Art and Architecture Book Publishing

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A TREND IS OFTEN DEFINED as a tendency or a drift. A trend is compared to the leisurely coursing of a river, to the smooth sailing of a cloud, lazy in a summer sky. The trend in art and architecture book publishing during the decade just past is no such slow and gradual development. To librarians trying to keep up with new publications, to fit the much more expensive volumes into their budgets, to make room for these books on inelastic shelves, the trend has seemed like a rush of water bursting its dam, overflowing the banks of the stream; the trend is a spate, a freshet, and the waters show no signs of subsiding.

The books on art and architecture are more numerous, more expensive, usually larger, more handsomely printed, and most noticeable of all the changes in recent years, they are alive with color. These many books on art and architecture cannot always be put into completely separate compartments. After all, there is sculpture in architecture, there are painted frescoes on many walls; furniture is often an integral part of the structure. For the purposes of this paper, books about the work of artists and architects, about their lives, and books written by them will be included. This article will touch upon encyclopedias and anthologies, on picture books and catalogs, but exclude the how-to-do-it books, the cartoon books, the third hand rehash of famous lives. Even without these few, there is ample grist for the mill.

Books on art and architecture were scarce well into the nineteenth century. Little was written about the artists and architects of the time. Before 1860, even when plans of buildings were published, the architects were not mentioned by name. The important books on art are listed on a very few pages by Mary B. Cowdrey in “Dunlap to Barker—A Century of Art History.”

Illustration seems to have been incidental rather than an object in

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itself; the advertisement, the trade card, and the drawing book supplied the art-hungry with their daily ration of pretty pictures. C. W. Drepperd tells of the drawing cards which in the mid-nineteenth century were approved for Sunday copying. Obviously pious households could not find satisfactory material on the bookshelf or parlor table. There are drawing books listed, as well, by Drepperd in American Pioneer Arts and Artists in a chapter devoted to early books.

The art unions were another early source for pictorial material. The American Art Union, founded in 1839 in New York City, "built up a sound relationship between the artist and a nation-wide public that has never been quite recaptured. Each year the best and most representative paintings were exhibited, engraved copies of the judges' choice were distributed, and, on Christmas night, paintings bought out of surplus funds were raffled off to the subscribers." Similar societies flourished in the Midwest but after a few years these lotteries were declared illegal and it was once more up to the individual to make his choice of works of art.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century no substantial household could resist those great tomes, those folios of steel engravings, so widely distributed, so soberly bound, which dealt with the masterpieces of European galleries, which detailed the exhibits of the world's fairs of those years. Incidentally, if the illustrations were in color, these had usually been prettied up by hand.

The first wood engravings in this country are attributed to Dr. Alexander Anderson, a physician for whom art was an avocation. When, in 1942, an early American engraver, Gabriel Miesse, was discovered, this was important news to the world of art. And so the conclusion must be that even up to the near present the field of art and architecture book publishing was not a crowded one.

As recently as twenty years ago, elder librarians, concentrating on books on art subjects, had frequent recourse to a very short list of titles. There was a steady demand for Gardner's Art Through the Ages, in architecture for Fletcher's A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method. Students asked for Dunlap's A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, for Isham's The History of American Painting, for Tuckerman's Book of the Artists.

Modern art, generally conceded to have its beginning in 1913 with the New York Armory Show, was not given much literary encourage-
ment. Any book on modern art must be antagonistic and bluntly articulate in attack if it is to be successful.\textsuperscript{6}

What, then, is the status of art books today? By examining the annual statistics in Publishers' Weekly for the twelve years from 1946 to 1957, an average annual figure of 316 titles is discovered. Checking the prices, it is found that in 1947 only a few books in the field were priced above $5. By 1950, there was an occasional $10 item. Today, many volumes are priced at $15 and more and the budget must be very substantial to take care of a satisfactory up-to-date collection in art and architecture.

The tendency is, of course, toward larger, handsomer, more colorful books. Publishers, now, seem to have hurdled the formidable barrier set up by the high cost of making color plates, by the expense of retouching these, by finding or being themselves the experts with a memory of color equal to total recall, with a keen sense of the rhythm of color.

Several firms such as Abrams, New York Graphic Society, and Skira devote themselves almost exclusively to publishing art books. Regular publishers such as Random House, Scribners, Simon and Schuster are publishing art books extensively, sometimes on their own, sometimes together with the art museums. Once the high costs have been met, once there is public acceptance of higher prices, once the publishers have set up the equipment necessary for the production of art books which are in themselves works of art, it follows quite naturally that distribution, set-up, and equipment should be used to the uttermost, that whole series of these handsome volumes should be produced.

Series of these picture books are being published, too, because the emphasis on pictures is great. When words are obstacles, a picture may well serve as a means of understanding between those who have no common language. Unesco working with New York Graphic Society aims to publish the "indigenous art of Unesco's Member Nations"; the native art of member nations is inexhaustible subject-matter far into the future. The first Unesco volume, \textit{India; Paintings from Ajanta Caves,}\textsuperscript{7} was published in 1954; others have followed and there are many more to come.

Some ten years ago, André Malraux wrote \textit{The Psychology of Art}. The first volume, "Museum without Walls," set forth the thought that, in this age of reproduction, the walls have fallen and treasures everywhere are to be seen by everyone.\textsuperscript{8} Albert Skira, going one step further by putting reproductions into books, has called these new

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style books produced by him portable museums. Making these volumes such vivid and accurate picture-galleries, he has further expanded Malraux’s idea by supplying a text, often by a museum authority, so that a high-ranking expert is provided for the gallery talk.9

The art publishing firms, treating the art of the Orient and of the old world in a new way, have an unlimited amount of material to draw upon. There have been, through the years, many other books about the mosaics of Ravenna but none as truly breathtaking in the brilliance and fidelity of reproduction as the 1956 New York Graphic Society’s Ravenna Mosaics.10

Actually, the reader, looking at pictures taken close up from the most favorable angle, with photographers perched precariously on dizzying scaffolding, may get a better view of a work of art than the on-the-spot traveler. Museums, cathedrals, palaces, each in turn so nobly treated, will be detailed and lined up on library shelves; the world is indeed, not our oyster, but our book. Both must be opened to be savored and enjoyed.

Not only in color but also in black and white does the good work in art and architecture book publishing go forward. The Pelican History of Art is planned as a vast, just short of fifty volumes, project. Those which have appeared to date are of uniform excellence, written with scholarly authority, illustrated with fine photographs; there are plans and sketches where needed; notes, index, and bibliography are helpfully at hand.

Catalogs of museum collections, of loan exhibitions, of auction sales, of the work of individual artists continue to come to library desks. Most of them will be well worth preserving as the basis for future research and for information at any date.11 These are important, not only when they deal with painting but also as they record furniture, porcelain, and the daily utilities and luxuries of a way of life.12

The publishers of artists’ biographies come upon the horns of a dilemma. Are the books to be written about the person, or his work? Shall the author be skillful in words or have know-how in the art world? How about the illustrations? Shall they be useful, handsome, or secondary? These questions are solved in various ways and with varying degrees of success. In the last few years, Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson, well-known English biographers, have dealt with Gauguin, Van Gogh, and with Toulouse-Lautrec.13-15 They have, in this writer’s opinion, been eminently successful in picturing their subjects. Though the illustrations in these books give no more than a

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shadowy hint of the work of these painters, interest should be roused so that the reader will go on to look at other reproductions and, if possible, at some originals. The Hansons, in these three books, may have a special advantage in that their subjects have inspired *The Moon and Sixpence, Lust for Life, and Moulin Rouge.* Fiction and the movies help to make real people even more real.

A handsome book, *Klee: A Study of his Life and Work,* published by Praeger does show much of the Swiss painter’s work in excellent color, demonstrates clearly that a book concerned with abstract art does better for this subject matter when it adds “another hue unto the rainbow.” The text is translated from the scholarly Italian of G. Di San Lazzaro. Klee’s work is well documented but the wordage, perhaps because of the translation, is often awkward. This is an example of difficulties ably set forth by Edward Mills, typographic designer of the Museum of Modern Art, when he speaks of the “problem with respect to doing justice to illustrations without compromise of the book’s integrity, or impairment of what text there may be.”

Sometimes a biography by one of the family or a friend, substituting insight for documentation, understanding for learning is unpretentiously successful. A granddaughter writing of *G. P. A. Healy: American Artist* tells of Chicago and Paris in the nineteenth century.

*Victorian Architect: The Life and Work of William Tinsley* by J. D. Forbes deals pleasantly with a builder of American Gothic churches, college buildings, and esplanades. The university presses are helpful in preserving for the record accounts of the works and lives of the less spectacular among the artists and architects. In this connection, one might mention *The Two Lives of James Jackson Jarves* by Francis Steegmuller, and *Peter Harrison: First American Architect* by Carl Bridenbaugh.

Modern architecture lends itself well to handsome bookmaking and modern architects are interesting and articulate as they tell of their ideas and ideals. The Bauhaus group, now in this country, the West Coast practitioners have their accomplishments dramatically set forth, often with colored photographs. And Frank Lloyd Wright, patriarch and *enfant terrible,* preaches: “If the quality of vision we call inspiration is lacking, all is lacking; and inspiration comes in its own good time in its own way, from within—comes only when all is ready, and usually must wait.”

Quite often, today, books are created through the joint effort of a number of experts or a book is found in which pertinent material
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has been gathered from periodicals, the work of one author or of several. These volumes skillfully used will be of great use to the smaller art collection, for there are many artists, many methods, many critical attitudes revealed in these pages.

There is no doubt that the picture-book is here to stay. It is handsome, it tells the story of art and architecture. The sensitively literate of the reading public cannot but hope that the quality of the accompanying prose will be scrutinized as carefully as the perfection of color-reproduction techniques. The “helping hand of novelists and poets” mentioned by James Thrall Soby in Modern Art and the New Past, the expressive, enthusiastic, analytical writings of art-lovers, of critics, of teachers, of artists and architects will complement and supplement the reproduction of works of art, will deal vividly with the past and analyze the present with skill and sympathy. Man cannot live by bread alone, neither should he look at pictures in books and skip the printed page. But pictures he should have; art is a necessity in this modern world for, as Malraux says, there may be hope for “art’s eternal victory over the human situation.”

References