Contemporary Collectibles: New books of interest to collectors

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

From the time of the ancient Egyptians, animal, bird and insect forms have been favorite jewelry motifs, as can be seen in the eye-catching new paperback edition of "The Jeweled Menagerie: The World of Animals in Gems" by Suzanne Tennenbaum and Janet Zapata (Thames & Hudson).

Virtually every denizen of the zoological world is represented in a wide variety of styles and materials - bejeweled French 19th century turtles, Victorian pins featuring painted dog heads, a Faberge gold bangle bracelet terminating in fierce lion heads, a stunning horn bumblebee hair comb by Rene Lalique, 1950s gold poodle charm bracelets and many other finely designed and crafted snakes, scorpions, dragons, owls, peacocks and butterflies in precious metals and gems. There is an extensive text, and more than 300 brilliant color illustrations.

An interesting approach to a collectibles category is taken by "Country Living: American Metalware - What is it? What is it Worth?" by Helaine Fendelman and Joe L. Rosson (House of Collectibles). Instead of providing an extended textual history of their subject, the authors tell the story via 60 individual examples, providing for each a description, a current market value and a description supplying historical and aesthetic context, and, when appropriate, distinguishing marks, plus a useful glossary.

Items cover the full range of metalwork, and include such pieces as toys, chandeliers and sconces, vases, bookends, weather vanes, signs, doorstops and tea services. A similar approach is taken by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in their collection highlight series (MFA Publications), the latest of which covers American Decorative Arts and Sculptures. Specific pieces of furniture and folk art, glass, silver and statuary are highlighted and presented with full descriptions and context, and there are also essays on the Colonial period, neoclassicism, revivalism, modernism and the studio craft movement.

"Once Upon a Time: Walt Disney, The Sources of Inspiration for the Disney Movies" by Ed Bruno Girveau (Prestel), published in conjunction with an exhibition that originated in Paris, is a handsome book reflecting the ambivalence of Gallic attitudes toward Walt Disney. Is it permissible for a Frenchman to love something as American as Disney movies without feeling guilty? The answer offered by the authors of this book is: "Yes, if we can show that Disney was inspired by European models."

This demonstrates that not only did stories like "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Pinocchio" have European origins, but that the inspiration for many of the visuals in Disney films was drawn from Old World artists like Gustave Dore and illustrators like Arthur Rackham, as well as from European live-action films such as the early expressionistic movies of Fritz Lang.

Disney's stable of concept artists included people like Albert Hurter, Gustaf Tenggren and Kay Nielsen, who were steeped in European tradition. The influence of Hollywood live-action movies is considered too (Snow

White was partially modeled on Janet Gaynor), and there is a curious postscript dealing with Disney and pop art. An interesting book.

"Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design" by Christopher Long (Yale University Press) focuses on a Viennese-born designer who came to America in 1914 and developed a distinctive and influential style that adapted the elegant proto-modernism associated with his native city into an idiom that reflected the energy and vertical thrust of the American urban landscape. His signature items were his Skyscraper bookcases that imitated the profile of the high-rise towers that dominated the New York skyline in the 1920s. In the 1930s, he moved to Southern California, where he created stylish interiors that might have been sets for Fred Astaire movies, and eventually, in the 1940s, he became a pioneer in the production of inexpensive, mass-produced modernist furniture. The current book is an essential reference for his work.

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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