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A Good Read: *Mid-century Ads - Advertising from the Mad Men Era*

By Jim Heimann and Steven Heller



Your coffee table may need some substantial reinforcement before putting this weighty duo from Taschen on display. However, this could be the definitive title for anyone who loves 1950s and '60s American graphic design and advertisements. If the inclusion in the title of the popular US TV series encourages more people to pick it up, then it's an excusable indulgence.

Each book is given over to one decade and, with the exception of a multi-lingual preface and two short essays on advertising in each, there is little text. Instead the adverts themselves outline the social, retail and political history of the time, generally one to a page.

It's the story of advertising as the catalyst for the consumerism necessary after the war. Modernism was used as a powerful marketing tool, embraced by the big ad agencies to create desirability in the same way that Apple has done in the last decade. It would be wrong to pretend that this was an enlightened time however, and this too is reflected in the ads. Author Stephen Heller comments, "Viewed from this vantage point the sixties had no civil rights protest, Vietnam war, or sex, drugs and rock and roll". In the main they all play to very comfortable aspirations.

The level of design innovation, period redolence, and surprising humour make for an entertaining read. Alcohol to aeroplanes, holidays to home goods, it's all here and it looks very cool indeed. For furniture fans, ads from the likes of Herman Miller and Knoll demonstrate a skilful combination of graphics and photography. TV advertising had not reached the filmic levels of production we see today, and instead it was in two-dimensional renderings that the greatest innovation could be found. And these books, in all their 720 pages of beautifully reproduced imagery show this to the full.

Midcentury Ads - Advertising from the Mad Men Era, edited by Jim Heimann with introduction by Steven Heller. Published by Taschen, ISBN 9783836528344, 720 pages, dimensions 335 x 238mm, priced £34.99 is available from www.taschen.com

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