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Ezelsoor: Newsletter of the Department of Book and Digital Media Studies

Spring 2006
Editorial

Welcome to the second issue of the renewed Ezelsoor. Here we hope to provide you with the latest developments in the life and loves of the Leiden Book and Digital Media Studies programme. We have been busy travelling both in terms of locations and mental horizons. Extended excursions have been made by both students and staff. On the way we have picked up some new faces and unfortunately lost a few as well. We have welcomed Professor Paul Rutten and said goodbye to Eva Gressnich, last term’s exchange student from Mainz. You can read about all of this and more within these twenty-four short pages.

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Friday February 17th 2006 is a landmark in the history of Leiden’s book trade. Mr. Rijk Smitskamp, the renowned owner of the ‘Smitskamp Oriental Antiquarium’, had decided to stop his antiquarian activities. When it had become clear that there would be no successor to his highly specialized business, he took the courageous decision to stop his enterprise altogether, to sell off his stock, and to wind up his shop. On that Friday evening a group of aficionados of the exotic book came together, celebrated the (well-catered) occasion and went home with the certainty that from now on it was all over.

Mr. Smitskamp in a short speech memorized some of the highlights of his career. His meeting with a Turkish food trader, he told his last guests, had, many years ago, influenced his professional life in a decisive way. This contact had brought him cartons full of manuscripts which he in turn traded out to all corners of the world, and with great profit. A few of the insiders in the audience of that evening expressed their appreciation for Mr. Smitskamp’s last effort to protect and hide his source with a series of well-chosen half-truths, but they were not to be fooled. Professional till the very last moment!

Mr. Smitskamp in his speech also mentioned the book which he still regrets ever having sold. A book, he said, which he should always have kept: a 1492 edition of the Bible, published by Froben in Basel, the first one produced by that famous publisher. And that incident had brought him to the core of his antiquarian thinking: trying to find, and to maintain, a fair balance between a professional love of books and a sound economic attitude. He had sold the 1492 Bible and never saw another copy again; he still felt the chagrin.

When I started my study in Arabic and Persian, back in 1964, that same place, Nieuwe Rijn 2, a seventeenth-century house overlooking the river Rhine, housed on the ground floor and the basement Brill’s bookshop, where the new books were sold. The place was managed by an elderly gentleman, Mr. Van Dijk, who had earned the firm so much money with book trade on Indonesia, that he was now allowed to let the bookshop go into slow de
Without much economical experience I could see that the place did not look as if it had made a profit in the past few years. Prices of the early 1950’s were sometimes still valid and I often took a bargain with me.

The upper stores of the building were occupied by Brill’s antiquarian department, which was led by a forbidding lady, Mrs. Gouda. After Van Dijk’s retirement, the new bookshop was made profitable again by the remarkable Mr. Joop van der Walle, who started to import books directly from the Middle East. This was a commercial success, but it also gave occasion to hilarious situations. Some of the famous large editorial projects of Brill’s, such as the Tabari-edition and the Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum by M.J. de Goeje and others, are an example of this. Both multi-volume sets, monuments of 19th-century Orientalism, could now, at the same time, be purchased from three different departments of Brill’s, at three entirely different prices. The original Tabari could still be bought at Brill’s antiquarian department – brand new sets, never owned by anyone, directly transferred from Brill’s storehouse to Brill’s antiquarian department – and that for a price of around Dfl. 2000.00, but that price was negotiable. Brill, the publisher, at the same time, sold a newly made offset reprint for slightly over Dfl. 1100.00, and now Mr. Van de Walle sold the illegal reprints made by Dâr al-Muthannã in Baghdad for a few hundred guilders per set.

Even stranger was the case of A.J. Wensinck’s Concordance. In 1969, the book had after some fifty years of international scholarly effort been completed (except for the 8th volume by Wim Raven and myself, which appeared in 1988) and was available on the market for about Dfl. 2500.00. This left Middle-Eastern publishers ample margin for reprinting. The first (out of many) pirate editions came out in Beirut, and Mr. Van de Walle went there immediately, together with an interpreter, and had all copies impounded by a Lebanese court order. However the shabby black-leather bound pirate sets were not destroyed, but quickly spirited away to the Netherlands. Visitors of the International Orientalists Congress in Paris in 1973 could order the official edition from Brill’s counter, and from under Brill’s counter the illegal edition (‘our edition for students’). This was not illegal as Brill
MA Theses of the 2005/2006 Book and Byte Class

This year’s MA Book & Byte students have been asked to submit a thirty-five page paper on their chosen subject. Each student was further advised to pick a journal and an audience to direct their paper towards.

One can see the range of interests and cultures represented in this year’s Book and Byte program in their research topics.

Below are thirteen topics chosen by this year’s students. Two students have chosen to postpone their papers because of prior commitments.

We hope our subjects pique your interest.

I intend to take a closer look at the part of the Bibliotheca Thysiana that deals with so-called secret knowledge. This comprises everything from alchemy, palmistry and divination to the existence and practices of witches. I will try and establish how elaborate this collection actually is, whether it incorporates the books one would expect, and how this sort of knowledge was seen in the middle of the seventeenth century, when modern science was coming into its own.

Gert-Jan Boskamp
was now selling its own book. Such and similar plans were devised in the offices in Nieuwe Rijn. Brill’s expanded further, opened a shop in Museum Street in London, both for its own publications and other books of orientalist content. That place was for a number of years led by the daring Mr. Van de Walle. But in the end, the London adventure was discontinued.

Meanwhile in Leiden, Mr. Smitskamp, who had become head of Brill’s antiquarian section, realized plans of his own. He was able to kiss awake the dormant stock of centuries and turn the dusty piles of old paper into gold. The added value was given, not with a touch of alchemy but in the shape of important bibliographical information and the search for new markets. Impressively catalogues of books and manuscripts have been distributed since that time from the premises on the Nieuwe Rijn. Of these, Brill’s 500th Catalogue deserves to be mentioned separately. It was written as a scholarly reference work by P.S. van Koningsveld and Qasim al-Samarrai. The manuscripts described in that catalogue are now in a collection in Saudi Arabia, it is said.

Another spin-off of Smitskamp’s activities was the publication (by his employer) of his own descriptions of old printed books. In 1992 appeared his well-researched and beautifully illustrated Philologia Orientalis in book form, which did not entirely eclipse De Schnurrer’s Bibliotheca Arabica of 1813 and its later successors, but provided for many works a deeper insight and a novel description. It was in fact a ‘titelauflage’ of three of his antiquarian catalogues which were published in 1976, 1983 and 1991, and which had for the occasion been provided with a useful cumulative index. That Smitskamp had always had a scholarly streak (indispensable in his line of work) had been known for quite a while. His exhibition catalogue at the occasion of the third centenary of the firms of Luchtmans and Brill is still a useful, and by now a rare, publication.

In the early 1990’s Smitskamp had to face a new challenge: a management buy-out. Brill’s firm was planning to get a notation at the Amsterdam stock exchange. The Brill share had been traded at the parallel-market in Amsterdam for many years, but the firm now wished its shares to be traded on the official market, which would...

In my thesis I intend to describe the products in legal publishing, and compare the differences in the legal publishing business between China and Western Countries by analyzing several main publishing companies. I will then explain how digital media influences legal book publications and give some prospects on academic publishing in the near future. Through an analysis along these lines, I will put forward some suggestions on how the situation can be improved in China for the legal publishing business.

Aihua Huo

In my thesis I will study the strategy of the versatile and prolific Amsterdam printer/bookseller Cornelis Claesz. (active 1578-1609) in publishing travel journals and exploration voyages. The central question of the thesis is to what extent Claesz. popularized his publications in order to satisfy the demands of the market. This may be reflected in the way the books were printed and edited (i.e. both in form and in content). For this study I will follow the model of G. Verhoeven, who has done similar research on the later 17th-century Amsterdam publisher Gillis Joosten Saeghman.

Arnaud van Cutsem
give them better opportunities to attract venture capital. However, the hazardous aspects of the antiquarian book trade had an averse effect, even if business was profitable, since it made the value of Brill’s shares sharply fluctuate. If Brill’s antiquarian department had purchased large stocks in the final months of the year, this would negatively influence the balance sheet for that particular year. When that stock could be sold at great profit in the course of the next year, the profit thus made would give the value of the Brill share a boost. As a result there was a considerable fluctuation of the share, and shareholders, and the market in general for that matter, do not like this. Fluctuating shares tend to attract the attention of speculative investors. So, quite paradoxically, notwithstanding high profits, the antiquarian department had to be severed from Brill; the cut caused the necessary quiet and undisturbed growth for which the Brill shares have become known for ever since.
What are the marketing techniques that scholarly publishers use to promote printed scholarly books or journals of Humanistic Studies and how do they approach their potential buyers, like libraries, institutions and bookshops? What attracts a library, an institution or a bookshop to buy a new scholarly publication? Do all scholarly publishing houses follow the same processes to market their books? Do scholarly publishing houses follow the same processes to market their books to different sorts of buyers? How much have the marketing techniques of scholarly publications changed with the advent of World Wide Web?

Eleni Androulaki

The ways people use language changes because of technology. Evidence of this change is apparent in the ways modern writers communicate to their audience. In my thesis I want to explore how writers employ visuals in communicating their message using techniques that were previously unavailable until digital technology became prevalent. Is this evidence of a movement from a language based on sound to a language based on visuals? I intend to outline some evidence that the way we communicate is changing because of technology and how the change is occurring.

Paul Mazurkiewicz

Smitskamp could acquire his own shop on agreeable conditions and so he became his own boss. Fifteen years have passed since then, many remarkable books have gone over the counter, and interesting catalogues have been sent out over the world, all very well illustrated, and some of scholarly ambition. The books and manuscripts are dispersed over the world, but the catalogues remain as reference works.

The end of Smitskamp’s Oriental Antiquarium announced itself in several different ways almost simultaneously. Smitskamp had always been known by his stiff prices. When the going was good and libraries had difficulties in spending their budget before the end of the year, the sky was the limit, and Mr. Smitskamp certainly may have seen that sky on several occasions. He has daringly developed Asian and Arabian markets undreamt of by his predecessors, but this could not last. The internet proved to be the great equalizer: why buy a book from €500 with Mr. Smitskamp when you can purchase it from some obscure firm at the other end of the world for less than half that amount? Another matter was Smitskamp’s succession, as he was approaching the age of retirement. Would there be someone willing to buy the stock plus the goodwill and continue the Antiquarium? Not surprisingly, the answer was no, there would not. Smitskamp had never groomed a successor, and his advanced specialism will remain unsurpassed. He proved himself to be the greatest asset of his firm, but that meant that he could not at the same time sell his company and not be part of the sale. The alternatives were simple: to die in the harness or discontinue the business. No doubt, Mr. Smitskamp’s wife will have had a say in this, and I assume that she advised him to opt out, while it was still possible. Most of the books of Middle-Eastern interest could be sold en bloc, and the remainder of the stock will be sold at several successive auctions by the Leiden auctioneers Burgersdijk & Niermans, starting May 2006. These and many other memories of the now bygone heydays of the antiquarian book trade on the Rhine were remembered that Friday.