

BOOKREVIEW



Marilyn Nissenson & Susan Jonas,
Snake Charm.
Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers. New York,
1995. ISBN: 0-8109-4456-1.
Price: ' Fl 40,-. (About 20 \$ ed.).

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Most people will think of exhausted cobras with their jaws sewn together, struggling to raise themselves from a basket and seeming to dance to the tones from a flute, when they hear about snake charming. This is not the type of snake charming that the book of Marilyn Nissenson and Susan Jones is all about. In this case, it is the contrary, which means that snakes charm man. Both authors write about the way that snakes fascinate man. Those who are not interested in the rich cultural history should not buy the book. They could also stop reading this review.

The book starts with 16 illustrated pages. Next there is an introduction. The introductory pages excellently present the content of the book. It shows us: an archaeological shield that is formed like a two headed snake, that many centuries ago belonged to the culture of the Aztecs, a suggestive gouache watercolour representing a snake and the moon by Morris Graves (1938-1939), a drawing of the notorious head of medusa, an expensive golden brooch and an oil painting by the revival painter Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) representing Saint George conquering the dragon while a beautiful virgin prays for him. The book contains many examples of biblical scenes. Two paintings, painted in 1507 by Albrecht Dürer, represent Adam and Eve who are about to break Jahwehs commandment by eating an apple from the tree of knowledge. One

could expect that the snake was represented on the painting. We see a drawing by Michelangelo representing Cleopatra committing suicide using a venomous snake and also a still life showing a snake among other things, a flowerpot decorated with snakes, a two thousand years old Peruvian offering barrel shaped like a human body. On this barrel there is a picture of a snake focussing on that part of the human body that snakes are often associated with, in many cultures. After the introduction there are still more illustrations. They are from a great period of time, the oldest are from the centuries before Christ while the latest are from our century. They show the important role (positive as well as negative) that snakes have fulfilled in global culture history.

Anyone who starts reading the introduction, is presented with an attractive story on the 'charming' and symbolism of snakes that has always been present in all cultures. You will also read about the hatred they can produce and about the danger and death they can cause. You will read about the fables concerning snakes (as well as other animals) written by the Roman writer Pliny (first century AD). Illustrators were inspired by their contribution in the production of a bestiarium in the Middle Ages. Snakes have always been deified. They have contributed a substantial part in the creation and maintenance of the earth, they have protected families, they have mediated between heaven and earth and many gods of various pantheons have a herpetological descent.

As well as an interesting introduction *Snake Charm* contains seven chapters: Deities and Power; The Tempter; in the Garden; After the Fall; Dragons and other Fanciful Creatures; The Snake Observed; The Jeweled Serpent and the seventh chapter Snake Charm. Finally the 160 pages book contains a

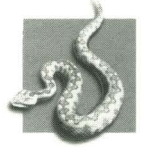
SNAKE CHARM



MARILYN
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BOOKREVIEW



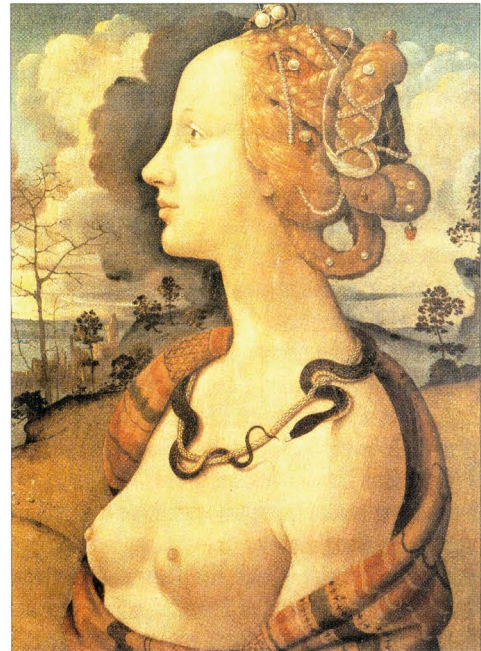
selective bibliography, an index, a word of gratitude and an account for the illustrations.

The successive chapters contain a lot of interesting details. In the first chapter, the authors give a detailed description of the divine role of snakes in some cultures. The ancient Greek, Egyptian, Chinese, Hindu and Indian cultures show clear snake worshipping aspects. But we also see references to the cult of the snake handling believers of the pauperised south east of the United States. They consider the snake as a symbol of the devil. There are still followers of this cult nowadays. In my opinion the way people think about snakes in the Western world is mainly inspired by the bible: The snake is the slyest of all wild animals, ever created by Jahweh God. In the same verse of the book of Genesis, the snake proves this qualification: The Serpent said to the woman: " 'Did God really forbid you to eat from the trees in the garden?'" Five verses later man plucks fruit from the tree of knowledge and eats it. Before punishing man Jahweh deals with the snake, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and wild animals, upon your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life'. As a consequence the snakes have been rejected by the whole Christian world. Many times the bible refers with a negative connotation to snakes. And the one who becomes known as a snake keeper has listen to many prejudices and rarely meets people that are sincerely interested in his pets.

Of course this colourful bible passage has inspired many artists. As mentioned before, *Snake Charm* contains many bible scenes. I now want to consider one special fact. Those looking at the illustrations on the temptation of Eve in Nissenson's and Jonas' book (or knows similar pictures from other books) will be surprised about the design of the devil who

is represented as a snake by successive artists. Nowadays the represented snakes will cause laughter. The picture of Eve and the figure that symbolises the devil and a very strange snake is very macabre (page 50). Sometimes the biblical snake is equipped with wings (page 51), and many snakes have a womans head (page 54), or the snake looks more like a mammal than a reptile (page 57).

This trend is continued. Illustrations like this date from the 8th or the 9th century until the end of the last century. I keep a picture from 1991 by the Dutch poet-painter Lucebert, also treating the fall and the temptation of the first human couple. I didn't know that it is possible to determine whether the artist is a Catholic or a Protestant by looking at a snake on a temptation picture. Nissenson and



*Piero di Cosimo. Musée Condé, Chantilly, Frankrijk.
In Nissenson & Jonas page 151.*

Jonas claim (page 52) that Catholic painters like Masoline, Raphael and Michelangelo portray the snake antropomorficly (like a man, and like a woman in this case) while Luterian artists represented snakes as snakes. An example of such an artist is Albrecht Dürer.

Man has written about the fall from many perspectives and the role that the snake has in the fall. I thought it was interesting to find an article by Henry A. Kelly among other things in the bibliography of *Snake Charm*. This is a monograph on the snake from the earth's paradise, with very interesting information. In this way one book or article can point out another and keep you busy.

The chapters that succeed the second are not very long but contain much information. The reader is invited to take a closer look at a specific detail. This is, for example, the case in the chapter about Dragons and other fanciful creatures. This chapter briefly handles basilisks and dragons among other things. All of this is combined with splendid illustrations.

I didn't know very much about the information contained in the chapter The Snake Observed. The authors write about some historic characters who were interested in snakes and who wrote splendid pieces of work. People who observed nature and, being without (digital) photo- and video cameras, had to draw and colour what they saw. Nature researchers like Albertus Seba (1665-1736), Mark Catesby (1682/3-1749), John James Aubundon (1785-1851) and many other nature lovers who put down their observations in splendid books. Catesby appears to have coloured all copies of his *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* manual himself. And of course there are beautiful reproductions of these copies in *Snake Charm*. Books like that must be very rare and so expensive nowadays.



Uit: Plein Jours en la compagnie de Lucebert/ Promptuaire à travers 220 dessins - De Volkskrant, 21 august 1995.

Those who not only look at snakes at 'Snakeday' (an annual event with snakes in the Netherlands ed.) but also at the people who are interested in snakes, often see eye-catching individuals. Tattoos, snake piercings, collars, rings, prints on jackets, and t-shirts, sometimes accumulated in one person. Apparently terrariums with snakes are not enough for many people. They have the need to show their love for snakes. I would not be surprised to hear that the furnishing of their homes are also based on their hobby. These people can eat their fill of the last two chapters: *The Jeweled Serpent* and *Snake Charm*. For many objects like jewellery and durable articles like flowerpots, floor lamps, bags, teapots and similar, goldsmiths, designers, couturiers and many other artists were inspired by the world of



BOOKREVIEW



snakes. I especially liked finding one painting in this book: on page 151 an oil painting by Pedro di Cosimo is printed. From other culture-historic works I know that in ancient times the snake was not only considered as a chthonic ruler of the kingdom of the dead, but that it was also awarded a protective role as a house snake. The Greek for example, represented their ancestors, especially the heroic ones, as snakes. In the beginning the snake-shaped ancestors were revered, as house snakes, later in the late Antic time, they evolved to tame pet snakes. Usually there was more than one snake in every house, for example one of both sexes. The Romans devaluated the snake shaped house God to a simple toy: Roman beauties used snakes to cool down their necks and bosom in hot weather. From a poem of the Roman poet Martialis I know that they even used ice-cooled cobras for

that purpose. I like to see such cultural-historic facts along with an illustration from ancient times.

Snake Charm is an intriguing book. The text section and the illustration section are charming in their own way. The text is charming because the compact style of the author. The illustrations are special because I do not know of a similar collection. The authors present a lot of information that invites the reader to delve deeper into the book. A book that presents so much about snakes (while there is not one real snake in the book) from so many points of view, some of them are not obvious. This is a very worthy book.

*Translated by Marcel Schoen
Corrections by Marc Wootten*