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Rare books in the 21st century: in conversation with Dr. Jörn Günther



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*From his base in Switzerland, **Dr. Jörn Günther** runs a small team focussed to the collection and preservation of antique and rare books for his company's clients. Many of these books are centuries old, valued at several thousand - or even hundreds of thousands - of dollars.*

But, in an age where we can download and read practically any work that has ever been published, how is value, and the perception of value, changing when it comes to the historical printed book? We asked Dr. Günther about how his work has changed, and is changing.

Please tell us your personal story of rare books: how you came to work in this field, and your love of it.

JG: My passion for medieval manuscripts was sparked by an eye-opening experience. When I was fourteen years old, my father, an eager collector of historic materials, came home with a medieval manuscript. The moment I opened that book, Rudolf von Ems' *Weltchronik* (now in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), I was so taken by it that I immediately knew illuminated manuscripts would play a significant part in my future career. This is a work of art. The book delivers an epic narrative aside intricate, beautifully crafted illustrations - it was this item that was to be my very first important sale in 1988.

Living with books additionally means dreaming of books and for many years a mysterious book consumed my dreams. By sheer coincidence - or was it fate? - I found the book while visiting a friend. I knew at once that this Byzantine codex was the book of my dreams. After years of negotiation, a blessing of an archbishop, and the efforts of a fiercely heroic curator, I was finally able to acquire the book and lead it to its home in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Now the manuscript, "a superlative example of an illuminated book as representative of one of the pre-eminent artistic traditions of the Byzantine Empire", has its place in the museum's expansive collection. It formally changed hands only four times in almost 1000 years.

How about the business which you have built up around it?

JG: Today, our firm deals worldwide with manuscripts, miniatures, and rare early printed books from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Our books can be written and, or printed in several different languages. Thematically, books with sacred content, such as magnificently decorated bibles and other theological texts, figure prominently in our inventory. Furthermore, the gallery has numerous illustrated manuscripts and early printed literary, philosophical, and historical works along with scientific treatises and early travel reports.

As the book-hunters of modern day, our work is fulfilled when we find ourselves playing a role in the reconstruction of humankind's colourful past. Actively circulating our findings and participating in scholarly discourse is thus a central part of our mission. Our team of experts

thoroughly researches and archives every book and miniature. Many of our discoveries are published in our richly illustrated catalogues.

For my personal collection, I am in possession of a collection of miniatures dating from the 9th to the 16th centuries, travel books from the 18th century, as well as Oceanic art. My favourite is a miniature from the 9th century with Carolingian decoration.



How would you describe the value of rare books – and the value which rare books give to collectors?

JG: The artistic value is the most important thing to consider about a rare book. The most coveted pieces and the focal points of many collections are those books of superlative art historical importance. A Simon Bening with a multi-million price tag will often be snapped up in a matter of days. Some of the finest paintings by the best medieval artists are preserved within illuminated manuscripts and many are slowly catching onto this fact.

The rare books that I am dealing with contain an enormous wealth of knowledge, and of intellectual development spread throughout several centuries. The books constitute a connecting line between the past and the present. They open a window to another world and help us to understand how we fit into our historical context. In this way, a medieval book is timeless.

The aura of the object is equally important. One is in awe at the thought of the sheer amount of labour and time spent producing these historical objects. The tactility and experiential quality make manuscripts particularly special: the touch of the parchment, the weight, the size of the book, its binding, even, quite funnily, the smell.

If you are speaking of monetary value, prices range from 10,000 to several million euros. Manuscripts are generally a good investment and prices rise for generations. As to specific works, three immediately come to mind as the most valuable: the Jaharis Gospel Lectionary, the aforementioned Stammheim Missal, and the Nibelungleid (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nibelungenlied>), a German national treasure. I can tell you that on the market, currently, the highest-value manuscripts can easily reach a price of 20 million euros.

In an age where we can access any content from any point in time on any device anywhere, does that change our relationship with rare books, and if so, how and why?

JG: In my experience, being able to encounter a book directly in front of you is essential. When I was a student I pursued my research on manuscripts by traveling to Stockholm and Gotha. I had to move through borders and negotiate different cultures. One misses the experience of the travel and the concerted effort associated with researching in different world libraries and collections if the books are accessed from home by clicking away on a computer.

Most importantly, physically handling a manuscript provides all kinds of conclusions that are impossible to formulate by looking at a reproduction. With a book in your hands, you feel its dimensions, its weight; you see tiny details like over-painting, faint notations, or erasures that are not visible on a screen, no matter how high the resolution.

An additional danger in my business is the manipulation of digital reproductions. I remember one unfortunate incident in which I purchased a miniature based on a reproduction I was provided by the seller. When the miniature arrived, it did not resemble its reproduction whatsoever and I regretted the purchase. For this reason, among others, I always insist on seeing the manuscripts and miniatures that I acquire in person.

On the positive side, the digital age does provide us with wonderful access to secondary research on manuscripts, art history, and history. We are lucky to live in an era where the world's libraries generously share so much of their holdings, providing not only a breadth of access, but also a depth of knowledge in multiple areas of research.

Further, ebook sales are falling

(<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/03/ebook-sales-falling-for-the-first-time-finds-new-report>) whilst the sales of printed books are rising once again. What is our attachment to the physical book, particularly from a collector's perspective?

JG: I think that there is something in the physical book that connects us to our lived experiences with them. When you go on vacation and spill a drop of red wine on the novel you have in hand, you have imprinted that moment on the book, to notice later and remember. When you spill red wine on your tablet, it breaks... and you have no more novel.

Furthermore, we know that information read from a digital copy does not stay with us as well as that read from a physical book. The contact with the physical book connects us to that information in a real way. When we lose contact with that physical reality, we lose our sensitivity to the real world, as well as to the information within it.



As a society, do we take enough care to preserve historically-important media (/en/features/media-complexity-and-choice) such as the printed book? Are they as culturally “valued” as, for example, works of art, which, by their singular nature, perhaps lend themselves to collection more easily?

JG: First of all, I collect books that *are* works of art. They are indeed valued extremely highly and are carefully preserved by institutions and private collectors alike. Just an example, the first book printed in movable type was the Gutenberg Bible, printed by Johann Gutenberg and Johann Fust in Mainz (1454–55). This was the first printed edition of the Latin Bible and the first substantial printed book of the western world. Gutenberg published 180 copies of this Bible, of which about forty-eight have survived, twenty of which are complete. Only one complete copy is in private hands, and this single book is worth an estimated \$100 million (though the owner has no interest in selling it).

Will there be a rare book market in 100 years from now? What will it look like?

JG: Of course there will, but I cannot comment on what it will be like.

For further information on Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books, visit the [company website](http://www.guenther-rarebooks.com) (<http://www.guenther-rarebooks.com>) and [@jgrarebooks](https://twitter.com/JGRareBooks) (<https://twitter.com/JGRareBooks>).

Main image: Dr. Jörn Günther

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