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Quirky Tools of Past Presidential Campaigns Find a New Audience

'Campaigning for the Presidency, 1960-1972: Selections from the Museum of Democracy' opens Friday at the New-York Historical Society.



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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Before presidential campaigns rolled out their messaging with robocalls and social media, they found folksier ways to spread the word.

Like printing an opponent's face on a toilet seat or referencing serious issues on soda cans.

Political memorabilia—some of it playful and surprisingly strange—take center stage in “Campaigning for the Presidency, 1960-1972: Selections from the Museum of Democracy,” an exhibition opening Friday at the New-York Historical Society. The show

features some 120 curiosities from races run by John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater, Lyndon Johnson, George McGovern, Hubert Humphrey and George Wallace.

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“This was the twilight of a tradition,”

said Cristian Panaite, research associate at the New-York Historical Society and curator of the show. “As soon as the first television debate in 1960, the material culture of elections, the variety of it, started getting more and more compressed.”

Visitors to the exhibition are greeted at first by an assemblage of TV commercials from the era, including a Kennedy spot with a jaunty jingle: “Do you want a man for president who’s seasoned through and through,” the song asks, “but not so doggone seasoned that he won’t try something new?”

Mementos from the 1960 campaign—the one during which Nixon famously sweated on a debate stage—include a metal clicker novelty toy reading “Click with Dick” and a gold tie-clip fashioned after the PT-109 boat at the center of Kennedy’s heroic war tales.

Highlights from 1964 include bottles of punnily branded Gold Water cologne and aftershave—“an aftershave for Americans,” the label makes clear. The grooming products might have resonated as a rebuke to the era’s beatniks and hippies, Mr. Panaite said.

Voters were encouraged to literally consume the candidates’ messages. Gold Water also served as the name of a canned campaign beverage dubbed “the right drink for the conservative taste.” And a can of lemon-lime-flavored Johnson Juice soda was emblazoned with a bucking donkey logo and a message that belies the sweetened beverage within: “a drink for health care.”

“This was a time when there was real sparkle and glitter in how campaigns were shaped,” said Austin Wright, chairman of the Wright Family Collection from which the memorabilia were culled.

His father, Jordan Wright, collected 1.4 million objects of political memorabilia before he died in 2008, and the goal remains to someday open a dedicated Museum of Democracy in New York for the many holdings now in storage in Queens.



Women in 1968 pose in dresses adorned with photos of presidential candidates, from left, Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, Nelson Rockefeller, Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon. PHOTO: OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY-GEORGE

“Our focus is to make sure the collection is displayed so the public can learn about our democracy and freedom and what it means,” Mr. Wright said.

The part of the collection on view in “Campaigning for the Presidency” also includes masks of the candidates and paper dresses of a kind popular among fashionistas in the age of pop art. Striking samples from 1968 include one printed with a blown-up photo of Robert F. Kennedy and another with blue stars and big blocky letters spelling “Nixon” in a hip ’60s design.

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Also reflecting the era: a poster of Nelson Rockefeller depicted in the midst of a psychedelic swirl. Beside that is a bold, primary-colored print by the artist Alexander Calder registering support for McGovern in ’72 with a pair of abstract crescent-moon faces.

“They are celebratory in many ways,” Mr. Panaite said of certain artifacts in the show.

Not that there weren’t combative or controversial curios. A set of vinyl LPs created for the campaign of former Alabama Gov. George Wallace includes one with the

Confederate flag emblazoned on the cover. And potty humor inspired a toilet seat and toilet paper featuring Nixon's face and name.

Louise Mirrer, the historical society's president and chief executive, said her favorite piece in the show is a Johnson campaign poster that cleverly twists the Goldwater slogan "In your heart, you know he's right" into "In your guts, you know he's nuts."

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"A lot of people say they've never seen such heated rhetoric before [this election cycle], but in fact there are historical precedents," said Ms. Mirrer. "It helps to frame current events in the context of a much longer history."

Another artifact connecting then and now: a red "Goldwater Girl" sash, similar to one Hillary Clinton has said she wore on behalf of the Arizona senator while she was still a teenager, learning her way on the stump.

"A lot can happen over the years," Mr. Panaite said.

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