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‘ONE OF THE WORLD’S FINEST COLLECTIONS OF GRAPHIC ART’

[78 Solander Boxes from the Albertina Museum Print Collection].

Author

KRAUSS, George Friedrich

Publication date

[c1822].

Publisher

Publication place

Vienna,

Physical description

78 solander boxes, quarter red morocco over paper boards, lower portion of each box with three fixed sides, exterior edges painted gold, and six bronze hook and eye clasps, spines in ten compartments separated by bands, decorated with gilt tooling, two green morocco lettering pieces to each.

Dimensions

780 by 490mm. (30.75 by 19.25 inches).

Notes

A magnificent collection of original archival boxes from the Albertina Museum, Vienna.

The Albertina Museum

The Albertina Museum, which sits in the heart of Vienna, houses 'one of the world's finest collections of graphic art' (Dossi). It contains over one million prints and drawings, from Old Master engravings to modern architectural plans. The collection was founded in 1770 by Duke Albert of Saxe-Teschen, who owned the palace that would later become the eponymous museum. The Duke intended to create a momentous collection for the purpose of education, and, at the time of his death, it comprised over 200,000 prints from the previous four centuries. The collection was then opened to any member of the public who "owned their own shoes", making it one of the earliest open art exhibitions.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the collection continued to grow, although the pieces that had been acquired from 1895 under Archduke Frederick of Saxe-Teschen were conceded to him as private property when the museum was transferred to the state in 1920. Under the new Austrian Republic, the collection at the Albertina Museum was expanded with all the contemporary art works formerly held in the Imperial Court Library, in which Griffiths terms 'a shot-gun wedding' of the two collections. The collection has increased throughout the twentieth century, and now represents the complete spectrum of printing styles, media and eras.

The Solander box

This type of archival box was the invention of Daniel Carlsson Solander (1733-1782), a Swedish scientist whose work in botany and zoology saw him appointed as the Keeper of the Natural History Department at the British Museum in London. Having studied under the legendary naturalist Carl Linnaeus, Solander travelled to England to promote his master's new classification system, which became - and remains - the basis for taxonomy across the world. Solander's began to work in the archives of the British Museums and his talents soon earned him a fellowship at the Royal Society.

In 1768, Solander travelled aboard the Endeavour on James Cook's first voyage, accompanying the head botanist Joseph Banks in examining the new flora and fauna they encountered. The expedition made Solander the first Swede to circumnavigate the globe, and it is down to him and Banks that the site of Cook's first landing in Australia is called Botany Bay. The voyage yielded a wealth of new natural specimens, many of which the scientists brought back to London with them, and which Solander continued to study at the British Museum.

As head of the natural history archives and Keeper of Printed Books, Solander dealt with a great number of important and fragile documents, specimens and books. To tackle the problem of storing these items, he created a new type of archival box. The uniform boxes were sturdy enough to be stacked, transported and rearranged without damaging the contents, and could be made to measure for more valuable or delicate items. The Solander box is still widely used across libraries, museums and archives worldwide.

The boxes

Georg Friedrich Krauss (fl1791-1824) was a bookbinder of German origins who worked in Vienna under the direct patronage of Duke Albrecht. Having adopted the neoclassical style that had emerged in Italy during the previous century, he soon became one of the continent's most important binders. The sumptuous bindings he produced for the Duke can be identified by the gilt "AST" monogram that appears on their spines. Krauss' most ambitious project was to produce hundreds of boxes to house the Albertina's vast collection of prints.

The boxes were designed to be stacked vertically, and with an internal depth of 65mm (2.5 inches), each one could be used to store multiple documents while ensuring their safekeeping. Their ornate

leather spines indicate that, aesthetically, the cases were intended to convey the importance and value of the pieces within. Gilt lettering on the spine of each book reads “raccolta di stampe”, or ‘collection of prints’, and identifies the work within. Most boxes are organised by their provenance, labelled according to their geographical origins, for instance “Tedesca” (German), “Fiamminga” (Flemish) or “Inglese” (English), while other miscellaneous groups are simply labelled “diverse”. Certain boxes bear the names of specific works or artists, such as “Lucas Cranach. Vol. II” and “L. Krug, A. Altorfer, J. Binck”. It is unclear why Italian is used instead of German, but it may reflect the prominence of Old Master prints within the collection, the majority of which stemmed from the Italian tradition.

It is likely that these boxes were produced around the time of the Duke’s passing in 1822, when the Albertina prints were still technically a private collection. In the 1990s a great number of the boxes were decommissioned, and since that time, the majority seem to have been lost or destroyed. In general, modern archives no longer use such large units, instead preferring technologically advanced storage systems or compact cases. These boxes therefore preserve an important stage in archival history, when the archives themselves were designed to reflect the artistry and craftsmanship of their contents.

Bibliography

Dossi, ‘Albertina: the history of the collection and its masterpieces’ (Prestel, 1999); Griffiths, ‘Review: The Albertina’ (Print Quarterly, 2000)

Provenance

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