

The real 'Mad Men': New book explores notable ads of the '50s and '60s

The fifth season of "Mad Men" premieres Sunday on AMC, marking the return, after a 17-month hiatus, of Don Draper and the gang at the advertising firm Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce.

For the latest on "Mad Men," we suggest you pay a visit to our colleague Jen Chaney's blog, *Celebritology*, where you can get a ["preparatory guide,"](#) or read Washington Post critic [Hank Stuever's review](#) of the upcoming season (he promises no spoilers). Then, of course, there's an opportunity to [take a quiz](#) and discover which "Mad Men" character you are. Or, if you're wondering how The Washington Post looked in the "Mad Men"-era, [take a tour of](#) the ads that appeared in the newspaper back then.

Ideas@Innovations also decided to [take a more quirky look at today's "Mad Men."](#) (For our first nominee, [look in the mirror.](#))



The cover of "Mid-Century Ads: Advertising from the Mad Men Era." (Photo courtesy of TASCHEN)

And there's [a new tome from art books publisher Taschen that](#) explores the work of the country's real-life mad men — the kings and queens of advertising — who brought America some of its most well-known catchphrases and advertising icons. Remember the "Marlboro Man" from Leo Burnett Co. in 1955, Maxwell House's "Good to the last drop" from Ogilvy, Benson & Mather in 1959 and the NASA "meatball" logo created by James Modarelli the same year? And these are just to

name a few. The two-volume hardcover features a full-color timeline of notable events from the era.

The advertising of the mad men period, even as it showcases many of the tactics used in today's advertising, also serves as a revealing history of the nation's cultural evolution. There are some interesting contrasts, such as images of overt sexuality and chauvinism even as American society was seen as largely buttoned-up and staid.

One passage, in particular, stood out as I was reading through review pages of the book and getting ready for my own reintroduction to the fictional "Mad Men" universe:

Superlatives were the lingo of capitalism and consumerism. Words like "clearest," "larger capacity," "unequaled in precision," "best yet," "nothing like it," "miracle," "smartest," and "extra power," to name only a few from the lexicon, dominated ads that sold American commercial values — industry and innovation — with gusto, and sometimes creativity. Or shall we say, rarely creativity. The majority of Fifties promotion could be likened to souped-up catalog pages: Whether for sinks or pencils or Cretonne slipcovers, it was all just merchandise being hawked and hustled. Television commercials were in the nascence and magazine ads ran the gamut between visual titillation and verbal hosannas (as in praising Mammon).

In looking back at these ads, and looking forward to the innovations you'd like to see next, how do you anticipate that advertising will change in the coming years — assuming you anticipate it will change at all?