

Greek Postwar Plastics Consumption as a Female Cultural Phenomenon

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Abstract

This research is historical in nature and concerns the capitalist expansion of the West in post-war Greece using as ‘Trojan Horse’ the plastic products that flooded the domestic market and were associated with new technologies, typologies and a brand-new way of living. The mass import of synthetics, synonymous with postwar American and European abundance and prosperity, is connected with the almost total overthrow of the strictly traditional social institutions, habits and customs of the Greeks, as well as with the emergence of a new model of cultural consumption based on female purchasing power which was at the same time associated with the female emancipation and independence, especially in the 1960s. The series of subversive developments that sealed, mostly anonymously, the formation of taste, class culture, but also triggered the birth of the domestic plastics industry, unfolds methodically and it is also connected to the political aspect of the ‘western cultural invasion’. Through this research we will be able to identify the introduction of plastic products into the Greek market, society and culture with the aim of prevailing in an aesthetic, practical and symbolic way. This research will also shed light on a totally neglected field of modern Greek cultural and material history connected with the synthetic materials transforming power as regards the female emancipation through consumption.

Keywords: plastics, Greece, women, consumption, postwar period

1. Introduction

Plastics are one of the major and perhaps most controversial phenomena in the industrial, social and cultural scene of the twentieth century, as they are carriers of qualities and concepts such as success, triumph, technological development, practicality and functionality, but also the ambiguous value, pseudo-beauty and cultural forgery. However, in the whirlwind of contradictions that arose regarding their validity, plastics managed to gain a high place in the list of globally accepted new typologies, only when their economic prospects began to converge with their contribution to cultural sphere.¹

In this research we try to outline the ‘myth’ of how plastics had begun to conquer the world scene, especially the European and American cultures, since

¹ Penny Sparke, *The Plastics Age- From Modernity to Post-Modernity* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum Publications, 1990), 7, 8.

the end of the nineteenth century, leaving Greece completely untouched, as plastics did not become known in the country as 'special, new' products before the 1950s². The causes of this delay are mainly attributed to the ethno-political and social circumstances that prevailed at that time in Greece. The political instability that had dominated Greece for many decades since the nineteenth century and continued until the First World War was the result of a long series of victorious, but also destructive wars which made Greece the 'poor relative' of the European family, as it was considered an underdeveloped country both technologically and culturally.³ The Second World War, as well as the subsequent Civil War (1945-1949) not only worsened the economic situation of the country, but also marked the beginning of a nationalist syndrome, which, combined with an increased religious puritanism, proved particularly negative towards any kind of sociocultural innovation.⁴ Especially the Greek Civil War, beyond its political epiphenomena, its military aspects and its international entanglements, appeared, in its primary structure, as a social revolution, something that was not evident in other wars of Greece. This new trend for social reorganization had as its starting point the existing, sharpened contradictions of postwar Greek society and aimed to overthrow the existing power structures and to restructure the network of social relations, in a perspective of socialist transformation, but no successful results.⁵ At the end of the 1940s, the Greeks gave the impression an 'autonomous', closed State, almost cut off from the rest of the world, which aimed to restore and reconstruct its national image and identity. Industry was at an early stage, following specific production practices with outdated and insufficient technological means, aimed at meeting the basic needs of the consumer public such as clothing, housing, etc. Small mass production units had already been put into operation since the interwar period in the largest urban centers of the country, producing textiles and footwear, as well as furniture and small household items. After all, home, as a family space, had always been a place whose configuration was directly related to consumer's taste.⁶ In the early 1950s the country's government policy turned to the developed countries of Western Europe asking for help and

² Until the 1950s, consumers in Western societies treated plastic with the same respect they paid to glass and silk. But then consumer product companies discovered the advantages of polymers (in: Christian Duran, *Break Free from Plastic* (Hamburg: Heinrich Böll Foundation Publications, 2021), 14.

³ Dionyssios A. Kokkinos, *Ιστορία της Νεωτέρας Ελλάδος (History of Modern Greece)*, Vol. II, (Athens: Melissa Publishing House, 1978), 1300.

⁴ Raymondos Alvanos, *Ο ελληνικός εμφύλιος (The Greek civil war)*, (Thessaloniki: Epikentro Publications, 2022), 4.

⁵ Filippos Iliou, 'Η πορεία προς τον εμφύλιο' ('The Road to Civil War'), in: Ilias Nikolakopoulos, Alkis Rigos, Grigoris Psalidas (editing), *Ο εμφύλιος πόλεμος (The Civil War)*, (Athens: Themelio Publications, 2002), 25.

⁶ Tim Putnam, *Household Choices*, (London: Future Publications Ltd., 1990), 7, 8.



support. The technologically and economically advanced countries of the West, including the US, which had already begun to make their military presence felt in the Mediterranean region, responded positively to this call by supporting the then Greek government to improve the country's economy and defense system. The new lifestyle model of Western societies that was introduced to Greece and that referred to a brand new consumption type that made everyday life easier, quickly influenced Greek consumers, especially those who belonged to the timidly appearing middle class.⁷ In this context, plastics brought an unexpected revolution to the social, economic and cultural landscape of the country, as they were the new, life-giving expression of a modern, glamorous and practical way of life. At the same time, they symbolized the strength and will of the Greeks to overcome the years of isolation, oblivion and deprivation by accepting the gifts of progress and modernization given by the West.⁸

The research that follows begins with a reference to the appearance of plastics in the world market, with an emphasis on the economically and technologically stronger countries that were to dynamically influence the emergence and spread of the plastics culture in Greece, i.e. Great Britain and especially the U.S. whose marketing policy was part of its broader foreign policy plan. As the area of plastics is extremely diverse and therefore particularly difficult to be examined in its entirety, the research concerns specific areas of synthetic goods: household and personal use products in post-war Greece until the 1970s, bought by the most dynamic consumer public that created and fueled the 'myth' of plastics: women. Seen from a strictly sociological and cultural perspective, the role of women in Greek society is revealed through the use of a western industrial invention that assumed the dimensions of a symbol or simply constituted a contemporary justification for the emancipation of Greek women. After all, plastics were considered to a sufficient extent, responsible for most of the changes that occurred in the social theater of the country, as they managed to clarify, perhaps even define, the position of women, always in relation to the male stereotype.

2. A new cultural model is born

The marvel of plastics was not only known, but had reached high social, even cultural dimensions in most European and American markets, while in Greece it was completely unknown as a mass industrial production phenomenon before the beginning of the 1950s, when the first synthetic goods, were imported from abroad. The way of production, but mainly the way of distribution of the first household or personal use synthetic goods, gave them the status of cult objects that defined the routes through which the country was led to new, ground-

⁷ Panagis Panagiotopoulos, *Περιπέτειες της μεσαίας τάξης. Κοινωνιολογικές καταγραφές στην Ελλάδα της ύστερης μεταπολίτευσης* (*Adventures of the middle class. Sociological records in late postcolonial Greece*) (Thessaloniki: Epikentro Publications, 2021), 98.

⁸ Andrea Dinoto, *Art Plastic - designed for living*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 34, 35.

breaking cultural spheres. Thus, according to the type of consumers they were addressed to, they were divided into two major categories: a) the plastic products related to the personal grooming, clothing and footwear of Greek women and b) the synthetic items they used in their daily household chores.⁹

The first synthetic objects were imported *en masse* into the country around 1953, while their domestic production did not become possible before the end of the same decade. A small number of items of personal use, such as plastic combs, buttons and nylon stockings, marked the beginning of a new era for Greek society and especially for the average Greek woman in which the notions of 'style' and 'liberation' would gain significant weight as they both would develop at a rapid pace.

Although the idea of some Athenian businessmen to import the above products was only aimed at increasing their profits, no one could have guessed how subversive and, therefore influential, the result of their initiative would be for the Greek society and market. Nor could one imagine that their financial intentions would open a new page in the course of women's fashion, coquetry and vanity, but also in the 'classic' position of the 'fair sex' in the realm of the household.¹⁰ As strange as it may seem, the commercialization of female coquetry was nothing more than a breeding ground for the dreams and visions of the young women of the time, which is why it quickly evolved into what is meant by the term *plastic mania*. We must therefore underline the fact that all three of the following cult items were mainly addressed to the female population of the large urban centers who were, in any case, the most vulnerable consumer audience to the introduction of the much promising synthetics items.¹¹

If we examine the social and work profile of Greek women just after the Second World War, we will fatally see their underestimated position in relation to the male counterpart. Always living in the shadow of the male stereotype, working women and housewives of the lower strata had to not only prove their work values, skills and abilities, but at the same time uphold their predetermined role as wives and mothers in the family context. Until then, both their personal taste and consumer interest could rarely turn to goods other than those related to the household environment and, *inter alia*, their leisure activities such as embroidery, sewing, knitting, etc., while their relationship with European fashion and its trends was rather weak.¹²

⁹ Interview with Mr. Ioannis Karagiannis, former general director of the association of plastics industries of Greece, November 20, 2022.

¹⁰ Johannis Tsoumas, *Women in Greek Advertisements in the 1960s*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar's Publishing, 2019), 52.

¹¹ Johannis Tsoumas, 'The designed object in the consumer's society and the designed object according to consumer's society gender' (M.A. diss. Middlesex Polytechnic, 1990), 2.

¹² *Ergoheiron Magazine*, no 22 (1955): 34.



In the early 1950s things were beginning to change as there was a wider spread of traditionally female occupations such as hairdressing and dressmaking mainly among the teenage, but also adult, working-class population, hence the aforementioned plastic objects they aimed right at the core of this consumer group.¹³ For example, the first plastic bakelite combs appeared as a godsend to make the hairdressing profession easier and more efficient. Their advantages were many and significant, as they were light and elegant items, in many joyful colors, easy to use and clean and, of course, extremely cheap. So, they easily and quickly replaced the old-fashioned aluminum, nickel or bronze combs, as well as the bone or wooden ones, which were much more expensive and less easy to use. Plastic combs were soon to become the symbol of women's beautification and remained so until the early 1970s. The first items were imported from Italy, while domestic manufacture was not achieved until the mid-1960s.¹⁴

Bakelite buttons also began to displace the corresponding ordinary wood or metal buttons and the even ivory or tortoiseshell ones which were more elegant, but more expensive and therefore difficult to find in the Greek market. The new plastic buttons had the same and perhaps superior qualities to the imported ones, as they were refined and durable, but most importantly, cheaper.¹⁵ These items, in simple design forms and bright colors, were immediately received with enthusiasm by women.¹⁶ At the same time, not only professionals, but also housewives found an immediate solution to the eternal problem of buttoning the family's clothes. The country of origin of the first synthetic buttons was again Italy, while their distribution in the major urban centers was undertaken by a group of unknown Athenian traders. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Bakelite buttons in extraordinary shapes and colors, 1950s (Source: Vintage Button Collecting)

¹³ Efi Avdela, "Όψεις της γυναικείας εργασίας" ('Aspects of women's work'), *Kathimerini Newspaper*, June 2, 1999): 21, 22.

¹⁴ *Hellinika Plastika Magazine*, no 7 (1985):10.

¹⁵ *Ergoheiron Magazine*, no 55 (1960): 26.

¹⁶ Interview with Mr. Ioannis Karagiannis, November 20, 2022.

But the triumph of female consumers reached its peak when the first nylon stockings were introduced in the mid-1950s. This special product pointed to the fact that the concept of gender was of catalytic importance in the formation of consumer groups. The women's market proved to be a rich place ready to be taken over by the profit-hungry importers of the early 1960s and domestic manufacturers. However, it should be noted that the introduction of the American pantyhose in the 1960s gave an alternative to stockings, and the use of stockings declined by the time.¹⁷

Greek female consumers of the 1950s reflected the constantly changing and contradictory physiognomy of the post-war market. That is why sometimes they were objectified by the intense advertising delusions of the time, while sometimes they claimed the powerful role of the consumer in a monopolistic purchasing process.¹⁸ Nylon stockings arrived on the Greek market from Great Britain, to emphasize both sides of this contradiction. As a new, revolutionary product it quickly became the subject of a vigorous advertising campaign in the daily press, in women's monthly magazines, in posters, and even on the radio advertisements which promoted female vanity while fueling men's sexual fantasies.¹⁹ This revolutionary product began to rapidly replace silk stockings, which were not only very expensive, but also difficult to find, making, at the same time, women a precious monopolistic consumer group. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Rayon mesh stockings from *Sears Spring-Summer Catalogue*, 'Lockstitch resists runs, snags', 1944 (Source: witness2fashion.wordpress.com)

On the other hand, it should be pointed out that their import to the Greek market also had a purely symbolic character as it represented a hugely important

¹⁷ Roland C. Christensen, *Business Policy: Text and Cases*, (Homewood IL: R.D. Irwin, 1982), 161.

¹⁸ Angela McRobbie, *Gender and Generation*, (New York: Mac Milan, 1984), 193.

¹⁹ Interview with Mr. Ioannis Karagiannis, November 20, 2022.



series of social changes in which women had a primary position. Characteristic signs of these changes in women's liberation and emancipation issues, are observed in the early 1960s, when women began to undertake a more substantial social role and expand their work aspirations in areas beyond the 'traditional' ones, such as managerial positions in factories and international companies, high positions in education or even in the health sector, conquering thus long-established male professional areas.²⁰ It was then, therefore, that a strong tendency was observed in the working and middle class female population towards these new modes of consumption, which, acting as psychological agents, enabled them to compete not only with the male sex, but also with the upper social and economic strata female consumers, who had long had the privilege of accessing the market for expensive and rare goods.

Of course, we ought to mention that within the context of this specific social group, the myth of consumption began to acquire distortion dimensions over time. As most working-class consumers were relentlessly bombarded through the daily press, women's magazines, film and theater with the glamorous actors, music idols and haute couture models lifestyle, they began to look for ways that would bring them as close as possible to the dream life of a star. Plastics were an auspicious, but artificial and cheap promise of the realization of such a dream which, however, would never come true. In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes explains how these types of myths work and the influence they can have on consumer purchasing behavior. But above all, it shows us that design of each product is responsible for creating such myths that can give the illusion of a future shiny reality.²¹ The myth in this case is the possibility that nylon stockings provided for vulnerable female consumers to enter a world of glamor and beauty, upgrading their image and boosting their 'ego' thus creating an antithesis with the world of strong but boring male stereotypes. Many businessmen later used this axiom in such a way as to immediately market this product and finally capture the commercial success they so desired.

After the successful mass introduction of plastic products to the Greek market, the first domestic plastic production factories made their appearance only in the last four years of the 1950s. Once again, Greek businessmen began to focus on the same, proven efficient, target group: women.²² This time, however, their target was another, equally important aspect of the average Greek woman that characterized her more than anything else: her social role as a housewife.

²⁰ Zogia Chronaki, 'Εργαζόμενες γυναίκες (Η είσοδος των γυναικών στην αμειβόμενη εργασία (1850-1940))'; ('Working women (The entry of women into paid work (1850-1940))'); (*Kathimerini Newspaper*, May 2, 1999): 30.

²¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (Glasgow: Paladin Books, 1973), 11, 12.

²² Interview with Mr. Ioannis Karagiannis, November 20, 2022.

Seen from a purely commercial/business point of view, Greek women as wives, mothers and housewives constituted a new market with extremely good prospects that included a wide range of consumers of almost all ages and social classes in both urban and rural areas of the country. But what exactly was the position of the Greek housewife? The Greek housewife of the 1950s was not a simple social stereotype, but a flawless person who represented the values of marriage and family and, more broadly, the culture and tradition of a nation.²³ In other words, it was the continuation of a female traditional social stereotype already from the period of the Greek interwar period (1922-1939) which was mainly nurtured by the Greek patriarchal society in every way. For example, women's magazines of the time avoided publishing articles about improving the position of women in society. This confirms the view that their male editors neither treated women as a separate social category with special claims, nor wished to challenge traditional and more widely accepted notions of social women roles, which were largely limited to the family and the household.²⁴ As expected, there was no institutional recognition of the woman's important position in society or the home, and therefore legal protection of her rights, in relation to her husband's rights, was non-existent. Nevertheless, her arduous and rarely enjoyable role gave her a special freedom of action in an area all her own, into which the man's 'entry' was forbidden, despite any economic dependence on him. So as a queen in the land of cleaning, washing, cooking, and especially consuming, she had, within her weakness, the freedom of choice: to decide on the 'how and when' of all these activities. She automatically became the dominator of the eternal game of the two sexes since taking into her hands the amount that her husband delivered weekly, she was able to spend it as she thought best.²⁵ Her purchasing choice became over time her power that defined a new consumer audience of the Greek market as it reinforced the categorization of the consumer spectrum into groups based on gender and/or social class. Her consumer power made her capable of determining and influencing market trends, since she constituted a new important market in her own right.²⁶ It is not paradoxical, therefore, that she constituted the most ideal motivation for the upcoming radical changes in the quality of products related to domestic activities and equipment. For example, the first innovative solution to the problem of food preservation since the late 1940s was the wooden ice refrigerator that successfully

²³ Aspasia Tsaoussi, 'Τα κοινωνικά προβλήματα των γυναικών στις ανεπτυγμένες χώρες' ('Women's Social Problems in Developed Countries'), (Brochure in the framework of the P. M. S. course 'Sociology of Law', Winter semester 2017-18, School of Law, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki).

²⁴ Maria Kyriakidou, 'Ο φεμινιστικός τύπος στην Ελλάδα του Μεσοπολέμου' ('The feminist press in Interwar Greece'), *Istor*, no 12 (2001): 70.

²⁵ *Gynaika Magazine*, no 24, (1959): 28.

²⁶ *Hellinika Plastika Magazine*, no 7 (1985): 7-10.



replaced the traditional, but defunct, ‘phanari,’ a vessel made of fine wire mesh used for storing food, initially in large urban centers.²⁷ The revolutionary device of ice fridge was the first attempt to modernize the domestic routine, promoting the qualities of hygiene and convenience in the Greek household. At the same time, the Greek housewife still struggled with heavy, rough, unwieldy household utensils to carry out daily household needs two of which were washing family clothes and kneading bread, a traditional activity more prevalent in rural areas of the country rather than in the big cities.²⁸

The most common vessel for washing clothes was *the skafi*, a large, heavy square metallic wash-tub - usually of galvanized iron, but sometimes of wood - quite difficult to use. It was accompanied by the *plaka*, also a heavy piece of wood in the shape of a trapezium with raised ridges on one surface that helped rub the clothes.²⁹ There were also clay basins, which were used to wash a smaller amount of clothes, mainly white ones.³⁰ The first electric washing machines imported from Germany and Great Britain in the late 1950s were extremely useful appliances, but aimed at middle-class consumers due to their high cost, hence the first plastic items that replaced the traditional *skafi* found an enthusiastic response from the Greek housewife of the middle and working class.³¹ The plastic substitute of the *skafi* was a light, simple polystyrene washing-tub, less deep, but longer in length and width in vivid colors and glossy, smooth surface that made a big impression on the market. The revolutionary new product became an instant hit, as the first batches of plastic *skafis* disappeared almost magically just two weeks after they had appeared on the market.³² Their demand was so great that a month later the manufacturers decided to double their production. This particular product, which is considered the first cult plastic object of domestic mass production and distribution, had two worthy successors: the plastic bucket and the plastic basin. (Figures 3, 4)

The bucket was a basic household item for both the rural population and the working classes of the urban areas of the country. Made of solid wood, fixed with metal plates and with a metal handle, the pre-war bucket was considered necessary for agricultural tasks such as milking, carrying or storing water, but also for daily household chores such as mopping, washing surfaces or objects etc. It was,

²⁷ Demetrios B. Demetrakos, *Μέγα Λεξικόν της Ελληνικής Γλώσσας* (Big Dictionary of the Greek Language), (Athens: Domi Publications Ltd., 1964), 45.

²⁸ Interview with Ms. Eleni Traganos, farmer, May 11, 2022.

²⁹ Interview with Ms. Eleni Traganos, May 11, 2022.

³⁰ Nikos P. Petropoulos, ‘The Washing of Clothes: from the Washing-tubs and the Fulling Mills to the Laundromats’ <https://vdm-vlahokerasia.gr/en/traditions/the-washing-of-clothes.html#clothes> (accessed 22/02/2023)

³¹ Interview with Mr. D. Chronopoulos, plastics retailer, June 5, 2022.

³² Interview with Mr. D. Chronopoulos, June 5, 2022.

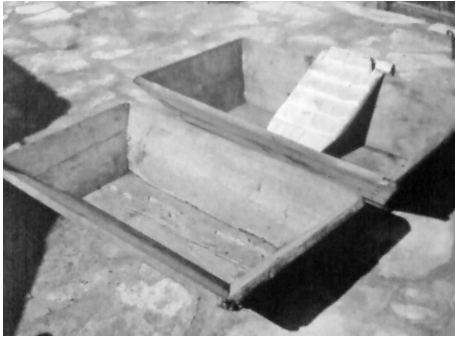


Figure 3. Traditional, old wooden *skafis*
(Source: www.cleaningfed.grservices)



Figure 4. Plastic glossy *skafis* in bright, eye-catching colors (Source: private archive)

however, a heavy, unwieldy object, without any ergonomic or aesthetic design.³³ Shortly after the end of the Second World War it was replaced by a new type of bucket, all metal, usually of tin or galvanized iron, which was more durable, but heavy and just as unsightly. Nevertheless, the beauty of the warm colors, orange or red, the significantly smaller size and weight, the elegant design line and the cheap price of the synthetic substitute of the bucket were probably the main reasons for its great commercial success. Although made in Greece, the plastic bucket was an Italian invention that first appeared on the Italian market shortly after the end of 1945 and became particularly popular in the rural and urban areas of southern Italy, where living conditions were more or less similar to those in Greece.³⁴

The third cult object in a row that marked the beginning of the mass production, distribution and use of Greek plastics was the portable basin. As we have already mentioned, the Greek housewives of the post-war era used the clay basin - a multi-purpose object - for washing a small amount of clothes, as well as for activities such as kneading, washing or cleaning vegetables or fruits, even for their personal hygiene.³⁵ The traditional, heavy clay basin was a rather deep, hollow vessel in the natural color of red clay, decorated around the perimeter sometimes with geometric and sometimes with traditional designs of white or sometimes yellow slip.³⁶ The new product brought our already familiar qualities that made it instantly popular: striking colors, glossy surface, light weight, low price and above all durability, an important quality that contrasted sharply with the fragile nature of old-fashioned clay vessels.

³³ Interview with Mr. Ioannis Chryssanthos, former street vendor of household goods, September 17, 2022.

³⁴ Interview with Mr. Ioannis Chryssanthos, September 17, 2022.

³⁵ Interview with Ms. Eleni Traganos, May 11, 2022.

³⁶ Betty Psaropoulou, *Οι τελευταίοι τσουκαλάδες του ανατολικού Αιγαίου (The last potters of the eastern Aegean)*, (Nafplio: Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation Publications, 1986), 137.



The birth of the era of Greek plastics was marked by the manufacture of the above three objects and progressed to maturity with the production of other, equally useful household items that gradually replaced their traditional counterparts. Examples include the classic green glass oil bottle, the traditional olive oil tin pot and the iron oil storage containers, which shortly before the 1960s had been replaced by their corresponding synthetic substitutes.

3. The American contribution to the configuration of plastics culture

The American plastics that had conquered the world market after the Second World War without finding an immediate response in the corresponding Greek market in the 1950s, due to the political beliefs of the traders at the time, found fertile ground during the 1960s. After a long, pressing game with the Greek economy that lasted more than a decade, the ever expanding marketing network of the American plastics industry, waited for the right moment to enter the Greek market aiming at two very specific targets: a) the introduction and promotion of products related to female vanity and which had already achieved commercial success in the world market and b) the establishment of companies manufacturing household plastics, aiming again at the female target group. Thus the mass import of American items of feminine interest in terms of clothing and beautification, with representative product being the revolutionary commercial pantyhose of the Madison company, a product aimed at shrinking or completely eliminating the corresponding imported British stockings, as well as the appearance of the internationally known Tupperware company, specialized in household goods, marked the beginning of a new era for the culture of plastics in Greece. The fact that the Greek female consumer public was thirsty for original, new and revolutionary plastic products was, in fact, undeniable³⁷. However, it was already known that the Greek market of the early 1960s offered the female population a limited selection of items that addressed to their flirtatious and, perhaps, vain side. Jewelry, sunglasses, clothing accessories, and footwear were just some of the items that dazzled the world of feminine charm, but at prices that were prohibitive for the working and middle classes.³⁸ Bone or tortoiseshell sunglass frames, high quality leather shoes, handmade jewelry with precious or semi-precious stones and metals soon began to be replaced by the American corresponding synthetic products. The import of the above items was gradual, and its beginning is dated to the year 1963. This fact was not at all accidental, as just one year before the pro-American government policy of the time had ensured the passage of a bill on the basis of which American manufactured products, plastics included, were

³⁷ Interview with A. Chryssikopoulos, plastics manufacturer and retailer, June 21, 2022.

³⁸ Interview with Ms. Dimitra Xanthou, former sales assistant at 'Minion' department store, June 15, 2022.

allowed to be imported into the Greek market for a trial period of five years. This government decision stemmed from the fear of a possible reaction of domestic entrepreneurs to the technological superiority of American goods, which would have significant consequences both for the course of the government itself and for the market.³⁹ On the contrary, however, Greek manufacturers did not seem to protest or react against this specific bill, not only because they were still waiting for government financial assistance to support their businesses, but also because these first American items were completely different, in terms of design and quality, from their own.⁴⁰

With the exception of some experimental import of a small series of 'handcrafted' plastic jewelry that could be found in large Athenian department stores and aimed at the affluent consumer public, the really big mass import of American acrylic jewelry took place in late 1963. Bracelets, rings, earrings, buckles, chains, etc., all cheap and accessible, immediately began to arouse the interest of consumers, but also the reactions of Greek jewelers who rightly pointed out that these items were only 'unnecessary burden in American warehouses, since they were what was left of the American market of the previous decade.'⁴¹ In shapes, colors and surfaces quite bold for the Greek standards of the time, the first imported American jewelry was nothing but conservative and old-fashioned forms for the American market.⁴² Around the same time, the first synthetic clothing accessories began to appear as sunglass frames, umbrellas, bags, belts, etc. One sector that was also affected by the new status quo in the Greek market was the footwear manufacturing. American ideas for the mass manufacturing of shoe parts such as soles, heels, inner lining, straps, etc. or footwear entirely made of synthetic materials, brought a real revolution in the field of domestic footwear industry.⁴³

Plastic short-sighted, long-sighted or astigmatism glasses, but especially sunglasses were the some of the first items that were upgraded from previously simple utilitarian objects into fashion commodities. Sunglasses, particularly popular among the female population of the country since the previous decades, had a huge variety of qualities shaped according to their design, their construction

³⁹ Interview with A. Chryssikopoulos, June 22, 2022.

⁴⁰ Interview with A. Chryssikopoulos, June 21, 2022.

⁴¹ At that time there was a new fashion in America that brought back the idea of the lost handicraft processing especially in synthetic jewelry, but also in other products. Synthetic jewelry pieces received the manual care of expert artists before being assembled and marketed at a much higher price than had been the norm for strictly industrially produced synthetic fashion goods.

⁴² As Ms. Helen Triantafyllou, female accessories shop owner in the 1960s, admits in the interview taken on May 15, 2022, most of the Greek jewelers reacted in an extremely negative way to the introduction of such products in the Greek market, as they almost knew how highly competitive they would be.

⁴³ *Plastika Chronika Magazine*, no 2 (1978): 5.



materials, but also their color scale, which created a wide range of purchasing options that addressed almost to every type of consumer.⁴⁴ The classic metal or bone eyeglass frames which were particularly prevalent in specific cases of women, such as middle class students, secretaries, teachers, doctors nurses, but also old women, soon began to be replaced by correspondingly conservative, but lighter and more elegant frames which were cheaper and very practical to use.⁴⁵

The American manufacturers did not also hesitate to use acrylic to create a series of evening bags and small elegant envelope wallets for women which however did not find the expected response in the American market.⁴⁶ The bold use of such a synthetic material in the manufacture of a strictly feminine clothing accessory that until then was inextricably linked to natural materials had ambiguous aesthetic results: translucent, fancy objects, decorated with fake pearls, beads or rhinestones, were characterized by many as kitsch, while for others tasteful and elegant. Such bags appeared on the Greek market around 1965, but were not satisfactorily absorbed before the first half of the 1970s, mainly because they were both impractical and daring in style.⁴⁷ Middle- and working-class Greek women of the mid-1960s were limited to buying imported artificial leather handbags, which were stylish, light, durable and easy to use, and of course cheaper than the leather ones.⁴⁸ (Figure 5)



Figure 5. An early 1960s American clear acrylic handbag rhinestones through the front (Source: www.etsy.com/listing/155948250/1960s-acrylic-purse-60s-clear-handbag)

A major challenge to the traditional domestic footwear industry was the new American proposal of new, revolutionary synthetic models that made their mass appearance in mid-1967. The basic design principles of the Greek footwear industry of the time were almost exclusively concerned with the practicality and functionality of the products, disregarding almost for their aesthetics which followed the conservative line of the time. For example, a typical pair of women's

⁴⁴ *Plastika Chronika Magazine*, no 1 (1978): 17-18.

⁴⁵ Interview with Ms. Dimitra Xanthou, June 15, 2022.

⁴⁶ *Gynaika Magazine*, no 28 (1967): 31.

⁴⁷ Andrea Dinoto, *Art Plastic - designed for living*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 108.

⁴⁸ Interview with Ms. Helen Triantafyllou, May 15, 2022.

everyday shoes had the following characteristics: glossy or matte, hard and durable leather forms in soft, dark color tones such as brown, blue, black or deep maroon with or without laces, flat soles or low heels. Inset decoration included small cute or tacky buttons, chains, buckles, or even embossed leather elements.

The first series of imported plastic shoes was made of soft, flexible vinyl, with subtle decoration and at an affordable price. Many of its designs successfully combined genuine leather with synthetic materials, while sandals, flip flops and open summer footwear in general stood out for their intense colors and inset decorative elements such as daisies, types of seashells, etc. *Cinderella type* transparent vinyl sandals, as well as the transparent soles or heels in general, soon began to become fashionable mainly among the younger generation, peaking in the 1970s.⁴⁹ Despite their relatively heavy weight, the fashionable, thick vinyl soles that formed the basis of high and bulky footwear soon became particularly popular. A creation by the designers Seymour Troy and Stanley Philipson, already successful in the American market since the 1950s, made its appearance in the Greek market at the end of the 1960s creating a new trend in classic footwear, such as the elegant black spike heels: new open or closed clear vinyl shoes combined with a thin leather ankle strap.⁵⁰

The introduction of British synthetic transparent stockings to Greece in the 1950s was the first opportunity for Greek women to discover the dimensions and perspective of their 'unknown' femininity through synthetic items that glorified the idea of vanity.⁵¹ Although known to the female population of large urban centers and less so in the province, nylon stockings became less popular after the introduction of American similar, but more sophisticated products into the country in the early 1960s. The new American proposal of the Madison nylon pantyhose found an immediate response in the Greek market and very soon began to displace the long-known British nylon stockings, the import of which was beginning to decrease over time.⁵² The main reasons for their success were their technological superiority, practicality, but also their much lower selling price. The dynamic presence of an American commercial sales representative in the country to promote these products was perhaps the most effective way of trading for both manufacturers and consumers. The extended advertising campaign of the company, the clever distribution system of the Americans, but also the huge quantities of the products were some more reasons that displaced

⁴⁹ *Cinderella shoes* was a fancy and striking type of evening sandals made of vinyl and suede, very popular in the American market in the 1950s. Its name, not coincidentally, acted as a powerful, albeit subconscious, factor in the consumer choice of American women, since, operating through the same familiar myth, it promised the transformation of the insignificant, unknown everyday female into a real princess.

⁵⁰ Andrea Dinoto, *Art Plastic - designed for living*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 68-71.

⁵¹ Interview with Ms. Helen Triantafyllou, May 15, 2022

⁵² Eunice Wilson, *A history of Shoe Fashions*, (New York: Pitman/Theater Arts Books, 1975), 19.



the import of the British stockings. In particular, the distribution of the American pantyhose in all major urban centers, as well as in the province, was so systematic that it managed to make them extremely popular in a short period of time. It was then that the dream of the emancipation of the oppressed women of the Greek province began to come true with an American pantyhose as a liberation flag that gradually displaced the old-fashioned woolen or cotton knee-length tights, socks and other similar hosiery and with all this the devalued position of the women of the Greek periphery. (**Figure 6**)



Figure 6. American textured pantyhose and stockings, early 1960s (Source: witness2fashion.wordpress.com)

Nylon pantyhose for the women themselves seemed to be intertwined with the notions of emancipation and redemption, whereas for the men of the small rural societies, it was only 'the beginning of many woes' in their relations with the opposite sex. Thus, according to their rigid reasoning regarding the position of women in the social environment, especially in the province, the term emancipation either did not exist, or was associated with the concepts of cheapness and immorality. However, despite the occasional backlash, the products of the Madison Company brought about a remarkable change in the way of thinking and acting of the female consumer public of the province, thus marking the beginning of its socio-cultural revolution against the patriarchal fiefdom of men.⁵³

⁵³ Interview with Mr. M. Teneketzis, former manager of the Athens Tupperware branch, October 20, 2022.

Tupperware is the trade name of one of the world's largest American companies producing plastic containers for food that began manufacturing its first products in the mid-1940s.⁵⁴ At that time, in a very important article, the authoritative magazine *House Beautiful* reported on these new products, urging consumers: '...put art in your home for only 39 cents...', which further boosted their sales and pushed the still small company to transform this domestic commercial activity into an all-powerful global empire.⁵⁵ The first twelve designs of household products grew to over two hundred in just a few years, included, in addition to the classic food storage containers, other objects and tools, such as gardening and floristry items, even toys and board games, and were exported to more than thirty countries around the world.⁵⁶ The rapid expansion of the company began to influence the marketing policy it followed during the 1950s-1960s in a way that dictated the production of items according to the cultural and traditional physiognomy of the markets they were aimed at. Characteristic products of the company's commercial strategy were the famous seaweed preservation containers for the Japanese market as well as the corresponding special containers for the traditional Mexican food, the tortilla.

The first, initially small in size, production unit of the Tupperware company in Greece was founded in 1964 with headquarters in the wider area of the city of Thebes. It soon transformed into a large modern industrial unit and even today it constitutes one of the largest and most productive plastics companies in the country.⁵⁷ The advanced technology, the excellent ergonomic design of the products, but above all the way they were distributed in the Greek market quickly made them popular first in the two major urban centers of the country, Athens and Thessaloniki. The good reputation and high sales of Tupperware products initially surprised and thereafter frightened the domestic plastics manufacturers, who in time saw them as an unexpected threat to their interests.

⁵⁴ In the late 1930s the chemist Earl Tupper from Massachusetts, began experimenting in his laboratory and finally produced through his machines a series of drinking glasses and food storage and preservation containers in pastel colors with polyethylene as a raw material. In 1948 his products were introduced to retail shops and soon stood out for their quality in the ocean of plastic items flooding post-war America, a fact that was not ignored by the American press and television.

⁵⁵ Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2001), 59.

⁵⁶ Earl Lifshey, *A History of the American Housewares Industry*, (Chicago: National Manufacturers Association, 1973), 86-90.

⁵⁷ The company became world famous thanks to a specific innovation in food preservation and storage: the secret was in the way the containers were sealed, which was facilitated by their flexible lid. Before fitting to the rim of the container, the lid helped expel air from the interior creating an airtight space where food could be kept intact and fresh. Tupperware stood out for yet another innovation: it was the world's first company to use polyethylene as a raw material for the manufacture of food products.



However, we should note that a key difference between Tupperware products and domestic plastic items was their selling price. The innovative, practical, modern and reliable Tupperware products were incomparably more expensive than the Greek or even the European imported ones, which of course were of much lower technological and ergonomic standards. Initially, this issue was an obstacle to their immediate absorption by the Greek market, since housewives treated them with reservations.⁵⁸ With low family incomes preventing them from purchasing household items at nearly twice the price, female consumers remained for some time loyal on the ordinary synthetic products, rejecting Tupperware's expensive ones. But the entrepreneurial spirit of the Americans in the art of commerce worked again in favor of their financial interests: Tupperware employed a unique way of promoting its products in the Greek and international market, which essentially formed the basis of its shining legend in world history of plastics. The company had a really clever idea whereby the products would be promoted directly by the company itself to the consumers and not through middlemen. Tupperware's salespeople, who were almost all women, promoted the products directly to homes through private demonstrations, which often took the form of small parties for landladies' guests whom the products were mainly presented to.⁵⁹ Working as a chain, this selling system would commit some female consumers with tempting gifts for 'booking' future demonstrations in their own homes, which favored saleswomen themselves - or dealers as they were called - to increase their own income since their salary was always related to the amount of sales they would achieve. This type of marketing allowed the company to control the production of its goods by keeping it at a certain level, and at the same time to save a considerable amount of the capital, which, otherwise would have to be spent on time-consuming and unprofitable dealings with middlemen and merchants.⁶⁰ The consumer target of the company was of course women, a really profitable market, which however, had to be conquered with the weapons of patience and prudence. After all, the sensitive Greek market was perhaps the appropriate consumer model for the American company's products and for this reason its peculiarities had to be taken seriously into account. The American way of commercializing material, but also moral values, made the company use all the social and cultural features that shaped the profile of the average Greek female consumer of the 1960s in an extensive advertising campaign that aimed to activate

⁵⁸ Interview with Mr. M. Teneketzi, October 20, 2022.

⁵⁹ Anbuchelvi Shinaya, Ahmad Lutfi Ramly & Zahariah Mohd Khalil, 'A Study on the Secret of Tupperware Brands' Success', *International Journal of Business and Management Invention (IJBMI)*, Volume 8 Issue 05 Series. I, (2019): 17-19.

⁶⁰ 'The History of Tupperware', Tupperware advertising leaflet, Athens (1972): 4.

her interest.⁶¹ In this way, basic concepts, such as the family, as a vital cell of Greek society, the roles of mother, wife as well as that of the modern and independent working woman, were employed and transformed into ideal, perhaps utopian advertising models that uniquely showcased Tupperware products. (Figure 7)



Figure 7. A variety of 1960s Tupperware products (Source: Retro Homewares for Collectors and Decorators)

Soon the company's methodical marketing policy began to pay off, as housewives, charmed by their almost celebratory contact with the objects, the friendly environment, the illustrated information brochures, the persuasiveness of the sellers and the company's gifts began to give in to the more expensive, but higher quality Tupperware products.⁶² The initially suspicious housewives later themselves became the ideal advertising agents for these items, which by the end of the 1960s had conquered the entire Greek market. But the biggest surprise was the ever-increasing buying interest of the less predictable group of consumers: working women. Women working in the private or public sector soon discovered the advantages of Tupperware products, since their daily heavy program made them carry food from home to work, which required systematic hygiene and cleanliness. The break was the workers' little daily paradise, as during it they could rest and enjoy their food, which had to be kept fresh. The convenient size, as well as the light weight of Tupperware plastic containers, combined with their soft pastel colors and airtight properties, soon made Greek workers turn to these items which gradually replaced the traditional, but hard to use metal containers for preserving or transporting cooked food.⁶³

Their innovative qualities soon made them among the items considered necessary for any household task or activity. Who does not remember a celebration

⁶¹ Julian Sivulka, *Soap, Sex and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* (*Η Ιστορία της Διαφήμισης – Soap, Sex and Cigarettes*), trans. Antigone Apostolopoulou, (Athens: Hellin Publications, 1999), 329, 330.

⁶² Interview with Mr. M. Teneketis, October 20, 2022.

⁶³ 'The History of Tupperware', Tupperware advertising leaflet, Athens (1972): 5.



or youth party of the 1960s without their presence? Plastic drink glasses, cups, plates and bowls, jugs, serving trays, cheese and fruit knives in translucent pastel colors began to become the cult objects of the time, as they represented the concepts of good taste and fashion in the world of household items. Excursions or short trips to the countryside had become almost synonymous with the entertainment of the working youth, who had already begun to form their own social identity. Tupperware products became the symbol of working-class girls and, along with synthetic grooming items such as commercial nylon pantyhose, formed the cornerstone of a new era of culture⁶⁴. The new generation of Greek women had then understood that the freedom of purchasing choice was of great importance to them. It was the moment when they were given the unique opportunity to enter two different social arenas and simultaneously harmonize their two respective social roles: the working woman as both an erotic, desirable being and as a great social capital through the roles of mother, wife and housewife in the family realm.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, we underline the fact that plastics marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the postwar Greek market, characterized by the culture of mass consumerism with women as genuine representatives. Their mass production and distribution in the 1960s gave birth to and nurtured unknown and untested relationships until then, the most important of which were: a) the adoption of the concept of design in relation to fundamental social values, such as family life, personal freedom and independence, but also health, hygiene and the broader concept of 'well-being', and b) the interactive relationship between the mass production of innovative and cheap goods and the gratification of consumers' joy-seeking instincts. In particular, plastics were the only group of industrially produced objects that activated the feeling of consumer pleasure, which is why they were rightly characterized as the absolute pioneers of the consumerism culture that opened up new horizons for the Greek market and society for many decades to come. Therefore, according to this new ideology, Greek consumers remained faithful to plastics that were easy to use, pleasing from an aesthetic point of view, but also very cheap, and formed a new consumer behavior, according to which items that seemed unworthy of repair, were easily thrown away and soon replaced with new ones. This derogatory way of managing consumer goods formed the basis of today's *throwaway culture* term the roots of which can be traced back to the historical route of plastic items. During their glorious post-war route, plastics proved that they had the ability to transform their functional nature into a magical one, that is, to shape the definition of the myth of imitative materials in general. After all, as we have seen, it was the concept of myth that upgraded synthetic items

⁶⁴ Interview with Mr. M. Teneketzi, October 20, 2022

from simple industrial products to ‘fetish’ objects. As the result of a chemical transformation, plastics managed to modify and/or overturn the centuries-old functionality of nature by defining new coordinates in the creation of form. But they never managed to acquire the high value of luxury objects, as their role was defined from the beginning: to be, at best, their simple and affordable substitutes. Plastic culture was intertwined with women’s emancipation in post-war Greece, a great act in the country’s social theater followed by the fatal fall of consumer nationalism. And even if the plastics glow seemed to fade in the following decades, nevertheless its imprints on the social fabric of Greece always remained alive and influential as they seemed to belong to a woman’s hand.

Rezumat

Această cercetare istorică se referă la expansiunea capitalistă a Occidentului în Grecia postbelică, folosind drept ”cal troian” produsele din plastic care au inundat piața internă și au fost asociate cu noi tehnologii, comportamente și un mod de viață complet nou. Importul masiv de materiale sintetice, sinonim cu abundența și prosperitatea americană și europeană postbelică, este legat de subminarea aproape totală a instituțiilor sociale, a obiceiurilor și cutumelor tradiționale ale grecilor, precum și de apariția unui nou model de consum cultural, bazat pe puterea de cumpărare a femeilor, care a fost în același timp asociat cu emanciparea și independența femeilor, în special în anii 1960. Seria de evoluții subversive care și-au pus amprenta, de cele mai multe ori tacit și discret, pe formarea gustului, a culturii de clasă, dar care au încurajat și nașterea industriei plastice autohtone, s-au desfășurat metodic, fiind legată și de aspectul politic al ”invaziei culturale occidentale”. Prin intermediul acestei cercetări vom putea identifica introducerea produselor din plastic pe piața, în societatea și în cultura greacă, la cele trei niveluri ale impactului estetic, practic și simbolic. De asemenea, această cercetare pune în lumină un domeniu total neglijat al istoriei culturale și materiale a Greciei moderne, legat de puterea de transformare a materialelor sintetice în ceea ce privește emanciparea feminină prin consum.

Cuvinte-cheie: materiale plastice, Grecia, femei, consum, perioada postbelică

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