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Not Alone Anymore

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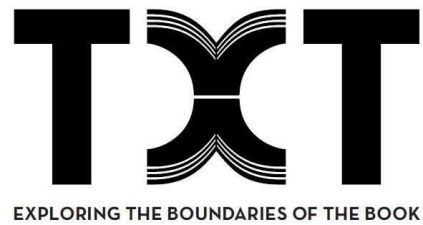
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“For book historians, publishers, as well as students of material art, the Elsevier Heritage Collection will prove to be a treasure trove, providing them with inspiration and new stories to tell.”



SJORS DE HEUVEL

Elsevier’s motto, *Non Solus*, as famously depicted in the company’s printer’s mark, still rings true – quite literally now. When Jacobus Robbers founded his small publishing company in 1880, he named it after the old Dutch publishing house Elzevir. From 1580 to 1712, the Elzevir family was responsible for the publication of some of the major scientific works of their time, as well as regional descriptions, classical literature, and even a French cookbook. The modern Elsevier company, considerably grown in size since Robbers’ days, has spent decades hunting down copies of its predecessor’s books. Now gathered in the company’s Amsterdam office boardroom, they snugly sit together, about 1500 of them, in beautiful glass showcases.



In the first months of 2012, Elsevier invited Book and Digital Media Studies to have a look at their Heritage Collection. Under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Paul Hoftijzer, a group of 15 students with an interest in book history joined with some of the Elsevier staff to participate in a series of lectures on the 17th century publishing house. The class followed pater familias Louis Elzevir’s humble beginnings as a bookbinder in Antwerp, to his founding a print shop in Leiden, and eventually succeeding Christopher Plantin as Leiden University’s publisher and printer. Admiration for the firm’s high quality print work and beautiful typography almost immediately led its books to become desirable objects throughout Europe, with an Elzevir collection forming the central part of many a bibliophile library, well into the 20th century.

The fact that for centuries book collectors have loved Elzevir editions, has given great variety to the current Elsevier Heritage Collection. Until not so long ago, a book’s history did not mean so much to collectors. The simple white vellum bindings that originally covered the paper book block were therefore often removed, and replaced by a binding more in fashion with the times. In a collection as large as the one in



Amsterdam, which has been gathered from many different sources, not a single book appears to look the same. Also the inside of the books, most including inscriptions and bookplates, turns each edition into an individual object with its own history and character.

The class assignment to delve further into the collection, and to each write an essay on the findings, has delivered some interesting results. One essay concerns itself with France's last king's grandson, Robert d'Orléans. After noticing that a mysterious stamp was featured on many bindings, careful research led us to discover that this 19th century bibliophile once owned approximately 1250 Elzevir editions, of which about 190 have found their way into the Elsevier Heritage Collection. Further analysis of his bindings, the treatment of the paper, and his involvement in a French bibliophile society, taught us a great deal about d'Orléans' passion for books, and allowed us to expand on the Elzevir legacy.

The individual essays and book descriptions that the students have created cover just a small percentage of all the stories that can be told based on the material in Amsterdam. For book historians, publishers, as well as students of material art, the Elsevier Heritage Collection will prove to be a treasure trove, providing them with inspiration and new stories to tell. Now that research on these books has been initiated, and will hopefully be continued, after 300 years the Amsterdam Elzevirs are not alone anymore.

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