

The LIBRARY

An Illustrated History



Stuart A. P. Murray
Introduction by Donald G. Davis, Jr.
Foreword by Nicholas A. Basbanes

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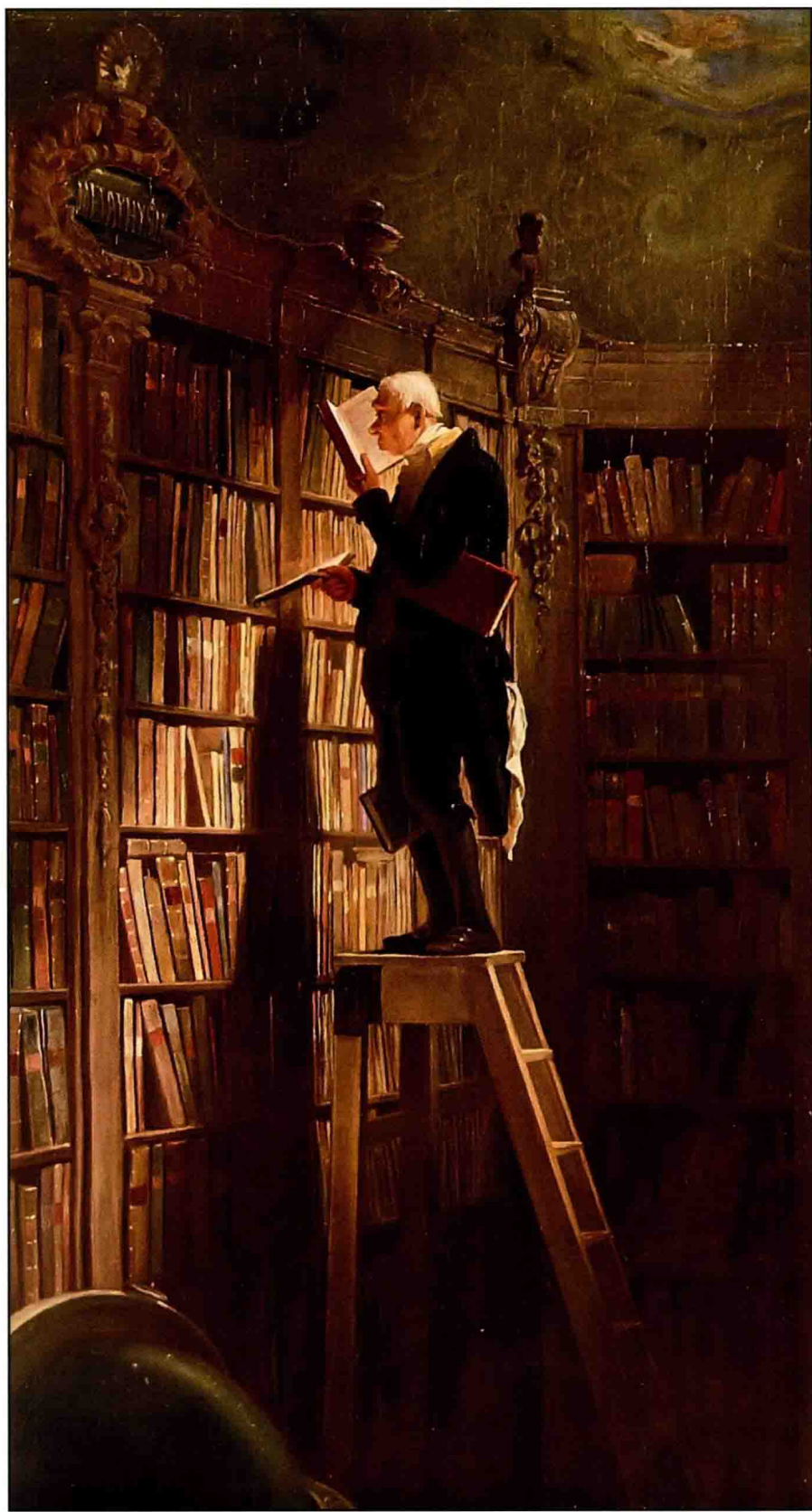
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Frontispiece: "The Bookworm," by Carl Spitzweg (1808–85)

The
LIBRARY



FOREWORD

During the darkest days of the Great Depression, a noted bibliophile named Paul Jourdan-Smith wrote a heartfelt tribute to the eternal power of reading in which he offered a passing commentary on the continuing misery he saw everywhere around him.

“This is no time for the collector to quit his books,” he observed. “He may have to quit his house, abandon his trip to Europe, and give away his car; but his books are patiently waiting to yield their comfort and provoke him to mirth. They will tell him that banks and civilizations have smashed before; governments have been on the rocks, and men have been fools in all ages. But it is all very funny. The gods laugh to see such sport, and why should we not join them?”

Published in 1933 in a work aptly titled *For the Love of Books*, Jourdan-Smith’s observation came at a time when people throughout the United States were using their local libraries in record numbers for precisely the reasons he had perceived, turning to them as sanctuaries of first resort during times of particular need. And the widespread reliance on these remarkable institutions of cultural preservation—five thousand years in the making, as we learn in Stuart Murray’s most useful survey—continued through the long trauma of World War II.

A week after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the charismatic mayor of New York City, Fiorello H. La Guardia, took to the airwaves on radio station WNYC for a series of Sunday night broadcasts in which he would speak directly to his constituents, keeping them apprised of world events, giving them all an encouraging pep talk in the process. At the end

of each program, it was the custom of the man affectionately known as the “Little Flower” to conclude his remarks with the words “patience and fortitude,” calm advice that he felt would see everyone safely through the long ordeal that lay ahead.

So inspirational was La Guardia’s message of comfort and hope that “Patience and Fortitude” were adopted as the unofficial names of the majestic lions carved from pink Tennessee marble that guard the entryway to the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. With concern in some myopic quarters arguing that technology has rendered twenty-first-century libraries quaint and archaic, these names have taken on renewed significance, especially as a financial crisis of monumental proportions took its toll during the early months of 2009. As conditions worsened, news reports began to crop up that libraries were busier than ever, a circumstance made especially curious by the fact that so many of them were among the first to suffer severe cutbacks in funding.

In New York, attendance for 2008 was up 13 percent over the previous year, with circulation reaching 21.1 million items, an increase of close to four million. Similar patterns were evident from coast to coast, with the American Library Association reporting more active borrowing cards in use nationally than at any other time in history. Americans visited their libraries some 1.3 billion times in 2008, and checked out more than 2 billion items—an increase in both figures of more than 10 percent. “It’s a national phenomenon,” ALA president Jim Rettig told NBC News. “Library use is up everywhere.” Too bad, he might have added, that it takes hard times for some people to appreciate the indispensability of this remarkable institution. What follows is an eloquent account of this noble history, as it has unfolded from its earliest times to the present. “A great library cannot be constructed,” the nineteenth-century Scottish historian John Hill Burton reminded us in *The Book-Hunter*, “It is the growth of ages.”

Nicholas A. Basbanes

INTRODUCTION

Libraries, or collections of recorded knowledge, are the collective memory of the human race. The story of libraries is the saga of what our predecessors thought was important enough to write down and preserve in order to inform or enlighten future readers. Thus, all libraries are acts of faith—faith that coming generations will make use of the contents of those libraries.

The record of human cultural achievement is found primarily in the writings and graphics preserved from previous generations. Archival and library collections enable us to understand our monuments and artifacts and to interpret their meaning and the context in which they came to be. The history of libraries is a cultural world history, seen through library-colored lenses. The present volume is a brief historical survey that serves as a modest introduction to human history as it relates to the transmitted record of civilization.

Beginning with the origins of writing, and the resulting early records and books, this volume summarizes vast periods of time and a multitude of regional and national traditions, ending with the globalization of information resources. Current strides in accessible electronic information are an extension of the library's classic role of bringing patrons and materials together, not only for pleasure, but as an engine for the production of still more knowledge.

After a chapter on ancient libraries, this survey continues with a balanced treatment of worldwide library development to the middle of the second millennium. Thereafter, following the arrangement of many library historians, the narrative combines a chronological treatment with relevant continental and national concerns. The emphasis is on libraries in the United States,

but the rest of the world is hardly slighted. Well-supported libraries of all types predominate in Europe and America, and of special interest is the rise of public libraries that provide popular materials and media for all levels of society. A section with brief sketches of notable and representative libraries (more than fifty, in all) concludes the book.

The difficult choices to be made in preparation of a short work that reaches for such breadth and scope should not be underestimated. Telling the intriguing story of the production, transmission, preservation, organization, and utilization of cumulated human knowledge—and telling it in a style that appeals to the widest spectrum of readers—is both a challenging and a most worthy task. No one—from library historians and cultural scholars to the general public and young readers—will agree on what should be included in or omitted from the text and illustrations. Least of all will librarians themselves be of one mind—of that we can be sure! But the effort to tell this story, however sketchy and even idiosyncratic, is well worth it.

Several audiences will find this volume helpful. There will be patrons of libraries who will be curious about how collections came to be and how they developed through history. Others will find this book a stimulus to read and study further about libraries. And, finally, there may well be readers and lovers of libraries who will be stimulated by text and illustrations to visit some of the libraries mentioned in this overview.

With whatever perspective a reader comes to this work, and to whatever purpose it is put, those who are drawn to its pages can agree on one thing: Libraries remind us of our humanity, preserve our legacy as a species, and provide the intellectual building blocks for the future.

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Bibliothèque Nationale de France
British Library
Austrian National Library
National Library of Russia
Russian State Library, Moscow
Library and Archives of Canada
Toronto Public Library
Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec
Royal Library of Belgium
Royal Library of the Netherlands

Hong Kong Public Libraries	
Italian National Libraries	
New York City Public Libraries	
New York Public Library	
Queens Public Library	
Brooklyn Public Library	
Boston Public Library	
Chicago Public Library	
Los Angeles Libraries	
County of Los Angeles Public Library	
Los Angeles Public Library	
National Library of China	
Shanghai Library	
German National Library	
Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences	
London Library	
National Library of Australia	
National Diet Library of Japan	
Jewish National and University Library	
National Library of Brazil	
Jagiellonian University Library	
National Library of Iran	
National Library of Pakistan	
Bibliotheca Alexandrina	
National Library of India	
Herzog August Bibliothek	
Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica	
Abbey Library of St. Gall	
Kedermister Library	
Huntington Library	
Folger Shakespeare Library	
American Antiquarian Society	
Newberry Library	
Cambridge University Library	
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“For the Dedication of the New City Library, Boston”

Behind the ever open gate

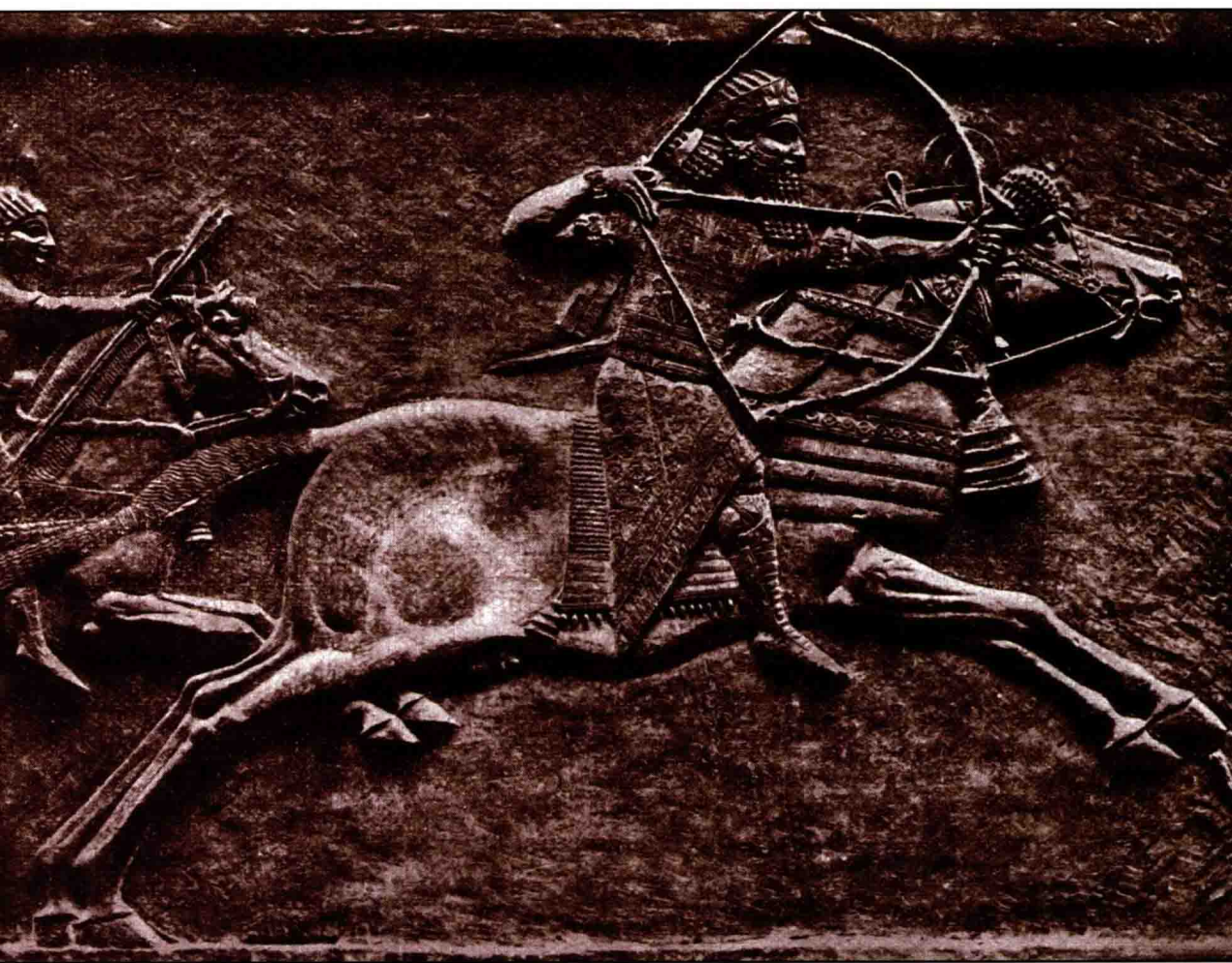
No pikes shall fence a crumbling throne,

No lackeys cringe, no courtiers wait, —

This palace is the people's own!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

1888



▲ This seventh-century carved alabaster panel from Nineveh shows Assyrian king, Assurbanipal, closing on his quarry during a lion hunt.

THE ANCIENT LIBRARIES

On a December night in 1853, gangs of diggers labored with pick and shovel by the light of oil lamps to fill baskets and handcarts with sandy rubble. An ancient palace was thought to be under their feet, part of the ruins of Nineveh, capital of mighty Assyria from the ninth to seventh centuries BCE. Nineveh had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BCE, razed, and left to the desert wind and sand.

The men worked after dark, in secret, because this ground was reserved for a competing French archaeologist—one who had neglected it too long but who could expel them if he found them here. Directing the laborers, who were from nearby Mosul, was Hormuzd Rassam (1826–1910), an Assyrian Christian and a native of that city. Rassam, who had studied at Oxford, was funded by the British Museum, which financed several ongoing excavations and took delivery of the best finds. If Rassam's diggers found something important, the established archaeologists' code would permit them to keep excavating, and the museum could claim first choice of any discoveries.

In a memoir, Rassam wrote about his worries that night as he watched the men work and as morning approached. If he were evicted before finding a structure, he would be accused of poaching, would be ridiculed, and the museum trustees surely would fire him. Then, there came the shout, "*Sooar!*"

meaning “images.” “[T]o the great delight of all we hit upon a marble wall,” Rassam wrote.

The work continued, excitement mounting. A “beautiful bas-relief in a perfect state of preservation” appeared, showing a king carved in alabaster, armed with bow and spear, standing in a chariot as he hunted lions. The digging soon revealed a long, narrow room, a “saloon,” as Rassam termed it.

Suddenly, an embankment attached to the sculpture fell away and fully “exposed to view that enchanting spectacle.” Rassam felt the excitement surge “through the whole party like electricity”:

They all rushed to see the new discovery, and having gazed on the bas-relief with wonder, they collected together, and began to dance and sing my praises, in the tune of their war-song, with all their might. Indeed, for a moment I did not know which was the most pleasant feeling that possessed me, the joy of my faithful men or the finding of the new palace.

That momentous find would lead to more sculptures and larger halls, to entire city walls with entrances paved with marble, decorated by carved rosettes and the lotus. So began the unearthing, shovel by shovel, of the palace of Assurbanipal (625–587 BCE), last ruler of Assyria. In the king’s “lion-hunt room” Rassam would find all the walls covered with carved alabaster scenes, and also something less dramatic:

[I]n the center of the same saloon I discovered the library of Assur-bani-pal, consisting of inscribed terra-cotta tablets of all shapes and sizes; the largest of these, which happened to be in better order, were mostly stamped with seals, and some inscribed with hieroglyphic and Phoenician characters.

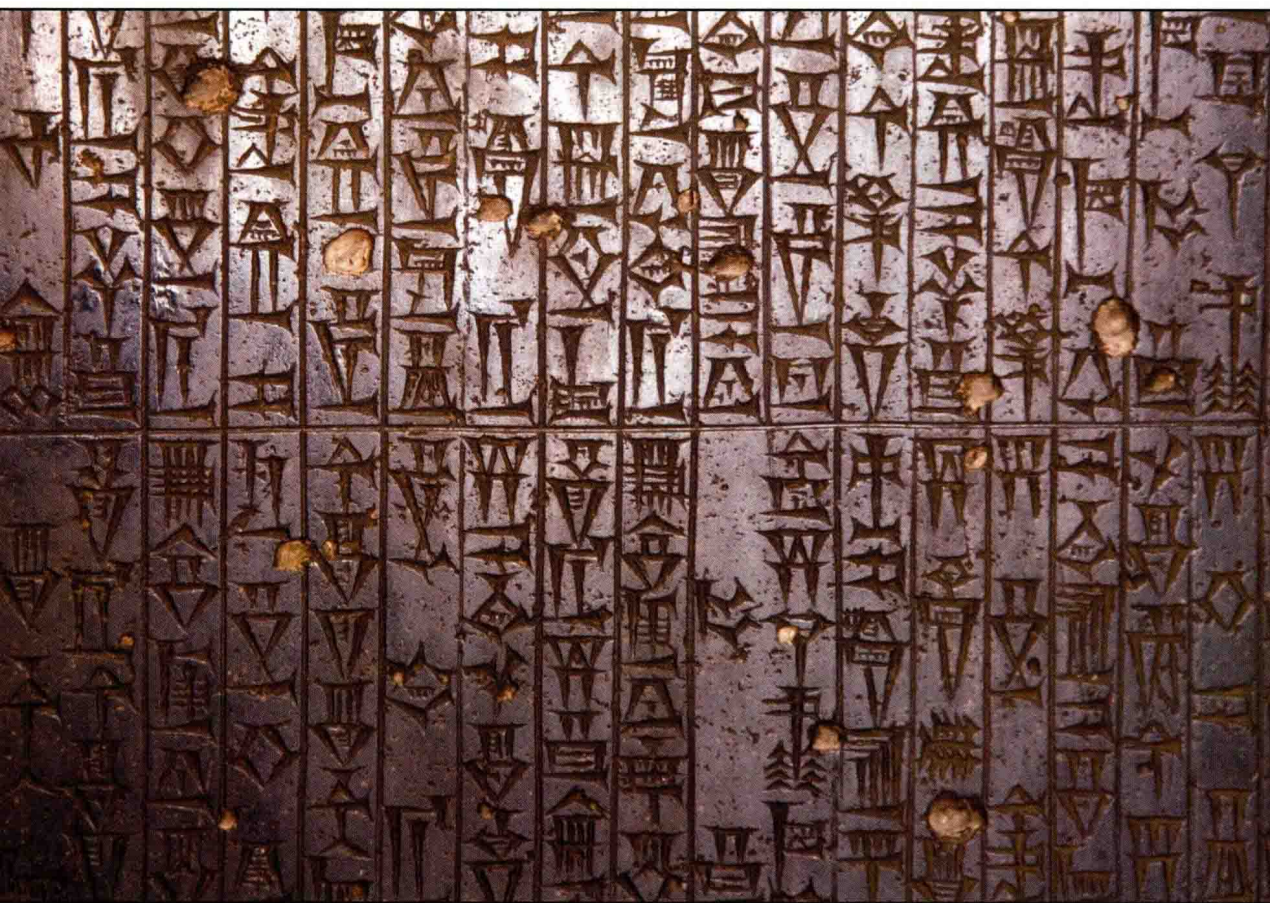
In the presence of such exquisite bas-relief scenes, it was no wonder Rassam mentioned only briefly the terra-cotta tablets. These, however, were part of

A weary digger, pick at his feet, rests from his labors excavating an ancient Nineveh palace. ►



the royal library, which would eventually number 30,000 tablets and fragments. This would prove to be the earliest-known “cataloged” library, organized into sections: government records, historical chronicles, poetry, science, mythological and medical texts, royal decrees and grants, divinations, omens, and hymns to the gods.

Scholars would learn vastly more about the ancient past from those unobtrusive stacks of tablets with their wedge-shaped writing than from all the glorious sculptures and palace rooms discovered in the long-buried ruins of Nineveh.



▲ This detail from a second-millennium BCE Babylonian stele, inscribed in cuneiform, proclaims Babylonian government regulations.