Treasures from Leuven University Library: The Beat of Europe’s Heart

It is 9 December 1425, a quarter of a century before the invention of printing. In Rome, Pope Martin V (1368-1431) signs the foundation charter of the Leuven University. The city government of Leuven and the chapter of Saint Peter have got what they wanted. A prestigious institution such as a university will breathe new life into the time-honoured ducal city of Leuven after the decline of its cloth industry.

The young university gets off to a quick start and will be a high point of learning, especially in the sixteenth century, when the learned world considered it second to none but Paris.

A first library was set up in 1438 in the Faculty of Arts, but it will be 1636 before the university has a fully-fledged central library at its disposal.

Today Leuven University Library has an impressive collection of some 5,000,000 volumes of printed material, and offers its researchers and students 27,000 full text journals and 637 databases.

Although it was destroyed completely during World War I and again, during World War II, its librarians, with the help of countless generous gifts from people around the world, managed in rebuilding a small but prestigious collection of exquisite manuscripts and rare scientific works, all of them related with the impressive scientific and cultural heritage of Leuven University.

It is impossible to give an overview of the most important items from our well protected vaults, so let us concentrate on 5 absolute highlights.

**Erasmus from Rotterdam (1469-1536)**

Desiderius Erasmus had many friends and enemies at Leuven University, which he frequented often. Quite a few of his books were published in Leuven by the university’s printer Dirk Martens (1446/47-1534).

The Flemish humanist Frans Cranevelt (1485-1564) was one of Erasmus’s correspondents. The letter depicted here, addressed to Frans Cranevelt, pensionary to the City of Bruges, was written by Erasmus and is dated Basel, 24 December 1525. Erasmus gives immediate vent to his emotions after the marriage of Luther (1483-1546) and the nun Catharina von Bora (1499-1522) and the swift birth of their child (only a few days after their marriage). He goes on to give short shrift to a number of Dominicans who had been sniping at him in pamphlets.

(photo: Bruno Vandermeulen – K.U.Leuven)
Sir Thomas More (1478-1535)

More started writing his Utopia during his diplomatic mission in the Low Countries in 1515. During that period he also visited Antwerp, enjoying the hospitality of his good friend Pieter Gilles (1486-1533), secretary to the mayor of the City of Antwerp. Gilles was, by the way, also a good friend of Erasmus.

Utopia was published for the first time at Leuven, by Dirk Martens. More’s Utopia describes a pagan and communist city-state in which the institutions and policies are entirely governed by reason. It was an immediate success and became the ancestor of a new literary genre, the utopian romance. The illustration shown here belongs to the third edition, Basel, 1518. Wars and confiscations unfortunately bereft Leuven University Library from its own 1515-edition.

Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564)

Andreas Vesalius is one of the most illustrious students of Leuven University. In 1543 the father of modern anatomy published his revolutionary De humani corporis fabrica. The Fabrica is regarded as a true milestone in the history of anatomy and medicine. Vesalius stole corpses of executed criminals in Leuven in order to collect the bones and to learn anatomy in his own empirical way.

This title page shows one of his famous dissections, attended by curious visitors of every description. Vesalius himself is depicted at the centre, just left from the dissected body, laying his right hand on the corpse. He looks us in the eye, self-confident and aware of the tremendous value of his knowledge.

(photo: University Library – K.U.Leuven)
Gerard Mercator
(1512-1594)

The cartographer Gerard Mercator is another notorious son from Leuven’s golden age. Just like Andreas Vesalius he started his scientific career at the oldest university from The Low Countries. He is generally recognised to be the most important cartographer of the sixteenth century and possibly of all times. Mercator is the father of modern mapmaking, especially known for his Mercator projection and his state of the art maps of the entire world. He regarded the maps, the accompanying texts and his chronology of world history as component parts of a major cosmological project in which he would describe the entire Creation in time and space. This title page from a compilation of Mercator’s maps shows Atlas, a Greek-roman mythological figure, carrying the celestial globe. This publication, with its famous Atlas-title page, was so groundbreaking and popular that ever since we call a compilation of maps an atlas.

(photo: University Library – K.U.Leuven)
Georges Lemaître (1894-1966)

Georges Lemaître was a Catholic priest with one of the most brilliant scientific minds ever in world history. He studied physics at Cambridge University and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1927 he became a professor of astrophysics at the Catholic University of Leuven. That same year he presented his big-bang theory, which explained the recession of the galaxies within the framework of Albert Einstein’s theory of general relativity.

On the photo we see Einstein meeting Lemaître in Pasadena, January 1933.

Lemaître’s theory of the initial explosion of the so called primeval atom, and the continuous expansion of the universe still stands today. Although he never mixed his religious convictions with pure science, one could interpret his theory as the scientific explanation of the biblical Genesis: there was a moment of creation.

(photo: University Archive – K.U.Leuven)

Jan van Impe
Information specialist sr.
Leuven University Library

The University Library Fund

In 2009 the University Library Fund was created. Your financial support will enable the University Library to acquire important academic publications (from 1425 onwards) and to establish a broad preservation and conservation program, with a specific focus on digitization.

Please contact Katrien Smeyers, University Library, Mgr. Ladeuzeplein 21, 3000 Leuven, tel. +32 16 32 46 22, fax +32 16 32 46 91, vrienden@bib.kuleuven.be

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