

IFLA Preconference:  
**Early Printed Books as Material Objects**  
19-21 August 2009  
Bayerische Hauptstaatsarchiv, München

My first knowledge of this event came through one of the speakers, who said it promised to be a sort of international summit conference of scholars of incunabula (books produced during the first fifty years of printing, 1450-1500.) The later official announcements, with abstracts of the papers, confirmed the rumor. Since my duties at the Huntington Library include the curatorship of over 5300 incunabula—the second-largest collection in the U.S.—I felt it would be important for me to attend the event, not just to increase my personal knowledge but also to reinforce the ties between the Huntington and the worldwide scholarly and institutional communities. A generous travel grant from BI-International helped to make this possible.

The conference was organized by Bettina Wagner of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (BSB), though it actually took place at the next-door Hauptstaatsarchiv. Two post-conference tours were also offered, one inside the BSB and one to the nearby town of Neuburg an der Donau. As if organizing these activities were not enough, Dr. Wagner had also curated a coordinated exhibit, “Als die Lettern laufen lernten”, featuring highlights from the BSB’s own extraordinary collection of 15th-century printing. All of these events therefore served the incidental function of publicizing the riches and wide-ranging activities of the BSB. (After the first day’s conference session, Wagner gave an unscheduled talk on the history of the library, its incunabula, and their cataloguing.)

The exhibit’s official opening took place on the evening before the conference began, and although I arrived in Munich nine hours late because of a canceled flight, I was able to dash over to the event about twenty minutes into the proceedings. I heard the whole talk of the main speaker, Peter Schmidt, regarding the earliest illustrated incunabula (up to about 1470). Since none of these very rare books are held by the Huntington (or indeed by most other libraries), this was new territory for me. Dr. Schmidt’s analysis of nail holes in the metal-cuts showed that, as with Flemish panel-stamps for bindings, some sort of casting process may have been used to manufacture them in multiple copies. After the opening ceremonies, which included a live performance of late medieval music to set the mood, we were invited to view the exhibit. This provided some spine-tingling moments, since it included some famous fragments of prototypography like the *Türken-Kalender* (1454). These unique survivals pre-date the completed Gutenberg Bible, and most of us had never seen them before at first-hand.

The main conference, which was held in English, occupied two half-days and one full day. It was organized by several broad topics:

- methodological aspects (principles and perspectives)
- illustration
- fragments of manuscripts and printed books in bindings
- binding databases and methods of description

- provenance (examples, and how to record it).

There were 25 talks, not counting a few shorter unscheduled ones, which meant that each speaker was limited to 15-20 minutes plus question-and-answer. This made it impossible for anyone to develop a topic in much depth. Nevertheless, many succeeded in drawing important conclusions supported by well-chosen examples. At this writing the abstracts were still available at [http://bsb-muenchen.de/fileadmin/imageswww/pdf-dateien/IFLA2009/IFLA-Abstracts\\_neu.pdf](http://bsb-muenchen.de/fileadmin/imageswww/pdf-dateien/IFLA2009/IFLA-Abstracts_neu.pdf). Below I will summarize—with apologies for technical language—the points in some of the talks (arranged in order of their presentation) that I found most valuable:

- Paul Needham: variants introduced into different copies of an edition before publication (e.g. stop-press corrections, cancels, and multiple settings) are copy-specific, but they need to be treated differently than post-production characteristics like bindings and reader annotations. Since they have a bearing on the production history of the edition, they deserve a place in the bibliographical description of the “ideal copy” of the edition. The speaker incidentally issued a challenge for anyone to find a stop-press correction in the first edition of Balbus’s *Catholicon*, which would disprove his theory that the book was composed in two-line slugs.
- David Pearson: studies of reader reception (e.g., Owen Gingerich’s census of the first two editions of Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus*) usually concentrate on works of high historical or literary importance. Pearson urged that, for a more balanced view of reading habits, we should also pay attention to the copy-specific features of less glamorous books which had more popularity in their own time. He offered as an example his own study of three editions of Julius Cæsar in English translation.
- Mayumi Ikeda examined the in-house illumination found in three editions printed by Fust and Schoeffer: (1) the 1457 Psalter, which famously used two-color printed initials; (2) the 1459 Durandus, with hand-illuminated initials of uniform design in all copies, but with different coloring schemes, and (3) the 1462 Bible, in which the hand-done initials are even less uniform from copy to copy, but with several discrete levels of luxury. She showed how the printers began with innovative but labor-intensive methods of illumination, gradually falling back on more traditional but (for the time) more efficient methods. Her evidence that more than one designer worked on the Psalter initials was particularly interesting.
- Falk Eisermann: some binder’s leaves retrieved during the conservation of a book have turned out to come from the correspondence of a bookbinder and bookseller named Meister Georg. The best letter is an order from a Cistercian monk in Meissen for copies of some works by Luther printed ca. 1530—apparently a precautionary action. This is evidence for the arrival of Lutheranism in Meissen eight years before it was previously documented.  
In the question-and-answer session, Nicholas Pickwoad issued a warning about the destruction of evidence that can result when bindings are restored; this led to a lively and not always comfortable pro-and-con discussion.
- Claire Bolton enumerated various characteristic and unworkmanlike features of editions and bindings executed for the publisher Konrad Dinckmut. His folios are very small even for chancery-size paper (the smallest standard size at the time). In the

question-and-answer session, Paul Needham acknowledged a problem with specifying a standard chancery measure, and postulated that smaller sizes may have been normal north of the Alps.

- Scott Husby has been cataloguing Gothic bindings in many libraries and using the results to trace patterns of book distribution. He has found that Italian books are often found in German bindings, but not *vice versa*, implying an unequal trade of books across the Alps.

In the question-and-answer session, Nicholas Pickwoad contended that forwarding techniques are more likely to be workshop-specific than are finishing tools. A binding may be forwarded in one place and finished in another, and often the location indicated by the earliest inscription in a book is far from the apparent place of binding. Husby later told me that the forwarding-versus-finishing question shows a basic difference in the two men's approach to binding attribution.

- Ivan Boserup: during the 1970s the Royal Library in Copenhagen suffered an insider theft of many books. Though about 1500 of them were recovered from the thief's home after his death, many are still missing. This prompted the construction, in 2005, of a website not only listing the books missing but also illustrating numerous marks of Danish royal ownership. Oddly, this did not lead to the recovery of a single additional volume. It is possible that the thief removed ownership marks before sale. The search was abandoned two years later. The thief's villa was confiscated by the state and sold, and the proceeds are being used by the Library to obtain microfilm copies of the editions known to be missing.
- Cristina Dondi: studies of economics and commerce of the Renaissance typically rely on archival sources. Books are unique as articles of Renaissance commerce because they have survived in large numbers, and often acquire physical traces that allow us to reconstruct their distribution.
- Kristian Jensen explored the emergence of incunabula as a distinct genre of collectible books around the turn of the nineteenth century. Gentlemen collectors of incunabula would usually have their original bindings removed because of the unfashionable medieval associations. Their replacement bindings might incorporate Roman imperial motifs, particularly designs from Herculaneum, but they could also be quite drab and cheap. Other alterations, like washing, helped integrate incunabula into their owners' collections of decorative art. As such, they helped the collector to construct a sort of fantasy historical mental landscape. Later nineteenth-century collectors did the same, but the prevailing fashions then centered on a re-imagined Gothic age.

Some speakers told of ongoing projects, sometimes producing masses of facts without drawing major conclusions. When handled well, this approach could also make for entertaining talks—one example was Eric Walter White's account of his search for and cataloguing of fragments of the Gutenberg Bible. Another was Marina Venier's account of the various forms of shelfmarks used by Italian religious houses. The best of these talks allowed one to "stand behind the magician" and learn new tricks of research and interpretation.

Another type of presentation followed the formula of “Here is my database, and here is how it works.” After we had listened to a few of these, one of the previous speakers rose to make a comment that ran something like, “This is all very well, but nobody in the scholarly world knows about your database.” His blunt statement helped to focus a thought I had been forming throughout the conference. There is no doubt that online files, containing images or text or most often both, are currently the most efficient medium for disseminating large masses of compiled information. Many researchers and groups are constructing web-based resources dealing with small segments of the bibliographical record—early book owners in Britain, the various components of the Bernstein Project on paper research, blind-tooled bindings in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, and the aforementioned database of marks of Danish royal ownership were only a few that we heard about. But who is using them, or even knows about them? We learned that several German groups are now working independently on standards for provenance description. The multiplicity of related and overlapping projects is daunting enough in the Anglo-American world, but when scholarly effort is further fragmented by linguistic as well as national and former national boundaries, the situation on the Web begins to resemble a Darwinian state of nature where only a few of the fittest databases will survive, perhaps swallowing up some of the others in the process. The realization of the difficulties that European scholars and institutions must experience in communicating and in coordinating effort was, for me, a sad lesson of this conference. One could not help being struck by the contrast with some of the sweeping projects that the BSB has been able to carry out with the committed financial backing of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. The most ambitious of these, just getting underway, is the digital reproduction of one copy of every incunable in the library—close to 10,000 books, representing something over a third of surviving fifteenth-century editions. Projects on this scale have no trouble establishing themselves as standard references on the virtual bookshelf. As to the coordination and publicizing of the many smaller projects like the ones mentioned above, a well organized European polyglot equivalent of Voice of the Shuttle (<http://vos.ucsb.edu/>) or SHARP (<http://www.sharpweb.org/>) would at least provide a central location from which scholars can explore what is available. If such a site already exists, nobody referred to it during this event. Otherwise, one can only dream of a sort of European Union for the History of the Book that could help focus these diffuse resources.

As with any conference, the unscheduled time between the formal papers was an integral part of the experience, an opportunity to renew old associations and form new ones. I had a particularly valuable talk with Falk Eisermann, the new editor of the *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke*, about difficulties my library has had in accessing the GW database. I had a conversation with Paul Needham about the responsibility for documenting, in a central location, the sort of pre-sale copy-specific features that were the subject of his paper. On our visit to the provincial library in Neuburg, Nicholas Pickwoad gave an off-the-cuff analysis of some characteristic Bavarian pegged bindings that we could only see behind the glass. Throughout the conference I gathered citations for some important reference books that the Huntington needs to acquire. And all the while, the host city of Munich radiated with late-summer muggy heat, vibrant street life, and *Gemütlichkeit*.



At the Staatliche Bibliothek, Neuburg-am-Donau

I am grateful not only to BI-International for a travel grant, but also to Dr. Bettina Wagner of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek for first calling my attention to this source of support, and to my own institution, the Huntington Library, for supplemental financial aid.

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