

## Uses of the Eternal: De Beers Advertising 1939-1948

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Diamonds have been tied to the idea of the eternal through advertising. De Beers and the N W Ayer advertising agency played an instrumental part in promoting the diamond as a physical object that lasts forever and can symbolize immortality for individuals. The idea is exemplified in the famous slogan "A Diamond is Forever." From the beginning of the association between De Beers and N.W. Ayer advertising agency, the advertising of diamonds used the idea of the eternal to sell diamonds. From 1939 through 1948, the usage of the idea of the eternal shifted. Originally centered around the eternal through a person's legacy, the focus of the eternal shifted from an emphasis on the future (a person's legacy), to the present (emphasis on the nature of "invincible" diamonds and current war production), and then to the past (memorializing the past through diamond engagement rings).

The work behind this extended abstract is of a preliminary nature. The research into De Beers advertising and the use made of the eternal in those advertisements is still in the exploratory stage. The nature of preliminary research means that the following abstract uses some contingent language. The purpose of the presenting of this extended abstract is to receive feedback and provoke discussion about the use of the eternal by advertisers.

### RESEARCH PURPOSE

The overall research purpose of this paper is to look at a product that has been portrayed as eternal and analyze the advertising that surrounds that product. "A Diamond is Forever" is an iconic statement about diamonds and usually ranks high on lists of top marketing slogans (Twitchell 2000). The N.W. Ayer advertising agency developed the slogan in 1948, after having created advertisements for De Beers for about a decade (Kanfer 1993). The advertising that is of interest for this paper was created by the N.W. Ayer advertising agency. While N.W. Ayer represented De Beers up until 1995, the advertising of interest spanned the pre-World War II, World War II, and post war periods (N.W. Ayer Collection).

The advertising originally developed by N.W. Ayer, dating from 1938 through 1941, emphasized family and the idea of legacies (N.W. Ayer Collection). The images accompanying the advertising were paintings by famous artists and tended to be bucolic (N.W. Ayer Collection;

this has been noted by others). Although a new campaign started in 1940 focusing on man's diamonds, with images of just luxury items with diamonds, the overarching emphasis was on hearth and home (N.W. Ayer Collection).

From 1942 through 1945, the advertising shifted to "fighting diamonds," and attempted to reassure people, especially women, that gem grade diamonds were not needed for industrial war production (N.W. Ayer Collection). The advertisements continued the man's diamond theme, but added images of different war material that used diamonds. Also at that time, advertisements presenting a woman's hand with an engagement ring reassured women that they would not need to sacrifice their diamond rings (N.W. Ayer Collection). At the same time, N.W. Ayer was creating advertising for the trade magazines where the war was portrayed as providing sales opportunities for jewelers (N.W. Ayer Collection). After the war, from 1945 up until 1948, there were several different advertising campaigns. One emphasized an almost disneyesque vision of women looking like princesses (N.W. Ayer Collection). All of this was a run up to the "A Diamond is Forever" slogan and an ad campaign featuring honeymoon spots around the world (N.W. Ayer Collection; Twitchell 2000).

As a quick contextual anchor, and what the author considers to be general knowledge as to some of the following world history, at the time De Beers hired N.W. Ayer, the diamond market had been in a slump for almost ten years (Epstein 1984). The diamond market crumbled during the Great Depression (Epstein 1984). Part of the issue was that a large number of gem grade diamonds came onto the market at the same time, due to people selling (Epstein 1984). This dumping undercut De Beers basic business model centered around the control of the diamond supply and keeping a secondary market unavailable (Epstein 1984). In 1939, Germany invaded Poland and officially started World War II. In 1940, the Battle of Britain had begun. South Africa was involved from the start, since it was a part of the British Commonwealth. At that time, the US was not officially at war with the Axis, but war was on the horizon. The advertising up to Pearl Harbor was still mostly focused on a peace time purchasing (N.W. Ayer Collection). From 1941 to 1945, the US was involved in the war. Industrial grade diamonds were in demand for war production (Epstein 1984; Roberts 2007). De Beers controlled, for all intents and purposes, the world supply (Epstein 1984). The US

had a hard time getting enough diamonds for production and there have been allegations that De Beers supplied the Axis with industrial grade diamonds (Epstein 1984; Roberts 2007). At the same time as this war material shortage, jewelers were provided with opportunities for reviving the gem diamond market with the jump in G.I.s marrying before shipping off to war ("Now every month is June," (N.W. Ayer Collection)). After the war, the US jumped back into prosperity, the US economy benefiting from the world's need to rebuild, the Marshall Plan, and industrial plants that were unharmed during the war. The above synopsis should give a feeling of what was happening around the advertising of interest.

In the advertising during the period of interest, De Beers used words like: timeless, ageless, eternal, and other terms signifying the eternal. Flowing from the overview above, the research question becomes: did the advertising claims change during those turbulent years? And if the advertising claims did change, what does that mean for a product pitched as eternal? If the advertising claims didn't change, how does the presentation of the eternal shift? If something is eternal, and its nature doesn't change, then how can depictions or representations about that item change? Flowing from this initial research is how the eternal has historically been used by other advertisers. At one step removed from the eternal is a broader interest in the use of highly abstract terms by advertisers.

#### SOURCE MATERIAL

The primary source material comes from the N.W. Ayer Collection at the National Museum of American History, Archives Center, Washington, DC. The source material is made up of proofs created by the N.W. Ayer advertising agency for De Beers, from 1939 through 1948. The advertising proofs were created primarily for national magazines, both consumer and trade.

The source material may also include transcriptions of oral histories that are in the collection. The oral histories include discussions with the woman who developed the phrase, "A Diamond is Forever." The oral histories should provide background on how NW Ayer approached the job of producing the advertising and also provide context for what was happening at the time the advertisements were made.

The above material deals with proofs developed for publication. The material may be supplemented by advertisements actually placed in US magazines by De

Beers. The proofs provide a feeling of what N.W. Ayer wanted to project about diamonds. The actual advertisements provide context for how the advertisements were presented to people. By looking at the advertisements in situ, a better sense of what was confronting readers when they were consuming the advertisement.

Secondary sources will be used to provide the historical context surrounding the change in focus of De Beers advertising. This will primarily deal with US, world, and De Beers history from 1938 through 1948. General history books will provide the details for the US and the world in general. Those sources will be supplemented by advertising history texts (Fox, F. 1975; Fox, S. 1984). Books and articles dealing specifically with De Beers during those years will provide a sense of what was happening around the advertisements (Roberts 2007; Kanfer 1993; etc.)

#### PRELIMINARY REFERENCES

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