

A fifteenth-century blockbook for the instruction of the poor

Biblia pauperum. Dutch or German, 1465. 11 1/2 x 9 inches (292 x 229 mm), 80 pages, illustrations throughout.

Blockbooks are illustrated volumes with pictures and text printed from hand-carved wooden blocks. They were contemporary with the earliest printed books and rather than just precursors of illustrated books, they were 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 Movable type quickly superseded the xylographic medium, making blockbook examples extremely rare today.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 *Biblia pauperum*, a medieval genre whose origin is attributed to Saint Anschar, Bishop of Bremen, was not a bible as such but an illustrated book with about forty pages of pictures from the New Testament, showing relevant scenes of prophecy from the Old Testament on either side and explanatory texts in the corners of the page. With the advent of blockbook printing, *bibliae pauperum* were much more economical to print than earlier pictorial Bibles and accordingly were used by the mendicant orders for the spiritual instruction of the poor. There are approximately eighty extant *bibliae pauperum*, in various configurations, some of which are incomplete. This particular *Biblia pauperum* is most likely the very first of the blockbook editions, from which all the others are derived.

This rarity from the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection at the Library of Congress is in a blind-stamped brown morocco binding made for John Bellingham Inglis (1780–1870). The earliest recorded owner of the Rosenwald *Biblia pauperum* is Alexander Horn, a man believed to be a supplier of incunables to King George III (1738–1820) and the second Earl Spencer (1758–1834). The next known owner is Inglis, a London wine merchant who had a contemporary reputation as a collector who actually read his books. (In 1832, he published anonymously the first translation from Latin into English of the *Philobiblon*, the great medieval testament to the virtues of book collecting by Richard de Bury.) Inglis sold the *Biblia*

pauperum in 1826, and after a period in the library of the 5th Lord Vernon (a Dante scholar), it came into the possession of Robert Stayner Holford (1808–92), a collector of beautiful objects, from Italian paintings and Rembrandt etchings to medieval manuscripts, incunabula, and eighteenth-century French illustrated books. The book remained in the Holford family until 1925, when it was acquired by A.S.W. Rosenbach and purchased by Rosenwald.

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