Design Notebook: Advertising art: Indelible images and cultural commentary

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Design Notebook

Ada Louise Huxtable

Advertising art: Indelible images and cultural commentary

FOR anyone who lived through the 1950's, "Which Twin Has the Toni?" is as much a part of the culture of that decade as rock-and-roll and the New Look from Dior. With every contrived curl glued in place in duplicate, and two pairs of red-painted lips at once suggesting and denying sensuality (the hair, of course, could never be disarranged), the two identical models (were there one or two?) were the epitome of the girdled, made-up, up-tight, pre-lib woman. No wonder the next step was to let it all hang out. Of such marvelous trivia is the stuff of history made.

Of such trivia, also, is the successful stuff of advertising made. The prime purpose of advertising, of course, is to sell products. And it does so by using every artistic and expressive medium ever invented, and by playing on every hope and fear that make society responsive to its messages.

The amount of money spent, and the part of the economy kept moving by advertising, are far from trivial. But it is exactly the fact that advertising is based on the passing standard of the moment, the ephemeral in taste and aspiration, reflecting an image of ourselves yielding more truths more quickly than any philosophical analysis, that gives it such stunning validity as social and cultural commentary. Any historian does without its record at his peril.

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Beyond its role as cultural indicator, advertising design is, indisputably, an art form of our time — as art directors (no blushing violets, they) continue to remind us with incestuous awards and exhibitions. The art of advertising design requires a quick and clever eye, an inspired sense of social and marketing psychology, a very strong style, and a gift for image and impact — qualities that are not to be undervalued. The people who practice this art are often tremendously talented, and they do their job very well. What they do, in fact, is to invent a mythical world, based on mythical values, which we may or may not admire; they create "indelible images" that we do not forget.

It is as the art of design that the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street) has approached the subject in the current exhibition called "Indelible Images: Contemporary Advertising Design," which will run through March 25. Certainly advertising art is a natural concern for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design. Richard B. Oliver, the museum's curator of contemporary architecture and design, who has selected and installed the material with the help of Dale Furman, is aware of the manners and mores involved, but he is even more interested in the techniques by which they are delivered.

There is a fascinating array of these techniques on display, from the literal and folksy illustrations of Norman Rockwell and N.C. Wyeth in the 1920's to the computer graphics of the 1970's. Skilled drawings were replaced early by expert photography. Every high art form was pressed into service almost as quickly as it appeared, from Pop Art to the white plaster figures of George Segal's sculpture (for Levi's jeans, of all things).

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One period was strongly influenced by the success of the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine." But psychedelic cartoon styles were soon followed by the eye-tingling color images that have been the computer's unexpected contribution to contemporary esthetics.

The conspicuous omission in this obviously limited survey is the airbrush work of the 1930's, a technique that swept the field of graphics for more than a decade, from the Wrigley twins to the Petty girl.

But the skill and imagination of the design and technical execution often far outdistance the message, which, as Mr. Oliver points out, is usually much more conservative than the medium and style in which it is expressed. In fact, the degree of inventiveness seems to be in inverse proportion to the content of the advertisement. The less a product has to offer as a selling feature, the more remarkable its graphics are likely to be.

What, for example, can you really say about Seven-Up except that you can drink it when you're thirsty? Do not underestimate the identification value and stunning impact of a star-burst galaxy of brilliant colored images suggesting a visual "trip." The medium is infinitely better than the message.

It is this dearth of real content that makes advertising art seem so slick and superficial in spite of the talent expended on it, since content is the real determinant of the stature of any art form. It is as pretentious, then, to try to elevate advertising art to some sort of esthetic pantheon as it is unfair to underestimate its efficacy and skills.

If the direct messages are often minuscule, the indirect messages about our times and world are broad and pervasive. Advertising is an intensely class-conscious medium, caught up with symbols of status and kinds of gratification that indicate the careful stratification of people's standards and expectations with acute, manipulative precision.

Soft drinks originally touted for simple "refreshment" are now promoted into touchstones of a youthful generation or a carefree life style — both of which almost everyone envies or covets. The aristocratic pitch for the white-tie-and-tails high society of the Lincoln automobile advertisements of the 1930's would never sell the coke-and-Gucci culture where the money is today. De Beers's "A diamond is forever" has been updated to "A diamond is for now."

Still, credibility is as much of a factor in advertisement acceptance as trendiness. The Perdue chicken and Volkswagen car campaigns have been exceptionally witty and entertaining, but they also have the advantage of being backed by a superior product.

The purpose of the Cooper-Hewitt show, which was aided by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts and contributions of exhibition material from advertising agencies, is to state the museum's serious interest in the subject of advertising design, and to start the process of building up an appropriate archive of advertising art. This introductory exhibition is no more than a preliminary and highly selective sampling of the field.

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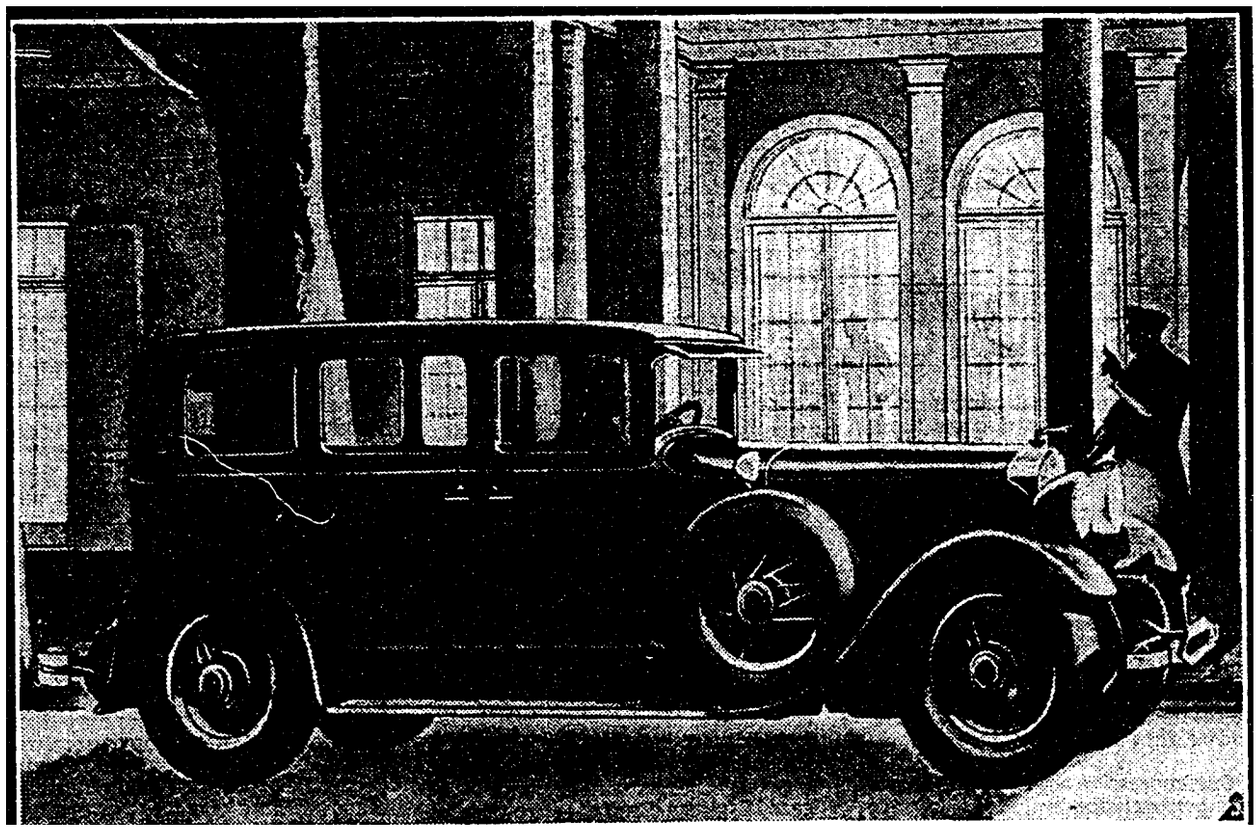
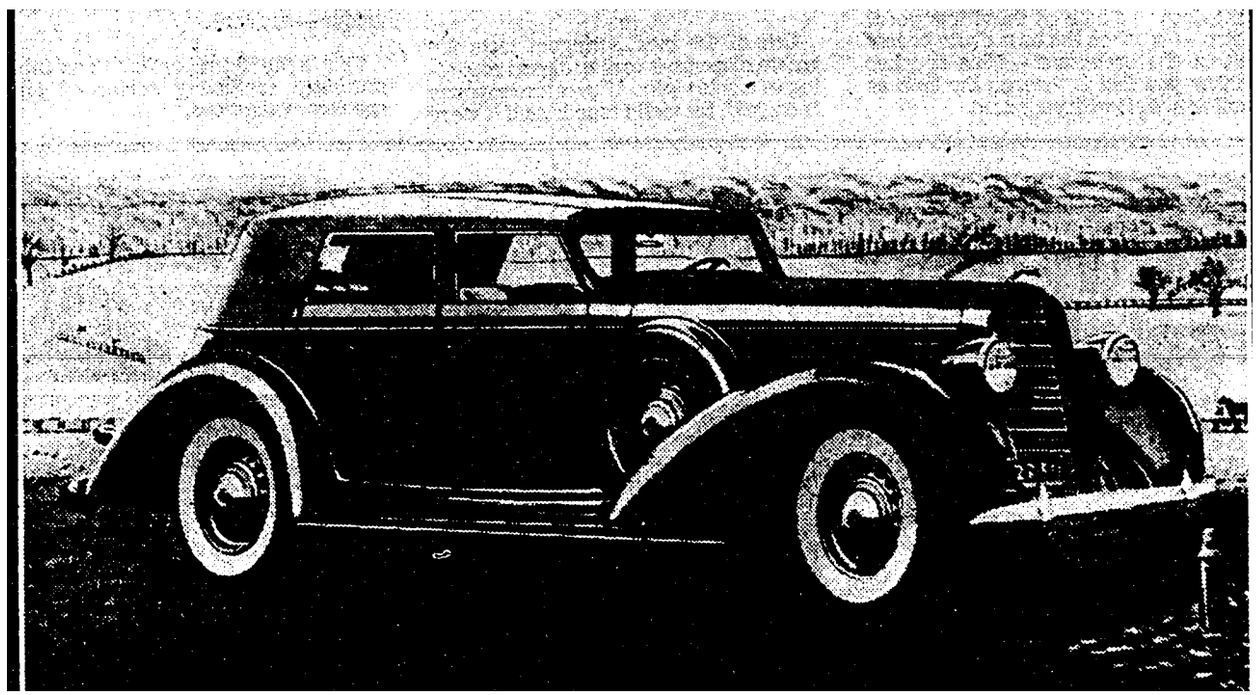
But for one viewer, at least, it afforded the delights of a pre-glitz-and-gimmick world, when the sell was soft, the style relaxed, and the appeal direct and simple. In the 1920's, Old Dutch Cleanser could promote itself by promising no more than "healthful cleanliness," and an English butler pronounced himself proud to serve the gentleman's drink, Canada Dry. Today, the products would have to be named Zap or Fizz and be extolled by "believable" housewives and hyperactive idols of the youth market.

In the 1930's, Coca-Cola continued to supply "wholesome refreshment," and Borden's Elsie the Cow flourished. The postwar years brought that doomed vestal virgin, the flawless young woman dressed for a ball and posed in a setting that aspired to Hollywood, House Beautiful and Buckingham Palace for the "Modess . . . because" campaign.

Then came hair and jeans, the sexual revolution, minority rights, Vietnam and doing one's own thing. Nothing was wholesome anymore, and it took a lot to make anyone look or listen. Today the messages are being addressed to a whole new class and money structure, in terms of completely changed perceptions and needs. But the ads still have to be, in Mr. Oliver's words, "funnier, faster, more full of status and luxury, more foolproof and fantastic than daily life." If the pitch has changed, the myths live on.





Two classics of car design, celebrated in the Cooper-Hewitt advertising art show, used an aristocratic pitch: the 1930 Lincoln sedan parked outside a grand house, above, and the 1936 Lincoln V-12 Le Baron, below, at the Maryland Hunt Club.