The publication of a fine illustrated work is always an exciting event for collectors, book dealers and students alike. Peter Dance is the leading authority on conchology (shell collecting), and with this book must be established as one of the world's leading authorities on illustrated works in the much broader field of natural history. The book is actually confined to zoology, and especially the zoology of 1600 to 1900 AD. Thus the work includes wood-cuts, copper and steel engraving and lithography, hand-coloured works and the development of chromolithography.

The author and publisher of a book like this face some tricky problems. In particular, the balance between text and illustrations is quite difficult to solve. It is possible to allow the text to "lead," placing the illustrations just where it best suits the narrative, reducing the size of the illustrations and reproducing them in black and white. This is an excellent formula for academic works, and there are some famous examples: Cole's History of Comparative Anatomy, Choulant's History and Bibliography of Anatomic Illustration, Diringer's The Alphabet (1st and 2nd editions), and the many works of Agnes Arber and Charles Singer. This is the simplest solution, and from many points of view the best, because the book stays at a manageable size, the text is less fragmented and hence more readable and the price of the book is reasonable -- though I should add that when these excellent books go out of print the price does rise -- the first English edition of Choulant sold at Sotheby's last season for £70!

The most extreme alternative is to separate the illustrations entirely from the text, as did Hutchinson's with the third edition of Diringer's The Alphabet. This is a magnificent work, now in two volumes in a nice slip-case; but I find it quite unusable. I always use the second edition in practice -- it really is too much to haul out a second volume, look up the index, find an illustration (and one may have to do that several times each paragraph). No, that's not a good solution.

The style chosen for Dance's book by Peter Cameron the editor-designer is best known as "coffee-table". It has become the standard format for marketing illustrated works to the general public, and deserves some attention for that reason alone. In the "coffee-table" genre, the illustrations lead, while the text is secondary. First of all, these books are large (sometimes far too large or heavy to be read in an armchair -- which in itself devalues the text). The page-size allows the illustrations to be produced in something like their original size, and in colour. Nowadays the best quality lithography produces colour of startling verity which tends to push the illustrations forward, often distracting attention from the text.

The illustrations do matter a very great deal in a book like this. Most people have
not (and never will) see the originals; the reproductions allow these readers to get some idea of the magnificence and subtle artistry of the originals. It may not matter that many readers will not care much or remember many of the points explained in the text. The pictures themselves are exquisite works and have an aesthetic value over and above their practical merit as scientific documents. This goes some way towards explaining the growth in number of coffee-table books, in spite of their high prices.

If, as is the case with Dance, the page layout is varied to suit the particular illustrations at hand, then much depends on the way the details are handled. The relation between text and illustration in particular must be as close to juxtaposition as is physically possible. Of course, every important point made by the author must be illustrated. This is the weakness of the book. Too often an important work is mentioned in the text but not illustrated at all; for example, on page 19, Megenberg’s *Buch der Nature* is, we are told, the first illustrated book to inform its readers about animals (“a significant event in the history of zoological iconography”). But no illustration is provided. This happens again and again, and it is most irritating. Some illustrations may have been omitted for reasons that seemed good at the time: they may have been thought to be too well-known, or competition for page space may have crowded some out. But that is not the whole explanation; even where the text is supported by an illustration, that illustration is physically separated from the text — sometimes even in another chapter. This is a clear design failure — close integration of text and illustration, which a work of this kind does need, has not been achieved. A complex page-layout is extremely vulnerable — unless the designer is extremely competent and has ample time to get the details right, then mistakes are bound to occur. I sense here the effects of an over-hasty production schedule: just a few months more would have made a wonderful difference.

Some subtle variations in the text-illustration battle are worth noting. In particular I like Lysaght’s *Book of Birds*, which has a classic simplicity which other designers might do well to copy. Each two-page spread is a separate unit. On one side is the illustration, on the other side is a discussion of the illustration, the artist and the book. All general discussion is placed in the Introduction. This arrangement makes the page layout simple and predictable. Predictability is actually important for readers, and a merit rather than a defect. The variation of content is quite enough. In this case I feel the Lysaght layout is better than the layout in Dance’s book, which is extremely complicated, even bewildering at times. Another work worth mentioning here is Tooley and Bricker’s *Landmarks of Mapmaking* which includes excellent fold out maps (that’s a good way to recapture some of the physical size of the original), and some silly “designer’s typography” — full pages set in italics with a ragged left edge. That is a good example of the extra freedom of the large page format allowing the designer to show his ignorance of the reader’s needs.

No discussion of the physical format of the book is complete without a look at the binding. Dance’s book is without dustjacket (in the English edition). The spine is flat-backed, and the case is cloth over what are possibly vinyl boards. This style of binding gives the book a rather unpleasant feel to the hand, cold and unyielding. This, together with its weight (2 kg) makes fairly sure that if the text is read it will be read on a table, not held in the hand and read in a chair. Also, the flat-spine style is notoriously weak, putting excessive strain on the hinges. Anyone using his copy as a reference work or for detailed study will most likely find the hinges coming adrift inside five years: not a happy thought. Perhaps coffee-table books get less wear and tear than average; but all in all the bind-