

***History of Design: Decorative Arts and Material Culture 1400-2000.* Pat Kirkham and Susan Weber, eds. New York: The Bard Graduate Center, 2013. 698 pp. [Distributed by Yale University Press]<sup>\*</sup>**

Reviewed by Amy de la Haye

*History of Design* is a lavish, highly visual, erudite, and ambitious book that documents the history of design and the decorative arts in Africa, the Americas, East Asia, Europe, the Indian subcontinent, and the Islamic world over a period of 600 years.

Some ten years in the making, the volume contains succinct and authoritative entries written by 28 university scholars and museum curators, mostly American. Pat Kirkham is a professor at the Bard Graduate Center, where Susan Weber is founder and director. Their target readership is students entering the Bard Graduate Center, a highly regarded graduate school, which takes the study of material culture as its core remit. I have returned to this work multiple times and have consistently found it compelling reading. I am confident that specialists and non-specialists would find likewise.

The narratives orbit around objects as primary evidence and explore object-human relationships, drawing upon social, economic, geographic, technological, and political contexts, as well as the history of ideas. Or, put more simply, the experiences of the human beings who designed, made, used, thought about, and, in some instances, actively preserved objects they valued.

The writers articulate and evaluate their research sources, which is intriguing and elucidates further the objects being examined—often using other objects as evidence. I am also fascinated to learn—and I would think students would find it useful—more about the textual and visual research methodologies used by the authors. Is, for example, Jules Prown’s proposed process of material culture analysis considered useful? And how do they engage with immateriality—the objects that no longer survive?

The rationale for caption writing is explained: identification of object type, the designer(s) or maker(s), material(s), where and when it was made, dimensions and details of the repository where it is currently held. A similar rationale is commonly used to provide core information on museum labels.

As a trained design historian who has, for the last thirty years, worked as a curator and writer on modern dress, I inevitably looked to see how my own subject has been documented and consider how I might use *History of Design* as a reference. Initially I looked for “haute couture”—the production of the most luxuriously crafted and design directional fashion in Paris—in the index. It is not there and neither is couture (the term used outside of Paris where its usage is strictly sanctioned). However the names of leading designers such as Worth, Chanel, and Miyake are identified and their work situated within a broader design history. For my own purposes, the huge strength of this book is the breadth of evidence. I will use it to glean reliable information on design trends, decorative motifs, world clothing styles, textiles and adornments, various craft techniques, and much more.

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*History of Design: Decorative Arts and Material Culture 1400-2000* is a weighty tome—698 large format pages packed within hard covers. It is a book to be ordered and delivered, a book to own. It will surely become a standard reference.

As I write this, Routledge have advised me about their latest publication called *Global Design History*. It seems the two books will be distinctive and, let's hope, altogether complementary.

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