

Atlas Maior of 1665

Taschen, \$200

If there's a serious cartographer or geographer on your gift list — and you have serious money to spend — this could be the book.

This 594-page volume is a visual delight and a fascinating read. It is a reprint of the Austrian National Library in Vienna's copy of the Baroque world atlas that in the 17th century touted itself as "the greatest and finest atlas ever published."

The artwork, originally hand-colored, is decidedly fanciful — map borders with mythic figures floating in clouds, maps festooned with coats of arms, cherubs perched here and there. America is depicted by a bare-breasted Indian woman, a huntress in a feather skirt.

The 17th century text notes, "Knowledge of inland America is still rather uncertain, especially as regards the north ... half of America stretches to the west; this part is entirely unknown in its interior and only its coasts have been explored."

Peter van der Krogt, a noted Utrecht University cartographer, has written an introduction and descriptions of the maps. Among the oddities he points out: "In most cases, north is at the top of the map. But this is not invariably so. Sometimes the cartographer or publisher chose a different orientation. This was generally motivated by the need to make economical use of the sheet, but aesthetic considerations sometimes prevailed."