

Big, bold, beautiful



Frank Whitford is entranced by stunning volumes about Van Gogh and Matisse, disturbed by the startling Walton Ford and reassured by the normality of the outstanding Norman Rockwell in his choice of the year's finest art books

Now there's a spectacular book, **Caravaggio** by Sebastian Schütze (Taschen £100), with breathtakingly good illustrations, some of them life-sized, and a complete catalogue, in which an essay is devoted to every painting. The main text is brilliant, too.

Other substantial monographs about more contemporary artists include **Henri Matisse: Cut-Outs** edited by Gilles and Xavier-Gilles Néret (Taschen £135). It is in two volumes, the first consisting of magnificent full-colour illustrations of the cut-outs, documentary photographs of the old, infirm Matisse, sometimes in the company of doves, and a comprehensive text. But what makes the publication irresistible (and its price understandable) is the second volume, a facsimile of *Jazz* (1947), the stunning *livre d'artiste* consisting of about 100 stencil prints made from the *papiers découpés*.

If Matisse's prints are ecstatic, Frank Auerbach's paintings are gritty and usually pretty gloomy, though brighter colours have been emerging through the pentiment of late.

The work of another American artist, Walton Ford, isn't so much creepy as weird. His watercolours of birds and beasts, perfectly characterised as a "cross between Audubon and Hieronymous Bosch", are the subject of one of the most opulent books of the year and certainly the most startling, **Walton Ford: Pancha Tantra** (Taschen £44.99). The superb, huge colour illustrations demonstrate Ford's total mastery of watercolour, but many of them make me, at least, feel sick – as they're surely intended to. How else can you react to a heron with its beak stuffed with wriggling, slimy frogs, or a bull elephant with two birds perched on his semi-tumescent member?