



## Holiday Gift Guide

# Books to Send, Recommend Or Just Lend

**P**ARALLEL universes are a hot topic for scientists these days. They're a hot one for book critics too. In some parallel world it is theoretically possible that a critic could read every single book published by English-speaking Earthlings in 2011 and list the 10 that are best. Some of those books might even be about parallel-universe theory.

But our own world doesn't work that way. Each of us reads new books nonstop throughout the year, but none of us read everything. So we, the three daily book critics of The New York Times, don't make 10 best lists. What we do is make Top 10s.

We list our favorites: books we would send, lend or recommend to friends.

Since each of us draws only from the books about which he or she has written, these lists don't overlap. Since none of us write about books by Times colleagues, there are some glaring omissions. And since a good book sometimes gets so much coverage elsewhere in the Times that a daily review seems superfluous, we've missed some things we wish we hadn't. One case in point: Donald Ray Pollock's book "The Devil All the Time."

But what Michiko Kakutani, Dwight Garner and I liked best in 2011 appears on Pages 37 and 40.

## Holiday Gift Guide

# For Art Lovers, Volumes Meant to Awe and Inspire

Who knows if the wave of holiday art books that has descended this year is bigger or better than before? You can't really see the edges anymore. You just have to wade in and try to grab the good stuff as it rushes past.

This year The Times's art critics have hauled in quite a few museum exhibition catalogs, including those that accompanied the high-profile shows of Alexander McQueen's extravagant garments, Willem de Kooning's paintings and Pablo Picasso (the Marie-Thérèse Walter years), as well as less prominent shows of American folk art and Central Nigerian art and objects. And let's not forget "Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980," the curatorial extravaganza that has taken over Southern California and released its own flood of publications.

One book by a documentary filmmaker ruminates on the history of emotionally charged photographs. In another, an architect turns his own camera on African metropolitan architecture. Two others tackle the subject of homosexuality in art. There is a high incidence of books by or about women: two memoirs, three books of artists' poetry and a new biography of de Kooning's contemporary, the American painter Joan Mitchell.

And in the middle of it all, an exceptionally large volume, even by art book standards, starts in the Lascaux caves and tries to encompass all art between its covers, as if it were a kind of Noah's Ark, minus the neatly aligned pairs of course.

ROBERTA SMITH

### Holland Cotter

Buying art books as holiday gifts can be a delicate matter. You have the urge to splurge, to go for kick-back luxe. At the same time, you want to give something substantial and usable, a book that will read as smart as it looks.

Some of the past season's outstanding exhibitions produced such books, with the looking-to-reading ratio vary-



**ANDER MCQUEEN: SAVAGE BEAUTY** (Metropolitan Museum of Art/distributed by Yale University Press, \$45), the catalog for that fashion designer's phenomenal Metropolitan Museum retrospective, is, even with good essays by Andrew Bolton and Susannah Frankel, primarily a visual experience.

From its unnerving cover picture, which has Mr. McQueen's face dissolving into a skull, through its astonishing photographs of his extremist couture, it captures at least some of the hard-to-shake atmosphere of a show that is bound to have lasting reverberations among young designers on the rise.

The catalog for the Museum of Modern Art's current **DE KOONING: A RETROSPECTIVE** (Museum of Modern Art, \$75) is, in scope and scholarship, on a different, more exalted plane, but still makes a highly companionable gift. The book's primary writer, John Elderfield, wears his depth of knowledge lightly, turning the artist's long career into an aesthetic adventure story (which, at the end, becomes a whodunit). And of course there's de Kooning's art. Even squeezed down in reproductions, his paintings slash and shimmy on the page.

A third catalog comes from a show far less trumpeted than the McQueen and de Kooning surveys, but no less exciting, **CENTRAL NIGERIA UNMASKED: ARTS OF THE BENUE RIVER VALLEY**. Originally organized by the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, and now at the National Museum of African Art in Washington (through March 4), it includes nearly 150 ritual masks, ceramics and iron pieces of staggering inventiveness, of which no one has taken anything like the full measure until now.

The hard-won result of decades of work by 17 scholars, the book (Fowler Museum at UCLA, \$100) is not geared to casual reading or a flip-through scan. It's a dense, 600-page stimulant to be enjoyed when you're awake and concentrating and hungry for information about some of the strangest and most beautiful images you'll ever see.

While in an African frame of mind, you might also consider a more straightforwardly eye-directed book, David Adjaye's **AFRICAN METROPOLITAN ARCHITECTURE** (Rizzoli, \$100). Mr. Adjaye, an architect and designer born in Tanzania and living in London, has traveled the African continent and photographed what's going on, and up, in terms of building, in cities from Abidjan, Ivory Coast, to Tripoli, Libya, and is clearly enthralled by what he's found. His engagement, embracing and critical, comes through in the pictures. Stun-

**STERS MAGAZINE: 1976-1979** (Primary Information/distributed by Artbook DAP, \$30) a compilation of art and articles from a funky, proto-punk zine that came and went in six issues and three short years. It was cooked up by a Detroit collective of artist-rockers called Destroy All Monsters, which initially included Cary Loren, Mike Kelley, Niagara and Jim Shaw.

Mr. Kelley and Mr. Shaw went on to achieve art establishment fame, but the book that they and their old colleagues have assembled from youthful material feels just right for the Occupy Wall Street moment, or almost right. The Destroy All Monsters spirit was dystopian, not utopian. Making change was on the agenda; making nice was not.

Finally, also independent from exhibitions but intimately bound to art, are three new books of poems by artists.

The wildest of the collections by far is **BODY SWEATS: THE UNCENSORED WRITINGS OF ELSA BARONESS VON FREYTAG LORINGHOVEN** (MIT Press, \$34.95), edited by Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo. The baroness (1874-1927) was one of the outstanding lifestyle radicals of the early Dada era, or of any era, really; I'm not sure even a hard-core punk collective would have known quite what to make of her. In addition to being an artist and a personage, she was a furiously witty and aggressively erotic experimental writer, as this first published collection of her poetry demonstrates.

The prettiest-looking of the three books is **CRYSTAL FLOWERS: POEMS AND A LIBRETTO** (Bookthug, \$18), by Florine Stettheimer, also edited, though for a different press, by Ms. Gammel and Ms. Zelazo. Stettheimer (1871-1944) was, like the baroness, a notable art world eccentric, though of a different kind: elusive, deeply private and withholding of her work. Her paintings of

fantastically imagined avant-garde soirees have become American modernist staples since her death. Her poetry has been little seen and, published in this neat little book, with Stettheimer floating across the cover, it's a delight: whimsical but with surprisingly frequent and well-placed bites.

**COMING TO THAT: POEMS BY DOROTHEA TANNING** (Graywolf Press, \$15) is a second poetry collection by a painter and sculptor who celebrated her 100th birthday last year. Ms. Tanning was married to the artist Max Ernst and is often taken for a Surrealist, though she went her own way with art that's dreamlike but also firmly reality-based, socio-politically attuned and bittersweet.

The same is true of her new poetry, which considers the liabilities of age and gender, and the fallibilities of art, with a cool eye, wryly and dryly, as in her poem "Artspeak":

*If Art would only talk it would, at last,  
reveal  
itself for what it is, what we all burn to  
know.  
As for our certainties, it would fetch a  
dry yawn  
then take a minute to sweep them  
under the rug:  
certainties time-honored as  
meaningless as dust  
under the rug. High time, my dears, to  
listen up.  
Finally Art would talk, fill the sky like  
a mouth,  
clear its convulsive throat while  
flashes and crashes  
erupted as it spoke — a star-shot  
avalanche of  
visions in uproar, drowned by the  
breathy din  
of soundbites as we strain to hear its  
august words:  
"a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w  
x y z."*

**Roberta Smith**

Sometimes art books get really, really big, especially around the holidays. Dimensions, weight and page count rise precipitously, and all of a sudden you've got coffee table books that threaten your coffee table. In these volumes historical sweep is usually the point, along with the contest to see how much visual information can be compressed between covers. Quantity competes with quality; reproductions often overwhelm text. Why else have big pages if not for big pictures?

Among this season's gargantuan, three stand out.

**EXPRESSIONS OF INNOCENCE AND ELOQUENCE: SELECTIONS FROM THE JANE KATCHER COLLECTION OF AMERICANA, VOLUME II** (Marquand Books/Yale University Press, \$95) keeps words and pictures in balance, offering further excursions into an outstanding private collection of American folk art, and following a first volume published in 2006. This one, also overseen by Jane Katcher, the collector, and David A. Schorsch and Ruth Wolfe, two antique and folk art specialists, coincides with an exhibition at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y. (through Dec. 31).

The book has contributions from 19 additional scholars, covering a familiar array of objects, including New England limners' portraits, quilts, weathervanes and embroidery and painted furniture. But the essays proceed in close-up, singling out individual objects and the people who made or used them, often with fresh and revelatory specificity.

Also hefty is **THE RONALD S. LAUDER COLLECTION: SELECTIONS FROM THE 3RD CENTURY B.C. TO THE 20TH CENTURY, GERMANY, AUSTRIA, AND FRANCE** (Prestel, \$75), which reveals the riches of another, somewhat more eclectic private collection. It belongs to Mr. Lauder,

founder of the Neue Galerie, which is exhibiting through April 2 about a third of the 1,200 objects reproduced in the book. After two girdle clasps from the third century B.C., these objects extend from early medieval art through a princely assortment of arms and armor and old master paintings to 19th- and 20-century modernist and postmodernist works of the German, Austrian and French persuasion.

High points include numerous paintings by Cézanne, a cache of extraordinary Picasso drawings and works by Sigmar Polke and Joseph Beuys, as well as the early-20th-century Viennese art and design for which Mr. Lauder and his museum are best known.

This book should be studied carefully by anyone who has ever raised a paddle at auction. Although Mr. Lauder has had the advantage of very deep pockets, his acquisitions still epitomize the basic principles of collecting: that, regardless of budget, it is best conducted with a rigorous eye and personal flair, as a form of self-expression.

The monster of all Christmas art books, this year and maybe for a while, is Phaidon's **ART MUSEUM**, an 18-pound monolith roughly the size of a tombstone that gives new meaning to André Malraux's "museum without walls." It is described as "the world's first truly accessible art museum," but it is more like a large portion of Wikipedia made tangible (with a \$200 price tag).

Illustrated with works from the world's greatest museums and cultural sites, laid out in 454 relatively text-free "rooms" that sometimes run to four pages, it starts in the Lascaux caves in southwestern France and concludes in the vicinity of Damien Hirst's self-generated 2007 auction.

In between, it bounds from continent to continent and culture to culture with images that often make full use of its 25-inch wingspan, including Chinese landscape paintings, Japanese screens, the Sistine ceiling, "Starry Night" and Diego Rivera's Sistine-inspired "Liberated Earth With Natural Forces," a mural-covered chapel at the Autonomous University of Chapingo in Mexico.

Like any museum, this one isn't perfect. In many instances the color could be better. The slant toward British art in the final section is a bit annoying, and it is possible to take issue throughout with various choices. In the realm of abstract painting, for example, there are several works by Brice Marden and Tomma Abts, but no early Black Painting by Frank Stella.

