TRUST, TESTING, AND TIME

The Evolution of the Good Housekeeping Seal as a Tool for Dating Antique Packaging and Advertising

Gordon Standlee
A Monograph
Sourced from Artifacts in the Author's Nearly Forty-Year Collection

Abstract

This monograph traces the evolution of the Good Housekeeping Seal from its introduction in 1909 through its modern forms in the twenty-first century. Examining changes in seal design, testing standards, regulatory influences, and consumer protection practices, it demonstrates how the Seal serves as a valuable tool for dating antique advertising, product packaging, and related consumer artifacts. Drawing upon examples preserved in the author's nearly forty-year collection, the study establishes a practical framework for identifying the earliest possible dates associated with specific Seal variations while illustrating the broader history of trust, testing, and consumer confidence in American advertising.

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Dedicated to the preservation and study of America's advertising heritage and the artifacts that document the evolution of consumer trust.

Dating Antique Advertising Using the Good Housekeeping Seal

At the turn of the 20th century, Americans were embracing the Industrial Revolution and all the marvels that were being introduced into everyday life. Products that had once been handmade, locally produced, or sold only in small regional markets were now appearing as national brands. The average household was suddenly being asked to trust unfamiliar appliances, medicines, prepared foods, cleaning aids, cosmetics, and home-help devices produced by companies far beyond the buyer's own community. With advertising expanding rapidly and product claims becoming more ambitious, the consumer faced a simple but important question: how could an ordinary person know whether a new product was safe, useful, and honestly represented?

Good Housekeeping Magazine answered that need by creating a system of testing, approval, and consumer assurance that eventually became one of the most recognizable symbols in American advertising. Beginning in 1909, the Good Housekeeping Seal gave readers a visible sign that a product had been reviewed under the standards then used by the magazine, its Institute, and later its specialized bureaus. Over time, the Seal moved from a magazine-controlled editorial emblem to an applied stamp, then to a printed mark on packaging, advertising, labels, cartons, tins, and product literature. Because each wording change and design adjustment occurred in a specific historical period, the Seal can now be used as an important dating tool for antique advertising and consumer-product artifacts.

Through the years, the wording in the oval Seal changed to adapt to new testing practices, legal requirements, advertising customs, and consumer-protection expectations. An approved product could easily remain in production for many years, and no change was necessarily required to the Seal already awarded to that product. For that reason, the presence of a particular Seal does not always identify the actual year an advertisement, package, or container was manufactured. Instead, it establishes the earliest possible date for that form of the artifact. This distinction is essential when using the Seal for dating: it can tell the collector how old an item cannot be, even when it cannot prove the exact year the item was made.

NOTE ON SOURCES AND METHOD

This guide is built from artifacts in my own collection gathered over nearly forty years. The examples that follow show how changes in wording, typography, seal shape, and placement can be read alongside the broader history of Good Housekeeping's testing program. By comparing an artifact's Seal to the known sequence of Seal forms, a collector can narrow the earliest possible date and better understand where that item fits within the larger story of American consumer trust, advertising practice, and product verification.

SEAL OF APPROVAL: 1909-1914

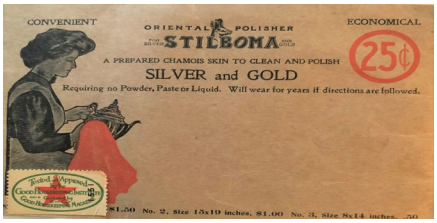
In 1909, the magazine debuted a product Seal of Approval. An Institute testing lab was opened in 1910 for the purpose of verifying the product claims of various home-help items. This was followed by a Bureau of Foods, Sanitation, and Health to test and confirm claims about foods, medicines, and cosmetics. This 1909 seal version was used as a section heading in the magazine to explain how the seal would represent that a product, advertised elsewhere in the magazine, could be depended upon as having been tested for safety, purity, and functionality. This form of the seal, with its various banners, was never used on product packaging or available to outside sources for use. It was a new concept controlled by the editorial staff of the magazine.

SEAL OF APPROVAL: 1914-1917

In 1914, the first Seal was used directly on product packaging. There were two different seals with wording inside an oval ring that corresponded to each testing lab's functions. The seal was printed on an actual gummed stamp, which was printed by Good Housekeeping and then supplied to the manufacturer to affix to the product. Products with an applied stamp are the oldest artifacts for the Good Housekeeping Seal and can be no older than 1914. These stamps turned into a real problem for several reasons. The stamp would not stay on because glues were not that efficient at the time, it took too much manpower and time, which slowed the production lines; and there was confusion around which stamps went with what products.

Here are examples from my collection representing the 1914-era use of a stamped seal. Note here that although the term "stamp of approval" had been in use for some time, it is this actual stamp of approval that popularized its use in household conversation.





This first item shows the actual applied stamp affixed by the manufacturer in the early 1910s. The **"STILBOMA ORIENTAL POLISHER"** was a home-help aid for silverware polish. This is the "Good Housekeeping Institute" version of the seal. These early seals carried a large red star that filled the center area of the oval and is a quick guide to know you are dealing with an early version of the seal.







This second item shows the "Good Housekeeping Bureau of Foods, Sanitation, and Health" used on a food product, **"TABLE KING COFFEE"**, with an image of the stamped seal printed directly on the product. Originally, this product, with a paper label, had a real stamp applied to it, and when the packaging was updated, the manufacturer simply transferred the stamp image into the new packaging.

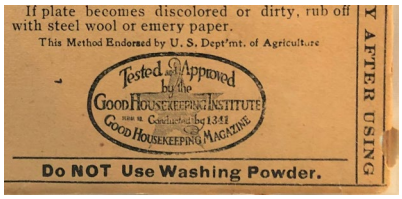
SEAL OF APPROVAL: 1917-1919

In this period, the seal was still trying to catch its footing for product packaging. With the troubles of the stamps, a change was needed to smooth out its use. Sourcing the magazine, it was in 1917 that an individual product ad was first shown with the seal as part of the ad. It was also in this period that Good Housekeeping decided to allow manufacturers to print the seal directly on their products. Although there is a clean break for the use of the seal in the magazine, the packaging use could have come a little earlier. Once this transition occurs, the stamp is eliminated, and from here forward the seal is shown in its oval form only. There are still two seals with the same testing criteria being applied to products.

Here are examples from my collection representing the 1917-era use of seals.



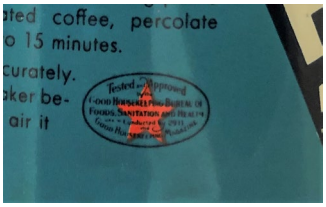




This first item is an early example of the "Good Housekeeping Institute" seal as used on the home-help aid **"THE TARNOFF PLATE"**, used to clean silver. The seals are now printed directly on the packaging. The interior wording of the seal, with its large center star, is unchanged.







This second item represents the use of the "Good Housekeeping Bureau of Foods, Sanitation, and Health" seal printed directly on a food product tin, **"MAXWELL HOUSE COFFEE"**. The interior wording of the seal, with its large center star, is unchanged. When dating these items, they can be no older than 1917.

SEAL OF APPROVAL: 1919-1924

The seal was beginning to mature in its use for packaging, but growth of the program was causing difficulties for staffing in the departments and for the editors of the magazine. Because of the slow pace of testing at the Bureau, a testing backlog was slowing the rate of product approvals, which in turn affected ad sales. To get around this issue, new leadership at the Institute created a new way to incorporate how products were classified so that the Institute could take on more testing at a faster approval rate. The "Department of Household Engineering" was created along with the "Department of Cookery" to combine the seals and to make the approval process quicker. Testing still occurred with both the Institute and the Bureau, and now all three seals were being issued.

Here is an example from my collection representing the 1919-era use of the seal.







Combining the two seals was an effort shown by this seal, "Department of Household Engineering Good Housekeeping Institute," which was introduced in 1919 and means that an item with this seal can be no older than 1919. Here a food item, **"KAFFEE HAG COFFEE"**, is shown as an item that should have been tested by the Good Housekeeping Bureau but was reclassified as a product that met different testing criteria. This form of the seal can be found on all types of products, home aids or foods, at this time. The wording inside the oval has changed, but the large center star remains.

SEAL OF APPROVAL: 1924-1941

Now, this question about combining the seal and reclassification to get around the slow testing did not sit well with Dr. Harvey Wiley, the head of the Bureau. He brought pressure to bear, including getting William Randolph Hearst into the matter, to assure that testing was done properly. More staff and larger labs may have been the answer, but no shortcuts would be tolerated. The editorial staff, the Institute, and the Bureau came together and settled the matter with strict parameters for what and how testing would proceed, and with a settled design for the two seals moving forward. The redesigned seals are again two distinct seals with wording that represents the testing function for each group. This is the beginning of the modern seal as we know it today.

Here are examples from my collection representing the 1924-era use of seals.







This first item is an example of the redesigned "Good Housekeeping Institute" seal as used on the home-help aid **"KELLOGG FLOOR MOP"**. This seal design changes Good Housekeeping into two lines, and the center star has been reduced in size to sit in the center top third of the oval. The printing itself has changed to a more modern style to fit the current state of printing in the industry.





