

1 "In Pursuit of Knowledge:
 2 600 Years of Leipzig University"
 3 The Grolier Club, New York.
 4 September 10–November 15, 2009

5 Founded in 1409 by students of the Saxon
 6 nation who had withdrawn from the Uni-
 7 versity of Prague, Leipzig University is, in
 8 consecutive years of existence, the second
 9 oldest university in Europe. A glance at its
 10 roster of former students—Goethe, Leib-
 11 niz, Richard Wagner, and Angela Merkel
 12 among them—suggests the university's
 13 central place in the intellectual, cultural, and
 14 political life of Germany and Europe alike.
 15 The six hundredth anniversary of the birth
 16 of such an august institution is certainly
 17 worthy of celebration. Yet the title of this
 18 odd little show is a bit misleading. "In Pur-
 19 suit of Knowledge" is more a portrait of the
 20 Universitäts Bibliothek Leipzig than a
 21 celebration of Leipzig University's history.
 22 In a way, it replicates the library in minia-
 23 ture: wide ranging, full of intriguing ob-
 24 jects, but a little dour.

25 The wall texts here relate how the univer-
 26 sity had no formally centralized library for
 27 more than a century after its founding.
 28 During much of the university's early his-
 29 tory, faculty relied primarily on their per-
 30 sonal libraries: the guiding principle for
 31 library acquisitions was to make available
 32 those books the teaching staff did not own
 33 or could not afford. The library evolved in
 34 an unplanned, often haphazard fashion, ab-
 35 sorbing over the years the private libraries
 36 gathered by its professors, collections from
 37 dissolved monasteries, and individual vol-
 38 umes from the estates of outside scholars.
 39 This eclectic approach garnered some mar-
 40 velous items, albeit by means modern
 41 librarians might find scattershot.

42 From the eighteenth century onward,
 43 library directors (by then professionals,
 44 rather than moonlighting faculty) adopted a
 45 more systematic approach, seeking out an
 46 impressive number of manuscripts, printed
 47 books, coins, and works on paper that
 48 reflected and served the university's intellec-
 49 tual ambitions. (All of it remained off limits

50 to students until 1711, when students were
 51 granted two hours' access a week.) By the
 52 nineteenth century, the library's collections
 53 would rank among the finest and largest in
 54 Europe, a hoard commensurate with the
 55 university's reputation for high academic
 56 achievement. Thanks to a dose of good for-
 57 tune, the library escaped serious predation
 58 during times of war, social unrest, and
 59 religious upheaval, although a considerable
 60 number of items carted off to the Soviet
 61 Union were never returned in the years after
 62 the Second World War.

63 Beyond celebrating the university's 600th
 64 anniversary, the real motive behind this
 65 show is to spotlight the library's ongoing
 66 efforts to collect important documents,
 67 conserve them, and make them available to
 68 a global community of scholars. These ef-
 69 forts are astounding in some cases: ir-
 70 replaceable manuscript leaves have been
 71 rescued from the bindings of printed vol-
 72 umes; delicate illuminations have been
 73 reproduced in facsimile to save the originals
 74 from the wear and tear of handling; papyrus
 75 fragments have been reassembled, some-
 76 times fiber by fiber, to reconstitute docu-
 77 ments whose very existence was otherwise
 78 unimaginable. The library's ongoing program
 79 of creating digital images of the objects in
 80 its collections and making them available on
 81 line is especially laudable.

82 But to see even a tiny selection of these
 83 remarkable items in the original will always
 84 be more satisfying than viewing them in
 85 facsimile or on the Internet. That is where
 86 the real pleasure lies in this exhibition. The
 87 pair of leaves from the *Codex Syriacus*—the
 88 oldest complete bible in existence—is a
 89 delight to the eye and the mind, as is the
 90 opening of the Mincha prayer in the *Mach-
 91 sor Lipsia* or the title spread of the mon-
 92 umental Mongol Qur'an. Each of these
 93 books—and many of the others in the
 94 show—reveals a complex, deeply human
 95 confluence of religious feeling, intellectual
 96 ambition, and aesthetic sensitivity.

97 The true commonality among all these
 98 objects is the degree to which the hands of
 99 their makers are present, whether as

Books

meticulous calligraphy, glowing illustration, or handsome printing. In the age of instantaneous access to information, it is easy to lose track of the way the intellectual inheritance of past centuries was maintained only at the cost of great human effort—as it is easy to forget the way an immaculately composed, carefully illustrated page can magnify the intellectual or religious content of a work. For all that the hieratic script of the *Papyrus Ebers* is inaccessible to the modern viewer, the miracle of its survival and the fluidity of its execution trump time and distance to connect us to the papyrus's maker.

The show's supporting elements—a tinny, amateurish website, a cumbersome set of wall panels, and a deeply disappointing catalogue—set out to tell the library's history in greater detail and to sketch a history of the university through short essays and timelines. An installation of video interviews with library staff and conservators also does little to lighten or expand the show. It is unfortunate that such small effort has been made to tie the objects in the show to the intellectual life of the university, or even to discuss in any detail their ongoing importance. Despite these missteps, however, the show does offer a rare opportunity to see a handful of truly marvelous pages.

—Carl W. Scarbrough