

Monrepos Manor collection – pearls of cultural exchange

Sirkka Havu & Päivi Pekkarinen

Having been nearly for 600 years under Swedish rule and for 100 years under Russian rule before independence, Finland has been culturally and politically strongly influenced by western and eastern powers. Cultural trends between these countries as well as between Europe were also reflected in literature. The collection of Monrepos Manor, now housed at the National Library of Finland in Helsinki, is one of the pearls of literature reflecting cultural exchanges in the 18th century. The collection originates from Vyborg – a city which, in its old charm, was a lively sea port for trading, and even a part of Finland between 1917 and 1944.

The Library of Monrepos Manor

The National Library of Finland houses the historical collection of Monrepos Manor situated in Vyborg, an old medieval town near St Petersburg. The town has by turns belonged either to Finland or to Russia, today it is a part of Russia. The archive and library was moved from Vyborg to the National Library of Finland in Helsinki during the First World War. The collection represents a crystallization of the French Enlightenment, Pan-European neo-humanistic culture and cultural trends between east and west in the 18th century Europe.

Monrepos manor, famous primarily for its landscape park, is also famous for its large library of some 9 000 volumes. The library was constructed mainly in the 18th century St Petersburg by two European intellectuals: Ludwig Heinrich and his son, Paul Nicolay, who both made their career in the service of the Russian court.

Ludwig Heinrich Nicolay bought Monrepos manor in Vyborg for his summer residence in 1788. Having retired in 1803 he moved permanently to Monrepos, where he divided his time in between his two projects: the library and the legendarily beautiful landscape park of Monrepos. The father, Ludwig Heinrich Nicolay (1737–

1820), set the principles for the library, and later the son Paul (1777–1866) continued to buy books for it following the ideas of his father.

Ludwig Heinrich Nicolay - librarian, writer, lawyer and member of cabinet

Ludwig Heinrich Nicolay was born 1760 in Germany. He studied law in Strasbourg and departed to Paris, where he was immediately enchanted with la Ville des Lumières. He became a frequent guest in the fashionable philosophical salons.

In 1761 Prince Golytsin, ambassador of Russia in Vienna, offered Nicolay a position as his secretary. In 1766 Count **Kirill Grigorievich Razuimovskii** offered Nicolay a position of a tutor and travelling companion for his son Alexei, and finally in 1769 Catherine II invited Nicolay to St Petersburg and appointed him a tutor for her son, Grand Duke Paul of Russia.

Ludwig Heinrich Nicolay made a brilliant career in the Russian Court where he acted as librarian and secretary of Grand Duke Paul; later he became a member of Emperor Paul I's cabinet and, among other things, President of St Petersburg Academy of Sciences. Beside this he was a well-known German writer whose collect-

ed works came out in two editions as early as in 18th century.

Philosophers of the Enlightenment

The Monrepos Library is an authentic document of the way the French Enlightenment was received in St Petersburg and how it was adopted in the Court of Catherine II. Over half of the collection's books are in French and a fifth in German, while the Italian-, English-, and Latin-language works account each about 10 %. Most of the books are printed in the 18th century, but other centuries are also well represented. There is even an incunabulum, *Liber chronicarum* by Hartmann Schedel (Nürnberg, 1493).

The French part of the Monrepos Collection is emphasized by the works of les Grands Philosophes of the Enlightenment. In fiction the emphasis is on the French classicism, with numerous editions of Corneille, Racine and Molière. Beside the classics, Nicolay had a great deal of contemporary French sentimental and moralistic literature.

The classical literature at Monrepos was main-

ly in Latin, including numerous editions of Nicolay's poets, Horace, Ovid and Tibullus. Nicolay's admiration for Italy is represented both by the classics of the early Renaissance and by numerous illustrated editions of Ariosto and Tasso, Nicolay's own literary models.

Old book in the new environment

Collections of the Monrepos Library were presented and discussed this year as a part of an international seminar 'The Message of the Old Book in the New Environment' in the context of the Paris Book Fair. The seminar was organized by the International Relations Group of the Finnish Research Library Association, with the generous support of the Finnish Institute of France and the Finnish Cultural Foundation, as well as the National Library of France.

The discussion of the seminar focused on two key issues: some aspects of the meaning of the old book may be lost, whereas some new aspects and dimensions of meaning may be created in the digital environment.

As in the 18th century upper class libraries in general, also in Monrepos the appearance of the book was an important factor for its acquisition. The Library is elegant with several grand papier editions in handsome leather bindings with gilt decorations and gilt edges. Books were there also to witness the high level of the owner's taste. In the 18th century taste or aesthetic sensitivity was considered an integral part of judgement, necessary to reach morally correct decisions.

Beauty of the print

In the Paris seminar, the question was raised: may these kinds of collections be transferred into the digital form and read on the two-dimensional screen without losing the intrinsic value of the collection?

The answer was no. As book historians, like D.F. McKenzie and Roger Chartier, emphasize, the understanding of the meaning of the text is connected with the object book: the format, the page layout, and typographical conventions have also an expressive function. The form does affect the meaning; it is necessary to consult texts in their original material form in order to really understand the ideas behind the words used.

The digitization will help the study of individual historical aspects of a book or a collection. However, this requires an expert cataloguing and detailed metadata: full bibliographic description and the information concerning the object book. The art historical treasures – hand made graphic – must be highlighted by detailed cataloguing and the provenance history must be coded.

In order to get statistical information of collections, a digitized collection with detailed cat-

aloguing is certainly almost a perfect tool for it. But in case you really need to understand the meaning of the works or appreciate the beauty of the books, the elegance of graphic art, or sense the atmosphere of the whole collection, it is necessary to work with real books. 📖

Information on authors:

Sirkka Havu
Special Librarian, Special Collections
National Library of Finland
Email. Sirkka.havu@helsinki.fi

Päivi Pekkarinen
Chair, International Relations Group
Finnish Research Library Association
Helsinki University Library
Email. Paivi.pekkarinen@helsinki.fi