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Bibliophiles flock to uptown book society

by [Allison Malecha](#)

The Grolier Club, one of America's oldest bibliophile societies on the Upper East Side, is currently hosting the exhibition "In Pursuit of Knowledge," a collection of highlights from Germany's Leipzig University Library.

The university was founded in 1409, and its 600 years of existence dwarf Columbia's 225. "The university, which is the second oldest in Germany after Heidelberg, has a peculiar beginning," said Dr. Ulrich Johannes Schneider, director of the Leipzig library and curator of the exhibition. "It's the only university to be founded by scholars alone, without the help of kings or princes."

Leipzig scholars have amassed quite a book collection over the last six centuries. "We have some very outstanding manuscripts, and we're proud of them," Schneider said. "You do have collectors and you do have interesting librarians but you rarely have professors bringing these types of manuscripts to a university. What we really want to produce is pleasure in viewing these things." Indeed, the exhibition offers no lack of visual intrigue. One can view, for instance, a colored drawing of an oil lamp adorned with a male face, abdomen, and erect penis in a 16th century archeological text, colored renderings of a Dresden royal parade from 1610 including images of Galapagan women perched topless upon giant sea turtles, or a Leipzig University professor's 1795 sketch of a North American peace pipe. These salacious pieces are as unexpected from such an elegant institution as the retro peach and cherry-red room in which they're displayed.

But the crown jewels of the show are three religious manuscripts, imposing both in size and history. The Machsor Lipsiae is an ornamental Hebrew prayer book from 1320, the Mongol Quran is a striking Muslim text illuminated with gold from 1307, and the Codex Sinaiticus is the oldest surviving biblical text to include the complete New Testament, across the impeccably preserved pages of which Greek sigmas and thetas are still recognizable, and which dates from around 350. Each manuscript in the exhibition is accompanied by detailed descriptions that set the piece in the context of world history and of Leipzig University itself.

Megan Smith, Grolier's exhibitions coordinator, calls these manuscripts "truly remarkable documents of cultural significance." But "In Pursuit of Knowledge" offers a human interest aspect as well. The "Student Life, the 17th Century" board at the far end of the exhibition room describes the custom of "pennalism" that was prohibited in 1656. The tradition forced younger students to perform services for and give money to seniors (something college seniors today might appreciate as well). As Smith concluded, "Students can see how little college students have really changed over the centuries."

"In Pursuit of Knowledge" provides ample appeal for bibliophiles, history-nuts, or anyone else who wants to feel learned for a bargain afternoon on the Upper East Side.

"In Pursuit of Knowledge" is located at the Grolier Club, 47 E. 60th St., open Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., admission free. Dr. Schneider will give a farewell lecture for the exhibition on Friday, Nov. 20, at 6 p.m.