

Veronica Horwell enjoys some 17th-century valentines

Emblems of love and death

Théâtre D'Amour
by Carsten-Peter Warncke
352pp, Taschen, £15

This is a fancy number even for Taschen, masters of flash volumes at a low price. I had to peer my way through the gilt print of Carsten-Peter Warncke's short essays to find out who might have compiled, around 1620, the original album of engravings it reproduces. And why. Neither query is Warncke's first concern. He's an art historian delighted to have 143 prints in fine condition. They are arranged in sets in a single volume that can be used to demonstrate the great 16th and 17th-century pastime, the emblem game.

This game, as he explains, began with a single book, the *Emblematum liber*, published in Augsburg in 1531. Each page combined a natty verse related to a woodcut illustration, captioned with a summary of the essential idea. It was a pop culture success, reissued and copied across Europe. The novel form depended equally on the across-class spread of literacy as printed texts became more available, and a continuation of the older habit of interpretation of religious imagery. The difference was that whereas church images had been communal, and their readings enforced, these new types of woodcuts and engravings could be personally owned and were wide open to individual interpretation.

Over the 150 years that the emblem game was played at all levels of European society, the fun came from changing challenges. Sometimes these transformations summarised directly in the words the meaning of the symbol illustrated, sometimes they used the borrowed familiar as the basis for a fresh twist, as in modern music sampling. Some collectors, rather like Warncke, could and did play the allusions game but were really interested in owning an economy edition of expensive, and often exotic, original artworks. The most graceful plates in this collection have been adapted from Italian mannerist and early Baroque paintings, and all have been hand-coloured with a bloom-on-the-rose balance of vibrancy and delicacy.

There were single-theme obsessives — geeks, especially in the Low Countries, world centre of the trade, with 10,000 prints



on their subject of choice (train-spotting well precedes trains). Whatever you desired, the burin could supply it: art, science, uplift, porn.

The whole business foreshadowed the modern ephemera industry. The album's prints of the Senses might be glossy ads, not so much fashion plates for the inspiration of clothing details as summaries of the ultimate female no girl can aspire to, nor man to have. The lumberingly lewd figures of speech, illustrated with expanses of rude red stocking on the womenfolk — Antwerp equivalent of blatant thong display — are even rougher than our gift-shop racks of smutty cards. (Can "shove one into the oven" really have meant "the younger son marrying before the elder" in vulgar Dutch parlance of the 17th century?)

The follies of love and the narratives of marriage are the simplest, most definitive forms of the stories of human failure that we still retell ourselves in Heat and other celebrity gossip rags, though solitary old age herein is even bleaker than it is for washed-up stars in Santa Barbara. The centenarian expires alone as inheritors squabble over the strongbox, and there's more

death in this album than young romance is now prepared to contemplate: what did it mean then to gaze upon an allegory of transience — an exquisite child among flowers and skulls — knowing that half or more of the children of any union would never survive their first year on Earth?

They must have been emotionally so much tougher than we are, considering that the single theme of this album, one of the few to make it through to our times almost complete (if rebound in

almost certainly the wrong order in the 19th century), was "the theatre of love". Warncke does finally explain, in the difficult golden typeface, that he believes that the compiler of the book, a Frenchman from his preference for editions customised to the Francophone market, meant it as a *Stambuch*, a kind of autograph album to which friends and acquaintances contributed pictures, had them coloured, and perhaps wrote in the rhymes. The usual purpose of a book of love was as a gift of intent from an

admirer to a potential bride from a good family. Well, the book woos me with its charming Cupid sequence, especially a putti-crewed ship sailing rough seas under a sky starry with the eyes of the beloved. But when it offers in its frank, Dutch, way plate 116 as a summary of the possible future (captioned "The wrinkled face I shall marry, And with her money buy another"), I'll take one perfect rose, thank you.

To order *Théâtre D'Amour* for £14.25 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0870 836 0875. guardian.co.uk/bookshop

**Be mine ...
a detail of
Venus and
Cupid**