



BIBLIOPHILY IN THE USA

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In this short article I survey the state of bibliophily in the United States, starting with its colonial beginnings and tracing it to the present day. It started with collections of books intended for professional use, mainly for the clergy. From very early on, many libraries were donated to the budding universities.

Serious collection of rare books was taken over from English nobility during the XIX century, but especially from 1890's to 1929, when American millionaires such as Pierpont Morgan or Henry Huntington purchased whole libraries in England and established their own in the United States, while most of the others donated them to universities.

The market crash of 1929 slowed the book acquisition considerably and the market really picked up only after World War II. Because of the exorbitant prices of rare books only the very rich could continue to buy them. Instead, the collection of contemporary authors' first editions came to dominate the field.

The introduction of the computer made finding needed books much easier and bibliophily in America is now a booming business with a very large number of participants, which is attested to by the many clubs, books and journals devoted to book collecting.

Books have been collected since antiquity, and every schoolboy knows about the libraries at Alexandria and Pergamon, but we shall examine the contemporary situation of the

special bibliophilic kind, where the emphasis is placed not on the text, but on the state and edition of a book. A bibliophile is born, not made, and the question as to why to collect does not arise. True, there are many who collect rare books as a hedge against inflation or simply to make a profit, but I would not deign to call them bibliophiles. Still others view books as part of the decoration of one's habitation, as we can see from the quotation:

“How can you excuse the man who buys bookcases of expensive wood, and piling into them the works of unknown, worthless authors, goes yawning amongst his thousands of volumes? He knows their titles, their bindings, but nothing else. It is in the homes of the idlest men that you find the biggest libraries—range upon range of books, ceiling high. For nowadays a library is one of the essential fittings of a home, like a bathroom. You could forgive this if it were all due to a zeal for learning. But these libraries of the works of piety and genius are collected for mere show, to ornament the walls of the house”.

This description sounds quite contemporary, but it was written by Pliny the Younger (AD c.61–c.113), a Roman author, describing book collectors of his own time. A true book lover chooses his books according to an established scheme, be it a topic, a period, an author, or any other criterion for selecting an addition to one's collection. Like all other cultural activities, collecting books reflects the *Zeitgeist* of the period and each age has its own peculiarities.

Books were collected in the American colonies from the very beginning by the first English settlers. Of course, these were not books for show, but the working libraries of government officials and especially of the clergy engaged in propagating Christianity among the settlers and the Indians. Thus in 1638 the Reverend John Harvard, a Puritan minister, dying at the age of thirty-one, bequeathed half his estate and four hundred volumes to the university which bears his name being built near Boston. Similarly in 1701 “forty volumes in folio”

were donated by ten Congregational ministers to the newly established Yale University.

Not much later we begin to find the earliest social libraries, i.e., libraries that charge a fee for membership. The best known are the Library Company of Philadelphia, established by Benjamin Franklin in 1731, the Redwood Library founded in 1747 at Newport, Rhode Island, the New York Society Library in 1754, and the Atheneum, in Boston, in 1807.

The first collector as such was the Reverend Thomas Prince (1687–1758), an associate pastor of the South Church in Boston. It is not surprising that he is called the father of American bibliography. Upon his death in 1758 his library was turned over to the South Church. A catalog published in 1812 listed some two hundred books in that collection. Eventually it was dispersed, but a part of it ended up in the Boston Public Library.

Another early collector was William Byrd II of Westover in Virginia (1674–1744), who was an aristocratic planter. It was his father who was the first to collect books, but it was the son who greatly expanded the library, which occupied a whole wing of the main house and consisted of some 3,625 volumes. Most of them were English and covered a very large range of topics. After his own death his son by the same name inherited the library, but his widow upon his death sold the library at auction in Philadelphia in 1777.

In Pennsylvania one of the earliest collectors was James Logan (1674–1751), who arrived in America in 1699 with William Penn as his secretary, and after the latter's return to England remained as his agent in the colonies. Even before his trip to America he had a collection of eight or nine hundred books. Besides his personal collection, which at that time equaled the Harvard library and was superior to Yale's, he was also an important advisor in selecting books for purchase by Benjamin Franklin's "Junto" Debating Club's library. Logan preferred editions with the best printing and the best notes, for himself and for his friends, as we find in his catalogs.

We also have to mention Thomas Jefferson, (1743–1826),

twice our president, whose personal library was purchased by the United States government for \$23,950 for 6, 479 volumes, as a replacement for the destroyed Library of Congress in 1814.

It would be futile to enumerate all the book collectors, who basically reflected English preferences and whose collections often ended up in university or public libraries.

As Alfred W. Pollard, the former Keeper of Books at the British Museum has remarked, it was mainly through private collectors' zeal that books which would have perished from neglect were discovered, preserved and made to yield their secrets, so that every great library owes more of its historical collection to their generosity than to the purchases with their own resources. There were simply too many collectors to enumerate but one can turn to one of the many histories on the subject.

The great change in bibliophily took place when a new breed of book-collectors began to build libraries as monuments for their own munificence. Under the Victorian cultural umbrella millionaires accepted particular books into their collections. The "Golden Age", from the gay nineties to the great crash of 1929, produced the most distinguished collections: J.P. Morgan, Henry E. Huntington, Alfred C. Chapin and many many others dominated the field, because they absorbed the great majority of the most desirable books and they set the tone for the proper book collector. It was only after the Second World War that rare books became a commodity once again.

For the Victorians, books, as they had for Cassiodorus in the sixth century of our era, again became the barrier between civilization and barbarism. America was being flooded with multitudes of proletarians from eastern Europe, Italy and other corners of the world to toil in factories and mines, and civilization was thought to be at risk of being submerged in this deluge. Libraries, not people, contained culture and were considered to be the ramparts against this onslaught of the uneducated.

The majority of book collectors were mainly of the middle and the upper classes and came primarily from the Northeast of the United States, from Boston to Baltimore. Most of them were relatively well educated and had the means and the leisure time to devote to their collections. Many of them perceived book collecting as a sport, similar to hunting, or especially to fishing. The competition was with other collectors, but also with the booksellers, with the aim of getting a jewel of a book for a pittance.

American collectors followed the patterns established in England, and most of the early collections were formed by buying entire libraries that many noblemen were forced to sell by the end of the century. Special attention was paid to early printing, especially the incunabula and even more so to the English ones by Caxton and others. Other favorite topics were Shakespeare's and other English writers' manuscripts and early editions, luxury editions and illustrated books. The most desirable books that were collected for being a unicum, or as close as possible to that state. An unopened edition is worth many times more than a read one. It developed that the reading itself diminished the book's worth in dollars. When dollars were the concern of the powerful classes, the game became the game of millionaires, the question being who could outbid whom, Morgan or Huntington at an auction. The libraries of the magnates grew until the collapse of the stock market in October 1929.

Many of the earlier collectors were not willing to donate their collections to universities or public libraries, where they were permanently excluded from further traffic, but felt that after their death their books should be resold. Probably the best example of such a collector was Robert Hoe III (1839–1909), who decided to sell his 15,000-volume library rather than donating it to an institution saying "If the great collections of the past had not been sold where would I have found my books?"

Not all collectors were content to enjoy their library only during their lifetime or to donate to them to an institution;

many established separate libraries, like Morgan, Huntington, Folger or John M. Wing.

Probably the most important was the multimillionaire John Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913). Already his father, the banker Junius S. Morgan, had a library of some twenty thousand volumes. Until 1899 Morgan was moderately interested in collecting books, but in 1899 he started really solid collecting by purchasing exquisite books and manuscripts assembled by an English book-seller. And he continued in this vein, purchasing whole libraries as well as the jewels of the typographical arts, including a Gutenberg Bible on vellum. Next to his mansion in Manhattan he built an Italianate palace to hold his library and his museum. It was incorporated in 1924 and soon thereafter established as a public reference library. To this day it is one of the most perfect oases a book-lover can find in the world.

However the sanctuary in San Marino, California, established by railroad magnate Henry E. Huntington (1850–1927), is just as attractive in different ways. It is larger and has English literature as its core. It, too, became a public library and many scholars use its treasures for research.

One of the best endowed university libraries is Harvard. As we already mentioned, the first library was established by a donation of the Reverend Harvard back in 1638, two years after the college was started. For the next two hundred years the library grew by donations only and in 1723 the University published a catalog of the books owned, so that benefactors would not duplicate the holdings. In fact, no significant funds for the purchase of books were provided until 1841 and 1842, with the intent to fill in gaps. Quite different was the five year gift of \$5,000 by William Gray, who wanted the latest works bought. By the 1870's endowed funds were established among the alumni so that regular purchases could be made.

The Harvard University Library consists of more than ninety separate libraries, many of them privately founded and endowed. The flagship of the system is the Widener Library which was established in 1915 in memory of a young graduate

who perished on the Titanic. This is the main social sciences and humanities library which holds some three million volumes. The rare books are held in the Houghton Library, which was established in 1942 and which contains probably the best collection of Russian literature in the west. Yale University has the Beineke Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, which was established in 1963 by a gift from the owners of the S&H Green Stamp Company. It is housed in a majestic six story tower, which contains several hundred thousand rare books and manuscripts.

Princeton University is another major holder of rare books, the majority being held in the Scheide Library, which remains a private possession of the family, but is located on the campus.

It would be futile to mention the great multitudes of donors to the various universities. I would like to mention only one benefactor, primarily because he is connected with my alma mater, the University of Michigan. William L. Clements (1861–1934) in 1923 donated his collection (to which he added until his death) of 17,000 volumes, 25,000 pamphlets and 3,000 maps, to the University and a building to house the collection. It was one of the first collections on early Americana outside the original thirteen states. Its strength lies in the collected papers of the English governing classes involved in the American Revolutionary War.

As mentioned before, the rare book market never reached the heights of the Golden Age, nevertheless the market was not totally devastated and with enough money a first-class library could be created, as exemplified by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center attached to the University of Texas at Austin. In 1957 Harry H. Ransom, the provost of the University, called for the formation of a library in the Southwest that would correspond to the great libraries of Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Princeton. What enabled this dream to be realized was the booming oil economy. Ransom realized that the HRC could excel only in new, non-traditional fields and he decided to concentrate on collecting the works of

modern living authors. It was not the published books that were the aim, but primary documents: manuscripts, letters, and journals. Indeed, the collection is unique in the world.

Not all collectors endowed university libraries, many also donated their collections to public libraries. The most famous were John Jacob Astor (1763–1848), a German immigrant who became the richest American at his death, the one of Waldorf-Astoria fame, and James Lennox (1800–1883), whose private libraries form the jewel of New York Public Library (NYPL), one of the best libraries in the world.

The competition in the bullmarket of rare books drove their price much too fast for the established book-dealers. This new market needed new types of salesmen who were educated and aggressive in bidding and one of the best was Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach (1876–1952). Some of the best book collections in the U.S.A. were built by him, such as the above-mentioned Huntington Library, Henry Folger's Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., Lessing Rosenwald's, and Harry Elkins Widener's at Harvard University. He also built his own collection of rare books, which form part of the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. From a poor boy he rose through salesmanship to wealth and high reputation, just as his friend Bernard Berenson (1865–1959) succeeded in the salesmanship of art. Practically alone he caused trade in luxury books to take off in America, and the prices skyrocketed.

Of course, the millionaires were not the only collectors, and many others with smaller means participated in the market, many of them viewing books as an investment. The prices of the books during the later twenties were climbing as rapidly as the prices of the stock-market. And when the stock-market collapsed in October 1929, the bookmarket took a nose-dive as well. Depressing as it was at that time, for many book collectors it was a much needed cleansing of bibliophily from speculators, playboys and the nouveaux riches. It had become a sport of sorts, with its own rules and customs. But bibliophily, or better bibliography, became a science, and today one can earn a Ph.D. in Library Science to prove it. In the early

twentieth-century books, not only texts, became objects of study, and librarianship became a solid profession.

The recuperation of the rare book business was relatively slow, and regained its vitality only after the Second World War. The trade was carried on by a growing number of astute and learned book dealers, many of whom were escapees from Hitler's persecutions. Dealers like Hans P. Kraus and Lucien Goldschmidt in New York, or Bernard Rosenthal at Berkeley lifted the rare book trade in America to the height it had in Europe.

But it was a changed market because really rare books were few and far between and were sold at prohibitive prices, and therefore collectors began to expand into new fields. Incunabula, early English editions of the masters, especially Shakespeare, early Americana, and manuscripts, which were the favorites of the previous era, were being supplemented by collections of eighteenth-century authors, Victoriana and first editions of modern authors of novels, or mystery stories, as well as westerns and even comic books. Parenthetically, collecting became a craze in all possible fields, from war memorabilia to beer bottles to cigarette boxes. A jocular advertisement sign on a side of a barn says it all, "We buy junk. We sell antiques."

With the multiplication of collectors, many collectors sought guidance in lists of desirable books. The most prestigious, the Grolier Club, already in 1902 published the *One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature*, to be followed by many many others, each one, of course, representing a particular attitude. This reflected the general tendency in the United States of the upwardly mobile classes to fit in with a more refined society because the "real" money had separated itself into a self-sustaining organization (I almost said organism), which became porous only after unceasing pressure from below.

Present-day collectors, unless they, like Bill Gates, are able to pay \$ 30 million dollars for a manuscript by Leonardo da Vinci, are limited by their finances to specialize in a small

area. Therefore, bibliophily today in the United States is totally anarchic. Each group has its own goals as well as standards. However, there are certain traits common to all collectors at any given time. Probably the most exciting thing is to establish a new trend. Start collecting an unknown but excellent writer, be it in mystery or poetry. If one had chosen to collect Ian Fleming or Allen Ginsberg before they became famous, the value of the collection would have multiplied mightily.

The new ideal became first editions in perfect condition and an unopened copy will bring the highest price. The collectors and dealers continue pursuing differences in printing, uncorrected errors, and similar aberrations, which are generally referenced as “points”. On the other hand, provenance, that this book had been owned by Pope Urban VIII, or association, that this book was inscribed by Tarquato Tasso, can add substantially to a book’s price. Even modern editions, say by Hemingway, with a dedication to a well-known figure, are worth much more than without one.

The cheapest rare books can be found in garage sales or second-hand stores, but there one has to go through piles of trash to find anything worthwhile. This I would suggest only to students or other impoverished book-collectors because one has to spend hours upon hours before something valuable might be found. The next step is used book stores, and the better they are, the more expensive, but few dealers know the value of their merchandise and one can find underpriced jewels once in a while. Then there are the rare-book dealers, but there are few bargains to be found and one pays the full price. Again, the price is not a firmly established quantity, but depends mostly on what particular books are in demand at any given time. Most rare-book dealers also sell through catalogs which they issue more or less regularly, but again there are few bargains.

Another way to purchase books is at auctions. Some are famous galleries, such as Sotheby’s or Christies, who hold book auctions a couple of times a year, but one would seldom

find lots for sale with bidding starting under \$1,000. The Swann Galleries of New York specialize only in book auctions and handle the largest number. There is another type of auction, called an estate auction, where the holdings of a family are being sold. These auctions are quite unpredictable, because one never knows who will be bidding.

During the last few years buying books through the Internet has become more and more popular, because there are websites that list not one but many dealers' offerings. The four primary servers are ABAA.org, ABEBooks.com, Bibliocity.com and Bibliofind.com. Even the most popular new book seller, Amazon.com, gives one an option to buy a used copy, while eBay.com, a general auction firm also has books for sale, but is not very reliable as to the quality of the books they sell, because it is the individual sellers that describe their wares, while eBay acts only as means of advertising. Just one of the book search engines estimates that it offers some 20 million books and adds 600,000 more every month. Prices in this market are established by supply and demand, and therefore lower and medium priced books are becoming cheaper, while true scarcity of others is demonstrated by their absence from the lists.

An interesting question is what determines a book's value. In the first place, one has to remember that what is bought and sold is not a title, or a text, but an individual copy. For example, the first edition of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* of 1936, a nice copy, but without its dustwrapper, is offered for \$60; in the same condition, but with a worn dust wrapper it sells for \$350, and a much nicer copy in a bright dustwrapper was priced at \$1,500 while one, almost new, went for \$3,000.

How does one go about in determining what books to collect? First, one has to read a lot until suddenly one is in love with a writer. Once one has chosen an author, and unless one is very rich, it better be a contemporary one. Then one has the choice of collecting the following:

- a. paperbound books.
- b. hardback editions , but not necessarily first editions.
- c. first editions without dustwrappers.
- d. first editions with dustwrappers.
- e. hardback editions signed by the author.
- f. hardback first editions inscribed by the author.
- g. all first editions in English, including American, British, Australian, etc.
- h. all editions of an author's work, including reprints, specially illustrated editions, foreign editions, etc.

Let us now explore what determines a book's value, besides supply and demand. Most valuable are the first editions, that is the first printing of a book. Usually first editions are identified as such by the publisher, but each publisher might use different methods, and many have changed over the years. There are two books to help one out: Edward N. Zempel and Linda A. Verkley, eds. *First editions, A Guide to identification* (Peoria, IL: Spoon River Press, 1995) and Bill McBride, *Pocket Guide to the Identification of First Editions* (West Hartford, CT: McBride/Publisher, 1995). And in order to keep up with on-going changes, the journal *Firsts: The Book Collector's Magazine* provides the latest information.

As mentioned before, besides the first edition itself, there are other determinants of its price which generally go under the term of "points". Before a book appears as a first edition, it will have existed as a manuscript, or even as preliminary notes to such a text. In print it first appears as galley proofs, then uncorrected proofs, advance reading copies, and normal trade editions with proof that they were sent prior to the publication date. To complicate things further, often a limited edition is printed by the publisher before the publication. One Thomas J. Wise (1859–1937) managed to fool the experts for years by selling forged pamphlets of limited editions of English romantic poets.

Another field of bibliophily is the collection of books produced by private presses, or fine presses, which produce

artistic exemplars of beautiful volumes, distinguished not only by special typefaces and superior paper and bindings, but also often with illustrations by famous artists. Usually the size of the edition is small and the price can run into seven figures. This tradition was started in England by Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill Estate in 1757, and a new impetus was given by William Morris with his Kelmscott Press, starting in 1888. This tradition continues to this day.

In the United States the first attempts to imitate Morris were a fiasco and the first successful enterprise was the Elston Press at New Rochelle, New York, which in 1901 printed *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, which followed closely Kelmscott's *Chaucer*, but by 1904 begins to show typographical independence.

Too numerous to be mentioned in this short article, private presses proliferated in America from coast to coast. On the whole they were a pastime for rich idealists who were not particularly interested in financial success, but they influenced men who regarded publishing primarily as a money-making enterprise. Among the earliest were two of particular merit, Theodore L. De Vinne and Walter Gillis. The most important master of fine printing in the United States was Bruce Rogers (1870–1957) who worked as an advisor to various presses. His major achievement is the Oxford University Press great lectern Bible of 1935. He also created the typeface called Centaur, a faithful imitation of Nicholas Jenson's roman type.

Again it is impossible to name all the contributors to fine printing. I will mention only one artist working today who is probably the most distinguished illustrator alive, Barry Moser (1940–), who during the last thirty years has contributed to 230 titles. His latest undertaking is the Bible in the King James version, published by his Pennyroyal Caxton Press. It contains 232 wood-cut (actually he used Resingrave, a synthetic material invented by Richard Woodman) illustrations by him and is limited to a 400 copy edition, each copy priced at \$10,000. An even more exclusive edition of only fifty copies printed on Japanese Kitakata paper is priced at \$30,000. This venture is

the first edition of the whole Bible illustrated by a single individual since the 1865 edition illustrated by Gustave Doré.

Bibliophily is everything or it is nothing. It represents a deranged state of mind over which the actor has no choice. But if you allow the passion to overtake your reality mind, you become a bibliomaniac. Therefore a few words of advice to those who need them.

Learn to read. To read where every page forces you to find a secondary treatment of the problem in the text. There is no clear text, there cannot be a perfect text. That's Platonism that ends up in empty attempts to change a dative into an ablative. Learn to separate the good from the bad. Neither encyclopedias nor bibliographies have all the answers. You must find the truth yourself.

The true joy of a bibliophile is the hunt. A hunt more similar to that of a geologist or a lepidopterist than to a buffalo hunter, or maybe it is more like hooking a trout at the end of your line with a dry fly. First you have to define the aim of your endeavor, what books are you after? The sois-disant bibliophile would first of all enjoin you to buy only first editions, possibly signed by the author. And he would be totally correct as this would increase the future value of your collection. But my bibliophile would be looking for the best book, the one that he needs most at the time.

For instance, if one would find in the most remote corner of the shop a copy of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* for \$3.00, that's the book I would buy, because I have heard so much about it. I am not interested in the edition. Having read the book I become interested in the history of psychiatry. I limit it to English psychiatry during the seventeenth-century. And now I collect everything that has anything to do with the topic. As you can see I am not a purist bibliophile, because I love books for their contents rather than for their state or rarity of edition. But congeries of books as represented by any collection tell a lot about the interests of the collector. That is especially true of the public and school libraries, which are in-

fluenced by popular opinion, where even Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* might still be purged.

Not all collectors purchased their books, some just stole them. In the recent years the most notorious of the thieves was Stephen C. Blumberg who during the past twenty years had looted coast to coast, from forty-five states, 23,600 books, including one hundred incunabula, from 268 libraries and institutions, a total of nineteen tons of rare books. Interestingly he was never caught, but was denounced by a friend for a \$56,000 reward.

In conclusion, bibliophily in the United States is a strong movement encompassing a variety of book lovers. Its health is attested to by the numerous bibliophile societies, such as the most prominent Grolier Club in New York, the Caxton Club in Chicago, the Elizabethan Club at Yale, the Zamorano Club in Los Angeles and many more. Because a great portion of rare books have ended up in various libraries, the prices of available ancient books have become astronomical. For instance *De Civitate Dei* by Saint Augustine was sold last year for \$480,000 .

True, the love of books is not the single motivation because many view book collecting as a business venture. A true bibliophile, however, collects books out of love.

Note: Please contact the author for references.