

Eve M. Kahn

A Count With Taste And Sticky Fingers

Count Guglielmo Libri mastered the art of appearing indignant when accused of felonies. From the 1820s to the 1860s, Libri, an Italian aristocrat, lectured at universities in France and Italy while pilfering library books and adding fake autographs.

He was investigated and convicted but wangled out of jail time, while he kept trafficking in volumes with dubious provenance. He was so erudite in philosophy, physics, math, literature and library science that colleagues defended him.

"Libri was a most cruelly and iniquitously treated man," *The Times* of London declared in an 1869 obituary.

"Isn't it incredible that his reputation, at least in certain parts of the world, was never tarnished?" said Jeremy M. Norman, a historian and bookseller in Novato, Calif., in a phone interview. His collection of about 120 books and documents related to Libri goes on view at the Grolier Club in Manhattan on Thursday, in an exhibition titled "Scientist, Scholar & Scoundrel: A Bibliographical Investigation of the Life and Exploits of Count Guglielmo Libri."

The catalog, published by the club, is subtitled "Mathematician, Journalist, Patriot, Historian of Science, Paleographer, Book Collector, Bibliographer, Antiquarian Bookseller, Forger and Book Thief." Mr. Norman has determined how Libri committed crimes on a grand scale.

Libri wore a cape, carried a stiletto and dropped names of political friends and supposed ancestors, including Galileo and Leonardo da Vinci. He hired restorers to scrub bindings and pages, removing telltale bookplates and stamps. He took jobs inspecting provincial libraries.

"Inspector Libri would climb the ladders to the highest shelves where the rarest items were kept," Mr. Norman writes in the catalog.

Libri shuttled among Italy, France and Britain looking for potential loot, including Leonardo drawings and illuminated medieval manuscripts. To pay his legal fees, he married a rich French widow and sold off collections.

Sotheby's ads in the 1850s for Libri auctions touted his "magnificent library" that had been maintained "in the most perfect state of preservation."

The Grolier show contains auction catalogs, pamphlets from Libri supporters and detractors, and images of his forged inscrip-



ARTHUR AND JANET ING FREEMAN

A portrait of Count Guglielmo Libri, around 1850. An exhibition in Manhattan details the questionable ways in which he obtained his art holdings.

tions. The modern-day dollar value of Libri's stolen goods "would be in the billions," Mr. Norman said.

Acquiring the material on view at the Grolier, including a few items belonging to Libri, required a decade of steady Web site trolling, but not a huge investment.

"The collection never cost very much," Mr. Norman said. "I certainly didn't exhibit it because it's valuable in a monetary sense. I exhibited it, and wrote the book and just started collecting, because it's a great story."

A Bounty of Books

The Mount St. Alphonsus seminary in Esopus, N.Y., used to send Redemptorist priests on book-buying trips in Europe. The seminary library, in a vast 1907 brick building overlooking the Hudson River, was filled to the rafters with tomes about architecture, astronomy, mineralogy and witches, along with Bibles and sermon collections.

In the 1980s, the building was turned into a religious retreat center, and last year it was sold for about \$21.5 million. Volumes dating to the 15th century, kept in what the seminary called the treasure room, had been scarcely looked at over the years.

"Every once in a while a random scholar would pass through, and we'd grant them access," the Rev. Matthew T. Allman, a Redemptorist priest in Philadelphia who is coordinating the group's heritage preservation projects, said in a phone interview.

The library holdings of about 40,000 books, marked here and there with Redemptorist stamps and priests' marginal notations, have been consigned for a series

of sales that starts April 4 at Freeman's auction house in Philadelphia. Estimates range from a few hundred dollars each for batches of 1650s legal dictionaries and 1720s maps to over \$10,000 each for saints' biographies illustrated by Dürer.

The Redemptorists are not selling any books related to their own congregations. Those volumes, Father Allman said, are destined for a planned research center at the National Shrine of St. John Neumann in Philadelphia.

These Old Walls Talk

Social climbers of the 17th and 18th centuries left traces of their architectural tastes along the Chesapeake Bay. Staff members at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia have fanned out across the region, documenting building trends and underlying attitudes.

Nine historians contributed essays to a new book, "The Chesapeake House: Architectural Investigation by Colonial Williamsburg" (University of North Carolina Press), covering everything



An 18th-century farmstead in Ch... book chronicles the history of us...