

Contemporary Collectibles: Getting a jump on Christmas gift books

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

An interesting array of varied gift-appropriate books is just hitting the bookstores in time for holiday consideration.

For any political malcontent on your list, a perfect choice would be "The Art of Ill Will: The Art of Political Cartoons" by Donald Dewey (NYU Press, \$35.) It's no coincidence that the word cartoon rhymes with lampoon - and harpoon, come to think of it - because this book provides hundreds of examples of what political cartoonists in this country have been doing since the Colonial period, and continue to do today: puncturing the myths and mendacities in the political arena. Here you'll find barbed images as diverse as Abraham Lincoln in baseball attire, Richard Nixon as Hamlet, and Doonesbury and Jules Feiffer strips.

It takes one to know one. Fashion semi-icon Tommy Hilfiger, together with advertising legend George Lois, has put together "Iconic America: A Roller-Coaster Ride Through the Eye-Popping Panorama of American Pop Culture" (Universe Publishing, \$60), a dynamic compendium of the icons of all strata of American history and contemporary life, from Ben Franklin to the fall of Enron, with some clever pairings, cogent commentary and, as would be expected, smashing graphics and illustrations (including a couple of foldouts, such as a 1971 Playboy Playmate centerfold). For me it's like a walk down memory lane viewing the ghosts of columns past - Crazy Kat, Santa Claus, Superman, Zippo lighters, Little Orphan Annie, The Jolly Green Giant, Betty Crocker, Coke bottles, Buster Brown, Barbie, Tarzan, Elsie the Cow and more serious subjects as well. All in all, an intoxicating cocktail of American culture.

A sparkling array of "Tiffany Colored Gems" by John Loring (Abrams, \$50) - one of a series of books by the design director of Tiffany & Co. - is enough to brighten anyone's holiday. This lavishly illustrated volume, effectively arranged by hue - purple, blue, green, white, yellow-orange and red-pink - offers a pre-Tiffany, primarily royal, colored-stone history, then continues with the firm's considerable contribution to the genre from the mid-19th century on. It includes such contemporary designers as Paloma Picasso, Elsa Peretti and Frank Gehry. Gems included go beyond the obvious rubies, emeralds and sapphires to green garnets, peridots, topazes, aquamarines, amethysts, lapis lazuli and opals, shown in original drawings as well as dazzling photographs. There is also a useful glossary and a gem chart.

Adding to the growing library of books delineating and illustrating the history of early photography is "Impressed by Light: British Photographs From Paper Negatives, 1840-1860" by Roger Taylor (published by a consortium of The Metropolitan Museum, National Gallery of Art and Yale University Press, \$75). In 1839, when Louis Daguerre was producing images on silvered sheets of copper in France, almost simultaneously in England, William Henry Fox Talbot was experimenting with a method of producing a paper negative using ordinary writing paper treated with chemicals, a negative from which an infinite number of prints could be made. First called "photogenic drawing," he later christened his invention "calotypes," derived from the Greek word for beauty. This substantial volume focuses on the first two decades of paper negative photography, from its experimental beginnings, its exposure at the Great Exhibition of 1851, patent wars, its acceptance and decline. The book is rich in descriptive detail and, not surprisingly, faultless reproductions.

Two other books from Yale, each with a great deal of charm: "Drawn to Enchant: Original Children's Book Art in the Betsy Beinecke Shirley Collection" (\$45), is a delightful array of juvenile illustration, from Victorian ABC books to the modern "Goodnight Moon" and "In the Night Kitchen"; and "The Art of William Steig" (\$40), done in conjunction with a current exhibition at New York's Jewish Museum, with a text by museum curator Claudia J. Nahson and others, comprises a delicious selection of the artist's inimitable New Yorker cartoons and children's book illustrations.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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