically associating the pleasure of smoking with the much desired 'company' of a beautiful woman.

The traditionally undervalued position of the Greek woman in society in relation to the male gender and consequently her reduced socialization at the beginning of the 20th century resulted in the avoidance of smoking by the majority of the female population for obvious reasons. The emancipation of women was one of the most important conquests of the female gender and led to their gradual 'emulation' with men in terms of the habit of smoking. However, the attempt of the large tobacco companies to expand the market value of their products into an unknown and pristine consumer target group such as women from all walks of life had no moral, social or cultural barriers. On the contrary, in the context of a broad capitalist and, in a sense, imperialist economic policy, it was a rather desperate attempt by them to expand the sales of their products by all means through their advertising promotion. These products had a greater impact on women's purchasing psychology due to the fact that they carried illustrations of strongly selfconfident female figures who had overcome all social restrictions and prejudices, and who were able to determine their destiny by having as weapons and their beauty and charm, women of all social classes were encouraged in their never-ending struggle for rights, freedom and a better living, in general. The way in which a female figure was depicted on a cigarette pack, a product hitherto associated with the non-negotiable dominance of men in almost all domains of life, gradually began to constitute the symbol of the questioning of male supremacy. It was not at all an oxymoron that these women were not portrayed as dynamic, unkempt, unamorous and aggressive feminists but, quite the reverse, as erotic and seductive divas. As until then they were associated with philedonia, fornication and social exclusion, in this case they symbolized the hidden power of women to use their degraded femininity against any form of oppression.

The Greek women of the interwar period, initially of the upper economic and intellectual strat, began to smoke realizing over time the symbolic value of this habit in their struggle for liberation. As Schulz aptly mentions 'the women who survived the 'genocide and the total war' of the early twentieth century constituted a strong stimulus for the female feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s' (Schulz, 2017, p. 1). In the case of the Greek interwar society, smoking, and indeed in

the context of this type of advertising campaign, encouraged the feminist minority mainly of the large urban centers and was an incentive for its symbolic spread to all urban social classes, including the middle and low social stratification. This phenomenon was observed mainly in women who were economically independent, working in factories, hospitals, offices, hair salons, seamstress shops, or even in women who studied, trying to oppose chauvinism and patriarchy, rather than in women who remained forever housewives fearing the consequences of breaking

their ties with 'domestic tradition' and the centuries-long 'intimate and safe male rule'.

On the other hand, the rather bold decision of the tobacco companies to use alluring female figures in cigarette brands that were also aimed at the traditional male target group, receives a completely different interpretation. In this case, male consumers who were used to either simple design interventions such as the logo of each company, the font, the color scale, even the various depictions of scenes from historical places, mythological figures etc., were pleasantly surprised. The depiction of female, liberated figures constituted a distinct, aesthetic experience easily combined with the erotic male pleasure. Thus, the habit of smoking began, in a way, to 'be legitimized' in men's consciousness as a form of dependence, but at the same time as a form of chauvinistic superiority, that is, as complicated and contradicting as their relations with the opposite sex were. In this case we can see women use their lures with the aim of exciting men's erotic imagination, stirring their passion and ultimately confirming the permanent sexist perception of women as sexually available to men's desires.

According to Schmitt (2002, p. 197) it is of no surprise that the mere use of the term 'sexism' conveys the idea of discrimination against women, not men....the consequences of gender discrimination are usually psychologically more harmful for the powerless. Furthermore, according to Wood and Eagly (2010, p. 629) sexism is a sweeping concept according to which the stereotypical beliefs of men against women are deeply rooted in the degraded social position of women, but also in the gender division of work and therefore in the whole social structure. The view that men always hold higher social status have more privileges and have significant power is almost dominant and central to many social and psychological analyzes of the concept of sexism. Here, then, the female figure isn't associated with the emotionally pure love relationship between the two sexes but constitutes a plain sexual object, which is a severe form of sexism, synonym with the devaluation of the female gender.

It is no coincidence that the female figure on cigarette packs had a catalytic effect on the rapid increase in sales to the male consumer audience of the interwar period. Surprisingly, the power of respective posters that used roughly the same means to attract male consumers, was not as effective. The reason was that a pack of cigarettes was for many decades an intimate, personal item of male consumers of almost every age since it was an integral part of their daily life. In fact, it represented the social emblem of their manhood as they could carry it in their jacket or trousers pockets and proudly display and use it while with their friends, lovers, family, at the coffee shop, work, cabarets, literally everywhere. Therefore, the decoration of an object so closely linked to gender inequality with alluring female figures, literally boosted men's 'patriarchal ego' and, at the same time, preserved the sexist myth of the erotic, but socially subservient women who were slaves of men's orders and desires.

Conclusion

The interwar period in Greece was, inter alia, the historical era in which the new socio-political foundations of the country's recent history were formed. The intervention of the Greek tobacco industry with the use of seductive female figures initially on large posters and color or black and white entries in magazines and newspapers, but mainly on the cigarette packs or tin boxes of specific brands contributed to this new order of things in a catalytic way, although their main goal was merely profit. Greek women who tried to find ways out of the terrifying social and personal impasses they faced for centuries, were treated in a manipulative way by the economic policy of the tobacco companies which however had two different and contradicting interpretations. Women's liberation and, at the same time, their sexual objectiveness first made this type of campaign overpass female emancipation, and focus on female sexual exploitation by male consumers. However, despite their deep connection with tradition that played a decisive role in shaping not only their national but also their individual identity, their deep and continuous sexist treatment by the patriarchal establishment, the beginning of the new changes that heralded their new social position in Greece in the decades that would follow had already been made. Smoking, through the revolutionary images/symbols of erotic female figures, was ultimately only the occasion for Greek women's emancipation and the conquest of their rights and freedoms that were unknown in the past.

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Dr. Johannis Tsoumas (B.A. (Hons) in 3D Design, Middlesex Polytechnic, M.A. History of Design, Middlesex University, PhD History of Art, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) has many publications in various scientific international and domestic journals to his credit, and he is the author of five books on design and culture. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2324-1320
Dr. Evangelia Diamantipoulou (B.A. History and Archeology, University of Athens, PhD History of Art, University of Athens) has several publications in many scientific international and domestic journals to her credit and she is the author of four books in the History of Art.