

# Books including the latest V&A publications



**30,000 years of art**  
Phaidon, £29.95

**1001 buildings you must see before you die**

Edited by Mark Irving  
Cassell Illustrated, £20

**History of Western Art**  
Herbert, £8.99

**Michelangelo: The Complete Works**

Taschen, £120  
Reviewed by David Redhead

Art history? Certainly, madam. Is that a medium, a maximum, or a massive? Does the standard vocabulary of the fast food joint seem out of place to you in the context of visual culture? Time to wake up and smell the Starbucks. A glance around the visual arts section of your local bookshop will reveal that publishers big and small are using canny packaging, clever design and very small, very tall and very large formats to turn yesterday's worthy reference book into a seductive twenty-first-century collectable.

It's partly a matter of common sense. Big city I-spy architecture books and upmarket city guides that fit neatly into your pocket or handbag – such as the *Wallpaper\* City Guides* – are no-brainer purchases for design-conscious



Above: Altamira bison, c.15000BC, Spain © akg-images.  
Left: Ottoman basin, c.1547, Turkey  
© Scala, Florence/HIP

urbanites. But what about big books? After all, when it comes to art history, Big is as much of a trend as Small. Twenty years ago when you wanted a definitive introduction to art history you were more than likely to turn to E H Gombrich's 688-page *Story of Art*. Today Gombrich needs a leg up among the other giants on offer.

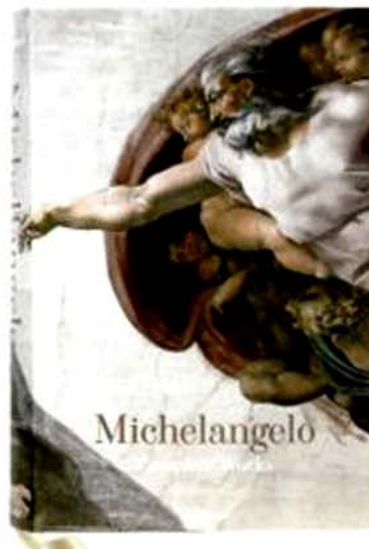
As the publisher of both Gombrich and the *Wallpaper\** guides, Phaidon is a company that has long known that size matters when it comes to art, but it has gone format mad in recent years with encyclopedic general guides to photography (*The Photography Book*), art (*The Art Book*) and a three-volume collection of design classics (*Phaidon Design Classics*). Phaidon's latest addition encapsulates the approach. The *30,000 years of art* volume is around a foot square and claims to embrace "all regions and cultures in single unfolding chronology". It offers pithy and accessible copy, big pictures and attention-demanding design wrapped up in a massive 1,000-page tome, for less than £30.

It's clear that the formula is one that is popular with the public. Why else would just about every publisher be jumping on the Big Book bandwagon? New additions to the "massive posse" include Cassell's *1001 buildings to see before you die* (nestling down comfortably alongside its companion volume, *1001*

*nights of passion and pleasure*, a guide to lovemaking).

So should we buy in or not? Do these new formats really provide the art and architecture buff with value and accessibility, or is the trend actually about dumbing down culture into superficial and digestible packages: the art critic equivalent of one of those Channel 4 list programmes? The answer, I suspect, is a bit of both. I'm as much of a sucker as the next man for a big book with lots of useful looking time lines and tables. But I've learned not to let a flashy design distract me from a serious omission or shortcoming. Try asking yourself: is this book well-written and accurate? Does it have a decent index (*1001 buildings to see before you die* doesn't, for instance)? Is the format functional? Why on earth, for example, is Herbert's new 500-page *History of Western Art* pocket-sized?

But who can resist the chance to indulge in a really big book occasionally? Phaidon crossed a new threshold with its super-sized *Warhol* volume a year or two ago. Now Taschen has raised the stakes with its immense *Michelangelo: The Complete Works*. Comprehensive, scholarly, beautifully illustrated, this is the ultimate book for the Michelangelo devotee. Not so much a coffee table book, in fact, as a coffee table in itself.



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