

Leaping the Generation Gap

During interviews with rare booksellers in Europe, SPENCER W. STUART discovers how the trade is adapting to changes in bookselling and collecting.

THE PAST TWO DECADES have witnessed paradigmatic shifts in the antiquarian book trade. Spurred on mostly by the development of digital technologies and the Internet, perceptions of rarity and value have been called into question. Certain titles once deemed “high spots” are either seen to be more common or increasingly valuable, diminishing potential profit margins as a result.

At the same time institutions are making efforts to digitize their holdings. This, in turn, makes the content of books more readily available and thus alleviates the financial burden of scholarly collectors, who once relied heavily on rare booksellers to provide them with essential source material for research. These conditions have forced booksellers to adapt, resulting in changes of focus for sellers entering the trade. In North America there is now a focus on ephemera and more recent cultural material, reflecting not only the changing taste of young collectors, but also the interests of new special collections faculty who seek to develop unique holdings.

In the spring of 2018 I embarked on a project. Following in the footsteps of Michael Ginsberg of the Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of America, who has amassed many interviews with the organization’s members in the United States, and Sheila Markham, whose series features U.K. booksellers, I endeavoured to interview booksellers outside of these geographic areas.

Using the directory of the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB) for reference and the contacts of colleagues across the Atlantic, I conducted in-person interviews with figures throughout Europe. Below are snapshots of five conversations I had during my travels, which will be published as complete transcripts at a later date.



ANTHONY PAYNE, LONDON

*Christie’s, Bernard Quaritch Ltd.,
Hordern House, Rare Books
April 10, 2018*

Anthony Payne needed to consult some sources in the British Library for his research on Richard Hakluyt, so—having only corresponded by e-mail—we miraculously found one another in the library’s gift shop and sat down for coffee in the atrium.

Payne began what would become a varied and continuing involvement in the trade starting in 1977, following his post-secondary studies at Cambridge, where he read history. That year his father (a dealer of antique jewellery and silver in Oxford) contacted then-director of Christie’s, Michael Clayton, to inquire whether there were any positions for him. Payne was called in for an interview and, in the meeting, was asked if he had a bad back. Being young, he replied that he did not, and so he was assigned to Christie’s book department in South Kensington.

Payne’s timing could not have been better, for he found himself in an atmosphere that was rapidly changing and developing. Christie’s was making moves to expand its profile and become the international auction house it is known as today. The auction house had offices scattered throughout the countryside, and Payne received entire libraries from stately homes. He quickly moved beyond simply carrying around the tea chests in which the libraries were transported to cataloguing their contents.

With John Carter’s *ABC for Book Collectors* by his side, Payne began to learn the techniques and attention required to catalogue books. Speaking to him amid the bustle of the British Library, he recalled the first book he catalogued—an edition of *Punch*—remembering the pleasure of realizing that it was in a quarto format. His cataloguing technique improved and, under

the direction of Stuart Bennett, was a part of transformation within the Christie's book department to provide more detailed catalogue descriptions. He was also the main auctioneer in the days of 120-lot-an-hour sales, where the auctioneer was expected to remember the names of prominent dealers and collectors in the room.

In 1983, having become director of the book department at Christie's, he was offered a position at Bernard Quaritch in its travel and exploration department. Having worked with Quaritch during his time at Christie's, he was always impressed with the professional character of its staff. The environment Payne entered at Quaritch was considerably different. Gone was the hubbub of the auction atmosphere and the pressure to publish catalogues in time for sales. It was an environment that relied purely on self-motivation. The drive was entirely self-generated, and considerable attention paid to the potential clientele he would contact with new stock he took in. However, in this self-reliant atmosphere, Payne also found a freedom that allowed him to think more creatively in the creation of a catalogue.

Payne went on to serve as a director of Quaritch for 20 years. By the end of his time there in 2008, he had branched out from travel and exploration to creating catalogues relating to the formation of international law and its treatment of Indigenous cultures. Citing the innovative catalogues and work of young booksellers such as Simon Beattie, Justin Croft and Leo Cadogan, he feels that detecting new, unusual or unexplored bibliographical fields is the most exciting and fruitful direction for the trade in the 21st century. As collectors move away from completing pre-defined lists of important titles, they are moving towards collecting selections in

topics they have more personal interest in, which weave through what were previously individual departments within major international dealers.

Payne continues to be involved in the trade as an independent bookseller, acting for a number of clients and serving as the European representative of Hordern House, a rare bookshop based in Sydney, Australia. Hordern House was founded by Anne McCormick and Derek McDonnell, a former colleague responsible for his hiring at Quaritch. Payne has also returned to academia, serving as an honorary research associate at University College London and as an honorary research fellow at the University of East Anglia. He is soon to complete a doctorate on the travel books of Richard Hakluyt (1580–88), which will comprise the first volume of a major bibliographical study that continues the work of the great Hakluyt scholar David Quinn.



MARCUS BENZ, ZURICH
EOS Buchantiquariat Benz
April 17, 2018

Marcus Benz's business phone line was not working when I arrived, and so for the first few minutes of our visit I watched as he worked to put things straight with the phone company. Soon, however, we sat down in his shop, nestled in the steep hills of the old city centre, where



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Bookends at Benz's shop.

there remain several rare booksellers. Benz's involvement in the trade came about completely by chance; initially it was a way to make money while studying economics in Scotland during the mid-1970s. There he became friends with a bookseller, whom he told he could assist in finding Swiss buyers. He was not entirely sure how to go about this, but his contacts in his native Switzerland turned out to be interested in the offers, and Benz was able to sell the books within a week. This business relationship continued through his schooling, and he received a commission for each sale.

After graduating from university, Benz went into the computer business, dealing books as a hobby. It was his wife, Gertrud, who took a serious interest in the trade, and in 1985, they opened a shop. The Scottish dealer provided a portion of the initial inventory on offer. Benz joined on full-time in 1996.

In the early years of their shop, Gertrud's expertise and interest in natural history and medicine (she previously worked in a hospital) shaped their inventory. Presenting a 1992 guide of *VEBUKU* (*Vereinigung der Buchantiquare und Kupferstichhändler in der Schweiz*), the Swiss chapter of *ILAB*, Benz remarks that a bookseller could specialize in those times. The guide shows 36 rare and used bookshops in Zurich. Today's environment of online sales has pushed established brick-and-mortar dealers to adapt and diversify, however, a change he is choosing

to embrace. Using the example of paintings, Benz explains that, 20 years ago, their store would not have had a single one. Now, after a few estate sales in which paintings were offered to him, they make up 30 percent of the store's turnover.

An active member of *VEBUKU*, Benz served as its president for eight years. Under his direction the community has been working to stay together by allowing non-chaptered members to participate in the Zurich Book Fair (many of them becoming members shortly after). On the topic of changes in collecting behaviour, Benz feels it is important to treat young people with respect and reach out in new ways to the public, thus changing the perception of antiquarian books being solely for intellectuals. Suspecting a widening gap between the antiquarian book trade and the public, Benz (along with four other local antiquarian booksellers) developed a speaker's series, with many of the talks relating to Swiss artists and writers, such as Johann Jakob Scheuchzer and Johann Kaspar Lavater. The booksellers were surprised and delighted by the response, as Benz's shop was stuffed with nearly 100 people for the debut event four years ago.

Remarking on the state of the trade, he says that the type of customers an antiquarian bookseller needs to cater to were already a minority 100 years ago and they will remain such into the future. Elements of this can change, he says, if you reach out and make an effort to find out what someone's interest is, assuming nothing and being open to every opportunity that presents itself.

JÖRN GÜNTHER, BASEL

Dr. Jörn Günther Antiquariats und Verwaltung AG
April 18, 2018

Taking a train from Zurich, I arrived in Basel to air thick with pollen and a highly schematic map of their local tram system. I managed to make it to Jörn Günther's office and was directed to his home around the corner by two of his staff. In his upstairs study, a room lined with books from his personal collection relating to 17th-century travel, he began to tell his story. Born in 1957, he grew up with a father who was a collector and his family home housed an extensive library to which he had access. Being an avid

reader at a young age, he took full advantage.

When Günther was 14 years old, his father came home with a medieval manuscript that was included with other acquisitions his father intended to buy. His father invited Jörn and his five siblings to view the manuscript and, from then on, Jörn was hooked. Seeing his son's response, Günther's father allowed him to keep the manuscript in his room. Jörn encouraged his father to collect more manuscripts and thus he was exposed to more examples.

Between secondary school and university, Günther had the opportunity of a lifetime: to intern with legendary bookseller Hans P. Kraus in New York. Although it was only a three-month stint, the experience was a headlong dive into the world of rare bookselling at its most established and allowed him to foster contacts not only with the most prominent booksellers of the second half of the 20th century, but also with German Jewish booksellers who had been forced to immigrate through the 1930s.

Following his time in New York, Günther returned to Europe to study history, German

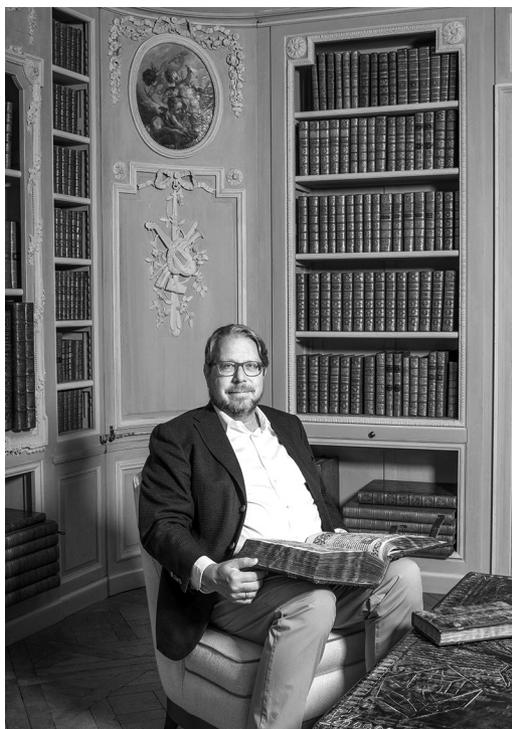
literature, and art history in university. During this time he had moved on from helping his father collect illuminated manuscripts to forming a collection of his own. To finance his studies, he started the practice of purchasing three items and selling two. This hybrid identity as a collector and dealer continues to this day and enriches his passion for early printed books and illuminated manuscripts.

After completing his doctoral thesis, Günther decided to dedicate himself to bookselling, something that was not a clear vocation initially. However, this had been an obvious path to his family. With financial assistance from his father, a German developer, Günther opened a store in Hamburg in 1990. Having begun his career with Kraus, he was exposed to established collectors of a generation that is no longer. Dedicated to the rarefied air of early printed books and illuminated, Günther has taken it upon himself to educate a generation of curious collectors.

In the past year he has been moving away from conventional book fairs, shifting the business to meet the challenges of the contemporary marketplace, including the hiring of someone to fill a dedicated public relations and marketing position. On their website, one has access to videos detailing some of the pieces in their inventory and the site itself is available in several languages, opening his operation up to new markets.

Recalling the image of two old men he observed in Paris exchanging stamps just prior to the transformations his business underwent, Günther has taken on a survivalist approach to the trade, in which one has to adapt to stay relevant and thrive. He believes education is the key to a new era of collectors connecting with early European print culture. He has also found it valuable to think beyond the typical collector of rare books.

Günther is looking to the world of contemporary art, where the cost of an illuminated manuscript is relatively small in comparison to a piece by a prominent figure of the 20th century. Furthermore, a thoroughly catalogued manuscript allows a glimpse into the highly complex interrelation of faith, devotion, and the innovation of materials and techniques to convey such ideas. A self-described "book hunter," Günther remains confident of the



Jörn Günther.

position of illuminated manuscripts within the culture. He cites an Austrian client who is immersed in the fast-paced world of modern business yet still reserves time to turn the pages of a manuscript to enter into a slower time, returning to the fray refreshed and rejuvenated.



TIMUR YÜKSEL, BASEL
Erasmushaus
April 18, 2018

With Jörn Günther's lush catalogues in hand (no doubt inspired by the illustrious catalogues of his mentor, H.P. Kraus) and the sun high in the sky, I grabbed a quick lunch and walked over to Erasmushaus to meet with Timur Yüksel. He and Henri, his son, greeted me at the door and we sat down in his office for a conversation amidst walls of auction catalogues and reference books.

A native of Zurich, Timur Yüksel's earliest exposure to older books came in the form of visits to his grandmother's inherited collection, comprised mostly of 18th- and 19th-century German literature. Timur recalls the ritual of having to wash his hands before touching anything. However, it was in his teens that his interest developed further. At first he was drawn to the physical appearance of early books, then through his studies in art history, French and philosophy, he began to understand the transformative power of their contents.

During university, Yüksel began dealing books for pocket money. It was a modest beginning, studying other sellers' catalogues and issuing two of his own. Not having any form of client base at the time, he relied largely on local dealers as buyers. After university he pursued his interest in

Old Masters painting, taking a position at Sotheby's. At a certain point he moved back towards books and transitioned from Sotheby's to a small regional house in Lausanne that specializes in rare books. Following an attempt to open a shop in Geneva (which he considers a good experience in what not to do), Yüksel joined Erasmushaus in June 1990. Shortly after, he was named

director, and in 2007, he took over operations.

A devout generalist, avoiding what he sees as the monotonous repetition of specialization, he believes generalization provides booksellers the advantage of opening up a field and being able to more easily adapt to shifts in the market by keeping a diverse inventory. Yüksel also stresses the importance of perfect copies in one's stock, having observed the ease with which a collector can connect with the object and not require the persuading words of a dealer.

Since taking over the business, Yüksel has reduced the operation from six employees to four and is concentrating his buying efforts on older, more valuable books from the early print period. Henri's involvement in the company started two years ago, and Yüksel says he is developing the skills required to capture the essence of a book's importance through description—a skill that involves keeping an eye to its historical contribution and relevance in a contemporary context. An early adopter of online selling, Yüksel feels the importance of contact with clients and fellow colleagues remains crucial to the health



Timur Yüksel leafs through a manuscript.

of the trade, observing that online customers are rarely repeat customers. He also stresses the benefit of relations with fellow sellers, who can often provide referrals as well as sound advice when considering a significant purchase.

With a sober tone, Yüksel admits that the text within a book is not necessary in the age of digitization. Therefore, attention to provenance and mapping the individual paths of each copy as a unique object becomes even more important, drawing people into those

various journeys through well researched and compelling catalogue descriptions.

**THOR GUNNAR NÆSS &
ROLF WARENDORPH, OSLO**

Norlis Antikvariat

April 23, 2018

The history of the antiquarian book trade in Oslo centres around three shops, all of which are still in operation: Damms Antikvariat, J.W. Cappelen Antikvariat, and Norlis Antikvariat. During my time in Oslo I had a chance to sit down with Thor Gunnar Næss and Rolf Warendorph of Norlis; their paths into the trade and the stories they relayed weave through the original three.

Founded as a publishing house, bookstore and second-hand shop in 1890, Norlis Antikvariat was at the epicentre of the development of modern Norwegian literature. The publishing portion of the business grew to be one of the largest bookshops for new titles in Oslo, supplying required reading for elementary schools and universities in the area. In 1986, the antiquarian portion of the business separated. Situated across from the National Art Gallery, the antiquarian part of Norlis focuses its attention on Norwegian first editions, polar travel and art books.

Næss's involvement in the book trade happened later in life; he started out first in hotel management and advertising. When the



Thor Gunnar Næss and Rolf Warendorph.

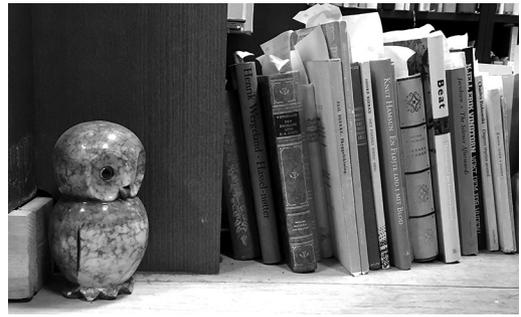
company he worked for shut down, he decided to borrow a friend's flat in Italy to regroup. The apartment was full of rare books and Næss's curiosity grew. He began to examine them and order them, spend time with them. Upon returning to Oslo he got in touch with his friend Anders Guldhaug at Damms, who took ownership of the nearly 170-year-old company in 2002. Næss went on to work for Damms for 10 years, and about 2015, he was offered the opportunity to buy a share of Norlis from third-generation bookseller Nina Welle.

Similar to Næss, Warendorph began his career at Damms, at the age of 24, in 1974. He then moved on to work for Norlis in 1982, shortly before the two wings of the company separated. Both men spoke fondly of their time at Damms and stressed the importance of it within the context of giving new rare booksellers an opportunity, something they feel is waning within the trade.

Speaking of the state of the trade, Warendorph recalls robust exchanges between tourists, particularly English, with interests in polar expeditions. However, the emergence of online sales drastically affected this portion of the trade, as collectors had access to a number of copies internationally. Furthermore, the mass production of books within Norway following the nation's discovery of oil off its shores has resulted in a glut of books flowing into the market over the past 25 years.

Nasjonallbiblioteket (the National Library of Norway) continues to be an active purchaser of titles significant to Norwegian culture, but it is only the main library that puts in requests. Despite these shifts, Næss and Warendorph observe an increase in younger people coming into their store buying items for themselves and others, indicating the emergence of collecting habits in areas such as unique art books and Norwegian firsts. Seeing this trend as a reaction to the highly technological world younger generations find themselves in, they see hope and an opportunity to foster new collectors by providing a warm, welcoming atmosphere.

Næss and Warendorph point to another phenomenon that has people in the local trade invigorated: Damms's multi-series estate auction



Owls adorn the shelves at Norlis Antikvariat.

of the famous Norwegian collector and dealer Bjørn Ringström. It is said that Ringström's estate is a collection offering Norwegian titles of rarity and quality seldom seen in a single lifetime. By the time I had interviewed Næss and Warendorph, there had already been two auctions of the collection and the results indicated healthy sales, something they see as a sign of hope. But the question remains, is there room for younger booksellers within Oslo? Norlis, like many antiquarian bookshops within a city centre, has been able to remain where it is due to a good lease that allows the shop to stay in its location for at least eight years. So the answer is yes—at least until 2026.

~ Spencer W. Stuart is a private collections advisor in Vancouver. A graduate of the Courtauld Institute, he subsequently worked in Toronto and New York for Bonhams Auctioneers, assisting its rare books and manuscripts division. This article and the accompanying photos are from his ongoing project interviewing rare booksellers in Europe and North America.