

## **“Materialism: Our Consuming Interest”**

*By: Linda Kulman*

As America became the economic leader around the turn of the twentieth century, it also took the lead in consumerism. By 2003, personal consumption accounted for 70 percent of the nation's gross domestic product. “We're opting for income over free time, and that income gets translated into consumer goods,” says Juliet Schor, author of *The Overspent American*. And if income falls short, Americans satisfy their wants by incurring debt, which now accounts for about 110 percent of personal disposable income.

We are a nation that believes in having it all. In 1950, American families owned one car and saved for a second. In 2000, nearly one in five families owned three cars or more. And while some other countries pride themselves on thriftiness - Americans shell out more for garbage bags than 90 percent of the world's 210 countries spend for everything. Indeed, America has double the number of shopping malls as it does high schools.

Why is our appetite for stuff so insatiable? For one thing we have come to think that buying is an essential expression of freedom and individualism. Consumption is a competitive business, with a constant ratcheting up of expectations. We no longer measure ourselves against the Joneses next door but against people we know only from the media. The piling on of such images gives us a sense that we need more and we need it sooner.

Says James Twitchell, author of *Living It Up: America's Love Affair with Luxury*: “Objects are now carrying the status weight that blood and religion and pigment used to carry.” Which is to say that Americans wear their wealth on their sleeve. Labels no longer hid discreetly inside the collar. Today Tommy Hilger's prized name can take up most of the shirt.

And after you get all the loot home, then what?

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