“In Pursuit of Knowledge:
600 Years of Leipzig University”
The Grolier Club, New York.
September 10—November 15, 2009

Founded in 1409 by students of the Saxon nation who had withdrawn from the University of Prague, Leipzig University is, in consecutive years of existence, the second oldest university in Europe. A glance at its roster of former students—Goethe, Leibniz, Richard Wagner, and Angela Merkel among them—suggests the university’s central place in the intellectual, cultural, and political life of Germany and Europe alike. The six hundredth anniversary of the birth of such an august institution is certainly worthy of celebration. Yet the title of this odd little show is a bit misleading. “In Pursuit of Knowledge” is more a portrait of the Universität Bibliothek Leipzig than a celebration of Leipzig University’s history. In a way, it replicates the library in miniature: wide ranging, full of intriguing objects, but a little dour.

The wall texts here relate how the university had no formally centralized library for more than a century after its founding. During much of the university’s early history, faculty relied primarily on their personal libraries: the guiding principle for library acquisitions was to make available those books the teaching staff did not own or could not afford. The library evolved in an unplanned, often haphazard fashion, absorbing over the years the private libraries gathered by its professors, collections from dissolved monasteries, and individual volumes from the estates of outside scholars. This eclectic approach garnered some marvelous items, albeit by means modern librarians might find scattershot.

From the eighteenth century onward, library directors (by then professionals, rather than moonlighting faculty) adopted a more systematic approach, seeking out an impressive number of manuscripts, printed books, coins, and works on paper that reflected and served the university’s intellectual ambitions. (All of it remained off limits to students until 1711, when students were granted two hours’ access a week.) By the nineteenth century, the library’s collections would rank among the finest and largest in Europe, a hoard commensurate with the university’s reputation for high academic achievement. Thanks to a dose of good fortune, the library escaped serious predation during times of war, social unrest, and religious upheaval, although a considerable number of items carted off to the Soviet Union were never returned in the years after the Second World War.

Beyond celebrating the university’s 600th anniversary, the real motive behind this show is to spotlight the library’s ongoing efforts to collect important documents, conserve them, and make them available to a global community of scholars. These efforts are astounding in some cases: irreplaceable manuscript leaves have been rescued from the bindings of printed volumes; delicate illuminations have been reproduced in facsimile to save the originals from the wear and tear of handling; papyrus fragments have been reassembled, sometimes fiber by fiber, to reconstitute documents whose very existence was otherwise unimagined. The library’s ongoing program of creating digital images of the objects in its collections and making them available on line is especially laudable.

But to see even a tiny selection of these remarkable items in the original will always be more satisfying than viewing them in facsimile or on the Internet. That is where the real pleasure lies in this exhibition. The pair of leaves from the Codex Sinaiticus—the oldest complete Bible in existence—is a delight to the eye and the mind, as is the opening of the Mincha prayer in the Machzor Lipsia or the title spread of the monumental Mongol Qur’an. Each of these books—and many of the others in the show—reveals a complex, deeply human confluence of religious feeling, intellectual ambition, and aesthetic sensitivity.

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

meticulous calligraphy, glowing illustration,
or handsome printing. In the age of instant-
taneous access to information, it is easy to
lose track of the way the intellectual in-
heritance 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 mod-
ern 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
tiny, amateurish website, a cumbersome
set of wall panels, and a deeply disappoint-
ing catalogue—set out to tell the library’s
history in greater detail and to sketch a his-
tory of the university through short essays
and timelines. An installation of video in-
terviews 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, how-
ever, the show does offer a rare opportunity
to see a handful of truly marvelous pages.

—Carl W. Scarbrough