

A vestment-pocket–sized xylographic gem

Ars moriendi. Germany, ca. 1475?. 5 1/2 inches x 3 3/4 inches (140 x 95 mm), 33 pages, hand-colored illustrations throughout.

Blockbooks are illustrated volumes with pictures and text that were printed from hand-carved wooden blocks. Contemporary with the earliest incunables, these were not simply precursors of illustrated books, but were instead a parallel form of publication for a different audience. The readers of blockbooks were accustomed to bold execution and modest production: nonetheless the medium boasts a number of striking works that reflect complex iconographic traditions. Movable type quickly superseded the xylographic medium, making blockbook examples extremely rare today.

The *Ars moriendi* (*Art of dying*) was a popular medieval genre that described the states of mind and soul that were to accompany the Catholic Church's rituals for salvation, culminating in the last rites. These handbooks were perfect candidates for publication; ideally, every priest required this brief and convenient guide to ministering to the dying — providing comfort and consolation, confession, and extreme unction. The earliest surviving printing of any *Ars moriendi* is not a typographical edition but a blockbook (as is this volume) from the southern Netherlands, tentatively dated to 1450.

This rarity from the matchless Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection at the Library of Congress is bound along with another blockbook, *Passio Christi* (Germany, ca. 1470?). It is in an eighteenth-century red morocco binding with gilt decorations from which arms have been effaced (front and back). The earliest recorded owner of this blockbook was the Russian prince Mikhail Aleksandrovich Golitsyn (1804–60), who described the book in the *Bulletin du Bibliophile* — see vol. 24 (1858) p. 836 and vol. 26 (1859) p. 276. The volume is also described on pp. 31–34 (no. 58) of the *Catalogue des livres de la bibliothèque du prince Michel Golitzin* (Moscow, 1866), a posthumous production by Charles Gunzbourg based on the collector's "notes autographes." It was sold at Sotheby's on 13 April 1931, passing into the hands of James Clark Maquire, at whose sale on 6 August 1937 it was bought by A.S.W. Rosenbach for Lessing J. Rosenwald.

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