

books

Female principals, *Domus* distilled, the sublime Turner, documents of decay, mosquitoes on the Mississippi

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DOMUS 1928-1999 (eds Charlotte and Peter Fiell; Taschen, rrp £400) The first thing to say about this astonishing production – these 12 volumes, these 7,000 pages, these 20,000 illustrations – is that it is indispensable to anybody serious about interior decoration. You will discover more ideas here about design and architecture, and a better guide to the major names of the last 80 years, than you could find with convenience anywhere else. There will be whole volumes, indeed whole decades, when much that was published in *Domus* seems now incredibly ugly; and yet even then, even in the depths of the 1970s or the early 1990s, the sheer volume of information is breathtaking.

Domus was launched as an international interior-design magazine by the Milanese publisher Gianni Mazzocchi in January 1928, with Gio Ponti as editor; Ponti remained at the helm, at least nominally, until his death in 1979, with the exception only of a brief wartime interregnum when he was tempted away by a ‘dynamic Italian/French woman with carrot-coloured hair’. Over the years, the magazine expanded its scope, increasingly featuring industrial design and big buildings. Taschen’s own big idea has been to reprint a selection as far as the end of 1999. Their editorial intervention is minimal: what you get here is, roughly, one or two articles from every issue, mainly with translations into English.

The result is a cavalcade of wonderful surprises: there are stunningly original furnishings and fittings right from the start; eight whole pages on that Milanese flat where Ponti and Fornasetti covered the walls with illusionistic cupboards and prints; elegant 1950s houses by Italian designers that have been unfairly forgotten; amazingly groovy, fluffy interiors by Nanda Vigo; blobby psychedelia galore, moulded or padded in orange and vermilion; and space-age kitchens from the early 1970s. You can even glimpse a young Janet Street-Porter on the floor of her Fulham pad, grasping a teapot.

A project of this size inevitably has some problems. An index is handily provided on a compact disc, but this is nastily stuck in a cheap plastic envelope glued into the final volume. The translations from the Italian are invariably horribly contorted, although it must be said that this is a *Domus* tradition: the translated critique of Richard and Ruth Rogers’s own home from April 1988 was a masterpiece of intelligibility. By the early 1990s the magazine had started to fill up with lengthy, pompous essays by ‘cultural luminaries’; this selection thankfully ignores these, but it also misses out some of the more unusual and colourful projects that still give *Domus* its particular flavour. The final volumes suffer from too little colour, too little interior photography, and too much of the work of Frank Gehry. That said, Carlo Mollino, Gio Ponti’s eccentric all-round designer friend, features prominently in earlier years, and he encapsulates the journal’s playful spirit and embrace of the fantastical. *Domus* at its best was about good design as a way of enjoying life and having fun ■
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