

**What Style Is It?** JOHN POPPELIERS, S. ALLEN CHAMBERS and NANCY B. SCHWARTZ. Washington: Preservation Press, [1978?]. ill. 46, [1] p. ISBN 0 89133 065 8 \$3.50.

**Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms, 1600-1945** JOHN J.-G. BLUMENSON. Foreword by SIR NIKOLAUS PEVSNER. With photographs from the HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY. Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, © 1977. vii, 118, [1] p. ill. ISBN 0 910050 24 4 Members: \$4.50, non-members \$6.75.

**The Buildings of Canada: A Guide to Pre-20th-Century Styles in Houses, Churches and Other Structures.** BARBARA A. HUMPHREYS and MEREDITH SYKES. Illustrator, MICHAEL MIDDLETON. [Ottawa]: Parks Canada, © 1974. ill. 13 p. Free.

“What style is it?” How often has this query been heard from a frustrated person trying to come to terms with some unknown building? The question is a valid one, for the determination of style is certainly the most useful means of describing and classifying architecture. While architectural historians may be trained in the procedure of identifying style, people in other professions generally are not and so find it bewildering. What is required is some kind of formal vocabulary with which to organize the many buildings encountered in the course of their work.

The need to develop a useful and comprehensible architectural taxonomy has obviously been recognized, for a number of guides to the styles of North American architecture have recently been published by the public agencies that foster the study of buildings. All differ somewhat in format, approach, and even nomenclature, yet each manages to define and explain the principal styles in a fairly easy-to-follow way. Nobody who reads one carefully should confuse any longer the Gothic Revival with the Queen Anne style.

*What Style Is It?* is the most polished of the three books under review. It has been prepared by three members of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), the programme of the United States National Park Service that records and documents buildings for the national architectural archive in the Library of Congress. Originally published as a series of articles in *Historic Preservation*, the book is essentially a capsule history of American architecture. Each of the principal styles is discussed concisely from both a descriptive and an historical point of view. The characteristic arrangement of pediments and pilasters is explained together with (and sometimes somewhat obscured by) the European sources and the names of significant American practitioners of the style. Every one of twenty styles, from the seventeenth century to the International Style, is illustrated with photographs (mostly from HABS) of a few buildings that “represent the most costly and sophisticated of their period.” These key monuments, the authors feel, consciously followed “the dictates of fashion” and “served as models for simpler buildings.”

The book’s strength is that it does what it set out to do competently and interestingly. Its weakness is that the vast majority of buildings that are encountered on the streets or in the architectural drawings and photography collections of our archives are not these famous monuments; they are those very “simpler buildings” that are neither illustrated nor discussed. The reader must therefore rely upon his or her own abilities to make the necessary connections between the textbook exemplars of style and the diluted versions that are so very much more common—not always an easy task. A four-page glossary explains the descriptive terms, and a short bibliography points toward histories of American architecture.

*Identifying American Architecture* avoids many of the problems encountered in the first book. Author Blumenson, who works with the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation, has produced a simple pictorial style guide aimed at the "tourist or traveler." The volume makes no attempt to be a history of architecture. Each of thirty-nine styles is presented across a two-page spread. A short description of the features of each is complemented by photographs (unfortunately murkily reproduced) of three or four buildings whose principal characteristics are listed and keyed by numbers. The buildings are left unidentified, properly stressing their anonymity and their role as mere exemplars of style.

The approach is clear and straightforward, although certain confusions do arise. For instance, too many styles are discerned. The layperson and expert alike will have difficulty, for example, distinguishing between the Romanesque Revival, Victorian Romanesque, and Richardsonian Romanesque; but this is not so serious because the styles are generally combined into one. (*What Style Is It?* identifies only the last of the three.) Furthermore, the numbered list of features includes both those that are characteristic of the style (such as the Gothic Revival's Tudor arch and crockets) and those features or materials which occur in many styles but happen to appear on the chosen photographs (such as its stucco finish and lantern).

The book concludes with a large-type index of terms and a pictorial glossary that effectively uses the keyed picture-and-list technique to explain a myriad of architectural details. *Identifying American Architecture* is small and portable, although its perfect binding might not survive too many years of field use.

*The Buildings of Canada* was prepared by Barbara A. Humphreys and Meredith Sykes of the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings (CIHB), Canada's counterpart to HABS. The material first appeared as a portion of the Reader's Digest and Canadian Automobile Association's *Explore Canada* (Montreal, 1974). This booklet, too, is essentially pictorial. It uses 121 excellent sketches by Michael Middleton and a dozen CIHB photographs to illustrate the various categories of Canadian architecture. The organization is by building type and then by style within each principal type. The treatment is concise, and probably works as a general guide. A single picture and terse description generally suffice for each style. Sections on Vernacular and Miscellaneous Building Types gamely attempt to classify the unclassifiable. Only in the section on dwellings do descriptions and illustrations expand and styles proliferate. Most of the categories work well, but the reader is hard pressed to understand the differences between four very similar styles: Georgian Tradition, Neo-classic, Regency, and Classic Revival. (The source for this redundant nomenclature is Marion MacRae and Anthony Adamson's *The Ancestral Roof* (Toronto, 1963); its progeny is *Up the Streets of Ontario* (Ottawa, 1976), a "building-watching" booklet by Heritage Canada's Executive Director R.A.J. Phillips, illustrated with sketches by David Lewis—shamelessly modelled on those in *The Buildings of Canada*—that likewise treats only houses in depth.)

Building-watching is, of course, akin to bird-watching, and it is this parallel that produced the earliest—and probably still the best—of the recent books in this genre: Marcus Whiffen's *American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969). Architectural historian and bird-watcher Whiffen conceded the inspiration of Roger Tory Peterson's famous guide to birds. Each of forty styles from the Adam Style to Brutalism is presented with a description of its characteristics (longer than Blumenson's), a handful of photographs (quietly identified without distracting captions), an enlightening history (more thorough than that in Poppeliers et al., and wholly separate from the description), and references (keyed to a lengthy bibliography). The *de rigueur* glossary and a carefully prepared index follow.

*American Architecture Since 1780* is a book rather than a booklet, but its 313 pages are compacted into the portable Peterson *Field Guide* format. Its only shortcomings are its omission of vernacular buildings and its growing bibliographical obsolescence with the approach of its tenth birthday.

Which style guide is best? *American Architecture Since 1780* remains the most authoritative and complete. The reader who is willing to put in a little effort would be best with it. The person who wants the once-over-lightly-but-competently approach should try *Identifying American Architecture*. And the chronic building-watcher might do well to collect all of them.

Harold Kalman  
Ottawa

**The Historian and Film.** Edited by PAUL SMITH. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976. viii, 208 p. ISBN 0 521 20992 7 \$13.95.

The publication of a group of articles always poses the question why the components were brought together as one collection. Paul Smith, editor of *The Historian and Film*, states that no substantial survey of the theme suggested by the work's title exists, and proposes "to say something about almost all the major aspects of historians' interest in film." He adds that "no line has been laid down to which contributors have been required to conform; their diversity of opinion reflects, as is proper, the state of the subject." This haphazard approach is often disastrous, but the book, which covers a wide range of ideas and themes with contributions of variable quality, has produced no outright calamities, suffers only some setbacks, and presents enough very good articles to make the work well worth recommending.

The major problems have to do with the continental contributors. For example, the English is so turgid and peculiar in Rolf Schuurmsma's contribution as to be incomprehensible in spots. No translator is credited for this article or the one by Marc Ferro, which also suffers from a touch of awkwardness. The editor should not have permitted this sort of thing to happen to foreign contributors, for it is his job to ensure that the English, if not elegant, is at least readable. The mediocrity of translation unfairly distracts the reader from what is being said, and in Schuurmsma's case, good advice about selecting compilation film footage is, as it were, lost in translation.

The book largely reflects a British perspective, which is not surprising since most of the contributors work at various British universities. Six of the eleven authors, in addition to the editor, are professors of history, three are what might be called media professionals, one is an archivist and another is a professor of film studies.

Smith defines three main areas which he hopes to treat in order to offset past neglect: the investigation of film as source material, the use of film in the teaching of history, and the making of films for academic purposes. The importance of film to the historian, Smith points out, depends upon the area of interest, "the bottom if he is studying or expounding, say, conventional diplomatic history: the top if he is studying, say, the development of popular culture. . . ."

Lisa Pontecorvo writes about film resources from the point of view of the user. Although her comments on archival matters are superficial, she does outline some of the problems involved in searching for and using film resources. She also gives an interesting account of the various problems which tracing and clearing film copyright entail. Clive Coultass looks at the use of film from the other side of the fence in a sober