

Wealth Happiness and Safety in the 1920s

Posted on October 22, 2019

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Introduction

Designing a poster about wealth, happiness, and safety in the 1920s requires more than assembling attractive images from the “Roaring Twenties.” The decade combined consumer expansion, mass advertising, automobiles, radio, urban nightlife, and rising stock ownership with profound inequalities and persistent insecurity. A poster that presents only prosperity would miss racial violence, immigration restriction, the legacy of World War I, labor instability, and the fragility created by consumer credit and speculative investment. My goal is therefore to use the poster as a historical argument rather than as a decorative collage. I want viewers to see that money could improve comfort, mobility, education, housing, and access to healthcare, yet wealth could not guarantee emotional happiness or protection from political, racial, economic, and personal danger. The visual design will place symbols of prosperity beside evidence of insecurity so that the contrast becomes part of the interpretation. This approach reflects scholarship showing that the 1920s created both a powerful culture of consumption and sharp social divisions that were often hidden beneath public images of abundance (Dumenil, 1995; Marchand, 1985).

Prosperity and the Meaning of Wealth

The most recognizable image of the 1920s is prosperity: automobiles, household appliances, department stores, skyscrapers, stock-market enthusiasm, and advertising that promised modern comfort. Wealth, however, should not be defined only as possessing a large amount of cash. For many families, it meant regular income, secure housing, food, access to transportation, savings, education, and the ability to survive unexpected expenses. The expansion of installment buying allowed households to acquire consumer goods before they had saved the full purchase price, creating new convenience but also new obligations. Advertising increasingly associated products with personal fulfillment, social status, romance, efficiency, and modern identity (Marchand, 1985). On the poster, I would place bright advertisements and consumer images near household budgets or credit documents to show that prosperity could be experienced through both ownership and debt. The contrast matters because visible consumption can make a society appear richer and more secure than individual families actually are. Wealth expanded choices, but its meaning depended on stability, access, and control over future income rather than on possessions alone.

Happiness, Consumer Culture, and Emotional Limits

Money can contribute to happiness when it reduces hardship and gives people meaningful choices, but the 1920s demonstrate why material abundance should not be treated as emotional security. Better wages or savings could improve housing, nutrition, leisure, transportation, and education, while consumer goods could genuinely make daily life easier. At the same time, advertising often suggested that personal dissatisfaction could be solved through purchase. A car represented freedom, cosmetics promised social acceptance, appliances symbolized efficient domestic life, and fashionable clothing offered modern identity. These messages helped build what Marchand (1985) describes as a commercial culture that connected products with aspirations. In my poster, I would not present consumption as false or shallow in every case; instead, I would show the difference between comfort and fulfillment. Family relationships, grief, health, discrimination, and fear could remain painful regardless of income. This distinction allows the project to make a balanced claim: wealth can remove important sources of suffering, but it cannot guarantee happiness because emotional well-being depends on conditions that markets cannot fully provide.

Safety after War, Red Scare, and Racial Violence

Safety in the 1920s was unevenly distributed. The United States had emerged from World War I, but veterans and families continued to live with death, disability, grief, and economic disruption. Political fear also shaped the early decade through the Red Scare, raids, deportations, and anxieties about radicalism. Racial violence and segregation meant that African Americans did not experience security on the same terms as many white Americans. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, lynching, discriminatory housing practices, and racial intimidation exposed the limits of national claims about prosperity and order (Dumenil, 1995). Immigration restriction similarly defined national belonging through exclusion. For the poster, I would place these forms of insecurity beside images of booming cities and consumer confidence so that viewers can see how the same decade could feel optimistic to one group and threatening to another. Safety is therefore both material and political. A family may possess money and property yet remain vulnerable to violence, discrimination, or state action. Historical interpretation must ask whose security is being described rather than assuming one national experience.

Women, Changing Roles, and Unequal Freedom

The 1920s also brought visible changes in women's public roles. The Nineteenth Amendment had expanded voting rights for women nationally in 1920, although racial discrimination continued to block many Black women and other citizens from effective participation. More women entered paid employment, higher education, consumer culture, and public leisure, while popular images of the

“new woman” emphasized fashion, mobility, and sexual independence. These developments created real opportunities but did not eliminate unequal wages, domestic expectations, or legal and social constraints. Kyvig (2002) emphasizes that daily life during the interwar period varied greatly by class, race, location, and family circumstance. In my poster, I would avoid using the flapper as a universal symbol of female life. Instead, I would contrast images of urban leisure with women working in factories, offices, farms, or homes. This broader representation shows that freedom could expand in some areas while economic dependence persisted in others. It also supports the larger argument that happiness and safety cannot be measured only through visible modernity or consumer participation.

Credit, Speculation, and Hidden Insecurity

The prosperity of the decade also contained financial vulnerabilities. Installment credit allowed consumers to spread payments over time, while stock-market enthusiasm encouraged many Americans to associate rising asset prices with permanent economic progress. Credit itself was not inherently irresponsible; it could help households purchase useful goods and businesses finance growth. The danger arose when future income was treated as certain and when leverage amplified losses. The Library of Congress’s collection on prosperity and thrift documents how saving, credit, advertising, and consumerism became central subjects of public debate during the Coolidge era (United States Library of Congress, n.d.). I would represent this tension through contrasting images of bankbooks, installment advertisements, stock tickers, and luxury goods. The visual message would be that apparent abundance can depend on assumptions about tomorrow. This is important because safety includes resilience: the ability to withstand unemployment, illness, market decline, or unexpected expense. A household with expensive possessions but little savings may look prosperous while remaining financially fragile, a distinction that became painfully clear when economic conditions deteriorated at the decade’s end.

A Personal Story and the Poster’s Historical Argument

One of the most important elements of my poster is the image of a child who has lost a father, because it prevents the project from reducing history to economic indicators. A war death, workplace accident, illness, or act of violence could transform a household regardless of national prosperity. The child represents how grief and insecurity are experienced at the personal level while statistics describe change at the national level. I would position this image near symbols of wealth to ask viewers whether money can compensate for irreversible loss. The answer is not that wealth is meaningless; financial resources can protect a bereaved family from eviction, hunger, or interrupted education. Yet the emotional absence remains. This visual contrast also reminds me that the act of designing a historical poster involves selection. I choose which sources appear together, which images dominate, and which story guides the viewer. Using primary documents responsibly therefore

requires context. A historical display becomes persuasive when images are not merely collected but arranged to show relationships among economic opportunity, emotional well-being, and unequal exposure to danger.

Conclusion

The 1920s cannot be understood simply as a decade in which wealth created happiness and safety, nor as a period in which prosperity was entirely illusory. Consumer growth, technological change, expanding credit, and new cultural possibilities improved daily life for many people, while money provided genuine protection against some forms of hardship. At the same time, war trauma, racial violence, political fear, immigration restriction, gender inequality, and financial fragility limited the security that prosperity appeared to promise. My poster will therefore use contrast as its central method. Bright commercial images will represent aspiration and material comfort, while evidence of grief, discrimination, debt, and instability will show the limits of those gains. The project has taught me that wealth, happiness, and safety overlap without being identical. Money can create options and reduce risk, but it cannot eliminate loss or guarantee equal protection. Historical interpretation becomes more accurate when public symbols of prosperity are placed beside the experiences that those symbols tended to conceal (Dumenil, 1995; Kyvig, 2002).

References

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