A HIDDEN TREASURE

Mortensen Library’s Collection Includes A World-Famous 15th-Century History

by Trish Charles

In the climate-controlled atmosphere of the rare book section of University Libraries at the University of Hartford rests a large volume with a somewhat dilapidated binding. Nothing about its exterior suggests its importance. Yet, Humphrey Tonkin, president emeritus of the university and president of the Mortensen Library board of visitors, has called it a “magnificent work.”

Published in June of 1493, the year after Columbus sailed to the Americas, the Nuremberg Chronicle (formally known as the Liber Chronicarum) tells the story of the history of the world as it was known in the late 15th century. It was compiled by Hartmann Schedel, a physician and scholar living in Nuremberg, Germany.

The Chronicle was originally published in Latin for the imperial, theological, and academic markets. A German translation, which came out six months later, was for the upper-middle class, who lacked a university education and therefore did not know Latin. Scholars estimate that 1,300 to 1,400 copies of the Latin edition were printed; 700 to 1,000 of the German. The university’s volume is one of approximately 400 copies in Latin of the Nuremberg Chronicle that survive today.
On Sept. 22, the Mortensen Library board of visitors sponsored a symposium on the *Nuremberg Chronicle* that was chaired by Robert Churchill, assistant professor of history at Hillyer College. Speakers included Dr. David Crombie, of the Hartford Medical Society; George Lechner, adjunct professor in the College of Arts and Sciences and reference assistant at Mortensen Library; and James Lee, associate professor of printmaking at Hartford Art School. *The Observer* asked the symposium participants and Randi Ashton-Pritting ’98, director of University Libraries, to tell us about this remarkable book.

There are a number of reasons. The primary one is undoubtedly religious in nature. We must remember that the making of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* was above all a religiously based project. The book begins with the Creation from a Christian perspective and ends with a vivid representation of the Last Judgment. Schedel was a Christian humanist, and he believed his scholarly vocation and duty on a spiritual level was the saving of souls. The use of elaborate, large-scale illustrations, as well as the publication of the text in both Latin and German, made the *Chronicle* all the more accessible to a newly literate middle class.

A significant impetus for the work is certainly the much-anticipated (or -dreaded) coming of the year 1500. Anxiety similar to what we experienced with the approach of the year 2000 dominated religious consciousness during the closing years of the 15th century, and this is one reason for the *Chronicle*’s repeated fascination with end-of-days omens like comets, freakish storms, and human oddities.

At this time, deformities were viewed as expressions of the wrath of God, and even portents of greater wrath to come, like pestilences, volcanoes, storms, and droughts. Doctors of that era had no notion of infection but were aware of the contagious nature of leprosy, plague, syphilis, smallpox, and other diseases. Bleeding the patient was a common means of “releasing bad humors” that were believed to contribute to disease. This practice is illustrated in the *Nuremberg Chronicle*. Surgery was performed as well but without modern anesthesia. Instead, various concoctions containing opium and strong wine were used to sedate the patient and diminish, but never eliminate, the pain.

The *Chronicle* is significant because its arrival marked the beginning of medical textbook publication. It also gives an appreciation of how far we have come in science since then, while reminding us of some of the values and practices that still apply 500 years later.