

Book Reviews: Rare Paper, Micro to Macro

WILLIAM BUTTS

De Hamel, Christopher. *The Book in the Cathedral: The Last Relic of Thomas Becket*. London: Allen Lane, 2020. 8vo. Hardbound. 58pp. Illustrations. £9.99.

HAVENS, Earle (editor). *Bibliomania: 150 Years of Collecting Rare Books for the George Peabody Library*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Libraries, 2017. 4to. Softbound. ix, 134pp. Illustrations. \$45.00.

SADLIER, Darlene J. *The Lilly Library from A to Z: Intriguing Objects in a World-Class Collection*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. Square 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. xii, 229pp. Extensive illustrations. \$35.00.

HOOVER, John Neal. *A Nation, A City, & Its First Library: Americana as a Way of Life at the St. Louis Mercantile Library*. St. Louis: St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, 2021. 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. xxii, 256pp. Frontispiece, extensive illustrations. \$45.00 (SLML members \$40.00).

Rarely in this column do books about one specific copy of a specific book come under review: Leona Rostenberg and Madeline Stern's *Quest Book – Guest Book: A Biblio-Folly* (about a 1511 copy of Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly*) in the Winter 1994 issue and Margaret Leslie Davis' *The Lost Gutenberg: The Astounding*

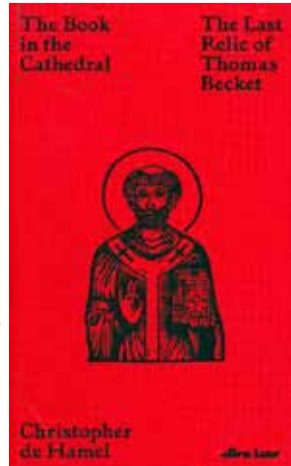
Story of One Book's Five-Hundred-Year Odyssey in the Fall 2020 issue come to mind. And not since 2018 and my review of *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World* has Christopher de Hamel come “under the microscope.”

The Book in the Cathedral: The Last Relic of Thomas Becket is indeed a microcosm. The object of de Hamel's attention may fit into one hand, but his inferences regarding it speak volumes about, among other things, the church in England in the twelfth and subsequent centuries, about faith and the medieval cult of saint's relics, about medieval bookbinding practices and the art of illumination.

In other words, de Hamel is at it again – and he's done it again. He has the unusual ability to explain the arcane and intricate features of medieval manuscripts in a lively, accessible manner enjoyable to the lay reader without ever slipping into the pedantry that often marks academicians in this field. *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* manages to analyze and illuminate famed medieval manuscripts in a fashion both learned and entertaining, while *The Book in the Cathedral* represents historical book sleuthing at its absolute best.

De Hamel makes a persuasive case that a little-known Anglo-Saxon Psalter is the very same book that Archbishop of Canterbury Becket clutched in his hand on December 29, 1170 when four of King Henry II's royal knights attacked him in the cathedral and he “was struck down, and his skull was hacked open.” At a mere 44 pages, plus nine pages of fine-print notes, this tiny page-turner can be read in one sitting.

De Hamel's skill set uniquely qualifies him to unravel a book provenance which at 851 years is a cold case beyond any gumshoe's ken. A medieval scholar who specialized in illuminated



manuscripts at Sotheby's for most of his lengthy career, de Hamel brings formidable bibliographic detecting chops to the table. Add to this a natural storytelling ability and you've got the formula for a first-rate literary mystery – a compelling true crime tale that traces this object's history over centuries.

You feel like Watson peering over Sherlock's shoulder as de Hamel makes pinpoint deductions based on ancient, arcane evidence, dissecting a 14th century inventory of books held by Canterbury Cathedral Priory and reconstructing those volumes given by Becket to the church. He lays out the evidence for a certain Psalter that resides today at the Parker Library (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge), showing how this volume matches the jeweled binding Becket is shown holding in several of the earliest surviving images of him. There's even a "Eureka!" moment that only a hardcore medievalist with illuminated manuscripts could recognize. This book bears nothing so straightforward as an ownership signature, but faint ancient markings point toward it having been owned prior to Becket by Alphege, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1006 to 1012. Alphege "was the first, and until Becket the only, archbishop of Canterbury to suffer martyrdom." When the Danish laid siege to Canterbury, burning the cathedral (and many of its books) and kidnapping Alphege, "The Psalter may have survived by remaining with the archbishop during his imprisonment." Intriguingly, Becket was a known devotee of his sainted predecessor and, according to one eyewitness to Becket's murder, "the archbishop's absolute last words spoken on Earth were to commend his soul into the care of Saint Alphege."

De Hamel lays out convincing evidence that the Psalter in question is the very same book that his friend Herbert of Bosham wrote about as having been rescued from Becket when he exiled to Flanders on a charge of treason in 1164. Today the binding-less manuscript Psalter even shows traces of nail markings at the rear with which precious stones and a carved ivory plaque would have been affixed. Amazingly,

In 1991 the British Museum acquired an eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon ivory of Christ in Majesty. . . It is reported as having been found in east Kent (near Canterbury therefore) and is assumed to be from a book cover. It is just over three inches high in the almond shape of a mandorla, precisely the right size. It shows a seated figure of Christ holding a book, as described in the inventory...

You've got to admire de Hamel's observation, not leaping to any conclusion but showing proper scholarly restraint: "Especially when writing about relics, I must not make the mistake of credulous identification based on wishful thinking, but it is at very least an example of the kind of ivory that must once have been attached to the manuscript."

Today's cult of celebrity is generally a modern invention without much age to it, but de Hamel makes a strong case for Thomas Becket as one of its first products:

After the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket. . . some small pieces of his bones and blood-stained clothing were carefully distributed and were often enclosed in beautiful enamel reliquaries commemorating the martyrdom of the new saint. Miracles were reported within a week of his death. The speed on Becket's canonization only three years after he died allowed opportunities to preserve many of his personal effects as relics. What remained of Becket's murdered body in Canterbury was gathered up into one of the most popular and profitable shrines in Christendom, dedicated in 1220. The desire to be close to these relics of the saint brought pilgrims to the cathedral in huge numbers, reportedly up to 100,000 a time for major festivals...It was a vast industry, both spiritually and commercially.

Having observed many shriveled body parts and saint artifacts in cathedrals around Europe myself, the fervent veneration of saintly relics has long baffled this non-Catholic. De Hamel brings home the extreme heights this veneration attained and the equally violent backlash against it later – and it’s hard to argue with his belief that our modern celebrity cult (which ties in with autograph collecting) is merely a secular equivalent. “Today, rock stars and footballers still generate memorabilia preserved by their devotees,” he notes.

Popular novelists in our time are not subjected to relentless requests for hair clippings, as the Bronte sisters or Jane Austen were...Collectors usually tell you that they prefer to venerate autographs in historical context, rather than as isolated signatures. The taste is for whole manuscripts, sustained working papers and significant correspondences, documenting the evolution of some great cultural achievement or scientific advance. The shrine to the Beatles in the British Library displays manuscript drafts of their songs, and it attracts an almost permanent arc of worshippers.

He further elaborates that:

It is striking what emphasis we now give to the written word among desirable relics of the past. If we had (say) a tooth of William Shakespeare or one of his shoes, it would have a certain mild interest, if its authenticity was provable, but its value would be finite. What we would really want now is a book from Shakespeare’s library (no undisputed examples are known), for that would be a window into the mind and learning of the man, especially if it showed signs of use of him and the workings of his thoughts.

I've always been fond of the saying "If I'd had more time I would have written *less*" – in which case *The Book in the Cathedral* must have taken de Hamel ages to write, so slim and tightly-constructed is it. Even the nine pages of dense small-print notes that follow the 44 text pages – highly recommended reading – reveal how deep and extensive is the learning that goes into weaving an account that reads so well. Well illustrated in color, attractively priced, albeit bizarrely bound in garish red cloth with blurbs for *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* printed in black directly on the rear board - never seen that - *The Book in the Cathedral* proves again that few medieval scholars can make a real-life bibliomystery as edge-of-your-seat riveting as Christopher de Hamel. "The mystery of Becket's mind is what makes his story such an enduring topic of speculative literature," de Hamel observes, "from the metrical romances of the end of the twelfth century through to Alfred Tennyson (1884), T.S. Eliot (1935), Jean Anouilh (1959) and others." Add de Hamel (2020) to that distinguished lineup.

Whether you're a collector, dealer, archivist, librarian or none of the above, one observable factor that separates your run-of-the-mill variety from your top-tier versions is the latter's knowledge of which collecting institutions own which treasures or in which field each collects. Such information is the very life blood for dealers, their stock in trade in knowing who to approach about their best material. For all manner of players in the rare book and autograph game knowing *who's got the goods* is invaluable information.

Short of spending enormous amounts of time and energy at scattered sources studying the holdings of this country's numerous special collections departments at its many university libraries and research libraries, how does one get a working knowledge of who's got what and who collects what? Easy: By reading the books showcasing their holdings that many rare book libraries publish! As invaluable as is this information, it's not exactly secret – these

institutions *want* you to know what they have. Many such volumes have been reviewed in this column, all large, lavish and beautifully illustrated.

Switching from “cosms” micro to macro, from rare paper you can hold in one hand such as Thomas Becket’s Psalter to those that require multi-story structures to house, brings us to surveys of the history and holdings of three of this country’s great research libraries. One is east coast, two are Midwest, and all boast enormous quantities of the choicest rare books and autographs, maps and other paper of great variety.



All three of these surveys take vastly differing approaches to the daunting task of chronicling their large holdings in such a way that huge numbers of seemingly-disparate collections fulfill each institution’s mission and vision – simply put, that their collections hang together well and make sense. The first (George Peabody Library, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore) takes the most traditional approach: Meaty, scholarly essays on the historic development of research libraries in general and the Peabody in specific, with particular items mainly of serious antiquarian nature highlighted along the way as examples. The second (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington) takes a fun and accessible approach, showcasing sixty-five specific items or collecting categories and using each as a jumping-off point for mini-essays. The third (St. Louis Mercantile Library, University of Missouri, St. Louis) takes its 175th anniversary as its guiding principle, breaking down its holdings into three main divisions and depicting and describing 175 stunning items or groupings.

I’ll never forget that moment when I first entered the George Peabody Library, easily the most awe-striking interior of any

American library in my experience. So when *Bibliomania: 150 Years of Collecting Rare Books for the George Peabody Library* editor Early Havens writes, “Surely all of us who have had the privilege will recall the first time we walked into the magnificent George Peabody Library,” it resonates deeply. Dean of Hopkins libraries Winston Tabb describes it in his foreword as “among the world’s most beautiful, with five tiers of ornamental cast-iron balconies drawing the eye up to the impressive skylight, more than 60 feet above the floor. . . [it] evokes a certain reverence.”

Surprisingly, *Bibliomania: 150 Years of Collecting Rare Books for the George Peabody Library* represents “the first large-scale exploration of the terra incognita of the Peabody Library’s rich rare-book collection and institutional manuscript archive. Remarkably, this material has never before been thoroughly researched by a team of scholars, nor described or illustrated in any detail in print.” *Bibliomania* is truly a first in many ways.

Editor Havens introduces it with “Portraiture and the Public Research Library,” exploring the theory of public research libraries with a case study of the early Public Academy Library at Leiden University in the Netherlands, a groundbreaking 16th century Enlightenment institution. He analyzes several early (late 16th/early 17th century) steel engraved images of it, each dense with symbolism and steeped in ancient Greek and Latin references. Learned citations abound in these complex images, all artfully elaborated by Havens. But, he posits, “just how ‘public’ could a great research library actually be during such a formative period? Just how ‘public’ was the ‘public academic library’ of Leiden University?” If “nearly the entire Leiden research collection was. . . composed of ancient languages, and almost none to speak of in the Dutch vernacular that was being universally spoken all around it,” is it really for the general public? He drives it home: “Was the public research library at Leiden for ‘the people’? Was it commonly possessed by a ‘reading public’?”

He contrasts this classic-obsessed institution with of course the George Peabody Library, completed in 1878:

It was to be categorically democratic and secular, a cathedral for all that would countenance neither irreverence nor idolatry. Its entire purpose is summed up in its gigantic open book stack, as an architectural celebration of the library's central ambition to collect books that record the knowledge of all the ages for all time...The Peabody's memorial to knowledge and human achievement was not antiquarian, but shaped instead in fireproof cast-iron walls according to the latest technological innovations in the building arts.

Unlike the Leiden library, not only were "almost none" of the Peabody's early holdings "in the most learned ancient and biblical languages of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew," but they maintained long, open public hours in sharp contrast to Leiden's measly four hours per week. A tough sell indeed were the Peabody's earliest forays into rare and antiquarian books in this working-class town struggling with a challenging post-Civil War economy; only gradually did classics of antiquity make their way into the Peabody's holdings.

Two fine scholarly essays seek to place the Peabody Library and its collections within the greater historical context of humanism and learning and collecting before Havens wraps up *Bibliomania: 150 Years of Collecting Rare Books for the George Peabody Library* with a glorious fifty-plus pages of description and images of a select handful of their greatest books and manuscripts.

First to offer some context is Christopher Geekie, whose "Old Worlds, New Worlds: Public Research Libraries and Cultural Renewal from the Renaissance to America" is an invigorating review of Italian humanism, the awakening that began in the 14th century and planted the first seeds of the Renaissance. The hunt mainly neglected monastic libraries for ancient Latin and Greek

texts thought long lost and the endeavor to translate and disseminate ancient wisdom in a society emerging from the dark medieval period will quicken the pulse of any collector. Geekie conveys the excitement and the influence of Petrarch, who envisioned a new type of library:

...the patrons of this new brand of research institution would not be those typically associated with libraries that were either monastic or private in nature. Instead of restricting potential clientele to limited circles of patrons, Petrarch offered access to his personal library to any literate person who might find pleasure and satisfaction in study as an end in itself.

Petrarch's vision takes root. Theologian and maniacal book hunter Tommaso Parentucelli becomes Pope Nicholas V in 1447. He "would plan and set into motion the first public research library since antiquity: the Vatican's own institutional Apostolic Library" and with the threat of Ottoman Empire invasion his successor Sixtus IV formally decrees this library in 1481.

America four centuries later was ripe for this same type of institution and civic-minded merchant George Peabody was the just the man with the mindset and deep pockets to make it happen. Geekie chronicles the library's growing pains as it slowly acquired its first 50,000 volumes, only reaching 2,965 titles by 1863. The library took the unorthodox step of publishing detailed "desiderata" lists – today we call them "want lists" – in 1861 and 1863. Acquisitions snowballed. What collector won't swoon at the thought of "the bulk quantity of pamphlet acquisitions," when the library purchased 580 pounds' worth of pamphlets, maps and books at twelve and a half cents per pound! Geekie's account of this formative period and its philosophical basis in Italy nearly half a millennium prior is a refreshing exposition.

Neil Weijer and Havens' "Bibliomania: Book Collecting and Libraries in Nineteenth Century Britain and Baltimore" explores the pathology and history of this malady, starting with its earliest sufferers among 17th and 18th century English aristocrats and how they "form[ed] the basis of the British Museum, the nation's first universal public museum and library (now the British Library), in 1753." French librarian Charles Nodier's 1831 novel *Le Bibliomane* introduced many of the stereotypes still circulating of the bibliomaniac, and Weijer and Havens ably review England's best-known 19th century examples: Reverend Thomas Frognall Dibdin (whose 1809 *Bibliomania; or, book-madness* and other titles "embrac[ed] its more pleasant and romantic connotations"), the wealthy Richard Heber, and the "most eccentric bibliomane of the age," Sir Thomas Phillipps, the depths of whose bibliomania seem yet to be equaled.

Weijer and Havens show that "American bibliomania' and certainly 'Baltimore bibliomania,' took on a markedly different appearance from that of its English predecessors" is a point well taken. This practical American institutional bibliomania was new and they develop this notion of "a new kind of large-scale acquisition – a civic brand of bibliomania that they might inspire among the wider citizenry of Baltimore." The nucleus of the Peabody Library was *not* George Peabody's collection, for he wasn't himself a collector, but rather the princely sum of money with which he funded and sustained it was to be spent building up a superb collection of important works from the ground up. Weijer and Havens chart the Peabody's growth as it reached 25,000 books by 1867 and 115,000 by 1893, citing major gifted or purchased rarities along the way and the independent institution's burgeoning relationship with Johns Hopkins University. The Peabody Library's unorthodox development represented a new variant of bibliomania never before seen, a fascinating theme nicely laid out in this intriguing essay.

The thirty-four eclectic treasures profiled in Havens closing chapter “reveal a dazzling picture of the idiosyncratic values, experimental ideas, and contrasting ambitions of mid-nineteenth-century America that would give the Peabody Library its first shape, form, and purpose.” All of these antiquarian rarities deserve discussion, but alas space prohibits. Once you appreciate the unique place the Peabody Library holds in American institutional collecting history, though, a shout-out seems in order for two special pieces: *Letter from George Peabody, Esq. to the Trustees for the Establishment of an Institute in the City of Baltimore* is a routine-looking pamphlet of 1857 that audaciously proposes what soon became the George Peabody Library and lists two hundred male Baltimore movers and shakers to undertake this daring endeavor – including local entrepreneur Johns Hopkins, whose university more than a century later would take the Peabody under its wing. In soaring language, this striving call to action known as the “Founder’s Letter” establishes and funds an institution Havens describes as “neutral but patriotic, impartial but tolerant, national but moral, intellectual but beneficent.” The copy pictured isn’t a routine copy bearing Peabody’s typeset name at its close, but a special copy without his typeset name and instead boldly signed by him in ink. The other item with pride of place is the 1863 *Catalogue of books to be purchased by the Peabody Institute, of the City of Baltimore* – not a regular printed copy (“Distributed to booksellers, book collectors, and other libraries and librarians around the nation, and across the Atlantic Ocean”) but a “special institutional copy of the...massively ambitious, small-type acquisitions ‘wish list’...specially interleaved and studiously annotated with purchase notes and sales records by the first librarians.” Thrilling to behold, especially for this proud parent of a freshly-minted Johns Hopkins graduate.

Bibliomania: 150 Years of Collecting Rare Books for the George Peabody Library is an exceptional study and tribute to this most out-of-the-ordinary research library.

The second of our research library surveys is Darlene J. Sadleir's *The Lilly Library from A to Z: Intriguing Objects in a World-Class Collection*. What "comfort food" is in the culinary world - familiar, nostalgic, reassuring - the classic alphabet-teaching A-B-C book is to children's books: A well-known, straightforward format that puts readers at ease and tells them that learning's on the way albeit in short, illustrated doses. A to Z is a smart choice, an organizing principle both approachable and enjoyable.

"Every book has its hook" is today's publishing mantra, so Sadleir's tried-and-true format surveying the Lilly's vast and varied collections, ranging from "the Gutenberg Bible, John Ford's Oscars, and the Shakespeare First Folio," is ideal for the bizarrely eclectic inventories of most rare book libraries. How far beyond dusty books and old paper this goes was brought home to me



recently when the director of a superb University special collections department pulled out "Buffalo Bill" Cody's leather briefcase.

Sadleir describes her method as "wandering' through the library – an outsider's view, although it probably reflects my own research interests in cinema and the culture of the Portuguese-speaking world...it is not written for professional librarians or specialists. The audience I have in mind is made up of educated or curious readers who may or may not have special interests...For each letter of the alphabet I have allowed myself to jump from one topic to another, as a way of indicating the amazing scope of the collections and the wonder I felt at seeing their variety."

Sadleir is not an archivist or special collections librarian, but a professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Indiana University. A frequent patron of the Lilly Library who also offered show-and-tells of its objects in her courses, she decided to populate these pages with “books, magazines, maps, cartoons, and individual pages that have a strong visual interest... I have simply taken the liberty of writing about objects that might strike a reader’s interest, and I should emphasize that the things I have selected are only the tip of an iceberg.” But lest you regard *The Lilly Library from A to Z* as a mere coffee table “pretty book” filled with lots of pictures and little substance, think again.

Sadleir “assume[s] most people will not try to read the book straight through from A to Z,” so let’s do as she assumes and “turn the pages... dipping into the text” as she suggests – starting with “A,” picking out “M” as the center point and ending with “Z.”

“A” covers “Armband,” “Audubon” and “Automobile Catalogs.” Pictured is a felt armband imprinted with “Remember! Justice Crucified August 22, 1927” worn at the funeral of Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti and three thoughtful pages about the Lilly Library’s exceptional archive about the incident. “Audubon” recounts the extraordinary tale of the most famous bird book of all time. Pictured is a leaf from the Library’s superb set, which is on permanent display, and their stunning recent acquisition of Audubon’s original ledger book. By the way, “A special glass display case was commissioned... to accommodate the double elephant folio, whose pages are turned regularly to showcase the beauty of its many prints. If turned weekly, the entire process requires eight and a half years.” As if these two topics aren’t disparate enough, “Automobile Catalogs” profiles the car catalogue collection of Indiana University administrator Thomas T. Solley. Sadleir makes you appreciate how these hundreds of slim catalogues from around the world, mostly from manufacturers long defunct, did more than just sell cars; they spoke about status, about sex appeal, about beauty. Did you know that early 20th century Indiana “rivaled

Michigan as the nation's automotive center; it produced more than 250 makes of cars in some forty cities"? Well, now you do.

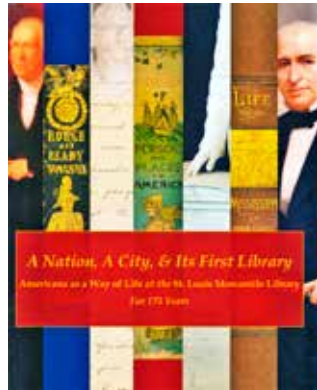
A memorable mélange of material gathers within the letter "M." It ranges from small and specific ("Makeup Case of Rita Hayworth," a snazzy 1940s leather case whose contents include touching love letters from her new husband Orson Welles) to gargantuan ("Maps," in which Sadleir focuses on a few 15th-16th century beauties such as the depicted 1482 *Cosmographia*). This unusually lengthy chapter also includes "Masks (Life and Death)" (pictured is 21-year-old poet John Keats in life and 74-year-old Indiana novelist Theodore Dreiser in death), "Medals" (Postmaster General Return Jonathan Meigs Jr.'s ultra-rare George Washington Peace Medal of 1792), "Miniatures" (16,000 miniature books and objects from Ruth E. Adomeit's collection, with a *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* from 1900 and another from 1940 pictured, each dwarfed by a Lincoln penny), "Money" (which conveys the confusing chaos of colonial currency values and depicts a choice array of them), and lastly "Myriopticon" (an astonishing post-Civil war Milton Bradley toy: "two dozen Civil War scenes pasted together on a strip that is mounted on two rolls [which] turn with keys inserted in the top of the game's small...box, through which the panorama passes as if on a theatrical stage").

Sadleir closes this unusual tour with "Z," which consists of "Zener Cards" (which detect psychic abilities, cousin to fortune-telling Tarot cards) and "Zinc and Other Metal Printing Plates" (which picture reproduction printing plates "used as a teaching tool for classes about the history of the book").

Sadleir's *The Lilly Library from A to Z* couldn't be more different from Havens' *Bibliomania*. Don't expect the academic air that permeates *Bibliomania*'s analysis of the intellectual backdrop of research libraries; Sadleir doesn't delve into the Lilly Library's formation and history. Instead, it's a taste teaser that demonstrated how much of a research library's contents is *not* books and documents, their bread and butter, but artifacts made from much

more than paper. Her accompanying essays tell the reader the background of each item (or category of items) and in so doing show the Lilly Library's mission of preserving and interpreting history.

The smoke-belching paddle-wheelers that plied their way up the Mississippi River tributary in the 19th century to my adopted hometown of Galena, Illinois, have given way to beer-belching paddleboarding tourists trying to stay upright. Head down Ol' Man River about 330 miles and you arrive at St. Louis and the fabulous St. Louis Mercantile Library, subject of John Neal Hoover's *A Nation, A City, & Its First Library: Americana as a Way of Life at the St. Louis Mercantile Library*.



Our third research library survey explores the riches of the Midwest's first research library, now celebrating its 175th anniversary. This worthy colleague of Chicago's Newberry Library and Ann Arbor's William L. Clements Library continues its mission of research and scholarship, gathering treasures and hosting exhibitions, all celebrated in Hoover's handsome tribute. "It is always a remarkable circumstance when an old library survives the generations," writes Hoover, the Mercantile's long-time director, in his preface:

What that means in an institution like the Mercantile is that it collected history as it happened, its books were read almost to raggedness by participants in great events and they are more hallowed than the fine copies that came from

wealthy collectors to other much younger but often better-known institutions. This is the story of one such collection of American history that is squarely imbedded in the American story – culturally, economically, politically – through presenting a selection of books that have been with the Mercantile for generations...

Fortunate indeed was St. Louis that from 1846 “The librarians here in the first days of this institution’s history clearly understood the historical moment which they seized,” enthuses Hoover.

They documented the epoch created by St. Louis’s strategic position as a cultural crossroads to America on the Library’s shelves. Because of that, from its inception, St. Louis possessed a national library that collected the heritage of a new nation while many stirring events were occurring...

Hoover’s enthusiasm is well founded and infectious. “The St. Louis Mercantile Library’s greatest achievement, perhaps, has been, from that early national and ‘global’ collecting impulse, to continue to create in the heartland one of the most respected and comprehensively developed collections of Americana, Western American and interdisciplinary American studies,” he waxes on, “certainly becoming one of the great historical research centers in the nation.” Enough to make you want to put this prairie gem on your itinerary.

I’ve got to point out a foldout image that precedes this book’s frontispiece, a lovely reproduction of an 1841 bird’s-eye lithographic view of St. Louis that measures a flabbergasting 68” (that’s *five feet eight inches!*) – one of the longest foldouts this book person has ever encountered. In a modern book that’s quite a rarity.

Before diving into the 175 items that constitute the bulk of *A Nation, A City, & Its First Library*, Hoover surveys the founding

of the Mercantile and development of its vast holdings. How do you summarize this library's bulging collections in ten pages? In a word: concisely. There are items on the American West ("over 250,000 printed items...nearly 15,000 St. Louis imprints"), extensive Western Americana manuscripts (their Holy Grail being trailblazer Auguste Chouteau's holograph "Narrative on the founding of St. Louis...a tremendously evocative narrative of Americana"), extensive general Americana from coast to coast, a mind-blowing mass of locomotive history ("one of the largest holdings of early railroad history in the world"), original documents from just about every American historical and literary figure, a newspaper collection which ranks up there with the American Antiquarian Society in scope and quality, historic photographs (the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* archive alone numbers "nearly 300,000 photographic prints and hundreds of thousands of negatives"), Western art galore ("works by Bingham, Deas, Moran, Meeker, Benton, Russell, Berninghaus, Remington, Hosmer, and a host of other nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty first century artists") – the elaboration goes on and on.

Hoover sorts his 175 groupings or topics, each depicting as few as one or two and as many as half a dozen or more images, into two halves. Part one ("People and Their American Narratives, Dreams, Thoughts, Observations and Achievements") covers items 1 through 99, while part two ("American Places") covers items 100 through 175. As completely inadequate as it seems for me to cull out a few representative samples to whet your appetite, I don't envy Hoover's task in culling out 175 items out of millions – but here goes:

Item #35: John James Audubon knew St. Louis well. In fact, two of the Mercantile's founding members subscribed to his *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* and one of their sets of this "imperial folio in three volumes, was one of the foundational acquisitions of the Library." As if that's not enough, one of the Mercantile's finest treasures is "one of three reserved family copies

of Audubon's other masterpiece, the double elephant folio *Birds of America* published in the 1830s. The Mercantile's copy is one of the only inscribed by the artist." (For more on this showstopper and the library's similar holdings, see Hoover's 2015 book *Audubon and Beyond: Collecting Five Centuries of Natural History at the St. Louis Mercantile Library* – highly recommended.)

Item #61: Most extraordinary of the handful of maps found in this volume is a spool map. "In the mid-1860s two St. Louis entrepreneurs devised a unique travel guide to the Mississippi to be used onboard Steamboat packets as they plied the river from St. Paul to New Orleans," Hoover explains. "This twelve-foot *Ribbon Map of The Father of Waters (St. Louis, 1866)*... could be cranked open as one passed various points on the river... These fragile toy-like objects did not survive little eager hands at home very well, and today they are extremely rare when found at all." I can't imagine that more than a few of these cartographic curiosities exist – a thrilling survivor to behold. (Again, for an in-depth look at the Mercantile's, I refer you to Hoover's 2014 book *Mapping St. Louis History: An Exhibition of Historic Maps, Rare Books and Images Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of the Founding of St. Louis*).

Item #169: Pleasing indeed is it to admire an assortment of St. Louis' earliest newspapers. "The most important reading material on the American frontier, beside the Bible," Hoover reminds us, "were current events printed by the early presses shipped cross country on flatboats, wagons and later by early trains to western towns springing up across the landscape. The imprints took the shape of newspaper, almanacs and informational broadsides and extras..." (Once more, the best way to delve into this area in greater detail is through Hoover's 2017 book, *Headlines of History: Historic Newspapers of St. Louis and the World Through the Centuries at the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association*.)

Item #40: This Lincolnist can't pass over "An engrossed and signed copy of the *Emancipation Proclamation* ratified at the

Mercantile Library for Missouri during the Civil War, along with a heavily patinaed medallion once affixed to Lincoln's hearse.

Items #17 and #75: What name evokes Missouri more than Thomas Hart Benton – either one of them. The statesman's most famous speech, "Western Star of Empire," was delivered at the Mercantile, and how fitting their copy is depicted along with the original manuscript of it, owned by them since "Old Bullion" uttered it in 1849. And who can't call to mind Americana scenes painted by the *other* Benton, the statesman's great-nephew, whom Hoover describes as the "Opinionated, irascible, supremely talented inventor of much of what American art calls Regionalism..." Several evocative examples of book illustration art and a stunning lithograph are lovingly included.

Item #19: Autograph material heavily peppers these pages, such as a sharp first edition of John C. "Pathfinder" Fremont's *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44*, with choice presentation inscription not from Fremont but from his beaming father-in-law Thomas Hart Benton.

Item #23: The Mercantile's superlative holdings from artist George Catlin include his scarce *O-Kee-Pa: A Religious Ceremony; and Other Customs of the Mandans*. Their "unique copy" bears "Catlin inscribed notes which were bound with the printed text."

Items #54, #55 and #56: The Mercantile is rife with artifacts and writings of the household-name famous, but every bit as fascinating and worthwhile are those of only local or regional renown. Here are manuscript ledger books of dry good merchant and early Jewish settler Joseph Philipson. "His account books are a 'Who's Who' of the city and his accounts reflected the daily purchases and needs of William Clark, Frederick Bates, the Chouteaus, and many others, including Louisiana Territory's Governor Meriwether Lewis." And this is followed by "some of the first preserved blacksmith records west of the Mississippi," those of John and James Sutton, which show that "everyone... all needed a well shod horse." Let's not

neglect mountain man wife Virginia Kyle Campbell, homemaker extraordinaire, whose household ledgers “are preserved at the Mercantile [and] give a glimpse of a pioneer woman’s interest in creating civilized, cultural opportunities on the frontier.”

From the mammoth foldout that heralds something out of the ordinary to the extensive illustrations that grace its pages, To call *A Nation, A City, & Its First Library: Americana as a Way of Life at the St. Louis Mercantile Library* stands out as one of the most exceptional of the institutional surveys reviewed in this column. Hoover is fond of writing long, complex sentences laden with commas and clauses that occasionally tie themselves up in knots -- he’d be better served by breaking some of these marathon sentences into short sprints. He conveys the Mercantile’s story and its sensational holdings well, though, and this striking volume is well worth any collector’s while.