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A Book Lover's Haven Turns 100

The Grolier Club, the nation's oldest society of bibliophiles, yet remains the commercial of its grand Manhattan home, so there's a secret staircase hidden in a bookshelf. No, do not use gloves in its library.

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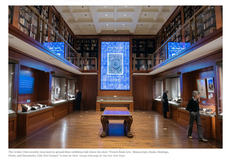

The Grolier Club recently renovated its great Manhattan hall where the show "French Book Arts: Manuscripts, Books, Bindings, Prints, and Documents, 15th-21st Century" is now on view. Gonzalo Córdoba for The New York Times

By Jennifer Schuessler

Jan. 7, 2022

The Grolier Club, a redoubt of bibliophiles on Manhattan's Upper East Side, has no shortage of stately, book-lined interiors that scream — or at least murmur quietly — "serious collectors here."

But the true spirit of the place might be found in an unassuming closet on the fourth floor containing an alarming, nearly floor-to-ceiling jumble of crumpled papers practically exploding out of weathered wooden crates.

It's a remnant of the vast private library of the 20th-century British bibliomaner Thomas Phillipps — and, for the unprepared, a jaw-dropping visual aide to the first sight of Norman Rosen's number in "Psycho."

"This is what happens when you are a classical book collector," Eric Holmenberg, the club's director, said on a recent morning.

The Phillipps legend is the kind of lore bibliophiles savor, and which Mr. Holmenberg was eager to share during a recent tour of the Grolier. Founded in 1884, it is the oldest bibliophile club in the United States and a gathering place for collectors, rare book dealers and academics from across the city's boroughs from the emerging (New Yorkers Book Arts: Manuscripts, Books, Bindings, Prints and Documents, 15th-21st Century") on view through Feb. 5) to the esoteric (Czech pop-up books; miniature bindings).

The club's director, Eric Holmenberg. Gonzalo Córdoba for The New York Times

Last month it celebrated the centennial of its Georgian-style headquarters, which underwent a lengthy renovation and hosted a full roster of events, including a talk by Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress.

And starting Jan. 22, the club will offer public lectures and exhibition tours during Bibliography Week, an annual event that attracts collectors, scholars and other bookish people from all over the world for stopwatch and general bibliotaing.

"It's kind of hard not to go for the Comic-Con comparison," Mr. Holmenberg said of "Bib Week," as devotees call it. "It's a gathering."

An illuminated Latin and French manuscript book of Hours, circa 1520, included in the club's current book arts exhibition. Gonzalo Córdoba for The New York Times

A 17th-copy of Gisanti-soap "Cuto Bagni" by the Parisian printer Joseph Gerard Barbier. Gonzalo Córdoba for The New York Times

A copy of Louis Antoine de Caraccioli's "La Liberté de quatre saisons," circa 1757 — a Rococo miniature book. Gonzalo Córdoba for The New York Times

The club, which has roughly 500 members, is named for Jean Grolier, a 16th-century French high official and book collector who owned Renaissance-era Ottoman bindings. The Latin motto on his bindings — "Io. Grolierii et Amicorum," or "belonging to Jean Grolier and his friends" — represents the ethic of sharing and sociability the club embodies.

Many of the exhibitions are drawn from members' own collections, which include mementos (books from the first half-century after the introduction of movable type in Europe around 1455) and fine bindings, but also more quirky items like miniature bindings, bookworms, calotypes, the member even has a sidebar in printed paper sleeves for coffee cups.

"The universe of printed matter is enormous," Mr. Holmenberg said. "It includes the high and the low, the beautiful and the ugly, the significant and the vulgar, and the insignificant. There's a lot of value in a big enough collection of really, really insignificant objects. It tells a story about human civilization."

As a collection of people, the club has historically exhibited a distinct pattern: male, older, white, well-heeled, often lowtrad.

In recent years, it has pushed to diversify, both in terms of exhibition subjects (Black Panther Party, Black Lives Matter) and it, remains a work in progress), and what they collect.

The grand Antebellum library at the club. Gonzalo Córdoba for The New York Times

Sarah Funke Butler, a private curator, said the number of women and younger people had increased since she joined 12 years ago. "The cap has to high bent ratio has really leveled off," she said.

The metaphor may be fancy, but members' tastes often are not. "Some people feel that the Grolier exhibition of a manuscript does not have to be expensive to be a collection," Ms. Butler said.

The Grolier was founded at a moment when machine printing and automated type production were degrading the quality of printed books, which in turn fanned an interest in fine printing. The newly renovated exhibition hall, designed by Ann Beha Architects as part of a $4.8 million overhaul, subtly reflects our own era's similarly fraught relationship with technology, with modern lighting and wood paneling with high-tech display cases and at one end, a large digital display screen. (Mr. Holmenberg confessed initial fear that an other member might see it "and fall over dead, or fall into").

Current catalogs from bookshelves and auction houses are placed on a table in the library's Sabine Wing, added to the collection of over 200,000 catalogs going back centuries. Gonzalo Córdoba for The New York Times

Artful illumination gives visitors a better glimpse of the shelves of books lining the 25-seconded balcony, hinting at the atmosphere of a Victorian-era library. "It's like, 'Oh, I'm being sucked into the center of the room,' said Bruce Crawford, the club's current president (and a collector of Dickens and other 19th-century authors).

On the way up to the members-only spaces, Mr. Holmenberg offered a tour of the ground floor, where the club's rotating art show features work including "Two American Poets: Walker Evans and William Carlos Williams," a new exhibition drawn from the collection of Alan M. Klein, a member and lawyer.

I made the mistake of taking that no one was wearing gloves.

"Never gloves!" several people exclaimed at once. They overpraise the grip, as it turns out, increasing the risk of dropping or tearing something.

Up in the library (open to researchers but not the general public), Meghan Constantinou, the club's director of rare books and manuscripts, was concentrating on a handful of Phillipps's spectacular manuscripts in order to begin cataloging some of the library's collection of more than 100,000 bookseller, auction and private library catalogs, as well as over 40,000 books about books.

Ms. Constantinou, a collector of women's bookplates, had pulled out one of the oldest printed books in the collection: a copy of Hartmann Schedel's 1493 "Liber Chronicarum" (published in 1493 in a illuminated picture-valued Johann Schnitzer (an honors relative to this reporter, alas).

Meghan Constantinou, the Grolier Club's librarian, entering the not-so-secret staircase. Gonzalo Córdoba for The New York Times

George Fletcher, a biomed former curator at the Morgan Library & Museum and the New York Public Library, stopped out from a nook, as if from central casting, to give a period history or bookmaking in the 15th-century, when movable type was still new.

In this period, printed and manuscript books contained, sometimes unknowingly, fragments of earlier books, the bindings often showing the place where leaderless pages of another text took over from Schneider's printed pages.

One floor up, there was a peek at the "Dutch kitchen," an ersatz fantasy of a colonial New Amsterdam tavern, built in the Grolier's previous quarters in the 1940s, when it had for such interiors swept New York's elites.

And there is was on to the Phillipps Room, home to the spectacularly messy (there, as well as a very nearly tidy) collection of material relating to the mad collector, including a lock of his hair.

An mammoth, front on the club's book-floor remains a jumble of scrapped papers, which now belonged to the 19th-century British bibliomaner Thomas Phillipps. Gonzalo Córdoba for The New York Times

George Etheredge for The New York Times

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If generous Jean Grolier is the Dr. Jekyll of book collecting, Phillipps is its Mr. Hyde. The illegitimate son of a rich cloth merchant, he was one of the first manuscript collectors to branch out from fine illuminated manuscripts and collect parish records, family genealogies and other humble but historically important material. (He is a focus of "Bibliomania," an exhibition that just opened at Yale University's Beinecke Library.)

Phillipps was also, Mr. Holzenberg said, "a total failure as a human being": irascible, cheap, scatterbrained, bad at Latin, rabidly anti-Catholic, horrible to his children, and so generally disagreeable that it was hard to get his book-loving friends to cooperate with him.

When he died in 1872, his manor house was so crammed with papers and books that it took a century to sell it all off. The stuff in the closet (carefully preserved behind glass) is a remnant that had floated from private collector to private collector, still in Phillipps's own crates, until the Grolier bought it in 2003, for about $10,000.

So is the closet meant as a warning? Or an inspiration?

Mr. Holzenberg didn't miss a beat. "Both!"

French Book Arts: Manuscripts, Books, Bindings, Prints, and Documents, 12th-21st Century (through Feb. 2) and Two American Poets: Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams (through Feb. 23)

Grolier Club of New York, 47 East 60th Street, Manhattan; 212-838-6690, grolierclub.org.

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