
A great humanist library celebrates 500 years of survival

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The Bibliotheca Corviniana is reassembled in Budapest.

A major event in library history took place this year in Budapest, Hungary. The remnants of the Bibliotheca Corviniana, the famous Renaissance library of King Matthias of Hungary, were brought together to the most complete extent ever attempted. Out of an estimated 3,000 volumes in the king's library, only 216 manuscripts and incunabula survive. Almost two-thirds of those were lent by libraries and museums in 14 countries to help commemorate the 500th anniversary of the king's death. People debate the merits of Matthias (Matyas) Corvinus—so named for the raven in his crest—as a politician, but everyone agrees that he was a “friend of the muses,” an enlightened patron of humanist thought and art whose knowledge of languages and love of reading were legendary. More than an impressive show of power and wealth, his library was the best and most complete humanist library outside Italy.

Humanism found its inspiration in the works of classical antiquity, accepting them as the source of virtually all knowledge and values. Accordingly, humanist libraries were primarily in the business of obtaining and preserving as many Greek and Latin sources as their resources or ingenuity allowed. It was no different with the Bibliotheca Corviniana, which built up an imposing collection of sources surviving from antiquity, covering all subjects from

philosophy, theology, historiography, philology, law, and literature, to military science, ethics, architecture, and the natural sciences. It was especially well known for the wealth of its Greek language materials.

The library occupied two vaulted rooms overlooking the Danube in the royal palace of Buda, next to the chapel. The interior was lavish: gilt shelves on all sides of the rooms, and the king's sofa, covered with a gilt spread, situated between stained glass windows. The books were fastened to the shelves with silver chains. Each volume was masterfully bound in gilt leather or velvet and bore a miniature of the royal coat of arms, a shield divided into four fields and, in the middle, the arms of the Hunyadi family, a black raven on a blue ground.

Although printing was already in use, most of the volumes were illuminated manuscripts. Matthias acquired them from several sources. Some he inherited from his royal predecessors; some he confiscated from the collections of disgraced nobles; others he purchased in Italy or ordered specially through his agents. To supplement and adorn his collection, he employed copiers and illuminators in the Buda castle.

Not only did the king take an active role in the acquisition of materials, he also created a center for humanist scholarship in Buda. He commissioned

chronicles and histories and attracted to his court famous humanists like Bandini, whose symposia the king himself attended. His ties with Italian humanism became even stronger after his marriage to the daughter of the king of Naples. He also did his best to promote reading among his noblemen. He employed Taddeo Ugoletto as his librarian and asked Naldus Naldius to prepare a panegyric that was essentially a poetic library catalog.

This active intellectual life in the Buda castle came to a sudden end with Matthias' untimely death in 1490. His successors, Wladislas II and Louis II, were both unfit for and uninterested in carrying on the humanist tradition. Not only were there no new acquisitions for the Bibliotheca Cor-

viniana, but a number of volumes were given away or "lent out" to interested visitors, with predictably harmful consequences to the integrity of the collection. Nevertheless, this carelessness proved to be a blessing, for it was those volumes that had the best chance to survive. Much of the collection was destroyed or carried off to Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks, who invaded Buda in 1526.

Fires, natural disasters, and wars further decimated the collection over the next 450 years. Today the 216 surviving volumes are scattered all over the world in various museums and libraries. History prevented the Bibliotheca Corviniana from becoming the core of a national library, but King Matthias' cultural legacy survives in fragments. ■■

COPAR newsletters back in print

The Washington, D.C.-Maryland-Virginia chapter of the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) announces the reprinting of the Newsletters of the Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records (COPAR), 1974-1985, both series complete, together with an original index. A valuable addition to any collection of art and architecture periodicals, the indexed reprint edition will also serve as a reference tool to locate collections of architectural records throughout the United States and to some extent abroad. It is available on acid-free paper either gathered in a plastic binder or left unbound and ready for permanent binding. Prices: \$20.00 bound, \$23.00 unbound. Order (with check payable to ARLIS/DC/MD/VA) from: Marilyn Wassman, 2109 Charleston Place, Hyattsville, MD 20783.

Historical photos on microfiche

The Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico is making available at cost two sets of historical photographs on microfiche and accompanying indexed finding guides. The Cobb Memorial Collection includes over 800 photographs documenting life in and around Albuquerque, New Mexico from 1870 to 1940. The Henry A. Schmidt Collection consists of some 1,200 excellent photographs of frontier life in the mining towns of southern New Mexico from 1890 to 1924. Guides contain descriptive item-level records and are indexed for subjects, photographer, locale, and identified persons. Cost of each set is \$30. This project was carried out with a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. For orders or information, write or call (505) 277-7170.

New PR brochure available

"Academic Libraries: Your Campus Information Service," a brochure introducing academic library services, is available from ALA's Graphics Department. The three-color pamphlet was prepared for ACRL by Edward G. Holley and Barbara B. Moran of the University of North Carolina. It describes the role of the librarian in helping academic users identify, locate, use, and evaluate information sources; special programs and services; and the future role of academic libraries.

"Although every institution of higher learning has a library, not everyone in academia has a very sophisticated sense of what librarians do," says ACRL past president William A. Moffett. "One of our most persistent challenges is to develop a clearer vision of our role and convey it persuasively and compellingly to others."

The brochure is available in 50-copy packets for \$10 from ALA Graphics, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. It may also be ordered by calling toll-free (800) 545-2433, then pressing 8. The item number is A130.

ALANET celebrates its 7th

ALANET, ALA's electronic communications system, is celebrating its 7th year of service by extending a 2-for-1 deal to extend the service to more librarians. When two cooperating libraries subscribe to ALANET for the first time, each library will pay half of the usual subscription rate. ALANET offers subscribers access to nearly 900 databases and news services including UPI, AIDS Daily Summary, and Dow Jones. For more details, call Rob Carlson, ALANET Systems Manager, at (800) 545-2433, ext. 4392, or write to him at ALA, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611.