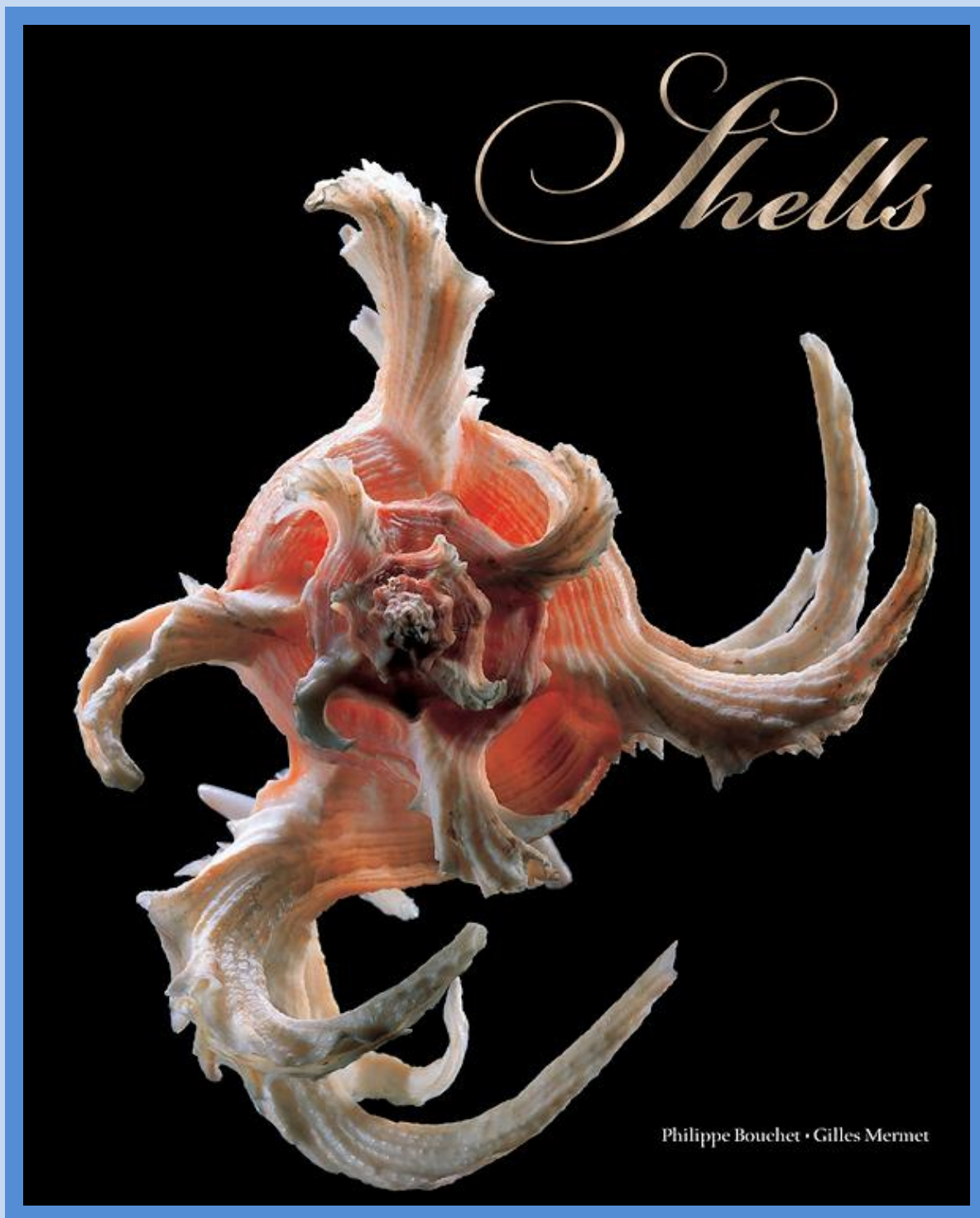


Book Review:



Shells by Philippe Bouchet and Gilles Mermet, 2008. Abbeville Press, New York. Pp. 1-168 (including numerous color plates: 31 in text, 78 full page, and 19 two-pages). 244 x 309 mm (9 1/2 by 12 1/8 in.). Hard-bound. ISBN 978-07892-0989-4. [French version published 2007 by the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturel (MNHN), Paris]. \$45.00; available from many booksellers.

It's a miracle the coffeetables in many a conchologist's home can withstand the gravity of the lavishly-illustrated contemporary works explicitly destined to laden their weary shoulders. Despite an admitted glut of titles of this genre in my possession, I received the Bouchet and Mermet on my birthday. The mere coincidence of this delivery notwithstanding, I somehow considered it a sentinel gift and set out to give it due attention.

No time was wasted setting the tone of this work: the front jacket features a much-enlarged *Chicoreus conucervi* (Röding, 1798) viewed in apical perspective, mysteriously illuminated from beneath, and set upon a matte pitch black background. This image joins 77 nearly as stunning, impeccably-executed full-page color photographs in the book itself. Most are on a similar black background, a motif that has only recently garnished the métier. To these are added 19 two-page (verso-recto) plates and over 30 text figures. This work is, by page count alone, an iconography!

Along with the usual suspects (*Architectonica*, *Murex pecten*, *Glossus humanus*, abalone nacre, *Epitonium scalare*, *Nautilus*, etc.), there are some refreshing and welcome strangers to the gallery like the terrestrial prosobranch *Tortulosa tortulosa* Gray, 1847, a freshwater vermetid *Helicostoa sinensis* Lamy, 1926, a watering-pot clam, an off-beat oyster *Pustulostrea tuberculata* (Lamarck, 1804), and the extinct St. Helena endemic land pulmonate *Chilonopsis aurisvulpina* (Holten, 1802). Each of the latter is particularly well-exploited in the heuristic companion plate explanation.

On page nine, Bouchet, who wrote all the text save photographer Gilles Mermet's acknowledgements, indicates that selection of photographic subject matter was made exclusively by the latter contributor during a campaign through the range of the MNHN. Aesthetic sensibilities were the only criteria applied in the process – no scientific encumbrances. That's perhaps as it should be, and maybe how most of these collaborative oeuvres usually evolve. However, despite heuristic and often quite clever use of the plate explanations, a firm bond between the illustrations and text is not consistently forged.

The road-weary maxim "Don't judge a book by its cover" resonated during my review. Wending through the profusion of fine shell images is an essay, saltatory in pagination but cohesive in content. In six short chapters Bouchet leads the reader through topics like the history of science, biodiversity, extinction, procedure in nomenclature, taxonomy, scientific publication, biological rarity, all delivered with enthusiasm but without obvious effort on his (or the reader's) part. Perhaps the style is best summarized by his stated

purpose [p. 23] “...an autobiographical narration about what it is like to be a malacologist and share with you a passion that has always motivated me.”

Just by way of example, in the third chapter, “Naming Shells,” written mostly in the first person as are much of the others, Bouchet does a commendable job demystifying scientific taxonomy and nomenclature with a discussion including the coining of nominal taxa, synonymy, homonymy, priority, and the International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN) among other topics. This is not hypothetical stuff; he is one of the two malacologists sitting on the ICZN (American Gary Rosenberg is the other). Would that this kind of clear thinking and writing was as easily available to me half a century ago!

Similarly in the next chapter “The Role of the Natural History Museum,” he skillfully blends personal anecdote with analysis of modern history, technological advances, and a reasoned didactic to explain topics like the concept and value of name-bearing types. All this he ties into an advocacy of natural history museum as an essential component of our culture.

Bouchet deals with the paradox of shell-collecting and proper environmental stewardship [Chap. 5 “Collectors and the Environment”]. Many perspectives are offered, including the “crisis of expertise” resulting from a shortage of taxonomists, geopolitical foibles, and whole-scale environmental degradation resulting from “demographic pressure.” He goes on to point out that “the collecting of shells is hardly ever the sole cause, or even the main reason for, the rarification of mollusks.” He balances that judgement with the statement: “I have counted that in recent years one-third and one-half of new marine mollusk species have been described by amateurs. Amateurs and collectors have even become the main initiators of discoveries in certain regions of the world.”

Although this is an English translation of a work composed in the French language, there are no significant problems so often encountered in vulnerably nuanced vocabulary and phraseology. One gremlin made it through: the image of the ovulid *Jenneria pustulata* on p. 136 is “flipped” making it sinistral. Since the companion dorsal view on the facing page is properly oriented, mutant chiral reversal seems unlikely. The taxonomy is current and excellent with one exception: *Neritina communis* (Quoy and Gaimard, 1832) appears to be a junior synonym of *N. waigiensis* (Lesson, 1831: 379). On the other hand, having been taught that Linnaeus only named mollusks in three publications (1758, 1767, 1771), I was made aware that a fourth work is involved thanks to Bouchet’s attention to nomenclatorial detail. This epiphany grew from a close reading of the caption on p. 18: *Stellaria solaris* (Linnaeus, 1764 [p. 645]). The full citation to the “Museum Ulricae,” as it is called, appears below.

In short, what we have here is a fine collaboration. For the price you couldn’t ask for a better artistic production ... and to that you can add the priceless text. The work, cohesion no matter, is substantial, and novel, recreation for the eye and mind. Get two, and give one to someone whom you wish to derive such delights.

Lesson, R. P., 1831 ["1830"]. *Voyage autour du monde, exécuté par ordre du Roi, sur la corvette de sa Majesté, La Coquille, pendant les années 1822, 1823, 1824 et 1825, sous le ministère et conformément aux instructions de S. E. M. le Marquis de Clermont-Tonnerre, Ministre de la Marine; et publié sous les auspices de son Excellence Mgr. Le Cte De Chabrol, Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies. Histoire naturelle. Zoologie 2(1) Mollusques.* Bertrand, Paris, Paris. Pp. 239-455.

Linnaeus, C., 1764. *Museum S:ae R:ae M:tis Ludovicae Ulricae Regine Svecorum, Gothorum, Vandalorumque etc. In quo Animalia rariora, exotica, imprimis Insecta & Conchilia describuntur & determinantur. Prodromi instar editum.* Laurentius Salvius, Holmia (Stockholm). 1- 720 + 8 pp.