

1 “In Pursuit of Knowledge:
2 600 Years of Leipzig University”
3 The Grolier Club, New York.
4 September 10–November 15, 2009
5

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7 nation who had withdrawn from the Uni-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

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

43 From the eighteenth century onward,
44 library directors (by then professionals,
45 rather than moonlighting faculty) adopted a
46 more systematic approach, seeking out an
47 impressive number of manuscripts, printed
48 books, coins, and works on paper that
49 reflected and served the university’s intellec-
50 tual 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 for-
tune, 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 ef-
forts are astounding in some cases: ir-
replaceable manuscript leaves have been
rescued from the bindings of printed vol-
umes; delicate illuminations have been
reproduced in facsimile to save the originals
from the wear and tear of handling; papyrus
fragments have been reassembled, some-
times fiber by fiber, to reconstitute docu-
ments 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 *Mach-
sor Lipsie* or the title spread of the mon-
umental 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

1 meticulous calligraphy, glowing illustration,
 2 or handsome printing. In the age of instan-
 3 taneous access to information, it is easy to
 4 lose track of the way the intellectual in-
 5 heritance of past centuries was maintained
 6 only at the cost of great human effort—as it
 7 is easy to forget the way an immaculately
 8 composed, carefully illustrated page can
 9 magnify the intellectual or religious content
 10 of a work. For all that the heiratic script of
 11 the *Papyrus Ebers* is inaccessible to the mod-
 12 ern viewer, the miracle of its survival and
 13 the fluidity of its execution trump time and
 14 distance to connect us to the papyrus’s
 15 maker.

16 The show’s supporting elements—a
 17 tinny, amateurish website, a cumbersome
 18 set of wall panels, and a deeply disappoint-
 19 ing catalogue—set out to tell the library’s
 20 history in greater detail and to sketch a his-
 21 tory of the university through short essays
 22 and timelines. An installation of video in-
 23 terviews with library staff and conservators
 24 also does little to lighten or expand the
 25 show. It is unfortunate that such small effort
 26 has been made to tie the objects in the show
 27 to the intellectual life of the university, or
 28 even to discuss in any detail their ongoing
 29 importance. Despite these missteps, how-
 30 ever, the show does offer a rare opportunity
 31 to see a handful of truly marvelous pages.

32 —*Carl W. Scarbrough*