

The Rare Book Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia

THE FREE LIBRARY OF PHILADELPHIA was a youthful institution which had been serving the public for only five years when a gift from one of Philadelphia's great industrialists committed it to a most agreeable policy—the acquisition of rare books. In 1899 P. A. B. Widener, street-railway magnate and wealthiest Philadelphian of his generation, presented the Free Library with the mansion at Broad Street and Girard Avenue which had been his home (its location made it suitable at that time for a branch library), and with the gift he included five hundred incunabula he had recently purchased, the personal collection of the bibliographer Walter Arthur Copinger.

Thereafter other generous donors presented notable collections to the library. Hampton L. Carson, a Philadelphia lawyer and trustee of the Free Library, gave his books on the growth of the English Common Law. These constitute the most comprehensive collection of the kind to have been assembled by a single individual. John Frederick Lewis, Sr., also a lawyer and a trustee of the Free Library, gave a series of collections illustrative of the history of books and the graphic arts. Other members of the Widener family made gifts, and Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach presented his famous collection of early American children's books.

It was in 1947, however, that the Free Library, which had at that time been ac-

quiring rare books for nearly fifty years, received an important bequest which made it possible to open a department devoted entirely to rare books. William McIntire Elkins, a Philadelphia investment banker and bibliophile, willed his books, manuscripts, and prints to the Free Library, of which institution he had been a trustee for sixteen years. His daughter, Elizabeth Elkins Holmquist, generously suggested that the actual library room in which her father's books had been housed should be removed from his home, "Briar Hill," at White-marsh and set up in the Free Library. The spacious, paneled room, sixty-two feet in length, with its books and its furnishings, was, therefore, installed on the third floor at the Central Library at Logan Square, and the entire floor was given over to the new department. An air conditioning system was set up to protect the books, and various previously acquired collections which came in the rare book category were transferred to the new quarters, where they could receive adequate care. In 1954 a rare book librarian was appointed, and in the course of the following year, a qualified staff was assembled.

At the present time most of the holdings of the department fall into a series of collections, and, to give some idea of the scope of the department, they are here listed briefly in the order of their acquisition:

THE COPINGER-WIDENER COLLECTION OF INCUNABULA. Acquired by gift of P. A. B. Widener in 1899, this collection was originally assembled by Walter Arthur

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The Elkins Room

Copinger, the bibliographer who compiled the supplement to Hain, and it had been his purpose to secure representative volumes of all the Continental presses of the fifteenth century. Its emphasis is essentially typographical, and it now numbers about 650 volumes.

THE HAMPTON L. CARSON COLLECTION ON THE GROWTH OF THE ENGLISH COMMON LAW was presented by Mr. Carson in 1927. It covers the English Common Law from the Anglo-Saxon period to modern times. Its nine thousand volumes (including some two hundred manuscripts from the thirteenth through the eighteenth centuries) are supported by eight thousand prints and two thousand letters and documents of legal significance.

THE DAVID NUNES CARVALHO COLLECTION OF HANDWRITING was purchased in 1928 from the heirs of Mr. Carvalho, an authority on handwriting, paper, and inks, who frequently served in court as

an expert witness. He gathered together actual examples of writing from the fifteenth to the early twentieth century, and the collection now includes about four thousand specimens.

THE JOHN FREDERICK LEWIS COLLECTION OF CUNEIFORM TABLETS was given to the Free Library in 1930; it includes about twenty-eight hundred specimens, which represent the various forms in use at different periods—tablets, wheels, clay nails, and cylinders. They fall into three groups: —I. Third Dynasty of Ur, 2300-2400 B.C.; —II. Time of Abraham, circa twentieth century B.C.; —III. Neo-Babylonian Period, third and fourth centuries B.C. While all other holdings of the department are for reference only, this, amazingly enough, is a circulating collection. The donor stipulated that these “books” of an ancient civilization should be checked out on a library card to any borrower who could return them with an accompanying

translation. (A number of doctoral candidates have been happy to comply with this requirement, and their translations have been verified by a member of the staff of the Free Library who reads cuneiform.)

THE JOHN FREDERICK LEWIS MANUSCRIPTS, which were given during the 1930's, fall into two categories:

*European Manuscripts*¹ which date from the eleventh through the eighteenth centuries, and contain many examples of illumination, are now 226 in number. In origin they are: Anglo-Norman, Bohemian, Dutch, English, Flemish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Russian, and Spanish. Supplementing these bound volumes is a collection of some two thousand individual leaves of still greater date span and more varied origins, which offer many possibilities to students of calligraphy and illumination.

*Oriental Manuscripts*² which date from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries and include 150 volumes. This collection contains manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hindustani, Sanskrit, Nepalese, Pali, Siamese, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Hebrew, Syriac, and Samaritan. Mr. Lewis's interest in oriental manuscripts was a later development of his collecting career, and it first originated in his appreciation of the beauty of their calligraphy. Among the Persian manuscripts are ten examples of the "Shāh-nāmah," in which he took particular pride.

THE ROSENBACH COLLECTION OF EARLY AMERICAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS³ today represents over 120 years of discriminating

¹ Edwin Wolf, II, comp. *A Descriptive Catalogue of the John Frederick Lewis Collection of European Manuscripts in the Free Library of Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia, 1937) lists the collection at the time Mr. Lewis gave it. Copies of this catalog are available from the Free Library at \$4.50. (All books from Free Library are subject to 3 per cent tax in Pennsylvania.)

² Muhammed Ahmed Simsar, *Oriental Manuscripts of the John Frederick Lewis Collection in the Free Library of Philadelphia: A Descriptive Catalog* (Philadelphia, 1937). Copies are available from the Free Library at \$4.50.

³ A. S. W. Rosenbach, *Early American Children's Books* (Portland, Maine, 1933), gives a bibliographical description of over eight hundred books in this collection.

collecting. It was begun in 1835 by Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach's uncle, Moses Pollock, who in 1900 presented it to his nephew. Dr. Rosenbach added to the collection for the next forty-seven years and in 1947 gave it to the Free Library. He later made additional gifts to the library to augment this collection. It covers the period from 1682 through 1836. Its original owner, Moses Pollock, described many of its items as falling into two categories: "rare" and "inferentially rare," and this classification still applies to a large part of the collection. There are a comforting number of original bindings in the collection, and, considering the fragile and ephemeral nature of the little books, their excellent condition is remarkable.

THE WILLIAM MCINTIRE ELKINS LIBRARY,⁴ bequeathed to the Free Library in 1947 together with the library room in which to house it, is devoted primarily to three major collections:

The Americana Collection, which lays special emphasis on early voyages and discoveries, was the latest of Mr. Elkins's collections and his favorite. At the time it came into the possession of the Free Library, it consisted of some 380 carefully selected volumes of considerable rarity, a series of letters relating to the Jay Treaty, and a small but excellently chosen collection of early American prints.

*The Oliver Goldsmith Collection*⁵ was Mr. Elkins's first major collection and it is a comprehensive one, which includes first and variant editions, Newbery's accounts with Goldsmith, and a collection of correspondence in which every member of

⁴ An account of Mr. Elkins and his library, "Portrait of a Philadelphia Collector: William McIntire Elkins" by Ellen Shaffer, accompanied by "A Checklist of the Americana Collection of William M. Elkins" by Howell J. Heaney, appeared in *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, Volume L (1956), 115-168. Separates of this article, together with the checklist, may be obtained from the Free Library for \$1.25.

⁵ This collection was the basis for *Oliver Goldsmith Bibliographically and Biographically Considered*, by Temple Scott (New York, 1928), which is available from the Free Library of Philadelphia at \$10.

"The Club" is represented. Mr. Elkins made extensive notes on this collection, which he planned to assemble and publish, and he once wrote that he thought this proposed bibliography "would have been as detailed a study of Goldsmith as existed up to that time." During World War I his notes were lost, and he later commissioned Temple Scott to do the bibliography mentioned in the footnotes.

The Charles Dickens Collection had its basis in the Sentimental Library of Harry B. Smith and contains some of the great treasures of Smith's collection, notably the *Pickwick* in parts presented to Mary Hogarth. There are thirty presentation copies in the Elkins collection, which also contains the original drawings by "Phiz" (Hablot K. Browne) for *Dombey & Son*, *David Copperfield*, and *Bleak House*. The first editions are in outstandingly fine condition, and there is a wealth of association material. The possession of this collection brought the Free Library the Benoliel Collection of Dickens letters, which will be mentioned later.

THE ELISABETH BALL COLLECTION OF HORN BOOKS was presented to the Free Library because the Rosenbach Collection of Early American Children's Books made this library the fitting recipient of such related material. There are 150 specimens, most of them wooden, a few of horn and of leather, and, included among them, are interesting examples of Arabic horn books.

THE A. EDWARD NEWTON COLLECTION of Mr. Newton's own copies of his books and publications, as well as some manuscript material, was the gift of the author's son, E. Swift Newton, and it has since been augmented by four hundred Newton letters, one group from the file of the London bookseller, Tregaskis, and another from Newton's close friend, Professor Charles G. Osgood. A. E. N. was for years a trustee of the Free Library and this institution is, therefore,

a logical place for his books and manuscripts.⁶

THE MONCURE BIDDLE COLLECTION OF HORACE is being presented to the Free Library in a series of gifts and, at present, numbers about 575 volumes. It is comprised of editions in the original Latin and translations into European languages from the fifteenth century to the present, as well as commentaries, critical studies, and general reference material. Fine presses and fine bindings are well represented in this collection, and many of the volumes are of distinguished provenance.

THE D. JACQUES BENOLIEL COLLECTION OF DICKENS LETTERS is likewise coming to the library in a series of gifts. It now contains 402 letters. The collection lays particular emphasis on Dickens' love for the theatre, and it is remarkable for long runs of correspondence with persons close to the author: Frank Stone, Mark Lemon, John Leech, Arthur Rylands, Frederick Dickens, Lady Blessington, and Daniel Maclise. Many of the letters are unpublished, and the Rare Book Department is cooperating with the editors of the Pilgrim Edition of Dickens Letters now being prepared in England.

THE HENRY S. BORNEMAN PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN COLLECTION, the life work of an indefatigable collector, was acquired by purchase through the Simon Gratz Trust Fund. Its six hundred examples of "Fraktur," or illuminated manuscript broadsides, show a wide range of this type of colorful American folk art. Among its thousand volumes are sixty manuscripts and imprints from thirty-six centers of German printing in Amer-

⁶ On the occasion of the presentation of this collection to the Free Library, Swift Newton gave a delightful talk on his father, which was later published by the Library in the same format in which Newton's Christmas booklets had appeared. Entitled "A.E.N.," it is in the familiar blue wrappers, and a few copies are available on request from the Free Library of Philadelphia.

ica, with the presses of Germantown and the Ephrata Cloister in predominance. The musical manuscripts from Ephrata include three copies of the *Paradisisches Wunderspiel* and seven choral books, all decorated by the nuns of the Ephrata Cloister.

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Most of the holdings of the Rare Book Department fall into major collections, but there is a wealth of delightful fringe material: three presentation Keats first editions, the original manuscript of Beatrix Potter's *The Tailor of Gloucester*, sketch books of Stevenson and Thackeray, American pamphlets which once belonged to the distinguished Philadelphian, Nicholas Biddle, and George Bernard Shaw letters. The department also administers a collection of Bibles, some of which are of considerable rarity, for the library's Department of Education, Philosophy, and Religion.

None of the collections is static. Additions are being made to them all as the opportunity arises, and the hunt for suitable material to augment them is always exhilarating. Catalogs are scanned, bookshops are visited, and various contacts are fostered which will help bring wanted volumes to the department's shelves. Donors, naturally enough, are heartily encouraged, not only for the books they give, but for the invaluable sympathetic interest they give as well.

As part of a public library, the department deals with both scholar and novice. The research worker usually needs no introduction to rare books; he is deep in his particular field and only wants to have the material he wishes made available to him. The amateur bibliophile, however, is often timid; he is drawn to the world of books, but has no idea of its scope. He may have a keen appreciation of the beauty of fine topography and meticulously executed bindings, and yet feel ashamed because he lacks the penetrating knowledge of the scholar as to

the contents of such books. So well have we been trained to regard all books as utilitarian that the amateur booklover often feels it hardly proper to be entranced by books he cannot read. One may love paintings without being an artist, and enjoy music without being a musician. Rare and beautiful books are also a part of our cultural heritage, and the Rare Book Department is glad to devote some of its time to increasing an appreciation of them. The people who receive a sympathetic, enthusiastic introduction to the rare book field today may become the scholars, research workers, and collectors of tomorrow.

The physical setup of the department lends itself well to brief introductory tours. It is situated on the third floor of the main building (apparently a traditional spot for rare book departments in public libraries since those of New York and Boston are so located), and its long corridors provide room for exhibit cases. The Elkins Room has a warmth and graciousness that reflects a way of life which now may be vanishing but which developed some great American libraries. Many of the teen-agers who visit the department today have never realized that any one ever lived as close to books as did William McIntire Elkins. These young people appreciate being shown the Elkins Room and they seem impressed by the whole department. One thirteen-year-old after being shown an example of incunabula remarked with wonder: "Gosh, we think we are so good today, and look what they could do!"

At times the department turns teacher. Classes of high school and university students come for lectures on various of the department's holdings. A class from Drexel's School of Library Science, for example, came to hear a talk on various book forms through the centuries illustrated with original material; members of a Temple University class which had been studying the development of children's books came for a lecture on

important books in the Rosenbach Collection of Early American Children's Books. An art class from La Salle College was given a talk and shown manuscripts which illustrated the calligraphy of different periods. A vacation school Bible Class had an opportunity to see and hear about Bibles—from manuscripts of the thirteenth century to the worn, modest volume which Robert Louis Stevenson used at Vailima.

Local groups also come from time to time to hear of particular collections that interest them. The department can accommodate from fifty to seventy-five people for a talk, and the Philadelphia Graphic Arts Forum, for instance, has spent an evening viewing exhibits and hearing talks on the Copinger-Widener incunabula and the Borneman Pennsylvania German Collection. The Dickens Fellowship has had a discussion of the Benoliel Dickens Letters. The Philadelphia Antiquarian Booksellers Association has visited the department and been given a briefing on its collections, and the Junketeers of New York City has made a trip to investigate its holdings in the graphic arts.

The scholars are busy in their own fields. One doctoral candidate was recently studying the fables related in certain Persian manuscripts. An English professor worked with the Shaw letters. A Pennsylvania German authority selected examples of "Fraktur" to illustrate an article he was writing on the subject. An author checked editions of Coke's *Institutes* in connection with a biography of the great jurist. A bibliographer made note of recent additions in the field of early American children's books. One professor of art made extensive photographs of a rare thirteenth century psalter, while another examined miniatures of mediaeval manuscripts to see if the open windows depicted in them showed a view, since her project was the origin and development of the open window in art.

The amateur is as thrilled over what he finds in the department as is the professional. The retired sea captain who had always wanted to see the first edition of Mather's *Magnalia Christi* was as delightedly enthusiastic as was the specialist in mediaeval manuscripts who came across some miniatures by the Master of Boucicaut, and the printer who saw his first illuminated manuscript at close range was as happy as the meticulous author who was supplied with the exact wording of a passage in a copy of the Book of Common Prayer printed in 1662.

Exhibits are an effective means of displaying the library's treasures, and this is another activity of the department. The exhibit cases in its own quarters may show some of the William Blackstone material in the Carson Collection on English Common Law, or such appealing bits of Americana as a Salem witch's confession, or the colorful maritime charts which enabled an English pirate to roam the coasts of Mexico and South America. An ivory horn book, a volume which may have been the first book on which Caxton worked, and a bilingual child's book done in Detroit in 1812 may be shown among recent acquisitions. In the main lobby of the Free Library are large vertical cases where major exhibits are staged. "The Christmas Story in Mediaeval Manuscripts" is an annual event, and from time to time other exhibits of such material as Charles Dickens, early legal prints, the history of books and printing, and children's books are presented.

Most public libraries do not have a rare book department, and Philadelphians are especially fortunate in theirs. It has many resources and a high standard of condition. It fills a definite role in the life of the city, and its potentialities for increasing service both in the city and to booklovers in other localities are indeed great.