

A memorable hand-colored blockbook from the collection of Lessing J. Rosenwald

Ars memorandi per figuras Evangelistarum. Germany, ca. 1470. 10 5/8 inches x 7 1/2 inches (273 x 191 mm), 60 pages, hand-colored illustrations throughout.

Memory, according to Hesiod, is the Mother of the Muses. It has thus always occupied a prominent, even paramount position in rhetoric, literature, and scholarship. To preserve and enhance this *creative* capacity, which is as distinct from “total recall” as knowledge is from information, many classificatory and analytical schemes have been developed, above all during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. With the advent of printing, the *Ars memorandi*, like the *Ars moriendi*, was an obvious candidate for publication as a kind of instructional wall-chart in a book — step-by-step instructions are ideally suited to the slide-show presentation of the blockbook, in preference to the more cinematic approach of the typographic book.

Memory was an important element in the early Christian church, notably as expressed in prayer. Biblical study was highly dependent on the exercise of memory, and much scholarly attention was applied to problems of classification and canonicity. Eusebius, the fourth-century Bishop of Caesarea, for instance, devised canonical tables (the “Eusebian Canons”) based on the “Ammonian Sections” (an early version of “chapter and verse”). They were an early form of hypertextuality that enabled readers to locate and to hold in mind the many parallel passages in the New Testament. As the “Evangelistarum” in its title indicates, this *Ars memorandi* provided symbolic assistance to those who wished to attain mental and spiritual mastery of the Gospels.

Like all blockbooks, the *Ars memorandi* is a rarity, possession descending from one eminent collector to another. The earliest recorded owner of this copy was the prominent merchant, parliamentarian, and abolitionist George Hibbert (1757–1837), at whose auction in 1829 it passed into the hands of Samuel Butler (1774–1839), Bishop of Lichfield. He was grandfather of the novelist and one of the three “Greek play bishops” — classical scholars who,

according to the clerical wit Sydney Smith, owed their episcopal positions to having edited one of the Greek dramatists. Butler added a brief pencilled note to the flyleaf (“This is the first of the two editions mentioned by Dibdin S. Butler”). The book was sold, with the rest of his notable library, in 1841, passing into the possession of Robert Stayner Holford (1808–92), the “Ideal Connoisseur” whose discriminating eye and vast riches enabled him to collect almost anything of beauty from Italian paintings and Rembrandt etchings to medieval manuscripts, incunabula, and eighteenth-century French illustrated books, all in the finest possible condition and binding. His son, Sir George Lindsay Holford (1860–1926), an unbookish orchid enthusiast, sold the *Ars memorandi* in 1925, along with 130 choice volumes, to the flamboyant Philadelphia dealer A.S.W. Rosenbach (1876–1952), from whom it was bought four years later — with three other blockbooks — by Lessing J. Rosenwald. It eventually came to the Library of Congress, as part of Rosenwald’s extraordinary donation, in a binding of nineteenth-century blind-stamped brown morocco, with his red morocco book label and his Library of Congress gift bookplate.

Schreiber vol.IV p.137, III.

The Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1977) no. 21.

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