

---

---

## Wasted Words

Packaging in the '90s" and "Demographics & Discards," in *Garbage* (Dec. 1992-Jan. 1993), Dovetale Publishers, 2 Main St., Gloucester, Mass. 01930.

*America the Wasteful* could be the title of a hit song on the environmentalist jukebox. The lyrics would tell how Americans in 1990 each threw away about four pounds of solid waste—about a pound more apiece than they had discarded 20 years earlier. The villain of the piece: excessive packaging, especially plastic packaging such as the foam clamshells McDonald's used to use to hold hamburgers.

Discarded packaging does make up one-third of the nation's waste, the editors of *Garbage* note, but much of it consists of items used in shipping, such as pallets, crates, stretch wrap, and cardboard cartons. It is strictly functional and reduces waste due to breakage. Even consumer-product packaging, the sort which so arouses the ire of environmentalists, usually serves legitimate purposes. "Certainly, offensive packaging exists, and it gets the lion's share of attention," the editors write. "But most packaging is both necessary and efficient, the result of years of improvement." Packaging, for example, protects meat and dairy products from bacterial contamination and helps keep the spoilage rate of food in the United States extremely low—less than three percent.

So why is packaging regarded as an environmen-

tal crisis? Because it is assumed that it is growing by leaps and bounds, "that we will be buried in plastic microwave trays if we don't do something." But the assumption is incorrect. The increase in garbage during recent decades, the editors assert, is due not to packaging but to demographics.

Between 1972 and 1987, the U.S. population increased 16 percent, but, thanks to delayed marriages, more divorces, and the growth of the elderly population, the number of households increased 34 percent—and total discards (after recycling) went up 28 percent, according to a study by Franklin Associates. More households meant more grass clippings and other yard waste, a big component of garbage (up 34 percent), more junked dishwashers, refrigerators, and washing machines (up 74 percent), and more home-furnishing discards (up 80 percent between 1970 and 1988).

The massive entry of women into the workplace, along with the shift toward a service economy, also had a large impact on garbage, the editors point out. Office paper increased 87 percent and copier paper, 150 percent. With less time for cooking and cleaning, Americans increased their consumption of time-saving products, such as dishwashers and prepackaged food.

Even so, the editors say, the weight of food packaging and utensils in the nation's trash was up only seven percent during the years its population rose by 16 percent. Reduced packaging and recycling apparently made a difference. Now that may be something to sing about.

---

---

## ARTS & LETTERS

---

### *Democracy's Portraitist*

"Rembrandt Peale: Citizen Portraitist of the New Republic" by Stephen May, in *American Arts Quarterly* (Winter 1993), P.O. Box 1654, Cooper Station, New York, N.Y. 10276.

Art historians traditionally have looked upon Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860), son of the early American artist Charles Willson Peale, as little more than a solid, competent craftsman. But

lately his stock has been rising. The National Gallery of Art paid a record \$4.07 million in 1985 for *Rubens Peale with Geranium*, an 1801 portrait of Peale's brother. The painting, in the view of art historian John Wilmerding, is "one of the most original images in the history of American art" and has "the power of a profound national icon." More recently, the National Portrait Gallery mounted an exhibition of some 75 works selected from Peale's massive oeuvre of more than 1,200 paintings and drawings. The exhibition's catalogue, by Lillian B. Miller and