

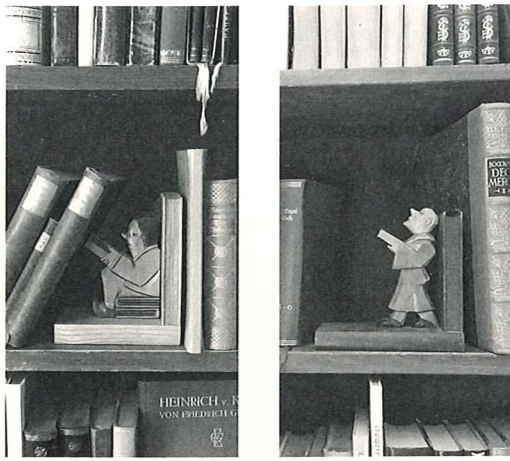


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Bookends at Benz's shop.

there remain several rare booksellers. Benz's involvement in the trade came about completely by chance; initially it was a way to make money while studying economics in Scotland during the mid-1970s. There he became friends with a bookseller, whom he told he could assist in finding Swiss buyers. He was not entirely sure how to go about this, but his contacts in his native Switzerland turned out to be interested in the offers, and Benz was able to sell the books within a week. This business relationship continued through his schooling, and he received a commission for each sale.

After graduating from university, Benz went into the computer business, dealing books as a hobby. It was his wife, Gertrud, who took a serious interest in the trade, and in 1985, they opened a shop. The Scottish dealer provided a portion of the initial inventory on offer. Benz joined on full-time in 1996.

In the early years of their shop, Gertrud's expertise and interest in natural history and medicine (she previously worked in a hospital) shaped their inventory. Presenting a 1992 guide of VEBUKU (Vereinigung der Buchantiquare und Kupferstichhändler in der Schweiz), the Swiss chapter of ILAB, Benz remarks that a bookseller could specialize in those times. The guide shows 36 rare and used bookshops in Zurich. Today's environment of online sales has pushed established brick-and-mortar dealers to adapt and diversify, however, a change he is choosing

to embrace. Using the example of paintings, Benz explains that, 20 years ago, their store would not have had a single one. Now, after a few estate sales in which paintings were offered to him, they make up 30 percent of the store's turnover.

An active member of VEBUKU, Benz served as its president for eight years. Under his direction the community has been working to stay together by allowing non-chaptered members to participate in the Zurich Book Fair (many of them becoming members shortly after). On the topic of changes in collecting behaviour, Benz feels it is important to treat young people with respect and reach out in new ways to the public, thus changing the perception of antiquarian books being solely for intellectuals. Suspecting a widening gap between the antiquarian book trade and the public, Benz (along with four other local antiquarian booksellers) developed a speaker's series, with many of the talks relating to Swiss artists and writers, such as Johann Jakob Scheuchzer and Johann Kaspar Lavater. The booksellers were surprised and delighted by the response, as Benz's shop was stuffed with nearly 100 people for the debut event four years ago.

Remarking on the state of the trade, he says that the type of customers an antiquarian bookseller needs to cater to were already a minority 100 years ago and they will remain such into the future. Elements of this can change, he says, if you reach out and make an effort to find out what someone's interest is, assuming nothing and being open to every opportunity that presents itself.

JÖRN GÜNTHER, BASEL

*Dr. Jörn Günther Antiquariats und Verwaltung AG*  
April 18, 2018

Taking a train from Zurich, I arrived in Basel to air thick with pollen and a highly schematic map of their local tram system. I managed to make it to Jörn Günther's office and was directed to his home around the corner by two of his staff. In his upstairs study, a room lined with books from his personal collection relating to 17th-century travel, he began to tell his story. Born in 1957, he grew up with a father who was a collector and his family home housed an extensive library to which he had access. Being an avid

reader at a young age, he took full advantage.

When Günther was 14 years old, his father came home with a medieval manuscript that was included with other acquisitions his father intended to buy. His father invited Jörn and his five siblings to view the manuscript and, from then on, Jörn was hooked. Seeing his son's response, Günther's father allowed him to keep the manuscript in his room. Jörn encouraged his father to collect more manuscripts and thus he was exposed to more examples.

Between secondary school and university, Günther had the opportunity of a lifetime: to intern with legendary bookseller Hans P. Kraus in New York. Although it was only a three-month stint, the experience was a headlong dive into the world of rare bookselling at its most established and allowed him to foster contacts not only with the most prominent booksellers of the second half of the 20th century, but also with German Jewish booksellers who had been forced to immigrate through the 1930s.

Following his time in New York, Günther returned to Europe to study history, German

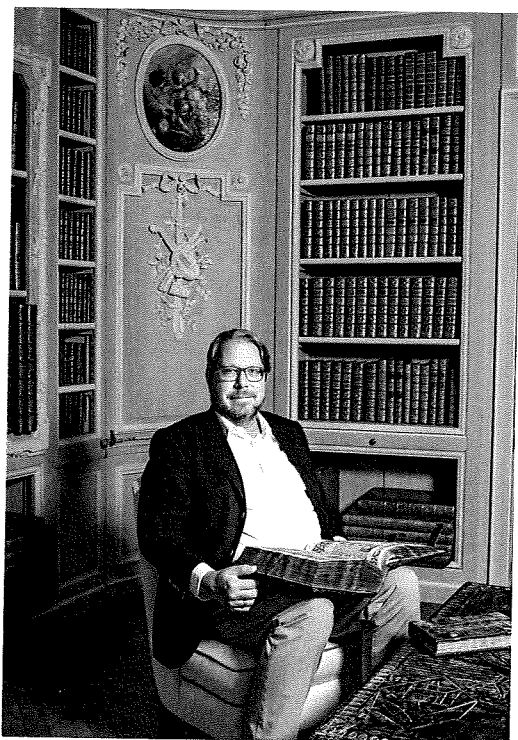
literature, and art history in university. During this time he had moved on from helping his father collect illuminated manuscripts to forming a collection of his own. To finance his studies, he started the practice of purchasing three items and selling two. This hybrid identity as a collector and dealer continues to this day and enriches his passion for early printed books and illuminated manuscripts.

After completing his doctoral thesis, Günther decided to dedicate himself to bookselling, something that was not a clear vocation initially. However, this had been an obvious path to his family. With financial assistance from his father, a German developer, Günther opened a store in Hamburg in 1990. Having begun his career with Kraus, he was exposed to established collectors of a generation that is no longer. Dedicated to the rarefied air of early printed books and illuminated, Günther has taken it upon himself to educate a generation of curious collectors.

In the past year he has been moving away from conventional book fairs, shifting the business to meet the challenges of the contemporary marketplace, including the hiring of someone to fill a dedicated public relations and marketing position. On their website, one has access to videos detailing some of the pieces in their inventory and the site itself is available in several languages, opening his operation up to new markets.

Recalling the image of two old men he observed in Paris exchanging stamps just prior to the transformations his business underwent, Günther has taken on a survivalist approach to the trade, in which one has to adapt to stay relevant and thrive. He believes education is the key to a new era of collectors connecting with early European print culture. He has also found it valuable to think beyond the typical collector of rare books.

Günther is looking to the world of contemporary art, where the cost of an illuminated manuscript is relatively small in comparison to a piece by a prominent figure of the 20th century. Furthermore, a thoroughly catalogued manuscript allows a glimpse into the highly complex interrelation of faith, devotion, and the innovation of materials and techniques to convey such ideas. A self-described "book hunter," Günther remains confident of the



*Jörn Günther.*



position of illuminated manuscripts within the culture. He cites an Austrian client who is immersed in the fast-paced world of modern business yet still reserves time to turn the pages of a manuscript to enter into a slower time, returning to the fray refreshed and rejuvenated.



TIMUR YÜKSEL, BASEL  
*Erasmushaus*  
April 18, 2018

With Jörn Günther's lush catalogues in hand (no doubt inspired by the illustrious catalogues of his mentor, H.P. Kraus) and the sun high in the sky, I grabbed a quick lunch and walked over to Erasmushaus to meet with Timur Yüksel. He and Henri, his son, greeted me at the door and we sat down in his office for a conversation amidst walls of auction catalogues and reference books.

A native of Zurich, Timur Yüksel's earliest exposure to older books came in the form of visits to his grandmother's inherited collection, comprised mostly of 18th- and 19th-century German literature. Timur recalls the ritual of having to wash his hands before touching anything. However, it was in his teens that his interest developed further. At first he was drawn to the physical appearance of early books, then through his studies in art history, French and philosophy, he began to understand the transformative power of their contents.

During university, Yüksel began dealing books for pocket money. It was a modest beginning, studying other sellers' catalogues and issuing two of his own. Not having any form of client base at the time, he relied largely on local dealers as buyers. After university he pursued his interest in

Old Masters painting, taking a position at Sotheby's. At a certain point he moved back towards books and transitioned from Sotheby's to a small regional house in Lausanne that specializes in rare books. Following an attempt to open a shop in Geneva (which he considers a good experience in what not to do), Yüksel joined Erasmushaus in June 1990. Shortly after, he was named

director, and in 2007, he took over operations.

A devout generalist, avoiding what he sees as the monotonous repetition of specialization, he believes generalization provides booksellers the advantage of opening up a field and being able to more easily adapt to shifts in the market by keeping a diverse inventory. Yüksel also stresses the importance of perfect copies in one's stock, having observed the ease with which a collector can connect with the object and not require the persuading words of a dealer.

Since taking over the business, Yüksel has reduced the operation from six employees to four and is concentrating his buying efforts on older, more valuable books from the early print period. Henri's involvement in the company started two years ago, and Yüksel says he is developing the skills required to capture the essence of a book's importance through description—a skill that involves keeping an eye to its historical contribution and relevance in a contemporary context. An early adopter of online selling, Yüksel feels the importance of contact with clients and fellow colleagues remains crucial to the health