
The National Library of Canada came into possession of Jacob Lowy's renowned collection of rare Hebraica and Judaica in 1977. It was the largest bequest ever made to that institution, comprising almost two thousand volumes, including forty-six incunabula, with a market value of over two million dollars.

One might have had reservations about the National Library's ability to maintain and display Mr. Lowy's munificent gift to its best advantage. Fortunately the NLC has dispelled most doubts about its fitness to carry out its responsibilities. A special room was provided to house the collection and to facilitate scholarly access; an able and erudite curator, Mr. Brad Sabin Hill, was appointed to administer it; and a comprehensive catalogue, describing the entire collection in full bibliographical detail in English, French, and Hebrew is currently being prepared.

The item under review, describing 150 of the choicest treasures in the collection, was produced to accompany the first major public exhibit of the Lowy gift. It offers a tantalizing cross-section of manuscripts and printed works spanning five hundred years of Jewish literary culture, from the incunabula period to the Holocaust, with most of the entries dating from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. It includes the famous first and second issues of the first edition of the King James Bible, rare and in some cases unique editions of the Talmud and Flavius Josephus, examples of pioneer Hebrew printing from the presses of Plantin and Robert Estienne, and even two Canadian imprints: an English translation of Josephus printed by N.G. Ellis in Kingston in 1844 and a volume of Hebrew and Yiddish miscellany privately published in Ottawa in 1942.

Mr. Hill expresses his intention that the catalogue be 'of more than ephemeral value' and accordingly supplies us with a set of useful indexes, providing access by date and place of printing, language, author, title — with separate listings for Hebrew and non-Hebrew works — and, for the manuscripts, by provenance. An appendix lists every incunable in the collection, including those not chosen for the exhibit, arranged by author, printer, and date and place of printing.

In contrast to this elaborate apparatus, the entries to which these indexes refer give only a cursory description of each work, with minimal bibliographical information (short title, author, and imprint). Succinctness is not necessarily a vice in an exhibition catalogue. Mr. Hill can hardly be faulted for failing to meet the standards of a full-fledged descriptive bibliography or a learned treatise on Jewish intellectual history. Nevertheless, it is not unknown for authors of such catalogues to venture original interpretations of the material in question. Mr. Hill has declined the challenge. The introductory remarks prefacing each section and the entries themselves are concise, factual, and strictly circumscribed. There is nothing here for the specialist, while the layman receives some competently presented basic information.

One might have expected a more detailed discussion of the place and influence of these works within the larger European culture in which they were (for the most part) produced, their role in the revival of classical learning during the Renaissance, and
the process whereby these ancient texts and languages were preserved and recovered. From the bibliographical point of view, some mention might have been made of the Greek, Gothic, Roman, and, above all, Hebrew typefaces represented in the collection; and of the men who cut them, such as Guillaume Le Bé, who designed Hebrew fonts for both Robert Estienne and Christophe Plantin, producing, according to Updike, at least seventeen in his lifetime. It is this kind of analysis that would have given Mr. Hill’s catalogue ‘more than ephemeral value.’ As it stands, it will probably be superseded with the publication of the complete catalogue of the Jacob M. Lowy Collection.

Hill divides his 150 entries into eighteen categories, each with its separate introduction, e.g., Incunabula, Bibles, Commentaries, Josephus, Talmud, etc. This complex arrangement might seem incongruous when so few volumes are being considered. Some sections consist of only four or five titles. Certain closely related themes might have been combined. On the other hand, this somewhat cumbersome scheme serves to emphasize the astonishing scope of the collection.

The production quality of the book is uneven. It is profusely illustrated, with full-page plates in colour and black-and-white and smaller line illustrations and vignettes. The reproductions are excellent, conveying the beauty of early type forms and the wealth of esoteric symbolism and imagery that seems to characterize the Jewish book. It is a matter of regret that these subjects are not further elucidated by Mr. Hill. The illustrations, while valuable, are scattered arbitrarily through the text, giving the whole a rather cluttered look. A more serious criticism can be levelled against the typography. The ugly lightweight face chosen for the English and French portions of the text is wholly inadequate. Diacritics are sloppily misplaced. Layout, especially with respect to character fit and word spacing, is poor and creates a jarring effect.

Considering the difficulties involved in juggling five languages and three alphabets, surprisingly few typographical errors were found. The catalogue is, of course, completely bilingual; the French translations are well executed and, apart from the general introduction, are set beside the relevant English text on the same page – a happy arrangement. The cover, with its glossy illustrated dust-jacket, is suitably handsome. The book, obviously intended to occupy a permanent place on the shelf or the coffee table, is sewn in signatures and sturdily bound.

Mr. Hill’s exhibition catalogue succeeds best in whetting one’s appetite, both for a more complete description of the collection and for an opportunity to view and handle the actual volumes themselves.

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There is still so much to be written about the history and evolution of the printed word in Canada. Consequently, it is gratifying to discover a new contribution to the story of printing in these five essays, commissioned to memorialize the sixty-first