

Mid-Century Ads: Advertising from the Mad Men Era

Do not be misled. This stunningly beautiful collection of work should be in the collection of anyone interested in advertising – or in American culture – of **any** time, and its appeal is not limited to those who are fond of the 1950s and 1960s, or the television show that features the exploits of Don Draper and his merry pranksters.

Jim Heimann has created something in two elegant volumes that is more than a repository, more than an encyclopedia, more than an archive. Over the course of more than 700 pages across two over-sized volumes, Mr. Heimann, pulling apparently from his personal collection, has assembled a stunning array of work. Some are beautiful (for example the Container Corporation ad featuring a George Washington quotation) and some are just bizarre (see the ad for Old Gold cigarettes on p. 121, or the one facing it featuring a secretary wearing a diving helmet). Some I still can't believe they sold – like the one for Tangee lipstick on p. 124 and some that just make me want to buy the poor copywriter a drink (“Fun in the sun with steel”? Really?)

Each volume also includes an essay from esteemed chronicler of design Stephen Heller, which are reprinted in three languages (though the reader is advised that the accompanying ads are different in each translation, so you'll not want to skip them).

Because the books are over-sized, one feels as if one's seeing the ads in – or close to – their original magazine state, which not only lets you experience the layouts and aesthetics the way they were meant to be enjoyed, but it also means you can actually watch copywriters wrestle with voice and language and the eternal jamming of ten pounds of features into a five pound sack.

Which is why although each client is identified in each ad, one wishes they were further tagged with the names of the agencies who produced them. Advertising was evolving and changing quickly during these two decades and it would be valuable to see which shops were consistently breaking new ground, which ones were just mining the same old vein regardless of client, and which ones were able to adapt their style to the styles of their clients.

These two decades saw literally millions of pages of work and any collection which culls from that trove must by definition be as arbitrary as an algorithm. That said, the editors are to be commended for a breadth of range in both category and genius. The famous are here – from Ogilvy's Rolls Royce (accompanied later by a clever parody of it) and DDB's “Think Small” to George Lois' “Nauga”, Polyakoff's “Does She or Doesn't She?”, and WRG's Branniff ads. But there are also some you've never seen – for feminine protection products, for office forms, even for the original Kodak carousels.

And then when you think you've seen everything, Howard Gossage's FINA “Pink Air” ads show up, looking exactly like the grenade from another planet they were – and still are – and to which we still strive to catch up.

Early on in the first volume, Heller writes “the Fifties, for all its integration of Modernism into some advertisements and campaigns was a time when American had bounty galore, yet had not yet found its best voice” – but we disagree. Two distinct voices **do** emerge from these pages and they are “best” in the sense that they are “true”. In the first volume it is exactly that bounty and its concomitant promise of a future of goodness, opportunity and possibility that shines through again and again. Technology is our helpmate. Science is our friend and Outer Space is our playground. And in the context of consumers emerging from a past of Depression and War one can understand why the future might look so rosy by comparison. Though rarely does one see it illustrated so dramatically.

And then, as we move to Volume Two, our gaze shifts from the ineffable horizon to our own insufferable navels, as our obsession with our looks, our youth, our status, ourselves becomes all-encompassing and all-consuming. Dreams of great deeds are replaced by dreams of better ‘dos. Even the stars lose their luster, becoming less a symbol for our aspirations and instead just one more way for a model to ask for a Smirnoff, or for our kids to desire a breakfast drink.

There is much here to marvel at. Much to be inspired by. And even much to be embarrassed by. But most of all, there is much to remind us that some day, some how, someone will be shaking their heads over our work as well.