

# BOOKSELLERS' CATALOGUES IN THE COLLECTION OF THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE (PARIS)

## A SCIENTIFIC DESCRIPTION OF THE COLLECTION OF EPHEMERA

EVE NETCHINE

*Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, Paris, France*

### ABSTRACT

The Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris) published three years ago a scientific description of the rich collection of booksellers' catalogues printed in Europe from 1473 until 1810 available in its collections. This catalogue can be considered a new source for historians of book, historians of literature, booksellers, and, of course, curators and keepers of "early printed books" in patrimonial libraries. While there have been many bibliographical and historical studies of the early printed catalogues of book auctions and of institutional and private libraries, much less scholarly attention has been devoted to booksellers' catalogues. The study of the most fugitive and ephemeral type of early printed book catalogues, those issued by individual booksellers – advertising either their own publications, or a stock of new books acquired by exchange with other booksellers, or second-hand books is a big issue in terms of the history of publishers, history of methods of sale, and also reading and collecting practices.

### KEYWORDS:

booksellers' catalogues, early European collections (1473-1810), collections of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris)

### Introduction

Until recently, very little scholarly attention has been given to catalogues issued by individual booksellers – advertising either their own publications, a stock of new books acquired by exchange with other booksellers, second-hand books or any combination of these<sup>1</sup>

1 Lesage, Claire; Ève Netchine; Véronique Sarrazin. *Catalogues de libraires 1473-1810*. Paris : Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2006.

– although it is an important issue in book trade history and in the history of reading.<sup>2</sup> The publication by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) of *Catalogues de libraires 1473-1810* is part of the trend of publication of sources for early printed book history.

The recently published inventory describes this elusive material as a rich group in terms of chronological range and international scope. It provides scientific descriptions, establishes publication dates for catalogues and offers analysis of the contents of each of them. The data of the printed catalogue are also available through the OPAC of the library, but not the index, of course; many indexes are provided - year and place of publication, but also subject-matter, methods of sale, provenance and evidence of use of individual copies (Figure 1).

### **Booksellers' catalogues: What are they?**

What is a bookseller's catalogue? It is a list of books for sale, published by a bookseller with the aim of advertising his stock. Some catalogues feature books issued by the bookseller himself; we call this category «livres de fonds» in French. Others also feature second-hand books and «assortiments» (in French again) published by other booksellers. The exchange of publications between booksellers provided an opportunity to propose a wide range of books; it was also a way to reduce the financial risk, by dividing it between several booksellers. Sometimes, the number of copies was reported; sometimes, the place and year of publication were given. Until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some of those catalogues mention acquisitions made at book fairs in Frankfurt or Leipzig. Of course, some catalogues also contain etchings, globes or paintings, and all kinds of products: stationery such as paper or sealing wax, as well as tea, chocolate, perfumes, seeds and drugs, etc.

The headings of presentation and their order, the way the books are described, giving or not the exact title, the place of publication and the name of the bookseller vary from one catalogue to another. Those criteria help to distinguish catalogues published for wholesale from those made for retail, and of course a wide range of them which were made for both uses.

2 The most focal work on bookseller's catalogues is Graham Pollard and Albert Ehrman's *The Distribution of books by catalogue from the invention of printing to A. D. 1800*, Cambridge, printed for presentation to members of the Roxburghe Club, 1965 (chapters I-V). A revised edition is in preparation by Giles Mandelbrote. The most recent work focused on booksellers' catalogues will be published in 2010: *Le livre entre le commerce et l'histoire des idées. Les catalogues de libraires (XVe-XIXe siècle) / études réunies par Annie Charon, Claire Lesage et Eve Netchine*. Paris : Ecole des Chartes, in preparation.

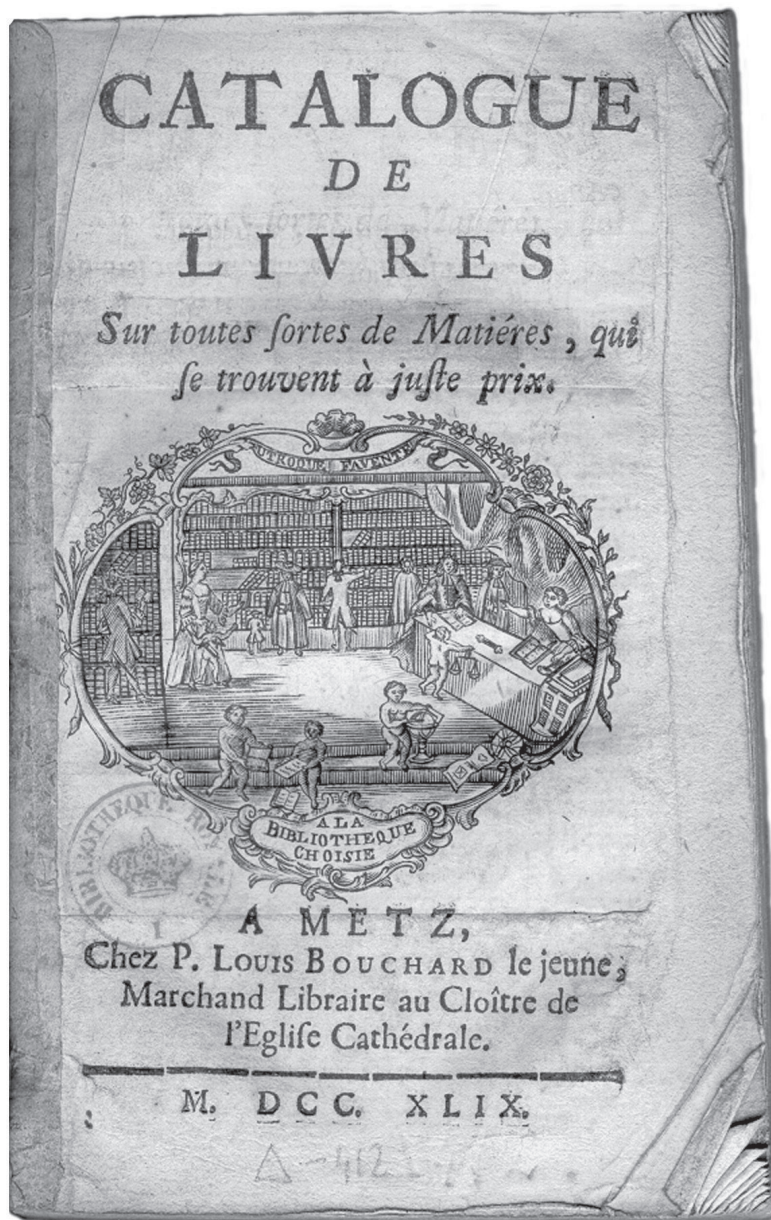


FIGURE 1:  
Catalogue of Pierre-Louis Bouchard (1720-178.?), bookseller in Metz (France), 1749, woodcut by "V.LS" \*i.e. \*Vincent Le Sueur (1668-1743). Catalogue is kept at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris

«Terms of purchase», letters «to the readers», «to the customers», and also mail-order conditions, bookbinding conditions, discount for other booksellers – all of those elements provide useful information about the readership that the bookseller wants to reach. Some of these catalogues are numbered and printed periodically. They represent an image of the bookseller's production, and the evolution of this production.

Most of the catalogues have a very modest layout – not impressive at a first glance. Some of them are broadsides or small leaflets of very modest appearance. Of course, others are heavy volumes with neat and elegant title pages, printer's devices, dropped caps, head pieces...and all kinds of typographic or engraved ornaments, while some even have fine bindings... but these represent a minor part of the holdings.

The holdings of the BnF are quite extensive! They are comprised of 3,200 different items, and more than 4,000 copies. The earliest catalogues are *incunabula* printed in Strasbourg (Johannes Mentelin, 1410?-1478) or in Venice (Aldo Manuzio, 1450?-1515); in terms of later catalogues, it was decided to stop the hunt with the volumes from the year 1810. In any case, drawing any conclusions about the representativeness of this corpus is tricky. This elusive material has not been well preserved, even in patrimonial libraries: such catalogues are not protected by copyright registration since this kind of booklet is not considered a "real book" in itself. Some statistical elements show that the remains are very poor in comparison with the original production: only 20 % of the 3,200 items of the collection are represented in more than one copy. A recent thesis on Charles Antoine Jombert (1712-1784)<sup>3</sup> explains that he is believed to have published 25 catalogues between 1738 and 1773; 20 of them are still extant today, 13 are in the BnF and others elsewhere in the world. The BnF catalogues are only the remains, testimonies of a much wider collection.

The chronologic curve is representative of what we know about the printed production in Europe; an exponential evolution from the very beginning of printing to the end of our period (Figure 2).

Parisian booksellers catalogues, which are an important part of the corpus, present the chronology quoted by Henri-Jean Martin<sup>4</sup>

3 Kaucher, Greta. Charles-Antoine Jombert, un libraire parisien sous Louis XIV : Mémoire de DEA sous la direction de Frédéric Barbier. Paris: Ecole pratique des hautes études, Section «Sciences historiques et philologiques», 2004. [dactyl]

4 Martin, Henri-Jean. Print, power, and people in 17th-century France. Metuchen (N.J.); London : Scarecrow, 1993.

	Booksellers' catalogues	%
15 <sup>th</sup> century	2	0.06
1501-1550	8	0.24
1551-1600	13	0.40
1601-1650	50	1.54
1651-1700	321	9.90
1701-1750	459	14.16
1751-1800	1964	61.67
1801-1810	397	12.22
Others	26	0.80
Total	3240	100

FIGURE 2.  
Chronology of the BnF corpus (data as of 2007)

about the French and Parisian 17<sup>th</sup> century's publishing history: there is a gap of 80 years between the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Simon de Colines, Robert and Charles Estienne, Chrétien Wechel, Nicolas Le Riche, or Guillaume Morel), and the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Siméon Piget, Sébastien Cramoisy, Frederic I. Léonard, Antoine Vitré, Guillaume I. Desprez, Thomas Blaise in 1641). During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the publication of catalogues was mainly a practice of academic booksellers. In the field of literature, booksellers did not offer real volumes, rather very short and selective broadsheets were bound at the end of the books themselves.

In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, every bookseller systematically published a catalogue, and updated it. During the French Revolution, every bookseller – even small ones, had their own printed catalogue published several times a year. Some important booksellers published serial catalogues; others published a general catalogue completed with supplements.

We already know, thanks to Henri-Jean Martin<sup>5</sup>, the BnF's collections are very representative of Parisian and academic issues. How-

5 Ibid.

ever, the geographical origin of the catalogues is a sensitive gauge of the main cultural and commercial roads connecting the French book trade:

- The French catalogues represent the major part of the corpus and Paris counts for much of this category (55%). Other French cities, even those which are important in the typographic landscape, like Lyon (51 issues), Rouen, Toulouse, Marseille and Avignon are very poorly represented (there is only one document from each of these towns).
- The Netherlands (more than 10%) and the German-speaking areas are important; peripheral towns as Bouillon, Neuchatel, Berne, Geneva and Basel occupy an important place in the corpus. We know that they provided the French kingdom with a wide range of books, which were not in a situation to get a copyright (a French “*Privilège*”) from the king.
- 81 catalogues come from Italy, which is less than 2%.
- The representation of Spain and Portugal is very discrete, in spite of the fact that this area, as we well know, produced a lot of catalogues: but the Iberian Peninsula was not a main interest of the French royal library.

### **Book trade practices**

These printed documents are modest indeed, but they are highly valuable as they are published by the booksellers themselves and thus express their own voice and give firsthand information on their periods of activity, their affiliations and associations, their addresses and successive moves, and, of course, on the books they sold, as well as on their trading policy and their relationships with customers.

The evolution of catalogues was very progressive: until the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the stock of the bookseller was presented in one list: bookseller's own publications; books obtained by exchange with colleagues; and then the second-hand books which were usually mixed or not precisely distinguished. It was also difficult to distinguish between catalogues made for booksellers buying wholesale, and catalogues made for retail.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was the time of differentiation: discount catalogues made for booksellers or stock catalogues with a heading in the front listing the bookseller's own editions; both retail and wholesale have their own publications.

There was a variety of uses for those catalogues: quite different from the shelves of the bookshop, the catalogues offer another kind of view on the stock. The description of the condition of the book was useful for mail-order selling; some booksellers offered rooms for rent to customers for bibliographic tours.<sup>6</sup>

A catalogue is, of course, a list of books, but small details show the purpose of this list, which is another way to present books, an alternative to the bookshop. In the bookshop, books are on the shelves; the catalogue give another presentation. This new kind of presentation was useful for local customers, but much more so for distant ones. It was for these distant customers that some German booksellers advertise in their catalogues rooms for rent in their homes. We also know from Lavoisier's correspondence that he usually prepared his bibliographic tours in Europe by consulting booksellers' catalogues. Descriptions of the condition of books were made mostly for these distant customers, who bought by mail.

The main booksellers' customers were the aristocracy and the learned "bourgeoisie" – keen on literature, history, enlightenment philosophy, but also on entertaining and practical books on topics such as gardening. However, from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, different categories of customers began to emerge, each with a particular focus – notable in particular are various specific professional categories, such as medicine, law, architecture and mathematics.

The order of the books<sup>7</sup> presented in the catalogues is complex and varies a lot between different booksellers and according to the orientation of their stocks: many systems are in use, often associated in the same catalogue. The most frequent structure is probably a division according to the format (*in-folio*, *in-quarto* and smaller formats), and inside each format, a presentation in an alphabetical order of titles and of authors' names. We find this system in every country and until the end of the period, especially in the case of short catalogues mainly made with the bookseller's own stock. We also find another system based on what is called in France the "classement des libraires", which means "booksellers' classification". Based on the structure of private libraries, this classification was created by Prosper Marchand (1678-1756) and Gabriel Martin (1678?-1761) for sales catalogues. But booksellers often used this system for their own catalogues, and adapted it, of course, to

6 This kind of bibliographic travels is described in: Beretta, Marco. *Bibliotheca Lavoisieriana* : the catalogue of the library of Antoine Laurent Lavoisier. Firenze : L. S. Olschki, 1995.

7 Chartier, Roger. *The order of books : readers, authors, and libraries in Europe between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries*. Stanford, Ca : Stanford University Press, 1994.

their stock, expanding the five headings (theology, law, arts and sciences, literature and history) according to their needs.

### **Provenance of booksellers' catalogues**

The interest in the description of the copy-related information (provenance and other descriptive elements such as handwritten marginal notes) is no longer limited to rare books or books belonging to great owners. These descriptions are now of a systematic concern. The results of these investigations justify the choice of the description: the use of these catalogues by the booksellers themselves, the customers (scholars or not), the owners of private collections and the bookkeepers give an image of the different uses – expected or not, of this specific category of documents.

This account of catalogues shows how the contribution of individual collectors, as much as of great institutions, can decisively shape our view of the past – especially in the case of ephemeral and fugitive materials such as booksellers' catalogues. Finally, it draws attention to some important early collectors whose catalogues are now part of the BnF collections. A better understanding of the provenance of booksellers' catalogues is essential to any attempt to interpret their historical context and patterns of survival and use.

Some of the documents, perhaps one third, come from the professional libraries of the bookkeepers. Catalogues were a tool used for buying books. Some ex-libris and manuscript dedications to the "Gardes des livres imprimés de la Bibliothèque nationale » mention Jean-Auguste Capperonnier (1745-1820) or Joseph Van Praet (1754-1837), for example. Others come from private collections; the most important owners are closely related to the world of book trade. They are:

- Etienne-Alexandre Anisson-Duperron (1749-1794) who was the last "directeur de l'imprimerie royale" and descendant of a great dynasty of booksellers working in Lyon in the 17<sup>th</sup>, and in Paris in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They also led the Imprimerie royale du Louvre. E.-A. Duperron was executed in 1794 and his private library confiscated and kept by the Bibliothèque nationale.
- Jean-Jacques Debure (1765-1853) comes from a dynasty of Parisian booksellers (libraires de la bibliothèque du Roi) who donated his collection of catalogues. They bear annotations by the bookseller's own hand and represent the memory of his family of booksellers.

- Achille Jullien (1794-1870), a bookseller working for book sales and auctions; a famous and fanatic owner of catalogues.

On the shelves of our libraries, we also find testimonies of another use of those catalogues: collections of bookseller's catalogues and sales catalogues bound together, sometimes with tabs or adhesive bookmarks, and index of the contents: these kinds of tools make these booklets easier to consult. Nicolas du Tralage (1640?-1720?), who was an editor of *Tite-Live* and a very learned geographer, owned many of these volumes. It documents an unexpected use of the catalogues by scholars. They divert the catalogues from their initial aim, and use them as a sort of bibliography.

In spite of their constant presence in the private and institutional libraries, booksellers' catalogues always remained in the shadow of their "half-brothers", sales catalogues, which, due to the manuscripts, the incunabula and the rare books they provided, attracted most of the attention. However, inventory work on those hidden collections offers avenues of fruitful investigation for the history of book trade and readership.

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## Readings

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## Biographical sketch

Eve Netchine is Deputy Keeper at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris). She has been working for several years as keeper of the books in the BNF, cataloguing early printed books. Her main interests are international book trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and history of readership in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. She is at present working on the development of public reading, and on the redefining the profession of librarian in Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She recently published a paper about Eugène Godin, one of the early librarians devoted to mass reading public at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the Bibliothèque nationale (*Revue de la bibliothèque nationale de France*, 34, 2010, 57-63).

She is also involved in the history of games and she curated an exhibition called "Jeux de princes, jeux de villains" (Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, March-June 2009).

**KNJIŽNIČARSKI KATALOZI U ZBIRCI NACIONALNE  
KNJIŽNICE FRANCUSKE U PARIZU  
ZNAKSTVENI OPIS ZBIRKE EFEMERNE GRAĐE**

**Sažetak**

Nacionalna knjižnica Francuske u Parizu objavila je prije tri godine znanstveni opis svoje bogate zbirke knjižarskih kataloga tiskanih u Europi u razdoblju od 1473. do 1810. Ovaj se katalog može smatrati novim izvorom za povjesničare knjige, povjesničare književnosti, knjižare i, naravno, knjižničare "stare knjige" u knjižnicama koje čuvaju nacionalnu baštinu. Mnoge bibliografije i povijesne studije obrađuju stare tiskane kataloge s dražbi knjiga te institucionalne i privatne knjižnice, međutim znatno je manje pozornosti posvećeno istraživanju knjižarskih kataloga. Proučavanje najnepostojanije i najefemernije vrste starih tiskanih kataloga, onih koje su objavljivali pojedini knjižari oglašavajući bilo svoje vlastite publikacije ili inventar novih knjiga dobivenih razmjenom s drugim knjižarima ili pak korištene knjige, značajna je tema za povijest izdavača, povijest metoda prodaje, kao i povijest navika čitanja i sakupljanja knjiga.

**Ključne riječi:** knjižničarski katalogi, stare europske zbirke (1473. - 1810.), zbirke nacionalne knjižnice Francuske u Parizu