

books



From top: 17th-century interior of a wealthy French household; the Promenade de Longchamp during year 10 of the French Consulate; pompom headdresses, 1640-50. To order *The Complete Costume History* for £90 (plus £3.50 UK p&p), ring the *World of Interiors* Bookshop on 0870 727 4147

THE COMPLETE COSTUME HISTORY (by Auguste Racinet; Taschen, rrp £100) Be warned – in spite of its title, this is not quite the complete costume history. Those whose tastes tend towards cloche hats, poodle skirts, kipper ties or shell suits will not find them represented here. This is because the author, Auguste Racinet, had the misfortune to die in 1893, and was thus unable to catalogue the sartorial developments of the 20th century in his otherwise exhaustive volume. Drawing on countless sources, Racinet created an immense reference work of clothing both historical and ethnographic, ranging from togas to saris, from chainmail to Highland dress, from Amazonian lip

plugs to strange pompom headdresses worn by what appear to be 17th-century Daleks. Armed with their copies of *Le Costume Historique*, the painters, theatrical wardrobe designers and fashion enthusiasts of *fin-de-siècle* France could see how people dressed at any given time and in any country.

It is the extent of Racinet's research that makes for one of the most fascinating aspects of this book from an art-historical perspective. For rather than attempting to standardise the visual style of his 500 plates, the artist allows his source material to dominate his draughtsmanship. Thus we find that the people of the Middle Ages are either effete and sketchy or staunch and solid, depending on whether they are borrowed from illuminated manuscripts or ecclesiastical statuary. Indians, taken from Mughal miniatures, are invariably in flat profile, as are their hieroglyph- and urn-derived Ancient Egyptian and Greek counterparts. These stylistic deviations are made more pronounced by their proximity to a more naturalistic 19th-century manner; certain of the interior studies, for example, bear the hallmarks of history paintings or the Orientalist style then in vogue, with all the accuracy that implies.

Since Racinet does not attempt to disguise his (uncredited) source material, it draws attention to the authenticity of what is depicted. If the fops of 1802 have the diagonal elongations of Regency caricatures, then surely their clothes are also exaggerated parodies rather than realistic studies? To a lesser extent, Racinet's dependence on portraits also affects this. One of the pictures of 16th-century dress, for example, is clearly based on a famous engraving of Elizabeth I by William Rogers: is the exaggerated garb of the Virgin Queen really to be taken as typical of what late Tudors wore, or just of her personal tastes? Subjects of portraits do not tend to wear their day-to-day clothing, but show off their latest finery – basing a costume history on such evidence is equivalent to extrapolating the daywear of modern Britain from the bizarre fashion-victim apparel of ITV light-entertainment presenters.

Nevertheless, *The Complete Costume History* is fascinating, both as a game of Spot the Original (is that a Hogarth on plate 378?) and as a huge collection of intriguing pictures in their own right. Taschen's reissue certainly plays up this aspect of the book as desirable object: it is in the now-familiar 'Super-Immense' format of the recent *Leonardo da Vinci* volume, suitable only for coffee tables made from reinforced steel. And it is apparent that the publishers do not regard this as a work for serious scholars – much of the author's original text is omitted, bowdlerised out of fear that his rather Victorian values might offend modern sensibilities. So take this volume in the spirit it is intended: don't worry about Racinet's accuracy, just marvel at his ambition, his scope and his achievement ■ STEPHEN PATIENCE▷

