

The libraries and collections of Basel

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The printing industry and the humanist culture of the sixteenth century left Basel with an exceptional heritage of books and collections. The University Library of Basel holds one of the largest collections of incunabula and early printed books in Switzerland, including many Basel editions, the Greek manuscripts brought to the city during the Council, the papers of the Amerbach family and the library of Erasmus, which Bonifacius Amerbach inherited.¹ These collections are a scholarly resource of international importance and a reminder of the city's role in the history of the book.

The acquisition of the Amerbach cabinet in 1661 deserves a closer look. After the death of the last member of the Amerbach family, the collection, which contained paintings, drawings, prints, coins, goldsmiths' models, books and natural curiosities, was threatened with sale abroad, apparently to a buyer from Amsterdam. The city council and the university decided to buy it for the city, paying the price from public funds.² The collection became the property of the university and was made accessible to the public. It is regarded as the first publicly owned museum collection in the world opened by a city.

The decision of 1661 shows that the citizens of Basel understood the value of cultural capital and were prepared to invest public money to retain it. Had the collection been sold, its proceeds would have enriched the heirs. The city chose to keep it and to make it public. This decision laid the foundation of the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Historical Museum and other institutions that today make Basel one of the leading museum cities of Europe. The export of cultural property and the retention of national treasures remain subjects of legal regulation today: the Cultural Property Transfer Act of 2003 allows the Confederation to maintain an inventory of cultural property of significant importance, whose export is subject to authorisation.³

1 Notes

1. On the holdings of the Universitätsbibliothek Basel (incunabula, early Basel prints, Greek manuscripts, Amerbach papers), see the publications of the Universitätsbibliothek Basel. To be verified. ↩
2. On the acquisition of the Amerbach cabinet by the city and university of Basel in 1661 to prevent its sale abroad (reportedly to an Amsterdam buyer), and its significance as the first municipally owned public collection, see HLS, article "Amerbach-Kabinett"; the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel. To be verified. ↩
3. Art. 3 and 5 CPTA (SR 444.1) on the federal register of cultural property and the prohibition of export without authorisation of cultural property entered in it. To be verified. ↩

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