

1,000 LIGHTS: 1879 TO 1959 (ed. Charlotte and Peter Fiell; Taschen, rrp £19.99) Lighting is crucial to looks, as any minor celebrity will tell you. It can be cruel or kind, and the same applies to interiors as to faces. Even an A&E waiting room might appear quite charming, softly illuminated by an artful sprinkling of night-lights. Conversely, the prettiest drawing room can be reduced to the bland and ordinary by the flash of an instant camera.

Contemporary lighting designers tend to concentrate on the quality of light in an interior rather than the light fitting itself. A room may be glamorised by a grand chandelier, but it will be lit from more discreet sources; up-lighters behind the cornice, down-lighters under the shelves, lights that lie flush with the floor or ceiling, with possibly a cluster of the latter to bestow extra sparkle on the chandelier.

Here is a book that turns the spotlight squarely onto the light fitting. *1,000 Lights: 1879 to 1959* is the first of two volumes that between them cover designs from Edison's electric lightbulb to the cutting-edge technology of today. At first flick it is not a particularly attractive book. A dense paperback, heavy as a stone, with a cover in lurid shades of violet and mustard on black, its 500 pages of product and caption are reminiscent of a giant mail-order catalogue. But this book deserves and repays far closer scrutiny.

Presented chronologically, decade by decade, there are lights dreamed up by some of the 20th century's most important and influential designers, from Charles Rennie Mackintosh to Arne Jacobsen, and representing every major style of interior design and architecture, starting with Arts and Crafts and finishing in this volume with the spindly, space-age exuberance of the 1950s. There are the glorious Art Nouveau curlicues of brass by William Benson, friend and colleague of William Morris; there are the strange copper and mica lamps of Dirk van Erp, as suitable for a goblin as his name; there are the inevitable leaded-glass confections by Tiffany, so thoroughly debased and bowdlerised by cheap imitations; there are George Carwardine's 1933 'Anglepoise', Max Ingrand's 1954 'Fontana' table light, and Verner Panton's 1959 'Topan' hanging light.

The book is clearly laid out and nicely produced. Every light is photographed singly, against a plain background, and a few are also revealingly shown in situ in the interiors for which they were first made. Next to the photographs are short captions and a paragraph of relevant text, replicated in both German and French, which is oddly irritating but doubtless economic.

There are also surprises, like how startlingly modern some early designs still look, or the fact that Mariano Fortuny, better known for his pleated silk dresses, was also an innovative lighting designer. There is even a light, made by Finnish designer Paavo Tynell in 1948, that prefigures Tord Boontje's phenomenally successful 'Garland' light for Habitat. On second thoughts, I rather wish this were a mail-order catalogue ■ ROS BYAM SHAW is a writer on design ▷