



The Jet Sex: Airline Stewardesses and the Making of an American Icon

By Victoria Vantoch



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In *The Jet Sex*, Victoria Vantoch explores in rich detail how multiple forces—business strategy, advertising, race, sexuality, and Cold War politics—cultivated an image of the stewardess that reflected America's vision of itself, from the wholesome girl-next-door of the 1940s to the cosmopolitan glamour girl of the Jet Age to the sexy playmate of the 1960s. Though airlines marketed her as the consummate hostess—an expert at pampering her mostly male passengers, while mixing martinis and allaying their fears of flying—she bridged the gap between the idealized 1950s housewife and the emerging "working woman." On the international stage, this select cadre of women served as ambassadors of their nation in the propaganda clashes of the Cold War. The stylish Pucci-clad American stewardess represented the United States as middle class and consumer oriented—hallmarks of capitalism's success and a stark contrast to her counterpart at Aeroflot, the Soviet national airline. As the apotheosis of feminine charm and American careerism, the stewardess subtly bucked traditional gender roles and paved the way for the women's movement. Drawing on industry archives and hundreds of interviews, this vibrant cultural history offers a fresh perspective on the sweeping changes in twentieth-century American life.



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Editorial Review

Review

"*The Jet Sex* is an impressive study of the stewardess as an American icon and a real human being. Those of us who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s can't help but remember her appeal as a model of beauty and of service in the magical realm of flying. Written in sprightly and compelling prose, the book should appeal both to scholars and to the general public."—Lois Banner, author of *Marilyn: The Passion and the Paradox*

"An original, evocative, and informative work that explores provocative questions about the place of the stewardess in American culture. With a flair for storytelling and for capturing the experiences of individual stewardesses, Victoria Vantoch also gives us a rich description of the development of a profession, the development of an industry, and the curious ways in which gender factored in at every turn."—Jennifer Scanlon, author of *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown*

About the Author

Victoria Vantoch is a journalist and historian whose work has appeared in the Washington Post, U.S. News and World Report, and the Los Angeles Times. She is the author of *The Threesome Handbook* and has a doctorate in history from the University of Southern California.

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Introduction

In postwar America, Rosie the Riveters were expected to abandon the assembly lines to become doting homemakers. Television's June Cleaver, who dished up casserole in her suburban dream kitchen, was a shining example of this feminine ideal in the America of the 1950s. But not all women wanted to be full-time homemakers and those who were unmarried or needed to work outside the home had limited options: they could be secretaries, nurses, teachers, or sales clerks, but not much else. Then something monumental happened. Millions of Americans started to travel on airplanes—and the stewardess profession was born.

Now, young working women did not have to change bedpans or take dictation; they could travel the world, meet important people, and lead exciting lives. The stewardess position was well paid, prestigious, and adventurous—and it quickly became the nation's most coveted job for women. Scores of qualified young women applied for each opening so airlines had their pick and could hire only the *crème de la crème*. In order to win a stewardess position, an applicant had to be young, beautiful, unmarried, well groomed, slim, charming, intelligent, well educated, white, heterosexual, and doting. In other words, the postwar stewardess embodied mainstream America's perfect woman. She became a role model for American girls, and an ambassador of femininity and the American way abroad.

This icon of American womanhood showed up everywhere in postwar culture—stewardesses appeared in Hollywood films and national ad campaigns for everything from milk to cigarettes. In 1955 a Disney television series featured an episode titled "I Want to Be a TWA Stewardess When I Grow Up." In 1958 a

Life magazine cover story reported that stewardesses held "one of the most coveted careers open to young American women." Airlines enlisted stewardesses to pose for publicity shots, to mingle with international dignitaries, and to speak at civic clubs around the nation. These enchanting women cavorted with A-listers at parties hosted by the Guggenheims. They also made appearances on the national political scene. Forty stewardesses decked out in tailored silver-sequined minidresses welcomed guests as the official presidential hostesses at Richard Nixon's inaugural ball. Even the nation's most popular doll, Barbie, appeared in a navy-blue American Airlines stewardess uniform (complete with a jaunty cap and suitcase). This was an era when little girls dreamed of becoming stewardesses.

At first glance, the stewardess appears to have been a reflection of conservative postwar gender roles—an immaculate airborne incarnation of the mythical homemaker of the 1950s who would happily abandon work to settle down with Mr. Right. A high-flying expert at applying lipstick, warming baby bottles, and mixing a martini, the stewardess was popularly imagined as the quintessential wife to be. Dubbed the "typical American girl," this masterful charmer—known for pampering her mostly male passengers while maintaining perfect poise (and straight stocking seams) thirty thousand feet above sea level—became an esteemed national heroine for her womanly perfection.

But while the stewardess appears to have been an airborne Donna Reed, a closer look reveals that she was also popularly represented as a sophisticated, independent, ambitious career woman employed on the cutting edge of technology. This iconic woman in the workforce was in a unique position to bring acceptance and respect to working women by bridging the gap between the postwar domestic ideal and wage work for women. As both the apotheosis of feminine charm and American careerism, the stewardess deftly straddled the domestic ideal and a career that took her far from home. Ultimately, she became a crucial figure in paving the way for feminism in America.

The stewardess, as both icon and individual, challenged the traditional gender roles of the 1950s in two ways. First, this multifaceted icon appeared pretty, feminine, *and* career-oriented. The stewardess image in the postwar media conformed to traditional gender norms in many ways, but it also contained porous spaces, which allowed subversive ideas about gender to leak through and to undermine the dominant happy-housewife ideal even during this conservative era. Thus, this icon exposes early seeds of feminism in the popular culture of the 1950s. The stewardess's metamorphosis from the doting, wholesome wife in training of the 1950s (1945 to 1957) to a glamorous, jet-setting career girl by the late 1950s to a seductress who performed in-flight strip teases in the mid-1960s serves as a link for understanding the critical gender transition in America from the dominant domestic ideal of the 1950s to the gender rebellion and sexual revolution of the late 1960s. Her evolution from a wholesome icon into a sex symbol also offers insight into the broader trend in America whereby images of sexualized women's bodies have been increasingly used to sell products.

Second, the profession fostered a budding feminist consciousness among these women long before the American women's movement brought gender inequality into the mainstream national consciousness. Before feminism was a household word, these pretty women had become aware of gender inequality and found ways to resist traditional gender norms. These girdled women conformed to draconian airline beauty codes, but at the same time they also marshaled a powerful rebellion against beauty-based gender inequality in the workplace (such as body weight limits). Using the Civil Rights Act's Title VII, they were among the first women in America to go up against major corporations for gender discrimination of various stripes, and, ultimately, to win landmark victories for working women on issues including equal pay, maternity leave, age limits, and body weight regulations. They also beat the tobacco industry by winning the nation's first ban on workplace smoking. These stewardesses show how gender consciousness burgeoned in one group of women before the rise of mainstream American feminism.

The stewardess also sheds light on how America's identity was being reconfigured as the nation assumed a new role in the postwar world order. When the United States replaced Britain as a world superpower in the postwar international landscape, American national identity changed in important ways. The stewardess came to symbolize America's emerging identity as a middle-class, consumer nation. This beautiful career girl projected an image of America as glamorous, consumer oriented, and technologically advanced—and this potent image would be central to America's international propaganda campaign as the nation aimed to charm and impress the Cold War world. The stewardess became a much-mythologized, international symbol of glamour.

At a time when few women traveled internationally, this pretty jetsetter served a broader role as a female diplomat who sold the American way overseas. Popularly dubbed "ambassadors," American stewardesses were on display all over the world—from greeting visitors at the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels to waving from Coca-Cola parade floats in the Dominican Republic to teaching Soviet women how to apply lipstick.

The stewardess's ambassadorship was particularly symbolic in the context of the global political climate of the Cold War. The stewardess rose to fame at a time when the Soviet Union and the United States were embroiled in a tense, long-term Cold War expressed through economic competitions, a nuclear arms race, wars of extension, and technological contests. The rival empires also fought an intense propaganda war, which prominently featured images of women. The question of which nation's women had better lives and whose women were prettiest were recurring themes in the Soviet-American propaganda wars. Pan Am's stewardess training motto of 1960 captured the power of beauty: "An attractive, well groomed appearance is a social expression of good will and friendship to the world."

These international dialogues about femininity were intricately woven into larger debates about Communism, capitalism, and freedom. In the international image war, American politicians heralded capitalism's superiority based on the abundant lipsticks, girdles, and suburban homes available to American women. On the American side the perfect woman was a dolled-up housewife who lived in a suburban dream home with an assortment of shiny new appliances. The U.S. stewardess encapsulated this very American version of womanhood—one that relied on being a modern, heterosexual, white, middle-class, attractive consumer. She was the ultimate consumer, who knew the latest Parisian fashion trends, wore designer uniforms, applied cosmetics expertly, and lived an enviable jet-setting lifestyle that brought her to five-star hotels in exotic cities around the world. The mainstream American press portrayed U.S. stewardesses (and American women in general) as glamorous, cosmopolitan, pretty world leaders in femininity—they were set in sharp contrast to unflattering portraits of Soviet women, who were depicted as overweight, unfashionable, and generally mannish.

On the other side of the propaganda war, Soviet politicians flaunted their working women as proof of gender equality and a testament to the success of Communism. Soviet propaganda chastised capitalist nations for lagging behind in women's equality by restricting women to unpaid household labor. The model Soviet woman was a worker and loyal party member who participated equally in the nation's economic and political life. Aeroflot stewardesses embodied this archetypal Soviet woman as a model worker, rather than a glamour girl or housewife in training. The iconic stewardess vividly demonstrates how gender, sexuality, race, technology, and beauty were connected to the global culture war between the Soviets and the Americans. Probing how gender and beauty related to broader political debates within the context of Cold War propaganda, this story of the stewardess highlights the ways in which national identity and global politics have been mapped onto women's bodies and how these female bodies were canvases for national ideals.

* * * *

In 1956, when my mother was in eighth grade, she dreamed of becoming the first female astronaut. She went on to become the salutatorian of her high-school class and won first prize in a model UN speech contest that

awarded her a month-long, all-expense paid trip to historical sites around the country. She subsequently earned a B.A. degree in Slavic languages from UCLA. The Library of Congress Aerospace Technology Division recruited her for her Russian language skills, and she moved to Washington, D.C., where she translated Russian aerospace articles on everything from Alexey Leonov, the first person to walk in space, to metallurgy—all of which bored her to the core.

She considered graduate school for international studies but did not have much savings and could not stomach the prospect of living on peanut-butter sandwiches for four years. So in 1968 she brushed up her Russian and interviewed for a stewardess position with Pan Am, which had just started flying to Moscow. She was devastated when the airline rejected her, but she managed to win a position with Eastern Airlines and her hometown newspaper chronicled her success. As a stewardess, she moved into a boarding house with Alice Paul, one of the twentieth century's most famous women's rights activists.

While living with Paul, her life was a collage of contradictions. She lobbied on Capitol Hill for the Equal Rights Amendment at the same time that she went to work as a stewardess wearing pale blue hot pants. In 1969, she gave a speech to Congress in honor of the early women's rights activist Lucretia Mott. The topic: gender equality in the workforce. That same year she also competed in two beauty pageants.

She got married, had my sister and me, continued to fly, and spent much of her adult life feeling guilty about being an absent parent. Flying was never really about the money for my mother. It meant freedom from suburban life and office monotony, and participation in a public realm that was usually reserved for men. I rode on flights with her and felt proud—my mother was the stewardess. And since airlines allowed employees to bring their families on flights for free, by the time I was twelve I had traveled to twenty-five countries.

Some of my mother's early stewardess friends went on to get doctorates in chemistry, to work at the Department of Defense, to manage large households of their own, and to become successful attorneys. My mother, however, continued to fly until Eastern went out of business. Without a job at the age of forty-eight, she desperately campaigned for a stewardess position with other airlines. She created a colorful billboard that read, "I will die if I don't fly" (along with—I'm serious—a song she wrote about her love of flying) and sent it to the American Airlines personnel department, which, after a series of interviews, hired her.

But this was the early 1990s and, by now, being a stewardess had lost its cachet. Around that time, in my early teens, I was interviewing for admission to exclusive New England boarding schools. During one interview that wasn't going particularly well, the pompous interviewer in a tweed jacket suggested that I become a stewardess like my mother—"because of my smile." I knew then I would be rejected. My face burned. I stopped mentioning my mother's profession. It was no longer something to be proud of. It had become an insult.

My fascination with airline stewardesses began with my mother. It began with curiosity about how a talented public speaker who was nearly fluent in Russian and committed to women's rights chose a career that ultimately allowed her to be written off as a vapid sex object and, ultimately, as a low-status service worker.

When I started researching airline stewardesses, I found that the topic made for amusing cocktail party banter. "You're writing a book about that? Wow, what fun!" Yes, it was fun, but it was also serious history. Pretty women do not fit into what we have come to think of as serious history. Real histories cover topics like Lincoln, World War II, or, frankly, anything involving powerful white males. These are the books that populate the history sections at bookstores and libraries. So why study stewardesses?

As I dove deeper into research, I never admitted my personal connection to the world of stewardesses. I feared that if I divulged my secret backstory, the topic might be dismissed and trivialized as fluffy family

history. But as I began to investigate stewardesses of this bygone era, it became patently clear that this mythic icon deserved deep historical research and analysis. The iconic stewardess served as the perfect lens for exploring broader questions about the origins of the women's movement, the relationship between popular culture and social change, and the role of beauty in activism. The stewardess allows us to see beyond our contemporary perspectives that often stereotype women of the prefeminist era as passive victims of gender oppression—by exposing how these women made sense of their lives, why they made their choices, how they felt about the gender norms of their time, and how they came to rebel against gender-based inequality.

This captivating icon also exposes how seemingly innocuous matters like lipstick, girdles, and virginity have unexpectedly—and surreptitiously—been at the forefront of the ideological battles of international politics. Beauty has had serious political, economic, and military consequences. Images of pretty women have structured our possibilities in this shrinking world and they have significantly influenced the lives of American women (and men) in terms of both aspirations and real behavior. Beauty, gender, and sex are not frivolous sidebars to "real history"; they are major forces that have framed global debates and shaped the nation's past. My mother's lasting devotion to her stewardess career drew me to study these powerful, yet often overlooked currents in history.

This cultural history of the stewardess deepens historical interpretations of gender and sexuality in postwar America by considering these iconic women in the context of globalization, Cold War politics, consumer culture, and the emerging emphasis on glamour in the United States. In order to understand the rise of the women's movement and the sexual revolution in the United States both in the 1960s, we need to consider the United States in relation to global politics. Within the context of Cold War propaganda, the stewardess displays how ideas about gender snuck across international borders and changed each nation. The stewardess suggests the ways in which gender, sexuality, and beauty have been powerful elements of international politics. Images of pretty stewardesses have served to install and justify international hierarchies with serious political, military, and economic consequences. Ultimately, some of the most important air raids of the Cold War were waged by pretty women serving champagne at thirty-thousand feet above sea level.

The story begins with the miracle of flight . . .

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