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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

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THE TRAINS ON AVENUE DE RUMINE, by Count Giansanti Coluzzi. 256 pages. Illustrated. Crown. \$75.

THOSE who are familiar with it know the infallibility of Sturgeon's Law, which holds that 90 percent of everything is junk. But to how many has it occurred that the inverse is also true, namely that 10 percent of everything is fairly acceptable and a tiny percentage of that may be really quite wonderful? In other words, no matter what subject or activity you happen to be considering, be it anything from shooting marbles to writing legal opinions, somebody somewhere has probably raised it to the level of art.

This reflection is inspired by an extraordinary book I have just discovered, "The Trains on Avenue de Rumine," which is about the world's greatest toy and model train collection. Now some readers will immediately object that the very activity of collecting toy and model trains has to fall into that percentage of possible things to do with your time that Sturgeon's Law was designed to dismiss. Those readers are excused with no hard feelings.

Those readers who stay will want to know about James Stanley Beeson, an Englishman now in his mid-70's with the reputation of being the Faberge of model-locomotive makers. Some of Beeson's work is illustrated in this volume, and if you have any feeling for these things the photographs will take your breath away and you will be stricken with spasms of covetousness.

Readers who stay will also want to know about Count Antonio Giansanti Coluzzi of Lausanne, Switzerland. The Count fell in love with trains in 1923, when, as an 8 year old wintering with his parents at Cap d'Ail on the Cote d'Azur, he would watch the Blue Train on its daily run from Paris to Ventimiglia. As he grew older he got to know the master artisans of toy- train making - he would call them artists, even folk artists - tucked away in various corners of Europe and, after World War II, of Japan. Eventually, in 1946, he would found a company called Fulgurex (Fulgur x Rex - "The king of the lightning flash"), an enterprise designed to produce and distribute the finest model trains for the most demanding of those obsessed with miniaturization.

Such are the feelings of the Count for trains that when he is asked in an interview that appears in this book if he ever wanted to own a real train, he replies: "But I have had one! I was offered a 2-4-1 P. I have had to give it over to the Town of Vallorbe who exhibit it. A locomotive becomes monstrously expensive. It is as if you are offered a completely naked girl - you are then obliged to go to Givenchy, Dior or Cardin to dress her." It is the Count whose photograph appears as the frontispiece of this book; he is holding a 1909 M"arklin II- gauge locomotive and tender (220 PLM Coupe-Vent) as if it were a favorite pet, a baby, or his heart. And it is, of course, the Count's famous train collection, housed in his museum-home on Avenue de Rumine in Lausanne, that is the subject of most of the 3,000 brilliant color photographs that fill this extraordinary book.

The accompanying text by Allen Levy, the book's originator and English publisher, is somewhat erratic, filled with typos, misspellings and references that never do get explained. Yet with a little patience you can glean from it some interesting facts about the history of model trains from 1880 to 1980: why, for instance, larger gauge models have survived more successfully than smaller ones ("gauge 0 more often fell into the hands of those for whom it was intended, i.e. children, whereas the larger gauges tended to be demonstrated for the children who would not be allowed to play with them.") Or how the Japanese after World War II brought finer scale to model trains by adapting lost wax-casting systems that set new standards for body detailing.

But the photographs are something else. There are endless arrays of colorful "goods wagons," or what we call freight cars - Shell, Esso, Heinz 57 Varieties, Budweiser, Crawford's Biscuits (though no Von Allmen pickle car, which I once built in a phase of my youth). There are pages and pages of incredibly detailed locomotives - some painted in their original handsome shades, others left in their original state of gleaming brass - that make you understand why Mr. Levy and the Count regard them not as mere mechanical objects, but as pieces of "beautiful sculpture."

Then there is the picture spread of Fulgurex gauge 0 models operating in Marcel Darphin's layout in the Swiss town of Zug, a circuit, reproducing part of the railway-traffic system running between France and Switzerland, that is considered one of the most beautiful and comprehensive in Europe. As Mr. Levy correctly observes, the only unsatisfying thing is the lifelessness of the little people.

There is no direct mention in the book of the price tag on a Fulgurex model, but judging from several defensive remarks in the text about Rolls-Royces and elitist hobbies, it is probably best not to inquire. As Mr. Levy writes in his Preface, "One of my publishing philosophies in New Cavendish Books is that certain books are owned in lieu of the objects they depict." "The Trains on Avenue de Rumine" is such a book, and it is almost enough to satisfy.