WISCONSIN ON A DARK NIGHT IN RURAL WISCONSIN, Miller marketing guru A. C. Paul gets lost in the Northwoods. No doubt having sampled his own wares, he stuggles through the wilderness, trying in vain to find his way out. Then a beautiful woman appears in the moon and steers him back to civilization. Or so the legend goes. In 1903, the so-called “girl in the moon” became the face of Miller High Life beer. Albeit with a significant makeover, she continues to grace bottle necks to this day.

Linda Hoffman claims her own family ties: She is on a mission to prove that her great uncle, Thomas Wallace Holmes, was the original artist and that he used her grandmother, Ruth Strauss, as his model. Whatever her origins, the girl in the moon helped launch a marketing phenomenon that swept the nation. Mythical creatures like angels, elves, and goats in tuxedos announced the beers of Wisconsin alongside cityscapes, brawny men, and, of course, sultry women. The breweries’ campaigns brought two big changes: They laid the
The turn of the twentieth century was a sweet spot for beer advertising. For one, industrial improvements had transformed local breweries from neighborhood watering holes into major operations—places like Milwaukee were producing more beer than even their most devoted constituents could drink, and now they had the railways to ship it. Meanwhile, the technology of lithography had advanced to the point where companies could make bright, new color prints in batches large enough to circulate nationwide. In the years leading up to the start of Prohibition in 1920, when the Eighteenth Amendment outlawed the sale of alcohol, these developments helped Wisconsin brewers build a lasting reputation.

Milwaukee breweries “had a lot of hurdles to get over when they started trying to get their product and their name out there,” says Erika Petterson, curator of “Art on Tap: Early Wisconsin Brewery Advertising,” an exhibition at the Museum of Wisconsin Art in West Bend supported by the Wisconsin Humanities Council. “On the East Coast and in New York people laughed at them: ‘who are you? You’re this little backwater . . . on the edge of nowhere.’” The first step toward a higher profile wasn’t to promote the product, or even the consumer, Petterson says—it was to market the place itself with bird’s-eye views of a glittering industrial metropolis. “We were not these teeny-tiny towns anymore—we were progress.”

Once breweries like Pabst, Schlitz, Blatz, Potosi, and Miller gained footholds in new markets, they became some of the first companies to solidify the concept of consumer identity, according to the exhibition. John Gund Brewing Co., now defunct but thriving in the days before Prohibition, used the slogan “House Committee on Refreshments” for separate ads showing blue-collar workers hauling a keg into the park and men in suits drinking out of fine glassware. This was the era when Miller coined the epithet “Champagne of Beers” for their High Life—back then, the “Champagne of Bottle Beers.”

Pabst, too, came up with a novel gimmick for their Best Select brew: In 1882, they started tying a blue ribbon around the neck of each bottle. The drink of choice for modern-day hipsters, recognizable simply by the initials PBR, was originally marketed as a high-end beverage. An oil painting in the exhibition shows two of these bottles, not only ribbon-bedecked but also topped with gold foil, alongside a stemmed glass and a plate of oysters on the half shell. The still life, commissioned by Pabst circa 1903, was made into a lithograph and became one of the most famous ads of the early twentieth century.

Wisconsin breweries courted clientele of all sorts. Just as they do today, they cast a wide net with humor, celebrity, and sex appeal—“pretty ladies have always been advertising beer,” says Petterson. Most out of place to the modern eye, a print of a woman spoon-feeding Pabst to her baby introduces a series of ads for “tonics,” the medicinal beers that helped keep brewers in business through thirteen years of Prohibition. “A Boon to Old and Young,” reads one of the ads, touting its product as a cure-all for exhaustion, mental health, old age, and breastfeeding. The last of these, at least, has stuck, though the many mothers who subscribe to it today tend to use brewer’s yeast instead of the final product.

In many households, brewery ads from mailings and magazines took the place of more expensive visual art. “One of the advertising strategies was, the more beautiful the object, the longer they’ll keep it up on their wall,” says Pet-

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