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The Raven King and His Library

by Wendy Buckle

Because of the library he assembled during his reign, King Matthias I of Hungary (1443 – 1490) is a figure of interest to those of us who collect illuminated manuscript books on stamps. Hungary in particular has issued several very attractive stamps that commemorate the king and his library.

Matthias Corvinus (Figs. 1-3), known as “The Raven King” after the raven that adorned his coat of arms (Figs. 4-5), seized the Hungarian throne in 1458, at the age of 15, and spent much of his life fighting the Hapsburgs. But as well as a successful warrior (Fig. 6), he was also a munificent patron of the arts who sought to leave as symbols of his strategic and humanist ambitions a strong, unified country, splendid palaces, and the most magnificent library in Christendom. The arts, science, and culture of Renaissance Italy, of Florence in particular, found a more appreciative audience in Buda, the Hungarian capital, than anywhere else outside Italy. Corvinus spent the last five

years of his life amassing a library that aimed to assemble all the knowledge of the ancient world. This ambitious goal meant buying, or having copied, the Latin and Greek classics, the great Byzantine writers, some Arab writers, and writings of the early Christian Church fathers. Scholars estimate that the library originally

contained perhaps 2,500 Greek and Latin volumes alone, and about 6,000 works (for volumes often contained several works), amounting to one of the greatest of the mediaeval libraries, and second in size only to the Vatican Library (Fig. 7).

Besides its magnificent book collection, the poet Naldo Naldi (1436-1513) describes the library itself as having high, stained-glass windows, vaulted ceilings, and jewel-encrusted veils set in place to shield the most expensive and cherished items from the bleaching sunlight. According to Naldi, the books were stored up-



Fig. 1: Hungary B119, the surtax on this semi-postal, which was issued on 1 July 1940, was used for war relief.



Fig. 2: Hungary B279; issued for the 43rd observance of Stamp Day on 22 August 1970, this sensuous depiction of Matthias as a Roman emperor comes from a work marking the engagement of his bastard son, John.

Continued on page 27

Also in This Issue

GPA News26

Powerful Computers [and the] Jewish Chronicles29

Recent Issues of Graphic Interest30

That “Old Book” Smell35

Dictionary of Printing and Other Graphics Luminaries Appearing on Stamps—Frank Lloyd Wrightfollowing 35

Continued from page 26

anced with ample acidity.” I believe that that “medium-sweet” finish carried the day for the Idaho Riesling! Many people prefer a sweet wine to a dry one, and our tasting was a perfect example. In any case, we plan to continue the tradition of a joint meeting and wine tasting next year at NTSS in St. Louis. The dates are 27 June through 29 June; please plan to attend!

Another bit of good ROPEX/NTSS news is that Marty Morrissey’s exhibit, *Printing Stamps of the World*, garnered a Bronze Medal in the Multi-Frame competition. Marty also won the Novice Award presented by the American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors. Congratulations, Marty, and keep on exhibiting!!

See also the GPA Financial Report on page 29.

Submitted by Bruce L. Johnson

Continued from page 25



Fig. 3: Hungary 4056; issued to observe Stamp Day 2008 and to mark the 550th anniversary of the election of King Matthias to the throne.

right on snakeskin tripods, covered with gold-coloured cloth adorned with heavy sparkling gems.

Sadly at the death of Matthias in 1490 (rather prosaically by eating a rotten fig that poisoned him), his li-



Fig. 6: Hungary B120; depicting an equestrian statue of King Matthias.

brary started to be dispersed and, when the Ottomans overran Hungary in 1521, what was left of the great library became part of the spoils of war. Today, only around 216 volumes, com-



Fig. 4 (left): Hungary B117; showing the Coat of Arms of the Hunyadi family, a Hungarian noble family, probably of Walachian (Romanian) ancestry, which was strongest in the Late Middle Ages. It shows a raven holding a golden ring in its beak. One source has it that, when a raven carried off a ring King Matthias had removed from his finger, he chased the bird down to retrieve the ring, and in commemoration of this event he took the raven as a symbol for his signet sign.
Fig. 5 (right): Hungary 3084; a stamp issued to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Stamp Day, depicts the arms of King Matthias.

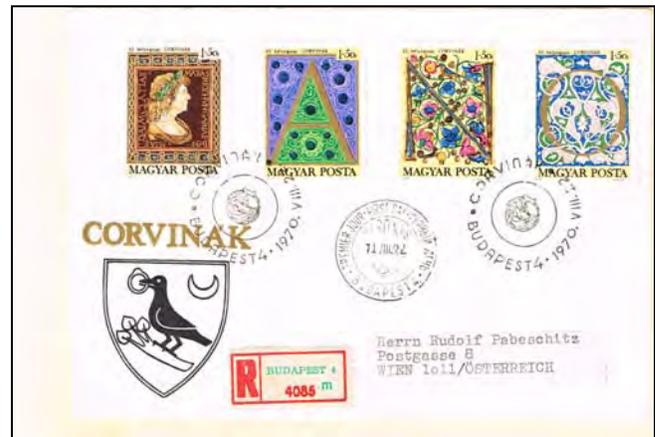


Fig. 7: Hungary B279-B282 on a FDC. Besides the portrait, this set reproduces initial letters from Bibliotheca Corvina manuscripts: B280, the letter A; B281, the Letter N; and B282, the letter O. See also Fig. 8, a miniature sheet of four.

prising around 600 works, are known to have survived. One of these is the magnificent 1485 *Missale Romanum* (Figs. 9), the liturgical book containing the texts and rubrics for the celebration of the Mass in the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church. It was illuminated by the Florentine artist Attavanti degli Attavanti, and is now in the Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, having arrived in Brussels in around 1526 in the baggage

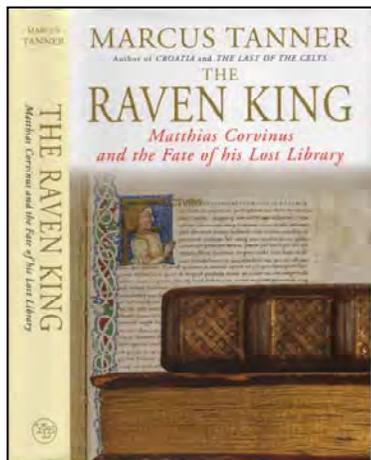
Continued on page 28

Continued from page 27



Fig. 8: Hungary, B283a-d; (a) shows Ransanus speaking before King Matthias; Ransanus was a Dominican and an Italian historian, who was ambassador of the King of Naples in Buda; (b) a scholar and the letter Q; (c) a portrait of Appianus, a Roman historian of Greek ethnicity, and the letter C; and (d) King David and the letter A.

of Mary of Hungary, the last Queen of Hungary before the Ottoman invasion.



Reference

Tanner, Marcus, *The Raven King: Matthias Corvinus and the Fate of His Lost Library* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008), xx, 265 pages.

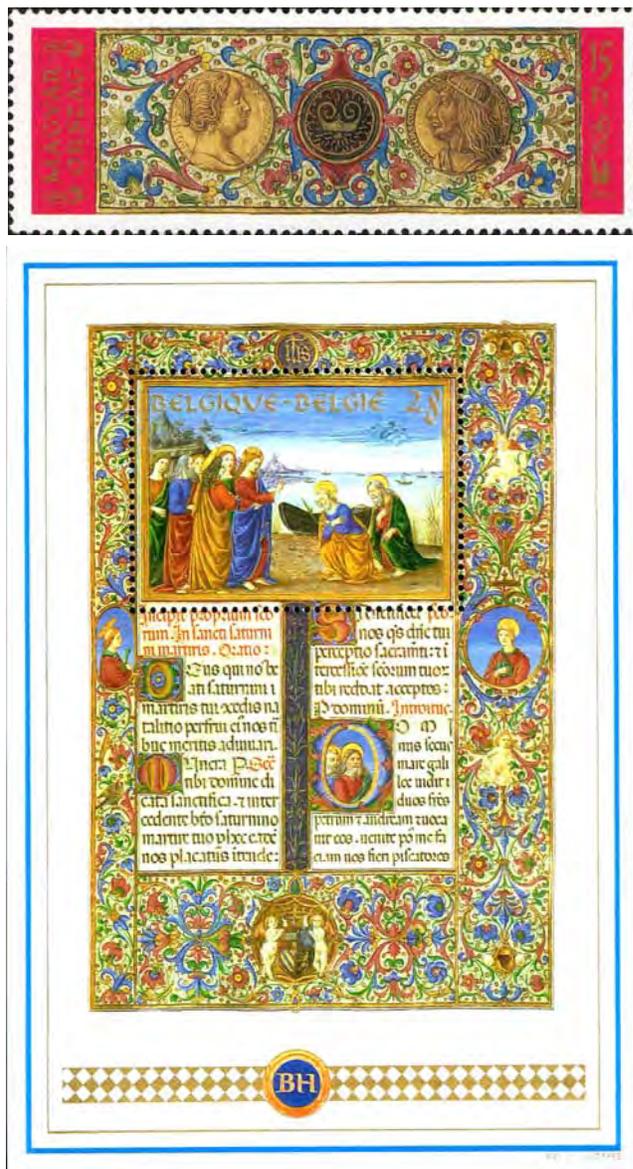


Fig. 9: Issued by Belgium in 1993 (Sc3385) to commemorate the *Missale Romanum* of Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary. Considered one of the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, the “prayer book” belonged to Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary from 1458 to 1490, founder of the University of Buda and the famous library Corviniana. The codex illumination was done by the famous Florentine miniaturist Attavante. As mentioned several times at the beginning of work, he served at the swearing in of various Spanish and Austrian governors. Under Philip II, king of the Netherlands, the manuscript passed into the Library of Burgundy. It includes the signatures of Albert and Isabella.