

BOOKS

The art of the book

— STORY BY SIMON HUGHES

THE FIRST QUESTION you have to ask is what was Myer doing stocking a \$15,000 book in the first place? By rights this should be a DJs story. But there was the rep for Taschen books, an imprint committed to 'masstige', lugging the world's biggest (50cm square and 34kg) and most expensive trade title – into 'My Store' in the forlorn hope of a sale. This surely had to be a fool's errand. As it turned out, no. The rep barely had time to leave before the Myer book department phone rang. Did they possibly stock the new Taschen title commemorating the life of Muhammad Ali? Er, yes they did. I'll take it, replied the caller and that was that.

This was all the way back in 2004. As it transpired, the caller made a wise purchase. The limited signed 'Champ's Edition' of GOAT (Greatest Of All Time): A Tribute to Muhammad Ali, with its dinky Jeff Koons inflatable sculptures, is now worth somewhere in the vicinity of \$25,000. Serious biscuits, and you naturally wonder: who buys such things – and why? To find out, we need first to take a quick swing through the recent history of the book. By the late 19th century, printed text had reached such a pitch of democratisation that books no longer resembled the gorgeous objects only the very wealthy could afford. Enter William Morris. As father of the private press, Morris revolted against affordability over design. Something similar would happen in Paris with the *livre d'artiste*, the artist's book, in which the publisher would seek to marry the painter Picasso, say, with the poet Apollinaire and, in Jean Cocteau's case, himself with his-self. Private press publication and the *livre d'artiste* restored the exclusivity of the book.

Space jump to the 21st century where the advent of electronic text and our good friends at Google could well spell the death of what began as the codex. Well, not quite. "It is one of the ironies of the new technology," says Des Cowley, rare printed collections manager at the State Library of Victoria, "that it is both destroyer and creator." It might threaten traditional publishing but without the new technology it would not be possible to produce a book such as GOAT for even the current exorbitant asking price. You can spot what Cowley describes as "a real flourishing of the book as iconic object" in the groovier bookstores, where a significant proportion of

the shelf space is given over to titles whose design smarts outweigh (literally) their literary qualities.

As Cowley points out, these tomes are almost designed to be felt as much as read. So we have, for example, *The Phaidon Atlas of Contemporary World Architecture* (\$275), which comes in a plastic suitcase; and Andy Warhol's *Interview: The Crystal Ball of Pop Culture Volume 1: Best of the First Decade 1969-1979* (Steidl, \$750), which has its own extendable handle and wheels. A good thing too, considering the package tips the scales at about 42kg. This efflorescence has to represent a boon for the bookshops. Selling a GOAT, you would think, would be akin to winning Lotto but, unhappily, some booksellers are now finding themselves the meat in the sandwich.

A forthcoming title featuring a retrospective of one of those fashion photographers whose work straddles porn and a Coke ad is due to retail at \$2,700, with the bookseller's commission pegged at 17.5 per cent. Normally it would be 40 per cent. A bookseller's traditional role is also subtly subverted by these transactions. "If I were channelling Carrie Bradshaw," says Jurate Sasnaitis, proprietor of Greville Street Books in Melbourne's Prahran, "I might ask: if buying a book is synonymous with buying culture, does buying a rare and expensive book automatically make us more cultured? Is a book's contents, in fact, of any value or importance, or is it all about the package and the price?"

Of course, whether you buy books by the kilo or are genuinely hot for the subject matter, many of these expensive volumes are, in the parlance of the trade, 'eminently collectable'. What can we recommend? Get a GOAT before you need to be a Macquarie Banker to afford it, even if it's the (sniff) 'Collector's Edition', which is a steal at \$8,000. The Warhol is a must for anyone who remembers having hair bigger than their head. Taschen moves from masstige to crasstige with Araki ("When I came out of the womb of my mother, I turned around and photographed her sex"), a snip at \$3,000. Or maybe the limited signed edition of *Leni Riefenstahl – Africa* retailing at \$US2,500 (\$3,468).

It is not only books. There are also magazines which, in the case of *Visionaire*, can look like anything but. Each issue is the brainchild of a name designer, with its price

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varying accordingly. One month 'the magazine' might be a lighting box, the next, a series of dolls retailing for a cool \$800. McSweeney's – in-jokes, esoteric information and rants about pop culture – has a similar commitment to design, but is merely exclusive as opposed to wallet-lightening.

A canny buyer might also usefully check out the state of modern artists' books. Even if it's already too late to get in early on such mouth-watering combinations as Robert Motherwell's illustrated edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Jasper Johns teaming with Samuel Beckett in *Foires/Fizzles*, the opportunity to own an aesthetic object which is also an asset still exists. Check out gallery shops and antiquarian booksellers.

And so to our original question. People who buy books equivalent to a deposit on a house (admittedly a small one) will be one of two things: a bloodless collector who never takes the thing out of its box (years ago Helmut Newton's *SUMO*, another \$3,000 Taschen title, which came with a metal display stand designed by Philippe Starck, was purchased by a Tasmanian pizza-shop owner as an investment – it currently sells for around \$12,000); or a true lover of the codex book in possibly its final flourishing. Reading may well be superfluous in this last phase but, at the very least, the willingness of punters to part with significant quantities of 'cold hard' is encouraging evidence of a revaluing of the book as a cultural object. ■

