

# == Making Book for Santa ==

By Eliot Fremont-Smith

Herewith, the now-traditional Christmas roundup of new art and pictorial books, this segment focusing on art (always) and science (a trend?). A follow-up will try to do right by photography. Why picture books? Because they're nifty (some of them), and because they represent a continuing revolution in publishing (news!), and because they get better: pictures no longer telegraph a dumb text. Why Christmas? Because that's what-for most of them are published; I make promises to review the best as they come out, and then they come out all in a greedy clump, between a month ago and two weeks hence. I can't reform if publishers won't.

The selection is, as usual, ruthless, whimsical, admiring, eclectic, and personal. Space is a problem, time a killer; some day I'd like to do 100 books and have 50 of them the worst. It might be educational, and the critic-in-outrage is a wholesome sight to see—entertaining and leading to notice another benefits, like apparent integrity. My trouble—aside from the clock (and John Cleese of *Faulty Towers* has nothing on me when it comes to railing at the fates)—is that I like, am moved by, get absorbed in, the best books more than I hate the worst.

On prices—all prices these days are astounding. Those given are current, and some are due to go up after Christmas or after January 1. After January 20, of course, we can expect them to decline rapidly toward the reasonable and the Right—as Ronald Reagan really socks it to inflation. Meantime, this may have to be more a browsing fantasy than a tipsheet. There are some bargains. Certain prices are lower than list in discount stores. Remainder tables should be perused (some true goodies among the *drab*). And a smart Santa, if he doesn't mind reviewers' art-book discards, will make at least one visit to the Strand.

**ARCIMBOLDO**, text by Roland Barthes, essay by Archie Bonito Oliva (Ricci/Rizzoli, \$150 boxed): The seventh uniform volume in the extraordinary, sumptuously decadent Franco Maria Ricci series of iconoclastic art books, whose design and execution is something close to heaven—if heaven is gorgeous and baroque and blue and slightly kinky.

The subject here is a real kook—Milanese Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593) who, for the pleasure of the Hapsburg court in Vienna, painted grotesque allegorical heads and portraits composed entirely of fish, flowers, fruit, flames, books, animals, trees, and kitchen utensils. Mannerism to some palindromic dead-end of obsession, though of course Arcimboldo had his copyists (a generous sampling is included) and, much later, the Surrealists paid brief homage. It takes the late Roland Barthes to find more—specifically menace—in an interpretive "text" that is otherwise extremely busy trying to locate its own tail. The choice of Barthes is exquisitely appropriate, given the Mannerist quest and rhetoric then, and the Structuralist perpetual-motion code now (or its remains—a pit surrounded by pooper-scoopers). Anyway, so comes and goes Arcimboldo.

But not the physical book. For the real artistry here is the Ricci design and production—the blue-gray charcoal paper, the tipped-in (highest quality) plates, the large handsome type, the silky gold-stamped binding, the mix of *de luxe*, (which is nonetheless bargain-priced) and purposefulness of conception (calculation, all the way—Ricci projects are commissioned, nothing seems accidental), the elegant human scale (the books can actually be held and read), and the fascination with the erotics of decorative art. Forthcoming subject: Tantric art, with "text" by Jorge Luis Borges. The best

previous subjects; Erte, Tamara de Lempicka, and last year's wild thing on statuettes of Isadora Duncan. (My wish: a volume on Voisin, Bugatti, and Art Deco-to-streamline French motor coachwork ca. 1926-1938.)

Yet the point is, Ricci books surpass their subjects, are artworks in themselves. Or, rather, they alchemize triviality into ecstasy—to where ethics and necessity no longer seem to matter. These volumes hover at the lip of vulgar collector-kitch (the Valhalla of aristocracy), but are saved by the grace and sinew of their intellectual-sensual contrivance. Thus, in a surprising way, they are truer to their subjects than their subjects are—they distill the sexually electric urgency of art and craftsmanship, the itch. Always the itch. There are art books that are nobler, more "educative" and inspiring—but I know of none that get anywhere near as close to the central *sin* of beauty. (Hey, Franco, maybe postpone Voisin—try Vermeer, with text by Philip Roth.)

**KENNEDY AND LINCOLN: Medical and Ballistic Comparisons of Their Assassinations**, by Dr. John K. Lattimer (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, \$19.95): Short, no-nonsense analyses, using latest info, photos, and new diagrams, all sup-

porting established conclusions of what happened, why, and how, including Booth's and Oswald's fates and, fascinatingly, the attempt on Seward's life, with resulting jaw operations in horrendous, riveting detail. Right or wrong in interpretation (Lattimer poo-pooes Lincoln's possible affliction with Marfan's Syndrome, and is less bugged than I am over Mafia and CIA connections with JFK's demise), this is an important and persuasive, evidential source-book, and an expander of perspective (the JFK assassination no longer in sacred isolation). It is also very handsomely designed—of course to the purpose of conveying a Gospel-like definitiveness to Lattimer's forensics and ballistics. The designer's name is not given, but even skeptics should applaud—and then, if still so inclined, resume the hunt for holes. Me—I'm taking a breather on this perplex.

**PAPER POOLS**, by David Hockney, edited by Nikos Stangos (Abrams, \$22.50): Hockney's famed 1978 series of 29 pressed-pulp paintings of a swimming pool and its reflections, sometimes still, sometimes with a diver splashing or refracted underneath. "I loved the idea, first of all, of painting like Leonardo, all his studies of water, swirling things. And I loved the

idea of painting this thing that lasts only two seconds." The innovation was the use of an all-wet medium—colored paper pulp applied to (poured into molds on) huge sheets of undried paper—which, when pressed, fused the image into the paper fiber. The book includes preparatory drawings and Hockney's cheery and chatty account of how the project went.

**THE TIMES ATLAS OF THE WORLD: Comprehensive Edition**, edited by John C. Bartholomew *et alia* (Times Books, \$125): This sixth revised "Comprehensive Edition" of the great (London) *Times* atlas—which, surprisingly, considering empire and all, dates only from 1895—contains 40 pages of front-matter charts and explanation, 123 pages of eight-color maps and detail inserts, and a 210,000-entry index. It boasts to be, and probably is, the finest and most complete single-volume world atlas available in English, perhaps in any language. Cartographically, it's very traditional, and a beauty (not for nothing is it dedicated "by gracious permission" to ERI); it's also heavy as lead and big as a table (which you'll need, the lap won't do). Updating includes new resource charts, pre-Saturn

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Oops! This exciting arrival in 19th-century Paris later inspired a famous Surrealist painting.