

When cars were nifty, peachy and swell

A gorgeous new book on the golden age of car advertising provides a fascinating take on the 20th century. By **Lucy Davies**

I wonder if the divorce rate soared in 1920. "Unequaled gift value" ran the advertisement in December 1919. "No present could be more useful; none could better express appreciation." Father Christmas, waves cheerily to the man in the moon. Except it isn't the moon, it's the Michelin Man, and his sack is full of inner tubes. "The custom of giving tubes for Christmas has grown in popularity" we are assured.

Pity the husband who believed it.

There can be few more pleasurable lenses through which to view recent history than the many incarnations of the motor car and the means by which we have been sold it. *20th Century Classic Cars* is a collection of more than 400 print advertisements collected by Jim Heimann for the publisher Taschen. It traces the effect of technological innovations, historical events, and popular culture on car design, which confirm America's vehicular prestige in vivid detail.

Dickens might have used

the railways as a metaphor for the screeching speed at which Victorian society was hurtling forward, but the car soon overtook.

At first the domain of crackpots inventors and the goggled rich, early ads were aimed at people who took care of cars rather than owners – oil and water had to be changed every few miles and flat tyres were frequent. But technology developed and so did the means with which to advertise it: magazines from *Life* to *Fortune* and *Time* took care of aspirational men with disposable incomes, and although women were at first secondary targets, *Vogue*, and *Ladies Home Journal* were quick to follow, until the buy-buy-buy tendrils reached into every American home.

Manufacturers were quick to harness celebrity endorsement. Henry Ford enlisted Bonnie and Clyde (in absentia, naturally) to his cause: by 1934, when it became known, a Ford was Mr Barrow's preferred getaway car. GM's Alfred Sloan followed suit with Hollywood's

elite (luckily producer Cecil B DeMille was a neighbour) and Daimler even claimed the King of England as sponsor.

Firms hired respected illustrators such as James Montgomery Flagg, known for his First World War recruitment poster featuring Uncle Sam. Although colour photography had been introduced commercially in 1938, car ads clung to painting, better able to romanticise the impossibly large vehicles purring through each. Idle rich in furs and silk stockings step in and out, attended by discreet doormen and drivers. Long shadows stretch across the sidewalk under peachy evening skies or beneficent moons. Later years saw Riviera-style lithographs: all

cloche hats, boaters, raccoon fur and gin. Typefaces suggest an invitation to a ball.

By midcentury the car had become the plaything of rock and roll. The Beach Boys sang

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about theirs; Elvis painted his pink. Detroit coped by using slogans such as "Dodge fever", and a vocabulary of nifty, peachy and swell. American

Dream machines (clockwise from top): the TravelAll, the GMC truck, a tigerish Pontiac and Studebaker's Erskine Six

Motors offered "blue jean" editions of their cars.

There are poignant notes to some of the changes this book highlights. The deaths of James Dean and Jayne Mansfield prompted a welter of ads focusing on safety. And lest we forget, many of these early brands, such as Winton and Overland, are now forgotten.

We're now quite used to and appreciative of cars being celebrated in films, novels, even songs, but recent economic events have honed sensitivity to our buying habits, making this a timely, even admonitory publication.

❖ *20th Century Classic Cars: 100 Years of Automotive Ads* is published by Taschen, £27.99