

Monash University Library

Rare Books Collection

Men of "Stamina", women who "Dare" – March 27 to June 5, 2014

Introduction

When the upwardly mobile middleclass of the nineteenth century discovered the delights of leisure, comfort and a disposable income, they required clues on how best to indulge these wicked new temptations. While promotional material has existed since the invention of the printing press, it was the avid consumers of the nineteenth century and their appetite for the latest and most fashionable that bore forth the industry of persuasion. Through sophisticated, clever, witty, flattering, and, one has to concede even misleading and offensive amalgams of text and image, advertising has cajoled consumers into purchasing everything from perfume to petrol; mascara to fungicide. Nothing was – or is – beyond need of promotion in the ever-crowded communication environment of modern life.

The advertising industry often bears the brunt of an aggressive anti-stance; cast as the parasitic child born of capitalism, consumption and 'want' over 'need'; draining the purses of the easily swayed. But, this is to do it an injustice. Advertising is a mirror to society and the currency of material culture. It documents the progress of thought, opinion, prejudice, fashion, politics and taste. It is a daily archive of popular ideas, reflective of the culture that it hopes to embrace and persuade, not offend with ideals counter to those of its audience. Certainly there are those advertisements that occasionally induce a community to rage, but largely they are a benign, though highly persuasive, appeal to the modern ego. We like to think of ourselves as sophisticated, independent thinkers capable of making our own decisions, but there are few of us who have not, at some point, been seduced by the allure of advertising, prepared to believe that we are better, smarter or stronger because a product promises to empower us as such.

Advertising art and the potent language of persuasion that it has finely tuned over the last 150 years cannot be dismissed as culturally meaningless, contemptible. It has delivered a de facto art education to the masses by persistently referencing current art and design movements in their layouts. The curvaceous vines of Art Nouveau and the slick, ornamental chevrons of Art Deco were not just for architecture, but frames for logos and products; the obscure juxtapositions of the Surrealists would be reinterpreted to promote everything from stockings to light bulbs; and Pop Art turned the tables to draw on advertising as its subject matter. Early twentieth century advertising has recently become a desirable art form in its own right, since the modernist posters promoting *Campari* and the like have begun to grace the wall of every chic domestic interior. There is hardly a movement that has not, at some point, been brought to our attention by the ad man.

The language, too, is one that has developed in parallel with middleclass western culture. The abundant, florid prose of *The Carbollic Smoke Ball* (no. 7) seems ludicrously wordy in an era of 'txt-msg' abbreviation and 140 character limits. But, in 1891 it knew its audience: middleclass Victorians, recently educated in the benefits of hygiene and keen on domestic science and medicines; literate enough to comprehend the claims of the makers; and wealthy enough to indulge in the time to actually read such swags of text. Unfortunately for the Carbollic makers one of their audience was also smart enough to engage in litigation when their wordy advertising claims failed her and she took them to court.

The Carbollic Smoke Ball Company ad is one of the earliest to draw on that now familiar marketing device, the celebrity endorsement. The impressive list of the English gentry the maker lays claim to as patrons, could not help but impress any aspiring wannabe. We see this device repeated

throughout the exhibition from the Mexican-born, Hollywood bombshell, Delores Del Rio, promoting Lucky Strike; to Graham Kennedy waving his culinary skills over Parka's Pantry Barbeque Buns.

By the 1950s copywriters had taken a knife to advertising prose. Its language shrank to ever-repeatable catch phrases that they hoped would enter the everyday lexicon of their audience. 'TAA, the Friendly Way' would remain one of the airline's most memorable taglines until it was absorbed by Qantas in the 1990s. Some continued long beyond the death of the ad itself. "Not happy, Jan" has been repeated interminably after the Yellow Pages ad disappeared 13 years ago. This is beyond advertising; this is branding: product messages that build a relationship with its clientele and defines how they feel about the product: humoured, loved, wanted, needed, special.

Over the years advertising has provided fertile ground for some of our most deserving creative artists, giving them not only an income but an audience far greater than any gallery could provide. Among them Douglas Annand (1903–1976), Eileen Mayo (1906–1994), James Northfield (1887–1973), and Gert Sellheim (1901–1970). Most artists, however, remained anonymous; their authorship ignored in favour of the product or service to which they loaned their considerable skills.

This exhibition of advertisements and advertising ephemera is but a fraction of material held in the Rare Books Collection at Monash University. The collection cherishes each item as a valuable cultural asset no less important than their oldest, rarest and most fragile document. They understand its importance as a social documentary; a detailed and revealing history of changing and occasionally persistent values. It induces awe and fascination alongside the occasional gasp at ideas so ludicrous, sexist or racist we blush with twenty-first century embarrassment. It is beyond nostalgia and far more than syrupy memories of a past long gone. This collection is a revealing portrait of how we came to be the people we are: "Men of Stamina" and women who "Dare".

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