

Cool Colleges: For the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, Just Plain Different

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“Fire drug.” Aptly named by the early Chinese, firecrackers have bewitched the senses of their wielders and watchers for centuries, managing to bridge traditions and cultures. Firecrackers, once simply made of bamboo, came to veil their volatility with the allure of exotic hues and the masterful union of art and advertisement. Chinese folklore met American pop culture on the labels of firecracker packs, where both Cha’ng O the moon maiden and Captain Kidd once dueled for the sale and the lit match—their enticement lost in a swirl of acerbic air.

Though associated nearly exclusively for Americans with Independence Day, Firecrackers awakens readers to the richly diverse past of its namesake, as it chronicles the numerous international celebrations which incorporate firecracker use, including those in England, France and India. An integral part of most Chinese celebrations, firecrackers punctuate the start of the Chinese New Year, weddings and store openings as well as religious and funeral rites. “By blasting away the negativity from the area, the bad spirits are sent away, leaving room for the good ones to join whatever ceremony is going on.”

In an effort to seduce the allowances of American youth, anonymous Chinese trade artists created pack labels finished in the kaleidoscopic brilliance of comic books. These labels, now sought by collectors, include cowboy motifs (“Redinjun” and “Buck -A-Roo” brands), a cavalcade of animal designs and even atomic age themes (“Martian Firecrackers” and “Big Bomb” brands.) Curious cross-cultural interpretations were often depicted on pack labels, including Asian mermaids, a winged King Kong and the presumably popular American sports of women’s boxing and bullfighting.

Additionally, the book addresses the evolution of the firecracker manufacturing processes, its dire working conditions (typically seventeen hours a day, seven days a week for about seven cents per day) and the political developments that once altered the firecracker trade. Novice collectors may find interest in the chapter devoted to starting a collection, the glossary and lists of resources including internet auction sites, organizations, manufacturers and importers.

Combining the efforts of a collector, a researcher and a pop culture writer as the books contributing authors, Firecrackers provides an arena for symbiotic expression of intellectual and aesthetic literary combustion, resulting in a fascinating blend of accessible history and a stylish production value. Firecrackers comfortably poises itself on the brink of art appreciation with its proud showcasing of label designs, where once the collector’s gallery was seen as forgotten trash—dancing on end around street corners, in flight upon red glassine wings.

KAREN WYCKOFF (May / June 2000)

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