

Book Review: *Mid-Century Ads: Advertising from the Mad Men Era*

The title is pretty self-explanatory, but it does not do justice to the incredible beauty contained in the two-volume *Mid-Century Ads: Advertising from the Mad Men Era*. The first book features magazine ads from the 1950s, and the second focuses on the 1960s.

The advertisements for practically every product under the sun reflect an amazing alternate view of history. It is an idealized world full of promise, and every single item here was meant to improve your life. The post-war surge of consumerism in the United States was on, and Madison



Avenue were there to guide us every step of the way.

As the most critically-acclaimed television show since *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* has inspired a lot of bandwagon-jumping. Hopefully, the reference to the program will help get these books into more hands. You will not find anything crafted by Don Draper here, but the artwork and copy contained here is something very special indeed.

I thought I might have been alone in being a person who gets a kick out of old advertisements, but evidently that is not the case. They often say much more about the culture of the era than the articles themselves. Not that you will find any mention of civil rights or other issues of the day in them of course. But we are able see the culture at large slowly accepted sweeping societal changes through the lens of mainstream advertising.

One example is men's hair. The books span the 20 years between 1950-1970, and the pictures speak for themselves. As we know, the idea of "long hair" on men was once a very visible form of rebellion. As the years progress though, the look became more and more acceptable.

What I found much more intriguing is how certain ads (and admen) were able to completely alter societal perceptions. Volkswagen is an excellent example. Their "Think Small" was so revolutionary that it was even mentioned in an episode of *Mad Men*.

In the Introduction, the editors discuss what they found especially noteworthy among the hundreds of examples that have been reproduced in the books. The entire Volkswagen campaign is one, and their points provide excellent food for thought. To quote: "Witness the Sixties campaign for Volkswagen created by Doyle Dane Bernbach that took a little Nazi 'people's' car designed in the late 1930s under Adolf Hitler's auspices and instantly made it the best-selling economy car in big-car-loving America by claiming its perceived deficits were truly advantages."

Brilliant. And what is even better is that we given the opportunity to see how this process worked over the years through the full-sized ads themselves. Each book's Introduction is reproduced in three languages, English, German, and French. Since all of the ads are from American magazines though, they are all in English.

The two volumes of *Mid-Century Ads: Advertising from the Mad Men Era* are housed in a sturdy cardboard slipcase, with the book covers represented on the front and back. Most importantly though, great care has been made to authentically reproduce the original ads. Since many were full-pagers in *Life* magazine, the books are an oversized 13.9 x 10 inches (the size of the original *Life*).

This is a beautiful package, worthwhile on a number of levels. It works as a wonderful "stroll through the past," as a very informed history of this incredible era, or simply as a collection of some very stunning artwork. No matter what your particular interests are, the books are highly recommended. Taschen Publishing have done a magnificent job with this package.