

# The Secrets Hidden in Old Candy Wrappers

The look of the products we consume says a lot about us.



A collection of action figure boxes at the Museum of Brands, Packaging, and Advertising in London. Photographs by Museum of Brands

By **Henry Chu**

PUBLISHED APRIL 7, 2016

LONDON Somewhere along the line, the word “laxative” was no longer a selling point. Or so the marketing gurus for Kellogg’s cereals decided, ditching the slogan splashed for years on boxes of All-Bran—“the natural laxative food”—in favor of the more euphemistic “naturally high in fiber”.

Advertisers also took note of the changing status of women as the sexual revolution and feminism gained steam. Pictures of smiling, aproned housewives started disappearing from labels on cleaning products and canned goods in the 1960s. Now they seem banished for good.

Then there’s “Allan,” a fresh-faced, well-coiffed brunet doll in shorts and unbuttoned shirt, which Mattel, maker of Barbie, marketed 50 years ago—without irony or innuendo—as “Ken’s buddy.” The promise on the box that “All of Ken’s Clothes Fit Him!” has different implications now in a world of growing marriage equality.

As society goes, so goes the marketing, branding, and packaging of the products it consumes. Logos, labels, mottos, boxes, and wrappers don’t just gauge changing aesthetics and technology; they hold up a mirror to the shifting mores and attitudes of the people they aim to attract and please.

That's one of the ideas behind the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising in London, which showcases objects most of us heedlessly throw away and uses them to trace the visual history of the last 150 years of consumerism, starting when the Industrial Revolution was in full swing.



Kellogg's and other cereal makers have often changed their packaging to reflect their customers' changing dietary interests. Photograph by Peter Yates, Corbis

The museum is the brainchild of British social historian Robert Opie. Where others see trash, Opie sees important artifacts. He's spent the last half-century obsessively amassing a collection of about 500,000 items, beginning with the candy wrapper he squirreled away as a teenager on a visit to Scotland. He'd been struck by the thought that the wrapper signified a particular moment in time, and that future iterations of it might be quite different.

To tour the museum—recently reopened in bigger quarters in west London—is to enter a time warp and embark on a voyage of either discovery or re-discovery, depending on your age.

Kids on field trips are surprised to learn that many of the products they consume boast long pedigrees—that people were eating Mars bars and Corn Flakes decades before they were born. For older visitors, there's the pleasure of nostalgia, of coming across obsolete brands or old-fashioned packaging that bring back times gone by.

"They're a portal to their past," Opie says. "You get generations of families coming around, and you hear grandparents talking about their experiences and lives and how it relates to them... That's the best thing that happens to many people: stories from your parents and grandparents you don't know about."

The recollections triggered by the exhibition are often all the more meaningful because of the items' ordinariness, not their extraordinariness.

"You see these cereal boxes or candy wrappers or detergent cartons, and you're immediately taken back to when you saw them on your dining table or in your kitchen growing up," says Allyson Stewart-Allen, an American in London who specializes in cross-cultural marketing. "It's connected to memory in the same way that smell is connected to memory. Smell is a more immediate connection, but the visuals are also immediate and evocative and emotional."

Beyond the personal memories are the wider social and technological contexts that can be read in the items on display.

Take gender roles. An old advertising poster aimed at harried housewives for a mangle, or mechanical laundry press, ends with the admonition: “Talk this over with your husband.” By the '60s, as more and more women were emancipated from the home and no longer needed to talk it over with their husbands—presuming they were married—such chauvinist taglines vanished. (This sometimes cut both ways: in the '70s, a box of instant oatmeal could still depict a father and son looking delighted at finding a cooking product that even they, as domestically incompetent males, could manage.)

**WE MEN**

*"We men are rather helpless about choosing presents. And we know we're helpless! That's why we're so grateful for a hint from our wives as to what they really want for Christmas." That's men the world over.*

Let **your** hint be—  
**The HOOVER**

Tell your husband how you'd love to have a Hoover this Christmas. Explain what it'll mean to you—how it'll make the housework a hundred times easier and yet far more thorough. Tell him that with a Hoover in the house you'll have something more precious than any fur or jewel—you'll have *leisure!* And if he thinks a vacuum cleaner too humdrum a present to give you, tell him it is not humdrum to be given the acknowledged best vacuum cleaner in the world! Any Authorised Hoover Dealer will give you further particulars. Or write to Hoover Limited, Dept. A, 229-233, Regent Street, London, W.1. Remember! The Hoover can now be obtained for less than many ordinary suction cleaners.

**A British Empire Product**

**The HOOVER**  
*It BEATS... as it Sweeps as it Cleans*

HOOVER LIMITED, 229-233, REGENT STREET, LONDON, W.1  
Advertising is the consumer's guarantee of merit.

This 1929 ad presents a new vacuum cleaner as the ideal gift for a woman. Pieces like this began to fade in the 1960s, and are largely absent from advertising and packaging today. Photograph by Jeff Morgan, Alamy

Aesthetically, graphics gave way to the budding art of photography, and crowded lines of text explaining a product's provenance and benefits surrendered to short attention spans and punchy slogans. In the museum's "Brand Histories" section, where visitors can see the evolution of household names like Grape Nuts ("fully cooked, pre-digested breakfast food") and Brillo pads, the labels on Ovaltine tins eventually stop containing enough words to fill a legal contract and switch to pictures of wholesome country lasses.

Although the museum focuses on British products, American ones are well-represented. In fact, it's notable how pervasive American brands and pop culture have been, for decades, on the opposite side of the Atlantic: not just Kellogg's cereals, but Coca-Cola, Maxwell House coffee, Birds Eye frozen vegetables, Tide detergent, Kraft Thousand Island dressing, and board games based on the TV shows

“Rawhide” and “The Six Million Dollar Man.” Especially in the immediate postwar era in Europe, America was the land of plenty.

“There’s something about the kind of U.S. consumer culture and what that represented here,” Stewart-Allen says. “If you think about postwar Britain, the U.S. was a bonanza of products and consumer heaven, where we always had a proliferation of choice. You didn’t have that here. You had ration books.”

Opie’s plans for the larger space include more interpretive, thematic displays that tell, for example, the story of the switch from glass to flexible plastics, or of the never-ending quest for convenience—all of which say something about modern society’s experience of the material world. Eventually, the museum is expected to house about 20,000 items, up from 12,000 in its previous location but still just a tiny fraction of Opie’s collection.

“People often say to me they’ve been several times and that every time they come, they learn another layer of history. You’re trying to awaken people’s ideas,” he says of the museum. “I’ve poured all my finances into it, and I’ve poured all my time into it ... All I’ve tried to do is increase appreciation for a subject that has never really had any status.”

*Henry Chu, former London bureau chief for the Los Angeles Times, remembers too many candy wrappers than is good for him. Follow him on Twitter.*