

MEMORIAL YEARS, MAJOR PROJECTS



CORVINA EXHIBITION AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

The Corvina Library and the Buda Workshop

If we accept the supposition as a fact, namely that the Corvina Library, as one of the old Hungarian relics, exceeds among the cultural Hungarikums due to its international fame and reputation, this alone justifies the repeated public exhibitions of the extant pieces of Matthias' library, organized in the national library, home to the majority of these corvinas. It is a fortunate case, when the popular demand meets that research objective of giving account of the newest findings, which either alter, or recreate or put into different context the current picture about the royal library.

In 2016, the Széchényi Library initiated an exceptional development with the aim of constructing the Hungarian National Library Platform (hereafter HNLP) that would incorporate all the formerly separated library services into one unified system, focusing on catalogues, databases and digital document services. According to the plans, the accomplishment of this IT reform would help meeting the requirements put up for the libraries of the 21st century, and apart from the traditional library services, it would come into view as a social space, an institution providing various services. After considering these, the NSZL decided to take advantage of the newest technological opportunities and present to the public in its complexity the most essential problem of the Corvina Library, the book copying, illuminating, and bookbinding products of the Buda workshop.

The exhibition of 65 codices and several other artefacts welcomed the public between 6 November 2018 and 10 February 2019. Apart from the library's own collection, selected pieces were borrowed from Hungarian collections (Eötvös Loránd University Library, Diocesan Treasury and Library of Győr) and foreign libraries (National Library

of Austria, National Library of France, Leipzig University Library, Vatican Library, Klosterneuburg Monastery Library), mainly corvinas, but also codices that were partly or entirely made in the Buda workshop and once belonged to the bibliophile prelate living and working in the royal court. Even though this series of problems cannot be examined here, it must be emphasized that this is the most complex aspect of the history of the Corvina Library, therefore – although the existence of the workshop itself has been accepted as fact in Hungarian scholarship for more than 100 years – the NSZL's exhibition happened to be the first scientific venture that, based upon the new research findings of the 20th century, the past one and a half decades and those collected during the two-year-long preparation, has drawn a new and complete picture of the operation of the workshop, starting from the identification of the masters working here to the refinement of chronological data, through the exploration of the workshop's internal and external relations up until the most essential focus point, namely the interpretation of style imitation as determining creative technique and the exemplification of this. Nothing describes better the work of Edina Zsupán and the advisory board (Marianne Rozsondai, Árpád Mikó, Dániel Pócs) who consulted in different fields during the preparation than by the consensual statement of the podium talk – attracting more than 200 students – closing the three-month long exhibition: the exhibition is a milestone in corvina research, and its magnitude will only be seen in 10–15 years. Namely, apart from the findings, it has pointed out with great sensitivity those main ideas that will point out the directions of further research, and as per the nature of the subject, not only the research of the royal library, but that of Hungary's book culture in the second half of the 15th century. The copious and nuanced written material of the exhibition was made available both in Hungarian and English, therefore foreign researchers,



codicology experts and art historians could also gain sight into this important European collection. Our Austrian, German and English guests have recognized the exhibition as a unique accomplishment and those, who visit the world's great exhibitions as part of their profession, have claimed that such a significant and spectacular exhibition is realised once in a decade.

The truly grandiose design praised the work of Mária Gazdag from Lulla Interiors and the installation by Expo Veres. In addition, the use of the audio-visual tools mentioned above also expanded the exhibition experience, not only was it possible for the public to 'flip through' the corvinas, but they could also emerge into the artefacts with the help of analogies, the introduction of the Italian origin of the corvinas

and with the 'macro footages' of corvina bindings. Moreover, they could give account of their knowledge with solving the likely interactive quiz. The exhibition was made even more exciting for the youngest age group with museum education programmes by Erika András, where they could interpret what they had seen via traditional and manual activities.

This exhibition was a short chapter but one of the most successful ones in the history of the NSZL. More than twenty thousand visitors were given an experience to be remembered for years or probably for a lifetime, who were not deterred not even by queues of one and a half or two hours. All the souvenirs were sold out by the closure of the exhibition and the visitors will definitely keep them as nice tokens, but it is even more significant that all the copies of the more than 250-page-long bilingual (Hungarian and English) *Exhibition Guide* sold out, too. This guide follows the structure of the exhibition and the content, being put together according to the highest academic standards but without details only concerning the narrow circle of scholars of the given field, presents the Buda workshop in the light of the newest findings and it also discusses the Corvina Library in general. As feedback suggests the volume became part of the visitors' private library, but it can now also be found on the shelves of school libraries. This means, therefore, that the *Exhibition Guide* will determine for decades the knowledge of the learned Hungarian public about the cultural life in the royal court of King Matthias.

According to all above, it cannot be highlighted enough that there are special fields of research where, due to our collections and professional colleagues, the national library can rightly claim the position of a research centre, but it also plays a key role in the research itself. Thus, it fulfils the responsibility of letting the public know about its findings in different forms, like exhibitions, lectures, publications and by getting involved in academic education.

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Bibliotheca Corvina Virtualis

On 5 November 2018, simultaneously with the opening of the exhibition *The Corvina Library and the Buda Workshop* – as part of the NSZL’s decades-long Covina Programme and led by the Department of Web Content Coordination – the new Covina webpage was launched: Bibliotheca Corvina Virtualis (<http://corvina.hu>). The service revised in its design, content and technological background has the long-term goal of virtual reconstruction of the Bibliotheca Corvina, the royal library established by Matthias de Hunyad, King of Hungary (1458–1490).

The surviving pieces of the former Corvina Library – approximately 220 corvinas – can now be found in the libraries of Europe and the United States. 55 of these belong to 5 Hungarian public collections, 37 are found at the National Széchényi Library. (The figure 35 known so far in general was raised by the corvina copy of Johannes de Thurocz’s chronicle [Inc. 1143b] and by the fact that the fragments of Bonfini’s Hungarian history are carded under separate numbers [Cod. Lat. 434, Cod. Lat. 542] and have

separate data sheets.) The service comprises a total of 235 corvina titles, as we have enlisted those codices, which, as convincingly confirmed by Angela Dillon Bussi a few years ago, were made for Matthias in Florence, however, they had not been sent to Hungary following the king’s death, and later were taken to the Medicis’ library.

In the first phase of our renewal of the Hungarian and English services, besides all the corvinas having been supplied with *data sheets*, with *narratives* written by Edina Zsupán and with continually thriving *bibliographies*, with *book descriptions* composed by the colleagues of the Restoration and Bindery Department and numerous interesting facts – such as Matthias portraits, emblems depicting him, corvina aquarelles made by Gyula Végh – all the corvinas kept in our country and those from Wolfenbüttel (Herzog August Bibliothek) have been made available. We have also collected the digitized versions – around 120 items – that have been published on the personal web pages of foreign keeper collections and institutions.

As far as the following years are concerned – in cooperation with the members of international and Hungarian corvina research, and with the keeper collections – we are



continuously updating the information and data shared on our page and as part of our services and we would like to display as many virtual versions of corvina codices kept in Europe and the United States as possible.

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Pupils at King Matthias’ Corvina Workshop

In the first half of 2018, activities regarding the exhibition of the 200th birth anniversary of poet János Arany were still available among museum education programmes offered by the National Széchényi Library. A great number of pupils even from outside Hungary attended these programmes, and apart from examining original manuscripts, they could learn about the history and operation of the library, as well. The castle tour also proved to be a popular activity, where visitors could learn about the most significant eras of this historical location through documents of the Special Collections related to the castle from. The pupils – in addition to their prior knowledge – could gain more information regarding the

turning points of our past by holding the facsimile editions of various publications in their hands.

Upon this year’s major exhibition, museum education programmes were prepared for three different age groups. This large-scale exhibition entitled *The Corvina Library and the Buda Workshop* opened up an outstanding opportunity of presenting both King Matthias and the Renaissance culture, therefore numerous school groups registered to see it. This was the first time we arranged a programme for kindergarteners under the title *The Quests of the Scribe Apprentice*. The youngest visitors learned about King Matthias and his scribe’s numerous duties through fabulous stories. They could also get closer to the culture of the people living in those old days with the help of various melodies, shapes, colours, and tiny but even more interesting characters. The activity *The Corvus in His Coat of Arms!* addressed children of the age of 8 to 12. They could explore the history of the exhibited codices and their tiniest details through attention controlling activities, then by following different hints throughout the exhibition, they could explore the mysteries of the manuscripts ornamented with the coat of arms depicting a raven. Children belonging to the third age group, ages 12 to 18, were invited to the programme *My Profession: Codex Illuminator*. In the form of a role-playing game, they could meet the codex illuminators who first



paid a visit to the royal court, then later – as outstanding members of the workshop of Buda – illuminated the pages of the codices presented at the exhibition. By visiting the rich collection, the children could gain an insight into the intellectual and artistic life of the Renaissance. Being prepared for large groups too, we also offered additional castle tours for the visiting classes. These groups could individually explore the building remains of the Buda Castle district built in the times of Matthias, old street names and the ornaments of the medieval houses with the guiding booklet called *Castle under the Wings of the Raven*.

The exhibition was also accompanied by a complex series of events: apart from the above mentioned, around one-hour long activities, we advertised a children's drawing contest and educational open days and invited families to a masquerade ball. On 19 January 2019, our guests were dressed in Renaissance attire and celebrated together with the winners of the drawing context at an outstanding party. We were very pleased that we received entries for the contest *ILLUMINATOR WANTED AT BUDA!* dedicated to pupils in 3rd and 4th, respectively 5th and 6th grade. Apart from the artworks, another requirement for the entrants was to look up Matthias' kingliest deed; this activity proved to be a valuable pastime according to the feedback from teachers and parents.

Apart from pupil groups, adults were also invited to the programme *WORKshop after Work* on the educational open day. Guided exhibition tours were also held at every event, each focusing on different techniques presented by our restorer colleagues. Here the participants could learn about the corvina-creating techniques, various materials and tools, and they could make their own 'masterpieces', as well.

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