

*Not For What They Contained:
The Myth-Building of the New York Grolier Club*

Nicholas Basbane, in his book of the same title, describes the urge to collect books as ‘a gentle madness,’¹ a descriptor which seems to strike the fancy of many American bibliophiles. And certainly, it’s a hobby which is easy to romanticize. There is no shortage of writings by collectors on collecting, which seek to create an image of the practice as beautiful, artistic, or even noble. People dedicate their lives to the collection of books, haunting library sales and antiquarian booksellers alike in search of their next find. But how ‘gentle,’ really, is this practice? The Grolier Club, and specifically the Carol Zeman Rothkopf Grolier Club Collection housed in Goucher College’s special collections & archives, offer a powerful example of how book collectors are engaging in myth-building around their own collections and the practice writ large—and how these myths serve to disguise and perpetuate some of the less romantic aspects of the community.

The Grolier Club is a club for American book collectors, based in New York and established in 1884. They have a physical location at 47 East 60th Street in Manhattan, a few blocks from Central Park. They currently have close to 800 members, nearly entirely American, and many from the New York area. According to their website, they were founded with the intention “to foster the study, collecting, and appreciation of books and works on paper, their art, history, production, and commerce.”² They aim to do so through their library, which is open to the public by appointment and boasts some 100,000 titles all relating in some way to the art and

¹ Nicholas A. Basbanes, *A Gentle Madness*, New York: Owl, 1999.

² “History.” History - The Grolier Club. Accessed May 14, 2022.

history of the book, as well as an exhibition space in which they regularly curate shows with books from the library, members personal collections, and loans from other institutions. They also publish their own books, many of them exhibition catalogs, which are available for purchase via their website.

In order to understand more fully the core values and beliefs of the club, it seems necessary to look to their namesake—16th century book collector and treasurer of France, Jean Grolier, whose library is famed for its breadth and for the titles he preserved in it.³ On the Grolier Club's website, an entire page under their 'about' section is dedicated to Grolier's biography, and mention is made of the club founder's great admiration of his work. In fact, that biography was printed originally as a pamphlet to be distributed by its founding members, very likely the first ever publication in the club's history.⁴ Clearly, Grolier's life and works were central to the founding of the early club, and seem to continue to serve as inspiration to this day. It stands to reason that what they feel necessary to disclose about Jean Grolier may serve as a strong indicator of what about him they wish to emulate.

The wording of their biography does seem to tell a clear story; it states, for one, that Grolier "loved books, not only for what they contained, but what they were. In clothing the masterpieces of literature in sumptuous garments, the impulses of art and literature within him, which were not strong enough for original creation, found an eloquent utterance."⁵ Two core ideas about the collector can be pulled from this quote: first, that collection and curation are an artistic endeavor. And, indeed, we often see club members speak of a collection "ethos," which

³ Gabriel Austin, "'From the Library of Jean Grolier,'" *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 31, no. 2 (1970), 129.

⁴ "Jean Grolier." Jean Grolier - The Grolier Club. Accessed May 14, 2022.

⁵ *Ibid.*

may shift as they continue in their practice but ultimately guides their collection.⁶ They seem to subscribe to an idea of consumption-as-creation; they are the curators of their own personal museum of books.

Given this idea that the act of consumption in and of itself is an art, the discussion of books as art objects before they are objects to be read makes a kind of sense. This quote speaks of ‘sumptuous garments,’ and seems to praise Grolier for his love of books which does not stem from “what they contained.”⁷ Later in the biography, they write that “Grolier represents the spirit of the renaissance, in all its proud, splendid materialism.”⁸ They also make mention of an occasion where Grolier invited scholars to his home for dinner, and presented them at the table with hunks of gold to take home.⁹ Overall, Grolier’s panache and ostentatious wealth seem just as important as any sense of artistry or dedication to the books he might have had. It makes sense - rare books are rarely cheap. To accumulate a truly impressive collection requires a not inconsiderable amount of money; it’s certainly much easier if you’re in possession of wealth. And, ultimately, if we imagine consumption in the form of book collecting as an art, the greatest artists will necessarily be those most capable of consumption. This language is also indicative of a kind of magpie-like urge which seems to be at the heart of many collector’s drives - to collect just any old books is not appealing. First editions, copies in pristine condition, with attractive bindings, or of special age and fetching special prices are what the bibliophile really wants. By raising this urge to the status of artistry, focusing in on the ‘craft’ and the dedication required to

⁶ Peter T. Kraus and Eric Holzenberg, “The Grolier Club Collects: Books, Manuscripts and Works on Paper from the Collections of Grolier Club Members,” The Grolier Club of New York, 2002.

⁷ “Jean Grolier.” Jean Grolier - The Grolier Club. Accessed May 14, 2022.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

compile a personal library which speaks to a particular ‘ethos,’ the club’s writings obscure the element of consumption which is truly inherent to forming a collection.

The club’s admiration for ‘proud, splendid materialism’ is also evident in many of their own publications. Though most of them are exhibition catalogs or clearly designed primarily for members of the club, they are uniformly printed on fine paper (likely rag, by the feel) and much care is put into the aesthetic details. Many of them include colophons at the end, a nod to the history of the book which the club champions, and fonts designed to emulate scribal hands are abundant. *Iter Hibernicum*, a travelog for a club expedition to Ireland, serves as a good example of this.¹⁰ The book’s contents include pictures from the expedition, a list of hotels visited and limericks that the travelers wrote on a bus together. It’s hard to imagine anyone but the people who took this trip (or a scholar of the club’s history) would ever want to purchase it. But despite appearing to function primarily as a keepsake for intrepid Grolier Club travelers, it sports an aesthetically appealing dark green hardback cover, as well as thick, cream-colored rag paper. The titles are printed in a stylized font reminiscent of Irish pub logos. It seems clear that much thought, effort, and money has been put into crafting a visual narrative in these books; it communicates luxury (to those in the know about books, at least) and seems to attempt to harken back to the medieval and early modern, to age and prestige.

Perhaps the strongest argument the club makes for Jean Grolier’s virtues is that he sought to share his collection, not simply to hoard it. They speak of the myth that “Grolier was a bibliophile of an uncommonly generous disposition and regarded his books as the property of his friends as well as of himself.”¹¹ And this interest in sharing the knowledge they have accrued does seem to be a meaningful part of the club’s mission. Their library, which is open to the

¹⁰ George Edwards, “*Iter hibernicum*,” The Grolier Club of New York, 1994.

¹¹ “Jean Grolier.” Jean Grolier - The Grolier Club. Accessed May 14, 2022.

public, and their exhibitions (which often make use of members' personal collections) both serve a purpose of opening up collections and the study of book arts to the general populace and to those interested in learning. It's also worth saying that many of the books from Jean Grolier's library would likely have been lost, or would at least be in much worse condition, if not for his collecting and storing them. It was common practice to cut into manuscripts to take interesting illustrations or keepsakes in Grolier's time and through the early modern period, and this practice destroyed more texts than we can ever know.¹² But it's also true that his practice of rebinding his acquisitions to fit a visual theme means that none of what he preserved has retained the information carried in an original binding. This focus on his 'generosity' and willingness to open his library doors to friends and scholars serves to perpetuate a narrative of the collector-as-steward, saving texts for future hands and future learners, keeping them safe from the world and the unwashed masses who might destroy them. That belief does not seem unique to the club's writing, but emblematic of a broader belief held by many American Bibliophiles.¹³

But does that narrative hold true, really, in modernity? Circumstances have changed more than a little since the 16th century, and there are now publicly owned libraries and museums aplenty to collect, safely store and conserve rare books. In an era where there are institutions founded with the purpose of keeping books safe and, crucially, available to any member of the public who can set an appointment, the collector-as-steward argument loses much of its merit. It could easily be argued that books are *less* safe in the hands of some collectors, not more, and that access to them is greatly limited, even by the most "generous" of private owners, in comparison

Commented [BM1]: If this is a direct quote, you should cite it. If indirect, change to single apostrophes.

¹² Adam Smyth, "'Shreds of Holiness': George Herbert, Little Gidding, and Cutting Up Texts in Early Modern England [with Illustrations]," *English Literary Renaissance* 42, no. 3 (2012), 457.

¹³ Edwin Wolf, "In the Mainstream of American Book Collecting," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 37, no. 2 (1976), 71.

to what would be possible at a library. The act of collection, as with any act of consumption, also has economic consequences. Demand for pristine or aesthetically appealing manuscripts and early print books—to satisfy the collector’s magpie-like impulses—has driven up cost exponentially, making the purchase of these objects difficult for many libraries and research institutions. The fact that many of these texts are housed in private collections, only coming on the market at the time of a collector’s death, has created scarcity.¹⁴ The subsequent inaccessibility of these texts has caused many antiquarian booksellers to engage in the cutting up of previously relatively intact manuscripts, as much more money can be made by selling leaves (and sometimes even individual illuminations) separately.

These leaves are often the only thing that many public institutions can afford in the inflated rare books market—and because of this practice, many leaves have been separated from their original context, bindings lost forever and pages scattered across the world. In a 2014 article for *The New Yorker*, Brian Mauk conducted an email interview with a bookseller who sells such leaves, who wrote to him that “‘In my experience, free-market forces in themselves lead to regulation,’ [and explained] that the most rare and sumptuous manuscripts are snapped up at auction by museums and large art dealers.”¹⁵ But that argument, as Mauk himself notes, is more than a little suspect. And there is no denying that ‘free market forces,’ led in large part by the insatiable appetites of collectors, have created the conditions which lead to the cutting up of manuscripts in the first place.

The Grolier club makes no statements on their website regarding provenance, or their stance on leaf-cutting. Arguably the lack of a statement in itself speaks volumes. There are few

¹⁴ Christopher De Hamel, *Cutting up Manuscripts for Pleasure and Profit: The 1995 Sol. M. Malkin Lecture in Bibliography*, Charlottesville, VA: Book Arts Press, (2002).

¹⁵ Ben Mauk, “Scattered Leaves,” *The New Yorker*, January 6, 2014.
<https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/scattered-leaves>.

cut leaves to be found on their site or in their exhibition catalogs. In “The Grolier Club Collects,” a catalog for an exhibition wherein club members sent in items from their personal collections which they believed to be especially important, with short blurbs under each title, we do see one—and from a peculiar source. Christopher de Hamel, who delivered the lecture *Cutting Up Manuscripts for Pleasure and Profit* on the history and consequences of the book-breaking practice, has sent in a cut leaf from a manuscript of Saint Thomas Aquinas. He believes that the leaf, from *Quaestiones De Veritate*, dates to the mid-to-late 13th century.¹⁶ He also gives us a lengthy explanation of the leaf’s history—the only nod to provenance in any publications or writings by the club which I have been able to find. He writes in his blurb: “I began buying medieval fragments in 1967 and have never ceased. The collection is now of considerable size...”¹⁷ Given that this compendium was published in 2002, seven years after his 1995 lecture, it is easy to read into his explanation of “unbroken provenance”¹⁸ and find a hint of guilt. This fragment, he has good reason to believe, was not cut for the purpose of sale by an antiquarian bookseller. Most likely, this is part of why he has chosen it. But his collection “of considerable size” must feed into the demand for cut leaves all the same. De Hamel is well aware of the ethical issues surrounding cut leaves, but struck by the ‘gentle madness’ of the bibliophile, he just can’t help himself.

“The Grolier Club Collects” also speaks more to this sense of collection ‘ethos,’ of the formation of a collection as a type of artistry. Many of the contributors also make glancing nods to backgrounds of wealths and connections which have served the formation of their collections. For one entry, of a Matisse print, the collector writes that it was a very early addition to their

¹⁶ Peter T. Kraus and Eric Holzenberg, “The Grolier Club Collects: Books, Manuscripts and Works on Paper from the Collections of Grolier Club Members,” *The Grolier Club of New York*, (2002), 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

collection—they were able to get it because their childhood friend’s father just so happened to be friendly with curators at the Cleveland Museum of Art, who offered the print to them for a sum of \$10.00.¹⁹ There is overall, a bit of a sense of elitism which is supported by the mythology of the collector the club attempts to cultivate. This sense, that book collectors and their love of the book could not possibly be understood properly by an outsider, seems to exist in the book collecting community writ large, and gives way to some number of upturned noses. Catherine Savage Brosman, in her short essay “Four Modes of Book Collecting” (in which she speaks about the ethos and psychology of the collector), writes that “Collecting has changed, as both levels of literacy and the taste for excellent writing have declined.”²⁰ And this concept, of the masses who do not understand the power or importance of the book and who collectors must protect their collections from, seems to form a subconscious argument against the public model. These books are better off in the hands of auteur collectors, who can discern the worthy and allow their books to be learned from by only those who have the prerequisite “taste for excellent writing.”

By lionizing the wealthy hobbyist, and by perpetuating their mythology of the collector-as-steward, the Grolier Club seeks to sidestep any discussion of the ethical issues surrounding the rare books trade. But through their careful crafting of a mythos around the act of collection, communicating at once both the idea of a ‘gentle madness’ behind the urge to accumulate and of the collector as steward and protector, curator and artist, they ultimately reinforce the problems which they are so careful not to mention. Their conflation of consumption with craft, moreover, leads to an attitude of elitism wherein only those capable of engaging in the often expensive rare

¹⁹ Ibid, 132

²⁰ Catherine Savage Brosman, “Four Modes of Book Collecting,” *The Sewanee Review* 120, no. 4 (2012), 538.

books trade can possibly be members of the bibliophile in-group. Driving the costs of rare books up through their collecting, book collectors have ultimately made collecting inaccessible even for publicly funded institutions which seek to provide access to these texts for study. This is not to say that collecting is inherently immoral or centered in elitism—but the club’s practices, their writing and fine press publications’ emphasis on luxury and indicators of wealth, along with their Manhattan townhouse location, and the choice of Jean Grolier as a patron saint for their ‘craft,’ all serve to perpetuate some of the less ‘gentle’ aspects of collection.

Bibliography:

- Austin, Gabriel. “From the Library of Jean Grolier.” *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 31, no. 2 (1970): 129–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26403979>.
- Basbanes, Nicholas A. *A Gentle Madness*. New York: Owl (1999).
- Brosman, Catherine Savage. “Four Modes of Book Collecting.” *The Sewanee Review* 120, no. 4 (2012): 537–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23356391>.
- De Hamel, Christopher. *Cutting up Manuscripts for Pleasure and Profit: The 1995 Sol. M. Malkin Lecture in Bibliography*. Charlottesville, VA: Book Arts Press, (2002).
- Edwards, George. “Iter hibernicum.” The Grolier Club of New York, (1994).
- “History.” History – The Grolier Club. Accessed May 14, (2022). <https://www.grolierclub.org/Default.aspx?p=dynamicmodule&pageid=384895&ssid=322516&vnf=1>
- “Jean Grolier.” Jean Grolier – The Grolier Club. Accessed May 14, (2022). <https://www.grolierclub.org/Default.aspx?p=DynamicModule&pageid=384821&ssid=322442&vnf=1>.
- Kraus, Peter T., Eric Holzenberg. “The Grolier Club Collects: Books, Manuscripts and Works on Paper from the Collections of Grolier Club Members.” The Grolier Club of New York, 2002.
- Mauk, Ben. “Scattered Leaves.” *The New Yorker*, January 6, (2014). <https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/scattered-leaves>.

Smyth, Adam. “‘Shreds of Holinesse’: George Herbert, Little Gidding, and Cutting Up Texts in Early Modern England [with Illustrations].” *English Literary Renaissance* 42, no. 3 (2012): 452–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43607536>.

Wolf, Edwin. “In the Mainstream of American Book Collecting.” *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 37, no. 2 (1976): 67–71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26403998>.