

Perspective

Blonde Ambition

By Robert Klara She's tall, young, blonde and saucy—and in one form or another, she's been selling brands in print ads for over half a century.

Question: What does a bottle of Pepsi from 1957 have in common with a pricey pair of Guess jeans in 2012?
Answer: Pretty much nothing—except for tall, blonde and provocatively posed young ladies. Perhaps we'd better revise that response. These two products actually have one very important thing in common, and it's a tactic that's easily the most prevalent and versatile of the advertising playbook: the woman as provocateur.

"For 30 years, advertising has been telling us that what's most important about women is how we appeal to men," observed Barbara J. Berg, historian and author of *Sexism in America*. "The hypersexualized look—usually blonde, usually young, usually 'hot'—tells the man 'these women are fawning over me. I'm going to get lucky.'" And that mere suggestion, men of America, has prompted you to purchase many a brand.

Academics have referred to this stereotypical portrayal as the objectification of women, the process by which a female figure in a magazine ad forfeits her personhood and defaults to being little more than a curvaceous prop—the "perfect provocateur," as sociologist Anthony J. Cortese has written. "Accepted attractiveness is her only attribute. She is slender, typically tall and long-legged."

The wife or girlfriend in the 1957 Pepsi ad is all of those things. And while the implied licentiousness is tame by today's standards, the female figure here is a prime example of early objectification, according to Berg. "The woman's stance, her hand on her hip and standing there with her leg up—it was saucy and flirtatious," she said. "This *isn't* June Cleaver." Note the man's easy confidence. That pretty woman sure digs him. Boy, those were the days.

But here's something to ponder: Seeing as the five decades that separate these two ads witnessed the liberation and empowerment of women—the abandoning of the stove and ironing board in favor of the college degree and business career—how is it that Guess can still cast a Rat Pack-era tootsie in its ad without seeming dated or out of touch? If women have come so far in society, why is this one still playing a postwar pinup girl?

In part, of course, it's the retro styling of the Guess men's jeans ad. But Berg believes another, more subtle force is at work here. "While we're living in a postfeminist society, we've seen a retreat somewhat," she said. The millennial-decade bookends of 9/11 and the Great Recession have, Berg believes, caused a kind of symbolic emasculation of the American male. "We're living in a period in which men have suffered tremendous blows to their egos," she said. "And in many ways it's led to a kind of remachoization of America." The symbology of the Guess ad suggests Berg is onto something. Note the man's easy confidence, the woman's tarty pose. Yeah, bud, you're gonna get lucky.

"I've seen far worse. These are great ads," Berg said. "They're both telling us we really haven't changed all that much."



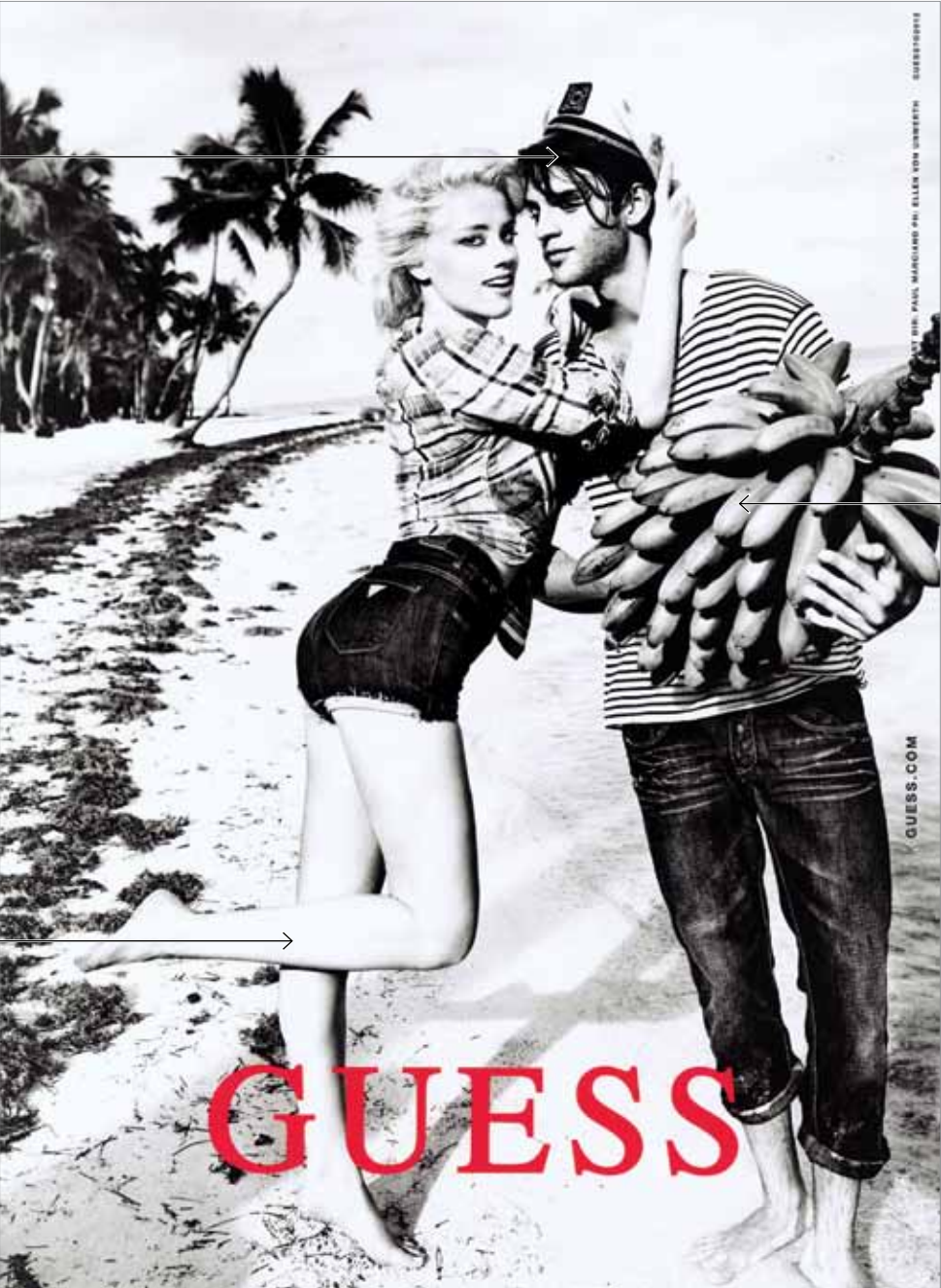
There's really no delicate way to put this, so here goes: What is *up* with that submarine sandwich, dude? While any brand in 1957 would have exercised a certain visual custodianship of its image, historian and author Barbara J. Berg believes the phallic suggestion is no accident. "It's absolutely there," she said, in particular "with the women's open legs"—a rather risqué theme on its own, with or without the lunch meat.

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Sailor boy here is a younger, swarthier variant of the Pepsi golf husband, but Berg says the attention he's enjoying is still a timeless branding message: "the fantasy that he'll conquer her." Presumably, his chin stubble and \$200 Guess jeans might help.

The sexually forward, knee-up stance of 1957 seems a close relation to this pointy-toe pose of 2012, but both make an interesting point. Objectifying as this image may be, it doesn't imply utter powerlessness. "It shows how women appeal to men and use their looks to get something they want," Berg said. "I see that in both ads."



Not to overplay the phallic thing, but it's worth mentioning that Josephine Baker used to perform nude except for a skirt made out of bananas. That was back in 1927, and even then the meaning wasn't lost on anyone.