



The celebrities may fade (remember Spuds MacKenzie?), but the images remain indelible. What do the ads of the 1980s say about their cultural moment?

Larry Hagman, Pitchman

80s: All-American Ads

Edited By Jim Heimann
Taschen, 603 pages, \$39.99

By NED CRABB



SOCIAL HISTORY comes in many forms: diaries, novels, newspapers, photographs and...advertisements. In the ads of decades past we can see what people wore and what they drove,

what attitudes they struck and what gestures they made. We can also see, of course, the goods that a consumer might covet and the strategies that companies might use to sell them.

In the past few years the publisher Taschen has offered by-the-decade collections of American advertising, starting with the 1920s. It arrives at the 1980s with "80s: All-American Ads," edited by Jim Heimann and beautifully printed on glossy, heavy stock. Like its predecessors, the book is a vivid snapshot of a decade's sense of style, not to mention its consumerist obsessions.

Still, an inner voice may be asking—the 1980s? Aren't they just a little too around the last corner for history? Well, yes, America through the eyes of 1980s advertisers doesn't look radically different from what you'll see if you go outside and take a look up and down the street.

But there are notable differences. No SUVs, for example; only Jeeps and jeep-like Ford Broncos and Range Rovers. No tattoos or piercings, no backpacks on adults and no cellphones. One ad features a big, clunky cordless phone and brags about its range of 1,000 feet from the "base station." Imagine!

More than clunky phones seem like ancient history. Among the celebrities are Larry Hagman in a black 10-gallon Stetson and black cowboy boots flogging Black Velvet Canadian whiskey and the Smothers Brothers being cute for Magnavox. In the 1980s, the (late) artists Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat helped to launch the Absolut

ads that we now see in a slightly different form. Other figures making an appearance in the book, and all but invisible today, include Joe Camel (he of the phallic physiognomy) and various Marlboro cowboys.

There are some striking campaigns and images. Remember that terrier with the black patch over his eye, slurping up a foaming Bud Light? That was Spuds MacKenzie, the "original party animal." Animalistic in a more refined way, Cindy Crawford and Brooke Shields stare out from the page entrancingly on behalf of all sorts of designers. For Sony Full Color Sound, the great Milton Glaser drew the black silhouette of a Victorian man, wearing a bowler, set against a blank music sheet; a multi-colored snail representing the cochlea is placed where the man's ear should be.

As such variety may suggest, the 1980s had no particular "look." Steven Heller, in an insightful introduction, explains: "Print had been the primary creative medium until the sixties; by the seventies, television commercials had stolen the creative thunder; so, by the eighties, print had become the table scrap of the advertising industry and a paltry number of print campaigns emerged."

But that's no reason to spurn this attractive book. History aside, it offers aesthetic pleasure—beauty in illustration and concept. In one ad a saxophonist and a black cat, shown in flat perspective, walk atop the black, toy-sized outline of a city, a red sky behind them. It's an ad for Takara Sochu vodka. (What is it about vodka?) Another ad shows virgin snow with animal tracks leading from foreground to a distant line of bare winter trees, the whole scene backlit by sunset-tinged clouds. Delicate type running across the snow reads: "I am Michigan. Something wonderful comes over me in winter." At some point today's hurricane-wrecked cities may want to hire the creative team behind that one.

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