

at least as Ackroyd tells it. Yet Ackroyd does do many things right. One is to set forth the terms and trying conditions of Blake's great project without explaining away (or worse, psychologizing) his visionary genius. Such tact, though leaving us eager for more answers, turns us toward the only reliable source—the works of the artist himself.

—Jay Tolson

ORNAMENT:

A Social History since 1450.

By Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard. Yale Univ. Press and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

232 pp. \$45

Upper-class English ladies have never worn tattoos. Or have they? In 1901, Lady Randolph Churchill celebrated the coronation of Edward VII by having a tiny serpent tattooed on her forearm. Tattoos were all the rage at the time. By 1920 the traditional prejudice against tattooing had returned, and Lady Churchill was never seen in public without a bracelet covering the spot.

The authors of this fascinating book do not say whether Lady Churchill ever regretted her tattoo. But they do explain much else, including the likely reason why she chose the serpent motif. Snodin, head of the designs collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Howard, an art historian at the University of Sussex, begin their survey in 1450, when the invention of printing led to the circulation of Renaissance and other design ideas throughout Europe. By the mid-1500s, art patrons were poring over “emblem books” in search of “visual symbols of personal qualities that a patron aspired to.” In this context, the serpent was “a symbol of eternity.” Hence the serpent embroidered in the sleeve of Elizabeth I in the famous “Rainbow” portrait (c. 1600).

As a social history of ornament, this book is a first. Snodin and Howard explain that 19th-century “grammars of ornament” classified visual motifs (everything from the Corinthian acanthus to the Chinese Willow Pattern) according to a hierarchy of aesthetic and moral value. With the 20th century came a different approach, one that read psychological meanings into various recurring images. (Need we dwell on what Lady Churchill's serpent would have meant to a generation raised on Freud?) This lavishly

illustrated volume takes the next step, which is to give historical context to our understanding of ornamental hierarchies and of the rules shaping ornament's private and public uses. Today's postmodern designers like to think they are beyond such considerations, but, as the authors wisely point out, “If rules are broken, then people choose to do that consciously; the very process of breaking rules emphasizes the fact that normally they are there.”

—Martha Bayles

ROSEBUD:

The Story of Orson Welles.

By David Thomson. Knopf. 448 pp. \$30

Forget the aging, obese Orson Welles, who promised to “sell no wine before its time” on television in the 1970s and '80s. This biography begins with the golden, whirling days of Welles's early career, when the handsome boy out of Kenosha, Wisconsin, had boundless creative vitality—and the power to charm anyone, in the theater or out. In 1931, the 16-year-old Welles was appearing at the Gate Theater in Dublin. In 1935, he was staging a sensational *Macbeth* with black actors in Harlem. Two years later, he was directing and starring in *Doctor Faustus*, working with John Houseman and Marc Blitzstein on the inflammatory prolabor musical *The Cradle Will Rock*, and lending his plummy voice to the radio role of Lamont Cranston in *The Shadow*. Welles (and Houseman) launched the Mercury Theater with a revelatory *Julius Caesar*. When the Mercury began a weekly radio series in 1938, Welles hoodwinked the nation with *War of the Worlds*, his notorious fake news broadcast of a Martian invasion.

Then Welles invaded Hollywood, where he directed a first feature that many regard as the best film ever made by an American: *Citizen Kane* (1941). He went on to make a second, darker movie, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), that might have been even greater had it been released in the form Welles intended. But he was in Brazil spending—



wasting?—RKO's money on a new film (which he left incomplete) when the studio edited 40 minutes out of *Ambersons* to give it more box office appeal. It was not the last time Welles would let a project slip out of his control—and in so doing seem to disavow what he had created.

The cliché about Welles is that everything went downhill after these first two films. But as Thomson, an actor and the author of several books about film, makes clear, this was not so—except in the sense that Welles never surpassed *Kane*. (But then, who has?) To be sure, Welles was forever beginning projects, dropping them, and taking them up again years later in makeshift locales and even with different casts. Yet despite a professional life that often resembled a Ponzi scheme, Welles the charlatan was also a practicing magician, reaching into his shabby hat and pulling out movie treasures such as *Macbeth* (1948), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *The Trial* (1962), parts of his admittedly disjointed Falstaff saga, *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), *The Immortal Story* (1968), and *F Is for Fake* (1973).

Thomson's Welles is monumentally imperfect, full of passion, appetite, guile, lies, manipulation, misjudgment, arrogance, doubt, and, of course, a kind of genius. He is a manic-depressive egotist, "vividly disturbed and hysterically well,

beyond treatment, so knowing that no doctor ever had a chance with him." This book traces the arc of his tumultuous life with surprising and admirable dispatch.

Too bad, then, that Thomson keeps intruding. His memory of seeing *Citizen Kane* for the first time, as a teenager alone in a revival house in London, is typical of the missteps: "I struggled with *Kane* because I knew that its show was more intense than anything I had seen, because I felt aroused by the need to run a little faster, because the shining young *Kane* was so entrancing."

Even more irksome are the imaginary dialogues between Thomson and—whom? his publisher? his alter ego?—that occur at irregular intervals without so much as a *caveat lector*. These are meant to dangle qualifications, questions, and alternative interpretations before our wondering eyes, and in their general fruitiness they are perhaps *echt*-Wellesian (the hokum Welles, that is). But mostly these dialogues recall the moments you faced as a child when a movie turned "icky" and you went to buy popcorn, hoping the actors would return to their senses by the time you returned to your seat. Too bad Thomson can't resist trying to upstage his subject. He of all people should have realized that no one ever upstaged Orson Welles.

—James Morris

Science & Technology

THE END OF SCIENCE:

Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age.

By John Horgan. Addison Wesley Longman. 320 pp. \$24

Ours is a time of endings: not just of a century but of a millennium. Honoring custom, we daily announce finalities. Academics lecture on "late"—not "advanced"—capitalism. Optimists foresee the demise of talk shows, pessimists the death of the humanities. Can modern science, gray with 300 years, be far behind?

According to Horgan, many of the best and brightest scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers are resigned to defeat. What looms is a "postempirical" and "ironic" approach: the abandonment of the search for fundamental laws of nature, and the rise of a

"science" that is . . . well, anxious, evocative, literary. In Horgan's words, "One must accept the possibility—even the probability—that the great era of scientific discovery is over. By *science* I mean not applied science, but science at its purest and grandest, the primordial human quest to understand the universe and our place in it. Further research may yield no more great revelations or revolutions, but only incremental, diminishing returns."

Horgan is the well-known author of profiles appearing in *Scientific American*, where he has explored the thinking and (more effectively) the personalities of a galaxy of stars, or at least scintillators, among those who have been doing science or meta-science for the past few decades. His finely crafted interviews have been adapted for *The End of Science*, with new material added.