

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
January 1986

GRANCEL FITZ: ADVERTISING PHOTOGRAPHS 1929-1939

March 20 - June 24, 1986

On March 20, 1986, The Museum of Modern Art will open an exhibition of photographs made as advertising illustrations during the thirties by one of the most successful commercial photographers of his time, Grancel Fitz (1894-1963). Organized by Sarah Anne McNear, The Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Fellow in the Department of Photography, GRANCEL FITZ: ADVERTISING PHOTOGRAPHS 1929-1939 will reveal the Depression-era vision of the good life in America--of casual elegance, resplendent women, and homemade pies--which provided a welcome fantasy of what could be.

Fitz's career as a commercial photographer began in the early twenties, when the advertising industry was first experimenting with photography as a marketing tool. According to McNear, "Advertising professionals, accustomed to the stylized illustrative drawings of the period, debated the merits of photography, lauding the medium's inherent 'believability' while complaining that most commercial photographs managed to convey no more than a 'vulgar, half-witted literalness.'" Fitz was challenged by the complex production process involving clients' expectations, art directors' preconceived layouts, and models who were unaccustomed to the camera. He created technically superb prints which, while highly artificial, are strangely engaging.

The exhibition, on view through June 24, includes approximately forty gelatin-silver photographs commissioned by advertising agencies for such accounts as Pontiac Motors, Chevrolet Motor Company, AT&T, Ivory Soap, Fromm Silver Fox Furs, and Ipana Toothpaste. These pictures reveal less about the products and more about the people who shaped them, their audience, and

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ourselves. In the 1931 Lux Flakes illustration for Lever Brothers Company, for example, the soap detergent is not depicted, but rather the Hollywood-style scene of an elegant woman in evening gown reposing on a couch. McNear sees this as an example of the advertising industry's faith in the persuasiveness of photographs which sold a product based not on its merits but through association with a type of person or lifestyle. She states, "Our ability to read this strategy in these pictures, and to be more than a little amused, serves to remind us of our own credulity in regard to that analogue of reality: the advertising image."

Grancel Fitz was born in 1894 in Philadelphia. He began making photographs at age twenty, winning his first medal for amateur photography in 1916. He received another eighty-eight awards over the next four years in many international pictorial photography salons. Fitz began his professional career as an illustrator in 1920, moving his studio from Philadelphia to New York in 1929. He married for the first time in 1914, became the father of three children, divorced in 1934, and married Betty Sample in 1942. Although Fitz was the recipient of eight Art Director Club Awards between 1924 and 1945, and served three terms as President of the Society of Photographic Illustrators, his reputation did not survive him. After 1945 Fitz turned his attention increasingly to competitive big game hunting. He died in 1963.

The works represented in the exhibition are on loan from his widow, Betty Fitz Bennett; the private collections of John C. Waddell, Paul Katz, and Francis DiMauro; the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth; and the Gilman Paper Company Collection, New York.

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no. 6

For further information, contact Jeanne Collins or Jessica Schwartz,
 Department of Public Information 212/708-9750