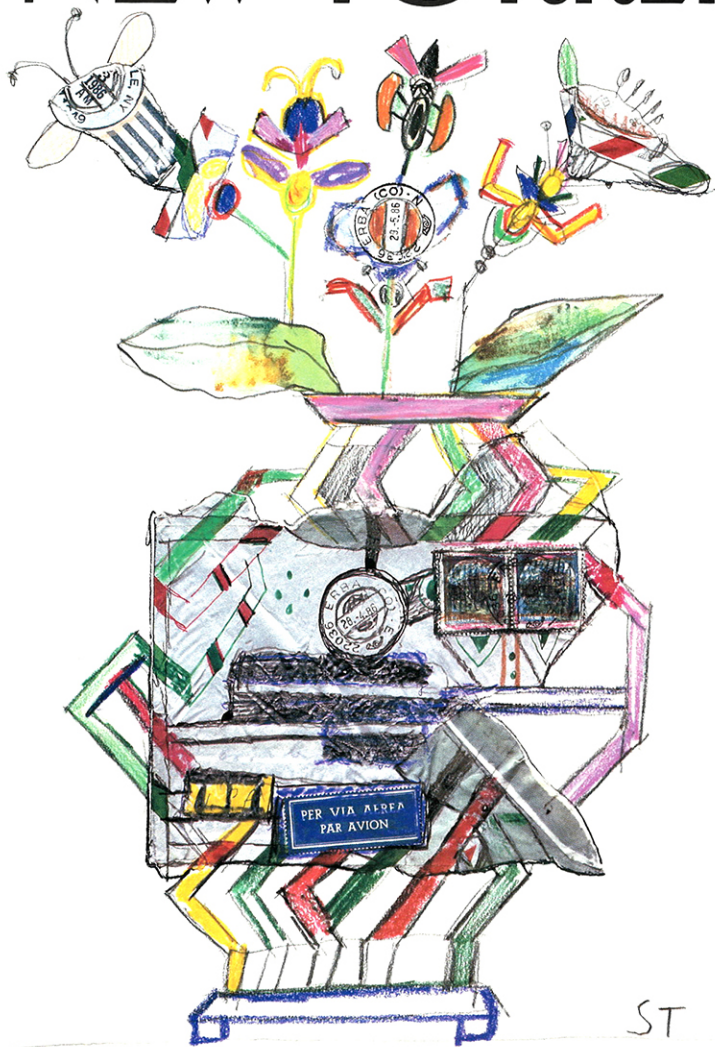


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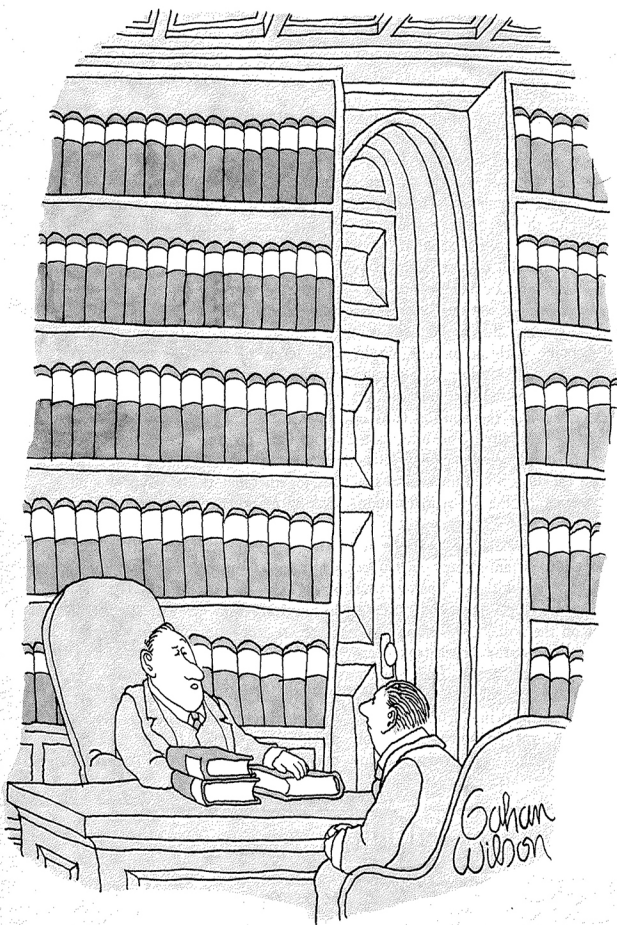
## Of Our Time

**R**ICHARD J. THALHEIMER, the thirty-eight-year-old president and founder, a mere nine years ago, of The Sharper Image, which is a hundred-and-thirty-million-dollar-a-year (as of

the latest count) catalogue-cum-twenty-five-coast-to-coast-shops (as of the latest count) enterprise, specializes in selling items that he proudly char-

acterizes as objects he lives with and loves. ("I call them an eclectic mix of unusual quality products.") From his headquarters, in downtown San Francisco, Mr. Thalheimer, who speaks with certainty of himself as "a man of our time," mails each month to people all over the world three million copies of his catalogue, at a cost of a million four hundred thousand dollars for each mailing, and he has determined through highly respected, highly contemporary polls that he nails at least a hundred and three readers for each copy sent out. He has also determined that the average Sharper Image customer is a forty-four-year-old male with an annual income of a hundred thousand dollars. The catalogue presents the items in visually oriented, practically jumping layouts, including some descriptive words created by three full-time writers. ("I personally edit every piece.") It has covers that are the ultimate in up-to-the-minute imagery, fixed firmly on the fast track. Two covers in 1986 alone featured Marilyn Monroe, and the last issue of the year featured an M.M. look-alike—in tight spangled red dress and red shoes, and holding a red leash tethering a white poodle that sported a red hair bow—being ogled by Marx Brothers look-alikes standing over the words "Beverly Hills Store Now Open." Every month, Mr. Thalheimer says, his catalogue demonstrates what an entrepreneur can achieve. ("We're bringing up a generation of people who think of us as L. L. Bean. We know that thirteen-to-fifteen-year-olds are fans and readers of the catalogue. Once you win their hearts, you have them for life.")

In person, Mr. Thalheimer is the very model of a modern major entrepreneur: tanned and muscular; deliberate and tenacious; tidy and clean; eye on the ball; a graduate of Yale, Class of 1970 ("I was a psychology major, because you can do anything if you know what makes people tick"); a graduate of the Hastings College of the Law, in San Francisco ("I was going out to build a big business, and I wanted to learn how to protect myself"); a money-maker as a college freshman ("I was the only Yale to show up at the Encyclopaedia Britannica office for a job as a salesman of it and the Great Books, and I was an immediate success. I made enough in my freshman year to buy a Porsche"); a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, who went to San Francisco after graduating from Yale and started a paper-



*"Well, there was a Malone who tried that in 1942 and won, but, on the other hand, there was a Parker who tried it in '63 and lost."*

and-office-supply business, run out of his apartment, that made a profit of twenty thousand dollars a year and paid his way through law school ("By now, I was accustomed to being a success"); with a wife, Elyse, who is a full-time partner in the business; and with a quickness to act, in 1977, on an ad he spotted in the magazine *Runner's World* for a jogging watch which did not say where it might be bought—he called the manufacturer of the watch, arranged to sell it, and made a profit, in his company's first year, of three hundred thousand dollars on that item alone. After that, Mr. Thalheimer welcomed his parents, who still live in Little Rock, into the business, his father as vice-president of the gemstone division and his mother as a designer of gem settings. Mr. Thalheimer also started going to electronics shows, sporting-goods stores, toy fairs, and fitness exhibits, and made trips all over the world to look for more items.

In the past few years, Mr. Thalheimer has developed hobbies ("I developed my hobbies in order to test my items"): running, bicycling, scuba-diving, cross-country skiing, photography, motorcycling, and flying. He is the co-pilot of his company plane, a Citation jet, which he uses to visit his stores, hopping from San Francisco to Dallas and on to Houston and New Orleans and back. ("I relax by flying my own personal plane, a V-Tail Bonanza.") He designs his own suits. He uses everything he sells. ("I choose things because I like the way they look. The ones I like the best sometimes become 'exclusively ours.' Like the giant wave machine. Exclusively ours. Three hundred and ninety-nine dollars. I am guided by my own entrepreneurial philosophy, which is: I sell what I like. I sell as though I were selling to myself.")

Mr. Thalheimer lives in a rambling modern house in Marin County, overlooking San Francisco Bay. He wakes up, at 6:30 A.M., to a voice-deactivated alarm clock (\$39). He sleeps in a



*"Listen, pal! I didn't spend seven million bucks to get here so I could yield the floor to you."*

Sharper Image T-shirt (color, burgundy, and it also comes in gray; shirts in either color free with purchases of \$50 or more), covered by an electric blanket that knows how to warm different parts of the body at different temperatures (\$139), and on a Neck Pillow (\$49). He gets up and turns off his Sound Soother, the Surf (\$129). He brushes his teeth with an Interplak (\$99), which is an electric toothbrush. ("An incredible product. It doesn't vibrate; it rotates. It's a fun toothbrush.") Before starting out of the house for a run, he hits the panel of his Toshiba coffee grinder and maker and puts on his Seiko pulse watch. He goes out with his dogs, two giant schnauzers, who are wearing electronic flea collars (\$49 each), returns and puts on his Turkish robe bearing the monogram RJT (\$75), sits for a while in his Getaway massage chair (\$1,595), checks his weight—a hundred and

seventy-four pounds—on his talking scale (\$99), drinks a cup of coffee, turns on his combination fan and heater called the Bonaire Gyro Twin Aire (\$129), checks his pants in the Corby Classic Pants Press (\$159), works out on the compact home gym (\$189), checks his blood pressure on the automatic monitor (\$99), notices some dust on his windowsills and cleans it up with a Panasonic Cordless Vacuum (\$69), and then gets dressed, choosing to put on one of several watches: the Moonphase (\$99), the calculator-phone-directory watch (\$59), or the dress watch Invicta (\$199). He picks up his executive micro recorder (\$199). He can't locate his car keys, so he claps his hands four times and they chirp at him by means of the Key Finder (\$19). He gets into his car, a Mercedes 500 sedan. It has a Clifford car alarm. ("That's seven hundred dollars, but I sell the Theft

Stop, for nineteen dollars and fifty cents—it serves practically the same purpose—and I have the house version on the house. Isn't that great?" He turns on his heated car seat (\$99) and drives to work, using a car phone. Within reach is his GUL radar detector (\$169). In his office he has a pair of Samurai swords (\$199), a 1,500-carat topaz paperweight (\$1,000), a Nautilus Abdominal Machine (\$485), a Marilyn Monroe lithograph (\$399), a cobalt lamp (\$199), a touch desk lamp (\$89), a wastebasket with a paper shredder attached (\$149), a globe of the world (\$179) from Denmark ("Exclusively ours. It shows Israel. I also sell one, made for the Middle East, that doesn't show Israel"), some model Ferrari cars (\$69 each), a special putter (\$79), a Porta Copy (\$349), and an Alpha phone with speaker and two-hundred-number memory (\$149). At 6 P.M., he leaves for home. He often stops off at a small airport thirty miles north of the city and goes flying in his Bonanza, wearing his orange-colored Révo aviator glasses (\$149). Entering his house, he hits the button of his Sony Integrated Answering System (\$239). He turns on his Proton FM/AM clock radio ("only ninety-nine dollars"). He lifts weights in his Universal Gym (\$3,500) and spends about forty-five minutes after that on the cross-country-skiing Fitness Master (\$399). He goes for a swim in the bay wearing Barracuda goggles (\$39), returns, and puts on the remote-controlled stereo (\$795), which plays compact disks. ("I like Mozart.") For a while, he watches the pelicans and gulls on the bay through Bushnell binoculars (\$99), checks the time on the captain's clock of solid brass (\$99), hears the quack-quack (instead of ring-ring) of his duck phone ("I have the first generation, in plastic. The present generation is better—it's wood, and eighty-nine dollars. But both have the same quacks"), lights a fire in his fireplace with a Flexi-Lite (\$29), and hooks up a Multi Vision to his television screen to permit him to see what is going on on two channels (\$499). While watching the news, he likes to hold and play his hand-held computer backgammon game (\$69). He relaxes on one of three massage tables, usually choosing the Acu, which massages without a masseur (\$1,595). He finishes himself off with

a hand-held massager. ("Only a hundred and fifty-nine dollars. It generates tiny pulses of sound, desensitizing pain spots. It's a great concept. It really works.") Mr. Thalheimer and his wife eat light, healthful meals. They cut up their vegetables with knives sharpened on their electric Chef'sChoice (\$79). Before retiring, Mr. Thalheimer uses his vacuum to make sure there is no dust. He often uses his Luma telephone to call his parents, to whom he gave one, so that he and they see each other (in a still, snapshot image) on screens while they are talking (\$1,450). He keeps a slide viewer (\$149) on hand in order to see product ideas submitted to him. ("I may look at something like Uncle Peppe's Clam Opener, which was not us, somehow.")

The other day, Mr. Thalheimer, wearing a Thalheimer-designed suit—a custom-made gray tweed with a belted sports back and a black Ultrasuede collar and matching black piping on three pockets—and his Moonphase watch and carrying what he identified as "the newest generation of miniature Casio musical keyboard," made a quick trip to New York, scouted some possible midtown sites for a new shop, and then looked in on his Sharper Image store on Pier 17, at the South Street Seaport. It was packed with well-dressed, mesmerized-looking shoppers, studying the gadgets in a leisurely way. ("We get tons of Wall Streeters here. Our stores take advantage of our good will.") The items were arranged, under glass or on glass shelves, with nice breathing space between item and item. The store manager, a robust middle-aged gentleman wearing a dark-blue suit, greeted Mr. Thalheimer with a smile, and Mr. Thalheimer quickly handed him the newest generation of keyboard. Mr.

Thalheimer then checked on things. He sat in the Getaway chair and had his back massaged with rollers while listening to the chair's cassette player. He tried out the Luma phone and studied his own picture on the small screen. He picked up a cue stick for the miniature ("exclusively ours") pool table (\$139) and played a shot. The store manager applauded, and told Mr. Thalheimer that a Sharper Image Wurlitzer jukebox, handmade in California, complete with the top records on the current charts (\$8,400), had been sold that morning to a

woman in Bayside, Queens. Mr. Thalheimer nodded, and gave a pat to a sculpture that changes at a touch (\$1,295). Then he passed his fingertips over the top of it.

"Dust," Mr. Thalheimer said. "Dust makes me very unhappy."

"Dust collects fast in the store," the manager said.

"I know," Mr. Thalheimer said sympathetically. He passed the palm of his hand over the dusty top, cleaning it the old-fashioned way.

