BOOK REVIEWS


The housewife enters the dining room, the afternoon sun shines through the folds of lace at the bay window upon the heavy coils of her hair, the pleats of her black serge skirt. In her hand she carries a porcelain plate which she places on the plate rail above her head. A cuckoo clock nearby informs us that it is half past three; in a corner near the bay a calendar proclaims that the day is the 20th of March, 1904. On the plate is a portrait, like a black and white sketch, of a woman's head, beautiful, stylish and bearing a certain resemblance to the face of the young housewife, but the pictured head is more soignée, more perfectly "presented." The image on the plate is that of the fashionable Gibson Girl, "all the rage" in the turn-of-the-century world — and the "live" young woman looks up at the social icon approvingly . . .

The light fades sharply only to rise again through a naked plate-glass window; a calendar on the desk says that the year is 1963, but the day doesn't matter. Open, among the papers on the desk top, is a rather thick square book; staring up from the spread page is a photograph of the Gibson Girl plate, the head still beautiful and smart, but it is now fashionable for another reason — the icon thus retains some vestigial power. If we turn the pages of the book, we will also find the cuckoo clock.

The dining room we saw has quite disappeared. In toto it would probably be scorned by modern taste, but certain of the objects it contained have now become quaint or amusing. They are being collected; they have become antiques. After a period of disregard, these decorative ephemera of a not-so-distant day now repose respectably in the bosom of history. They have become accepted, "saved" as it were, and the book is the evidence of their canonization as collectable items.

This portly volume, which has something of the shape and feel of a streamlined Victorian photograph album, is a candidate for the modern equivalent of the old parlor table. As a title, Victorian Antiques is not particularly accurate; considerable material from the Edwardian period after 1900 is included, as witness the Gibson Girl plate, Rookwood pottery and Tiffany glass (the production cycles of the latter two span the turn of the century). But we have no reason to question either the acumen or the accuracy of the author, Thelma Shull; she
presents her material both straightforwardly and agreeably.

For the dealer or the scholar, a well illustrated manual or a series of such manuals on the multitude of varied subjects treated in this one volume would have sufficed, but our compendium is obviously a picture-book for the gift trade. It is also a book for women, since it is devoted to the objects that women collect — knickknacks in glass and china, fans and parasols, buttons, dolls and dolls' tea sets; a section on beer steins is a notable masculine exception. However, the album could hardly be called a vade mecum for that great company of American females (to revive a much used Victorian term) who go antiquing — it weighs too much. Rather it is a living room companion, a reminder of past expeditions and a "source" for future forays.

Any attempt to describe the contents of this compendium of minor objects from the near past would be hopeless. In addition to those categories already named we could add Victorian furniture, Venetian glass of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, old iron trivets, berry bowls and epergnes, bridle rosettes and old marbles. What do you lack?

It is interesting to note that Rookwood pottery, Haviland china and Prang chromo-lithographs are now collected. The book is a barometer of present-day American antiquarian taste, at least in its more middle class, feminine and suburban aspects.

Such books, if they are well and accurately written, have certainly the merit of illuminating some of the minor paths of recent history — many of them lying within living memory. Small and fragile objects, like the smell of lilacs in May, may have the power of evoking very poignantly the past. The plate on the dining room shelf or in the book, may recall to us not only the famous girl but the whole world of Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944). There are many ways of approaching history, and certainly the picture on the plate is not the least attractive one.

Bibliographically, we had already been intrigued (in reviewing one of the publisher's previous offerings) by Tuttle's activities in both Vermont and Japan. The book now under review has its type set in Chicago, but both the printing and the gravure plates were done in Japan. The firm's editorial offices also appear to be in Tokyo. One would like to know more about this international publishing company; undoubtedly we should learn something concerning the contemporary economics of printing.

But there is nothing of Japan in the contents of Victorian Antiques. It has enabled us to follow the picture plate from its admired
place on the wall, to oblivion, to a photograph, and back to the wall again. The pages turn, the fan opens and shuts, the eye of the china doll turns outward to eternity. History may lie in the hand that holds the colored marble.

*Carnegie Institute of Technology*  
JAMES D. VAN TRUMP


The Preface to this volume (p. 3) is a model. It is very brief but altogether satisfactory to the general reader. The Introduction (pp. 5-19) is definitely superior. Expenditure of much time, energy, accumulated scholarship and money is revealed on virtually every page.

Dr. George Hunter, Philadelphia chemist and druggist, a personage of importance and distinction six generations ago, is lifted from obscurity which descended upon him after his death in 1823. But fortunately for his permanent reputation and for history he was a journalist or diarist and left four or more separate journals, all of which seem eventually to have come into the possession of the American Philosophical Society.

John Francis McDermott is a researcher, editor and author of considerable repute. Some of his output has appeared in this periodical. The reader may assume that materials in this volume are "exactly and completely reproduced from the original."

The journals of Dr. George Hunter as found herein printed, throw great light on his biography along with valuable historical information about travel, settlement and trade in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Illinois, Louisiana and Arkansas in the decade from 1796-1805.

The editor has added much in footnotes which may well be called "explanatory notes." Involving wide research and much travel the footnotes are an essential part of the publication.

Perfection is the objective of such publications, though it is rarely, if ever, attained. Where, as here, major imperfections are not found, minor discrepancies are not always eliminated by the most careful workmanship. There is debatable English (p. 5, line 12 and p. 6, column 2, line 4). There is repetition (unobjectionable) of a statement