

# The Dibner Library of the History of Science and Technology

..... New Acquisitions .....

## Highlights from Recent Acquisitions

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### The Amsterdam printing of the *Journal des sçavans*

In July 2000 the Dibner Library of the History of Science and Technology acquired a large set of the Amsterdam printing of the *Journal des sçavans* (sçavans being an early form of savants, the French word for scholars). This set consists of 220 volumes and is complete from the first volume of 1665 through to October 1759. The *Journal des sçavans* will be a significant addition to the research value of the collections in the Dibner Library. The purchase of the set was made possible through funds provided by the Spencer Baird Society.

The *Journal des sçavans* is widely regarded as the first scientific journal published. Prior to its appearance, regular scientific communication only took place through private correspondence. Though this proved to be quite sporadic, on occasion individuals, like Marin Mersenne (1588-1648), would provide a service as a clearinghouse for scientific news from his wide network of correspondents. A solution to the basic unreliability of private correspondence as a means of scientific dissemination was finally provided by Denys de Sallo (1626-1669). Sallo was conseiller of the Parlement of Paris and part of the coterie of the powerful Jean-Baptiste Colbert. Sallo proposed to Colbert a scheme whereby Sallo would publish a weekly periodical containing information on matters of interest to the learned public including numerous reviews of new books. Sallo was granted a privilège for the printing of the journal in 1664 which was then passed on to the Parisian printer Jean Cusson.

The first issue of the *Journal des sçavans* appeared on January 5, 1665, and sold for five sous. Sallo, in an introductory note to the reader (under a nom de plume of Sieur de Hedouville), outlined his five-fold purpose for the publication:

1. To provide a catalogue and brief description of the principal books printed in Europe.
2. To print obituaries on famous men.
3. To publish findings from experiments in physics and chemistry, new discoveries in the arts and sciences such as machines and useful or curious inventions of mathematicians, celestial and meteorological observations, and new anatomical findings made on animals.
4. To document the findings of secular and ecclesiastical tribunals as well as universities in France and the rest of Europe.
5. To report bits of news that might be of interest to men of letters.

The first issue had ten articles on such diverse topics as an account of a monstrous birth near Oxford, a note on Giuseppe Campani's new telescopes and lenses, comments on a new edition of René Descartes's *De l'homme*, and a review of recent editions on the history of the African church. The first thirteen issues contained over eighty reviews of books including a few which are recognized as classics in their field: Thomas Willis's *Cerebri anatome*, Nicolaus

Steno's *De musculis et glandis*, and the first issue of the *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London*.

Sallo was denied the attempt to fully develop his journal as the *Journal des sçavans* was suppressed following the thirteenth issue of March 30, 1665. The official reason for the shutdown was that Sallo was not submitting his proofs for

Official reason for the shutdown was that Sallo was not submitting his proofs for official approval before publication, but the real reason probably had more to do with his criticisms of the work of important people, papal policy, and the old orthodox views on science. After a hiatus of several months, the Journal returned on January 4, 1666, under the editorship of Jean Gallois, a member of Sallo's household. The Journal appeared regularly on a weekly basis, under various stewardship, up to 1724 when it became a monthly issue. The Revolution halted publication of the Journal in 1792 although it resurfaced briefly in 1797 with a revised title: *Journal des savants*. After the Napoleonic Wars, the *Journal des savants* finally reappeared in 1816 and this time it was published under the auspices of an organization, the Institut de France (Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres). The [Journal continues to this day in a slightly irreverent form](#), though it has evolved into an even more generalist periodical with little in the way of scientific issues.

Interest in the Journal grew steadily after it first appeared, and in 1684 an unauthorized edition appeared in Amsterdam to help fill the increasing appetite for the work. The Dutch printer produced reprints of all the early issues back to the very first in 1665 (he had already printed an edition of the first volume in 1679), and began reprinting the weekly issues after the French versions arrived in the Netherlands, often with additional articles not in the Parisian issue. In 1710, due to difficulties in getting the French issues in a timely manner, the Dutch edition began appearing as a monthly. The Amsterdam Journal was printed in a smaller size as well, being a 12mo format rather than the French quarto. The Dibner Library's copy is this Amsterdam reprint and forms a complete run of the issues from the first of 1665 to October 1759. The 220 volumes are all identically bound in eighteenth-century brown leather. The covers are smooth and the spine is gold-tooled in five panels, the second having the title and volume number on red leather, the third having the months and/or years of the volume. Each volume is quite petite, the 12mo format putting their size at 5½ inches tall. Inside the front cover of each book is a bookplate from the Ur Alkvetterns Library of the [Lundsbergs Skola](#), the oldest boarding school in Sweden.

Although the *Journal des savants* is often hailed as the first scientific journal, this is not quite true. The Journal is more of a class of a general gazetteer with all sorts of news that might be of interest to scholarly readers. In its early years, the Journal contained a mix of articles and reviews on scientific, historical, humanistic, legal, and ecclesiastical matters. By far though, the Journal proved most significant for the dissemination of scientific information, which depended heavily on communication among its practitioners that was both frequent and regular. Over the first one hundred years of the Journal, we can see a slow growth in the quantity of its scientific content, indicative of an increasing interest in science among its readership during this period. For the most part, the scientific portion of the Journal ranges around thirty to forty percent of the total contents. Some of the more significant articles in the early issues were on such things as William Petty's double-hulled vessel, Robert Holmes's use of Christiaan Huygens's clocks on voyages in the Atlantic, a conference on comets held at the Jesuit college, a review of Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*, and Ole Roemer's report of his determination of the speed of light (see the diagram at left). Occasionally the articles and reviews are illustrated and our set contains more than 150 engravings (many folded) and numerous woodcuts in the text. All in all, a welcome addition to the holdings of the Dibner Library.

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