

BOOKSHELF

Pitching paradise

Vintage graphics capture the image-making of surf culture.

YOU see a surfer on an advertisement or a postcard and think, "This guy never owned a pair of pants in his life." But do you roll your eyes and dispatch him with the thought, "What a loser"?

No, argues Jim Heimann in the introduction to "Surfing," a collection of vintage surfing graphics published by Taschen. Lots of folks, particularly those who live far from the epicenters of beach culture, extract a heady vibe from looking at a wave rider.

Surfers personify freedom. In "Surf Swimming by Sandwich Islanders," an 1872 anonymous engraving that sets the giddy tone of "Surfing," naked men and women glide across a glassy closed-out wave, hair blowing against the backdrop of a volcanic paradise. Skip ahead 80 years or

so, past the fun-in-the-sun images of longboarders cruising toward shore in snug, high-waisted trunks, to a time when coastal towns used surfers and their apparent hedonistic tendencies as marketing tools.

"Manhattan Beach California! Where Living All Year 'Round Is Vacation Everyday!" reads the copy accompanying a photo of an Adonis (who miraculously rides without getting wet) on a 1955 travel brochure. A promo for Huntington Beach relies solely on the, ahem, magnetism of its surfer-model to attract visitors.

Such "local, naive stuff" faded in the '60s, Heimann says, as Southern California's cities merged into a megalopolis and the Hollywood feature film "Gidget" took the surfing lifestyle global. Paperback novelists and pop music artists played with the theme. So did Rick Griffin. The artist's car-

toons starring the grom Murphy appeared in *Surfer* magazine and inspired Heimann, then a Playa del Rey school kid, to become an illustrator, graphic designer and all-around hoarder of L.A. ephemera. "I doodled Murphy in the margins of my notebooks," Heimann says.

Heimann's "Surfing" bails on the sport's visual timeline around 1980 because, he writes, that's when other board sports — skate, snow, wake — spun off to develop their own subcultures. Suddenly the surfer had to share his crown as California's premier nonconformist. It may have gotten diluted in this country, but the image of the unstarved Bohemian is still a viable export, Heimann says. The ratio of "Surfing" copies sold so far in France to copies sold in the United States? "16 to 1."

— PAMM HIGGINS