Now more than four centuries old, Leiden University Library is an invaluable storehouse of European culture. The library houses a wide variety of collections containing a wealth of unique material. The Magna Commoditas offers the first survey of the library's history from its beginning in 1575, when William of Orange gave a Polyglot Bible printed by Christopher Plantin to the new university library. Many donations and gifts to the library followed, such as the Holmannus bequest, the Vogtius collection and the Legatum Warriarianum. Already in possession of more than two million volumes, the library is still expanding its collection, now partly digitised. The history of Leiden University Library reflects the development of four centuries of art and learning, against the backdrop of social, political and cultural change.

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Magna Commoditas
Est hic magna commoditas bibliothecae ut studiosi possint studere.
The greatest advantage of the library is that those who want to study, can study.

Josephus Justus Scaliger
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My first trip to the Netherlands was occasioned in part by a
long-held desire to see one of history's legendary centers of
learning and to be introduced to the magnificent collection
of books, manuscripts, engravings, maps, globes, and
atlases that has served it so nobly for more than four cen-
turies. Admittedly, I was drawn there at first in the autumn
of 1997 by the seductive lure of what had become some-
thing of an iconic image in library history, the famous
woodcut by Jan Cornelis Woudanus showing the universi-
ity's reading room as it appeared in 1616, a center of in-
tellectual energy packed with chained books and bustling with
activity. I knew in advance, of course, that the scene pic-
tured in the engraving survived only as a distant memory,
but as a nonfiction writer who believes deeply in verisimili-
tude, I felt the need to pay my respects to this important
landmark in person, and to pause, if only for a few brief
moments, outside the quaint brick building that gave it life
so many years ago.

At the time of my visit, I was in the early stages of
researching a wide-ranging work that proposed to offer a
selective account of 'book people, book places, and book
culture' through history, a worthy companion, I envi-
ioned, to an earlier work that had celebrated the impulse to
gather and preserve the literature and records of Western
Civilization over twenty-five hundred years, a book I had
called A Gente Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the
Eternal Passion for Books. My title for the new work, Patience
and Fortitude, represented a respectful bow of tribute to the
unofficial names of the elegant lions carved from pink Ten-
collections,' the first systematic attempt to develop a corps of influential friends, patrons, and benefactors throughout the world, the first ‘universal’ library, the list goes on and on – and underpinning it all is a humanistic approach to education and discovery that has figured prominently throughout its history, along with an unbending belief in the limitless potential of human inquiry.

This open-minded attitude of inclusion at Leiden is reflected in a palpable way by the impressive breadth and depth of the collections that have been gathered over the decades to support serious scholarship, materials prudently acquired as much for future use as for immediate need. From the beginning of its existence, the university’s pioneering approach was such that it became a prototype for others to emulate, most notably by the sixteenth-century English diplomat Sir Thomas Bodley who modeled the great library he established at Oxford University on what he had seen so gloriously realized at Leiden.

Best of all, though, as Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck’s splendid monograph makes eloquently clear, is how gloriously the university library remains a work-in-progress, one that is constantly adapting itself to the times, one that is forever evaluating its mission and building on what has gone before. This grand enterprise that began in a spirit of hope and purpose continues today with ingenuity and distinction, and the words of the nineteenth-century Scottish historian John Hill Burton seem particularly appropriate to the example that has been set at Leiden: ‘A great library cannot be constructed – it is the growth of ages.’

Nicholas A. Besharat
A Library born from the Dutch Revolt, 1575-1607

The library's first book was the Polyglot Bible, printed by Plantijn, a gift of William of Orange. It was called the 'basis' of the library. At the time the university was founded, it was immediately determined that a library in the vicinity of lecture halls was an absolute necessity. Professors William Feugerey (Feugereus) and Louis Capel (Capellus) made great efforts to accomplish this. The first step was to keep the books in the registrar's house. In 1587 the vault of the White Nuns convent at Rapenburg was put to use as a library.
Janus Dousa was the first librarian (1585-1593). His first large acquisition was the *Inscriptiones* of Smetius, a handwritten collection of Latin inscriptions that was later published by Justus Lipsius. He saw publishing classical sources as every humanist’s task, and it was thus the task of every university library to collect manuscripts that qualified for publication.

In 1586 Holmannus bequeathed his private library to the University. This constituted the first sizeable collection of the library and probably amounted to several hundred books, although only about sixty books from the current collection have been traced back with certainty. Its theological works were those of a Lutheran preacher belonging to the moderate irenical movement, and there was nothing Calvinistic about it.

The second large section of the new library was not Calvinistic either; in 1587 it acquired part of the library of Bonaventura Vulcaniu. The books that Vulcaniu gave away have an encyclopaedic character: in addition to philological sources there were medical, legal, botanical and geographic works. Dousa probably helped Vulcaniu to make the selection to fit the fields taught at the university. In so doing, Janus Dousa set a precedent for future collections, striving for a coherent whole when acquiring new titles. Thus, contrary to common belief, there was no rash collection practice in the university’s early period. Vulcaniu himself indicated what he had in mind when he gave his
books to the library. When the library became operational in the vault of the current academic building at Rapenburg on 31 October 1587 he donated a Greek manuscript of Demosthenes speeches, one of the most important texts from Greek rhetoric. Vulcanius considered rhetoric to be an essential part of academic humanities training, and this was probably his way of emphasizing the point. The Young Library was not exclusively filled with books and manuscripts from private libraries of Leiden professors, though: purchases were also made from booksellers. This task had been the responsibility of the academic printer since the very beginning of the library.

In the fall of 1587 the library in the vault was ready. Two inscriptions of the times point to 31 October 1587 as the year the University Library was born. New books kept coming in, donated, from auctions, acquired from private persons, and purchased by Leiden book buyers in Frankfurt and Paris. Soon the library became too small and a decision was made to move it to the first floor of the Faliide Bagijn church, next to the new Theatrurn Anatomicum (the lecture-theatre where anatomical lessons were given). In late November 1593 renovations had advanced enough for the library to start to be moved. The second librarian of Leiden University, Janus Douai Jr., appointed in 1593, died in 1596. After his death his tasks were taken over by the sub-regent of the university, the Fleming Petrus Bertius, who became a significant figure for the library. Petrus Bertius is the author of Nomenclator, the first catalogue of the University of Leiden library as well as the first printed catalogue of an institutional library in Europe.

The Nomenclator was printed by Raphelengius in the spring of 1595 and offered to the curators and mayors on the occasion of the opening of the new library at the Faliide Bagijn church on 24 May of that same year. Bertius made a subject-based inventory of the books in the order in which they were stored in the shelves, beginning with the shelves containing the largest books kept in folios. Determining large classifications was done in consultation with Jan van Hout. He and Bertius chose a classical order of knowledge as found in the large libraries of the
The first book of the library, a copy of the Polyglot Bible, was printed by the Antwerp printer Christoffel Plantijn between 1569 and 1572. Although this Bible was a donation to the first Protestant University in the Netherlands, it was printed under the auspices of the Spanish Catholic king Philip II. For this reason it is also known as the Biblia Regia.

Renaissance. In 1595 the library had a total of 442 titles and about 525 volumes. The *Nomenclator* is an exceptionally accurate and modern catalogue, and a delight to the eye. A variety of letter types help the reader easily find his way around. For each book Bertius gives the publication place and year, and often the name of the publisher too. These elements are usually absent from library catalogues as recent as those made well into the eighteenth century. In every inside cover he also indicates the number of the book on the shelf. Thanks to this accuracy it should be possible to reconstruct the original collection of the library in archaeological fashion, as if it were an excavation. Bertius even indicated what different types of library readers could expect: knowledge for theologians, practical knowledge for lawyers, instruction for doctors and pleasure for literary buffs. Completely in keeping with humanist tradition, Bertius encouraged filling the library’s walls with portraits of scholars and important people, and making the world palpable and visible through the presence of globes and maps.

We know of two editions of the *Nomenclator*. The first, of which 625 copies were published, came out when the library opened on 24 May 1595 and contains the complete catalogue. The second was probably done a few months later. The most important authors forming the basis of university education in the seven disciplines — theology, law, medicine, history, philosophy, mathematics and the humanities — are represented in the library. Compared to other fields, theology is over-represented: there are almost twice as many theological books as there are history and philosophy

This anonymous engraving by Joannes Meumier, taken from *Adonias Batavia* (Leiden, 1655), shows the Academy, situated on the Rapenburg, as it looked in 1644. The library was initially housed in the vaulted room of the former Convent of the Dominican Nuns (‘White Nuns’), to the left of the main gate. The Academy gate was demolished in the nineteenth century.
books. The four other fields - law, medicine, mathematics and the humanities - are equally represented. This is how the University of Leiden library, founded on humanistic ideals in the late sixteenth century, joined the tradition of institutional libraries as they had developed since the Middle Ages. This was a tradition of large monastery and university libraries in which theology played the largest role. With the Bible, the commentaries and the full writings of the Church Fathers, theology dominated libraries until far into the eighteenth century, in both Protestant and Catholic areas. Although the first books from the Leiden collection are from private persons like Holmannus, Vulcannus and Raphelengius, they represented the basic facilities deemed absolutely necessary for knowledge in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

When the new library was opened on 24 May 1595, there...
Petrus Berrias compiled the first printed catalogue of the Library of Leiden. After he left Leiden, he was active as a cosmographer for King Louis XIII in Paris. This hand colored engraving is taken from Prolegomena, "Theatrum geographiae veteris, duobus tomi digestum..." (Amsterdam, J. Hondius, 1618), edited by Berrias.

Janus Douai junior succeeded his father as librarian in 1593. He died two years later, at the age of 27. This portrait was painted in 1595, by appointment of the trustees of the university.

The Nomenclator was published in the spring of 1595 by Franciscus Raphelengius, printer to the Academy, to mark the opening of the new library.

was an ordinance that determined the Use of the keys. A limited number of people received keys and were free to use the collection: curators and professors, the regent and sub-regent of the State College, and also members of the Town Council and public administrators. Prominent institutions and individuals from the Republic could consider the Leiden library as their own, as they possessed the keys to it.

The gesture symbolized a clear political ideal far removed from the original one, a book collection accessible to the entire Leiden university community. Little remained of the original ideal of a library for the entire university, but this restriction was quickly averted: students managed to access the library, borrowing keys from their professors and having them copied. It took less than two academic years to
turn the orderly library of May 1595 into a chaotic mess. As a result, the library was closed for two years. This tough measure did not remain in force for very long, as professors heavily protested against it. Seven years later the situation became so critical once again that the library was closed to students; that situation continued from 1605 to 1630. Merula was in charge of the library from 1597 to 1607, and this period was a blessing for the institution. The chaos that made use of the library impossible in 1597 was quickly reversed and order restored. The Memoranda that Merula regularly sent to the curators show he was a decisive professional who took measures to enrich the collection selectively, protect it and make optimum use of it. Merula was especially interested in encouraging donations. He wrote potential donors directly, and put a large board with donors’ names in a prominent place in the library. The success of Merula’s policies was great, and the library grew quickly. The ideal library Merula had around 1600 reached further than the one the university wanted in 1575. The idea then was to make available source texts and general reference books to university members who did not have such material at their disposal and to add lustre to the new academy. Twenty-five years later, the purpose was to have an encyclopaedic collection that put all the world’s knowledge within reach. This shift is clear, not only when considering the enormous flow of books and manuscripts,
but imaged knowledge started competing with the written word too.

In his Nomenclatur of 1595, Bertius launched the idea of placing portraits of scholars in the library of Leiden University. Merula limited his choice to the most renowned scholars from Leiden and Holland. Portraits of scholars gave, as it were, access to their erudition. Pictures of the earth, places and objects spin a thread of recognition between the spectator and the entire reality of things. This is now the ‘Prospect van Constantinopol’ (Constantinople Prospect), which hung on the northern wall of the library, shows the rising interest in the East.

In 1597 Merula prepared two remarkable catalogues: a printed catalogue of donations and a handwritten catalogue of costly works. The donation catalogue, titled Catalogus Principum, civitatum et singulariorum, qui donationem vel inter vivos vel mortis causa, Bibliothecam Publicam in Academia Lugduno Batavorum, liberaliter diaram, was updated yearly until 1603. This is a cumulative catalogue into which new donations were incorporated. Merula sent around copies of the Catalogus principum as an enclosure to his requests for donations. This paid off, as gifts poured in. Merula’s second catalogue is a completely different work. The handwritten Catalogus rariorum from 1607 describes 143 Latin, Greek and Eastern manuscripts and books as well as 27 maps and globes that were carefully kept in the office of the library or in the nearby globe cupboards. The Catalogus rariorum deals with the contents of works. It had the opposite purpose of the Catalogus principum, which partially described the same works. With the Catalogus principum Merula wanted to stimulate donations, whereas with the Catalogus rariorum he wanted to stimulate the use of special sources, regardless of their origin. The advantage for us in the handwritten catalogue is that it indicates how manuscripts, books and maps found their way to the library. From this we learn that two-thirds of the Rariora do not consist of gifts but were bought from formerly private libraries of humanists like Franciscus Nansius, Gerard van Falckenburg, Marnix van Sint Aldegonde and Commelius. The first Leiden librarians worked along two lines: completing the core collection for subjects taught at the university, and acquiring primary sources for classical editions.