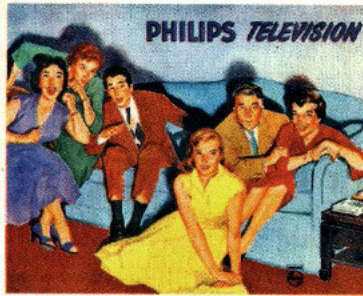


Photo-Op: Ad Infinitum



EVER SINCE 1957, when Vance Packard published 'The Hidden Persuaders,' we've had the idea that advertisements are a porthole to our cultural subconscious. The massive two-volume compendium 'Mid-Century Ads: Advertising From the "Mad Men" Era' (Taschen, 720 pages, \$59.99) would certainly have us think so. It tells a more complex tale than the AMC drama invoked in its title, whose nostalgia for lost glamour is typically mixed with a heavy dose of condescension. The advertisements of the 1950s and 1960s certainly didn't shy away from casual sexism; the same blonde 'girl' sells everything from men's shirts to Heinz ketchup, and she has nothing on how stewardesses are displayed. (American Airlines in 1967 saw fit to show a comely young woman in her hostess uniform staring directly into the camera with the tagline "Think of her as your mother.") It's easy to be smug about such ads—and about the brightly optimistic hues that heralded such wonders as tail-finned cars, color television and touch-tone phones. But as the years flip by, the impression of a new energy in the culture is undeniable, most of all in verbal and visual wit. Most of the ads appear at nearly their original size, allowing readers to scrutinize the (often copious) text and appreciate a level of graphic design and typography that far exceeds anything served up on our tiny screens today. An ad like Braniff airlines' dynamic presentation of its stewardesses' outfits (below) is simultaneously astonishing, offensive and an unintentionally apposite emblem of the late-1960s loosening of mores. We should think twice before condescending: When scholars gather today's ads—for diet pills, direct gold sales, Viagra and worse—what will they imagine our own collective subconscious looked like? —The Editors

