

# Book Reviews

## Comptes rendus de livres

Carlos Mustienes, *1000 Extra/Ordinary Objects*

Uwe Ommer, *1000 Families: The Family Album of Planet Earth*

JENNY COOK

Mustienes, Carlos, with Giuliana Rando, Valerie Williams and Isabelle Baraton. *1000 Extra/Ordinary Objects*. Cologne: Taschen, 2000. 764 pp., col. illus., paper, US\$29.99, ISBN 3-8228-5851-X.

Ommer, Uwe. *1000 Families: The Family Album of Planet Earth*. Cologne: Taschen, 2000. 552 pp., illus., paper, US\$25, ISBN 3-8228-6213-4. Cologne: Taschen/UNICEF, 2002. 576 pp., illus., cloth, US\$29.99, ISBN 3-8228-2264-7.

Teaching material history at the university level is no easy task. Finding a course text is nigh on impossible. The snatching and focusing of attention of the young aspiring, self-styled "hip" students of the latest "in generation" requires a certain understanding of the contemporary world and how it may be used to get a handle on the past. If you show them Inuit mukluks, a Nova Scotian glass jug and an imported one-hundred-year-old can of vacuum-sealed cigarettes, the response might be mild interest. Pull in a friendly anthropologist toting war paraphernalia and teeth on necklaces from the South Pacific and their icy cool exteriors begin to crack. What *are* those things? *1000 Extra/Ordinary Objects* articulates more familiar scenarios by introducing Western stuff of everyday life: today's world reduced to those tangibles that serve to stimulate inquiry by shocking and titillating its audience. Objects are placed in such a modern context that the "alertness factor" in our dank classrooms risk being transformed from the "when is break?" bored end of the spectrum to the "I don't believe that — tell me more" unending question session at the other end. Through an unusual assemblage of objects categorized alternately as food, fashion, animals, body, soul and leisure, we begin to understand our material world and that of our forebears. And we can do

it in our two official languages; each flashy single image carried on a whole page comes with French and English interpretations.

There are joys in *1000 Objects* along the lines of Cambridge University's *Little Blue Book* — a student underground masterpiece that in my youth told innocent freshmen how the real world works, from venereal disease through to umbilical cords, bong use through to abortion clinics. Beyond the usual sex, drugs and rock n'roll voodoo factor of university "freedom," *1000 Objects* creates the same awe and wonder, but for more everyday things and for an audience that goes beyond just undergrads. The bizarre market for Pre-Stained Panties. Men's Bullet-proof Gauchies. Farrah Fawcett Shampoo. Barbie Wigs. Edible Cow Pies. Dog Hair Scarves. The Star of David Slinky. On first glimpse this is a shocking book that parents of undergraduates would have a hernia seeing on their innocent child's reading list. A Vulva-shaped Petting Cushion? Yet all these objects encapsulate the real world, perhaps not everybody's world — after all these are *extraordinary* objects. But think about the discussions — clothing and fashion, household products and time use, biology and reproduction, religion and marriage, other nations' seemingly inane cultural values.

The script that accompanies excellent photographs is reassuring to the young and informative for those of us who already know what's up. Images of male and female mannequins appear next to the text "a woman as thin as a modern mannequin wouldn't be able to menstruate. Real fashion models can be even slimmer, weighing 23 percent less than the average woman... while most people have got fatter" (114). By talking about ourselves we begin to question those costume displays at the McCord Museum of Canadian History — women watch the evolution of waistlines and question granny's lifestyle. How have things changed? Why?

So what? In Canada we have the option of wearing toques covering the top of the head, in England, BalACLAVAS — essentially a toque stretched down under the chin, yet in Chiapas — home of the Zapatistas — the black ski mask that reveals only the eyes — is illegal (118). A discussion of revolution and how in its aftermath everyday life changes might ensue. On the other hand, continuing on in the fashion theme, in many respects we try to be who we are not — acceptance is the order of the day. English “Status Shoes” give shorter men an extra five centimetres in height — they look like ordinary brogues but have a lift on the inside (125). “Fantasy Feet” can be bought — slip your own foot into a plastic cast of a manicured female wearing stilettos — perfect for the cross-dresser on the go (124). Less lofty are the caribou skin boots favoured by University of Manitoba winter survival instructor Rick Riewe who points out that *kamiks* successfully repel water and lead to a rise in core body temperature (152). Just as the professor is about to reject the text for its “risqué” factor something else “more educational” redeems the book, thanks to the interspersal of different “weights” of object and accompanying information.

Old meets new in other areas — objects of today leading us into the past. A white sock replete with individual toes has a mass-produced print of Japanese pressure points plastered on its sole — useful for those of us who read Japanese and can figure out how to massage a troubled liver or work towards the heel where sexual organs and insomnia can be dealt with indirectly at the same time (163). Thus students are introduced to foreign cultures established centuries ago while having a fun time postulating what that curved yellow patch could mean close to the little toe. Outside the classroom one or two of these young innocents might venture into the library voluntarily to track down more information in unfamiliar new territories. This is exactly what the professor should be encouraging — the questioning and exploration of students in today’s world. For those intrigued about what they see, a yellow-page section at the end of the book points out sources and fascinating facts.

I inherited the class “Material Culture of Canada: The Stuff of Everyday Life” from Annmarie Adams, School of Architecture, McGill University and her teaching assistant Rhona Richman Kenneally. There are twenty-four classes each semester replete with guest lecturers who take things from the past and make them relevant today, or take today’s things and put them into a broader perspective. As a student of mine said “it is the only class at McGill that has any direct application for me in the outside world.” To put this in perspective, Annmarie had

suggested I take a look at *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* (Peter Menzel and Charles C. Mann, California: Sierra Club, 1995). A totally stunning book with fabulous photographs and a neat concept — to travel to far away places, meet folks from the “middling sort” (United Nations), and get a family to stand outside their residence surrounded by *all their household objects*. Then photograph it. The result, intertwined with life statistics and intelligent text, places objects into context. Having enjoyed this veritable masterpiece, and using reference to the photographs of toilets from around the world for a class on the same subject, I was looking forward to seeing what a “less official” version Taschen would produce.

I was disappointed. Aficionados of Menzel’s work can only be mildly pleased by Uwe Ommer’s *1000 Families: The Family Album of Planet Earth*. While his task of photographing 1000 families instantly conjures up the amount of travel hassle and logistical nightmares this Paris-based photographer overcame, the end result is disappointing. Why? The 1251 families photographed (the book being massaged into the 1000 series of Taschen) are wonderful but without interpretation they become merely documents of how these people looked at a specific time. Their objects and possessions are neither focused on nor discussed. I try to stop myself thinking that if I ventured through downtown Toronto on festival days that I could achieve (given instant photographic powers) the same thing. Part of this is due to the fact that I know there are many of the worlds’ ethnic groups represented in Toronto, the other part is that Ommer has deliberately extracted the posed families from their environment by placing them in front of a white paper — blocking off the interesting backgrounds. Indeed, in many instances the families were so large that they spilled over the bounds of the white backdrop and into the more interesting countryside. Another problem is image interpretation. Each photo has a mildly interesting chatty line in German, English and French flanking a way-too-large territorial map of the continent to geographically place the family (North and Central America (hmmm), South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia). The text is not always placed with larger images, so page flipping is necessary. Some images are merely six by seven centimetres.

From an educator’s perspective, and I pick *totally* at random here, I examined an image (45) of an Indian family. The map of Asia appears with “Darjeeling, India, 18 November 1999. ‘One day we are hoping to return to our homeland of Tibet with the Dalai Lama.’ They live with their children

in a refugee centre [Ommer continues]. He is responsible for carpet production and she paints pictures and postcards. 'We don't want to be Indian or Chinese: we are Tibetan.'" I cannot help but feel totally annoyed and powerless as an instructor. The information is more aggravating than useful and means more to the writer/photographer than anybody else. Why has he chosen this to highlight his meeting? What is the prognosis for this family? Are teenagers expected to understand? Is this family now squarely placed in its "box of identification"? What have we learned? We have learned we need to know more and go elsewhere for answers, yet if we do this for nearly 1300 images, the students will have a reading list of over 3000 books. In comparing it with the *Material World* text, the bottom line is that *1000 Families: The Family Album of Planet Earth* is just that — a family album of pretty pictures to flip through. Out of context, out of place, out of time, the book fails to stimulate interest and will prove unusable for educators but stands as a fabulous record for Ommer himself to cherish and expand upon when giving the inevitably more entertaining public lecture.

It is easy to understand why the "course pack" came into existence. Professors find articles of pertinence, images to copy, from a variety of sources

that are bunched together under copyright and distributed at the beginning of term. Material historians are still troubled by not having a specific and inexpensive single text, let alone have it with Canadian content. Even *Design in Canada* is disappointing in this area — what are Canadian designs? A talk with one of the authors at a book signing the other week revealed that there isn't much in that text that helps us out, despite the title.

Taschen is helping us in that they are publishing in multiple languages in one book — both French and English predominate. The *1000 Objects* text also makes reference to Canada and objects available here — for example, the Insectarium in Montreal sells those lollipops with crickets in them, that grace the section heading "food" (11). If you put *1000 Objects* together with *1000 Families* you have a controversial yet not as enlightening *Material World*. For those students who submit papers with an edge to them, *1000 Objects* could act as a springboard to interesting insights. For parents of innocent children, and we do sometimes get the latter at McGill, *1000 Objects* is anathema in print. And so, I still await that text that is suitable and more encompassing for my material culture class.

## Rachel Gotlieb and Cora Golden, *Design in Canada: Fifty Years from Teakettles to Task Chairs*

RHONA RICHMAN KENNEALLY

Gotlieb, Rachel and Cora Golden. *Design in Canada: Fifty Years from Teakettles to Task Chairs*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2001. 277 pp., illus. (b&w, colour), cloth, \$74, ISBN 0-676-97138-5.

In 1976, Bill Lishman, a designer practicing in Blackstock, Ontario, designed a rocking chair in which his wife could knit comfortably. Little did he know that it would later be used as a prize on the American game show, *The Price is Right*. In a similar claim to fame, a Toronto-made Clairtone Project G stereo, "the epitome of 'bachelor pad' cool," appeared in such films as *The Graduate* and was rumoured to have been purchased by Hugh Hefner for the Playboy mansion. Such are the nuggets of information that may be found in *Design in Canada: Fifty Years from Teakettles to Task Chairs*, a new and welcome publication in

this under-represented field of Canadian culture. Co-written by Rachel Gotlieb, curator of Toronto's Design Exchange (a pre-eminent centre for design research and promotion), and Cora Golden, a committed advocate of Canadian design in her own right, this work is an ambitious overview of three-dimensional product design, especially for the home, from the postwar era to the present. Building on such works as Adele Freedman's *Sight Lines: Looking at Architecture and Design in Canada* of 1990 and Virginia Wright's 1997 *Modern Furniture in Canada: 1920–1970*, *Design in Canada* successfully contributes to Canadian design historiography, in this case staking out a domain in which selected furniture, lighting, textiles, consumer electronics, ceramics, glass, small appliances and metal arts justifiably receive the attention they deserve, both inside and outside