Between the classic films of Walt Disney in the 1940s and the televised cartoon revolution of the 1960s was a critical period in the history of animation. Amid Amidi, of the influential Animation Blast magazine and CartoonBrew blog, charts the evolution of the modern style in animation, which largely discarded the lifelike aesthetic for a more graphic and often abstract approach. Abundantly found in commercials, industrial and educational films, fair and expo infotainment, and more, this quickly popular cartoon modernism shared much with the painting and graphic design movements of the era. Showcasing hundreds of rare and forgotten sketches, model boards, cels, and film stills, Cartoon Modern is a thoroughly researched, eye-popping, and delightful account of a vital decade of animation design.

**Personal Review: Cartoon Modern: Style and Design in 1950s Animation by Amid Amidi**

Ever since I saw this book on Amazon, I kept returning to the page, almost ordering it. Nothing told me what to expect: I thought it would be black and white and sparsely illustrated. Instead, it's an oversized, hardback, 200 page coffee table book drenched in color. Any coffee table would be glad to have this book on it, and no one visiting the home could resist picking it up.
up. If, like me, you love 'fifties cartoons and animation...well, you see where this is going.

Coffee table books are either all splashy pictorial or exhaustive in their entries. This one hits mid stride. It's divided by studios, and subdivided by animators or designers (once they were one and the same). Since most animation of this period is vastly underrated and mostly unknown, the first surprise is that there were so many studios. "When modern design met cartoons, the look of animation changed forever" reads the back cover blurb. Well, where can you see this animation?

With the Disney Treasures series out now, viewers may be surprised to see the modern touch in some Disney cartoons (well documented here by Amidi). I have a poster on my wall that says "This Theater Regularly Shows Terrytoons Cartoons". Now I know who designed the smiling square Terrytoons logo on it (Gene Deitch), and why it looks so much like the design for Tom Teriffic, the wonderfully minimalist cartoon segment which ran on the Captain Kangaroo Show.

Amidi also revives glimpses of the UPA shorts I saw in film class: Thurber's "The Unicorn in the Garden", Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart". the later Columbia Mr. Magoo shorts. Now that Gerald McBoing Boing is out on DVD, I wondered how there could ever have been a McBoing Boing Show on network TV, as I read there was, since there seem to be only a handful of Gerald cartoons. Amidi enlightened me with the amazing news that the McBoing Boing Show didn't just show Gerald shorts, but all sorts of experimental animation.

All of the money for animation was in commercials, which, as the radio announcer gave way to the new visual medium, were mostly product endorsements by celebrities--visual radio. That changed in the '50s when designers brought modern style, snap and sparseness to their ads, many of which outdo most of the ads on TV now for creative styling.

Making a TV cartoon, however, had its own hurdles, since one minute of advertising had the same budget as an entire half hour cartoon show. Enter Hanna-Barbera and the much maligned idea of "limited animation". In retrospect however, it appears as a brainstorm. For all the naysayers, Ed Benedict's designs for H-B characters--Yogi, Huck, the Flintstones, to name a few--are so endearing that we still watch them today. The '90s renaissance on Cartoon Network and Nick came from animators and designers who looked back in tribute to this era, and theirs are the cartoons which, besides these others, have endured. Amidi provides a lavish spread of Benedict's designs, and for me, he will always be one of the patron saints of cartoons.

Are we done yet? We haven't begun. If you want facts and figures, they're also there, although most of these bits read like an encyclopedia. In the '50s there were often TV spots for something called "Religion in American
Life”, with the tagline, "Worship this week at your church or synagogue". Some of these spots were quite creative, and various denominations, in this era when everyone went to church, also did their bit to provide uplifting TV.

The best known, of course, is Davey and Goliath, the clay animation series by Gumby creator Art Clokey, and sponsored by the Lutheran Church. Unfortunately, this series is today mocked by "adult" cartoons like Moral Orel, made by those who apparently don't realize that Davey and Goliath is already camp. Yet, those with open minds may be amazed to find how modern was the design in a Baptist Church sponsored uplift spot called "Jot". I can remember a few well-animated station breaks by the Methodist Church, alas lost to history. Until now. Amidi devotes two pages to ten color stills from a super-modern Methodist short from 1959 called "Stop Driving Us Crazy". This "offbeat marriage of gospel, design, and jazz", as Amidi calls it, now tops my must-see list.

Are there omissions? Yes, because the period was so prodigious that 200 pages cannot do it justice. In the Warner Bros. section, I'm glad to see Maurice Noble finally getting credit for his dazzling backgrounds in "What's Opera, Doc" and "Hareway to the Stars". The 22 page Disney spread rightly touches on "101 Dalmations" and "Mars and Beyond", but as Amidi knows, this is the tip of an iceberg. Soundac Studios is briefly mentioned in passing, but doesn't get it's own section. Yet they are known for two modern art high points: Colonel Bleep, the ultra-modern cartoon martian, and numerous stylized weather spots that local stations could run depending on climate conditions.

Anyone interested in this era may find more in the magazine Amidi edits, Animation Blast, or at the site he co-runs with animator and historian Jerry Beck, Cartoon Brew. Those with only a passing interest in the era or cartoons who crack the cover may yet find themselves drawn in by the inviting pictures, anyone of which is worth a thousand words.

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