Thomas Hollis and his donation to Leiden University Library, 1759-70

It is generally felt that the second half of the eighteenth century is not one of the most flourishing periods in the life of the University of Leiden. Students from neighbouring countries, who a century or even fifty years previously, would have flocked to Leiden with celebrities such as Petrus Burman, professor from 1715 to 1741, Gerard Noodt (1686-1725) and especially Herman Boerhaave (1709-38), stayed at home or continued their studies elsewhere. Important new investments did not materialize, and few foreign tourists were impressed by what they saw at Leiden: in London, Paris, but also Amsterdam and even at the medical school in Rotterdam scholars were better provided with academic collections, auditoria and libraries. According to the young merchant Charles Leroulx, a visit to the once famous anatomical theatre of Leiden was a complete waste of time.

All the same, in the Republic, Leiden stood for scholarship and learning, and tourists kept visiting the traditional sights mentioned in their guidebooks, particularly the comparatively small botanical garden (those in Paris, Uppsala and Amsterdam were more important) and the adjoining cabinet of natural history, places appreciated by scientists and laymen alike.

Comments on the library are less frequent, possibly because the building, just as the reading rooms of the British Museum (founded 1753), and the Royal Library in Paris, was open only twice a week: on Wednesdays and Saturdays.
from two to four. Dr John Ratcliff, Master of Pembroke College, Oxford, while on tour in Holland in 1734, wrote:

The public library adjoins the anatomical theatre. They both of them are contained within the same building, which in times of Popery seems to have been a monastical church. The east end is entirely taken up in the anatomical theatre, the remaining part is now divided into two storeys; the lower one is now used for the English church, and the upper one for the library. The room is of about the same extent as one of our larger private college libraries in Oxford, and is filled up usefully enough, but in as plain a manner as can well be. The books are placed most of them in a lofty row of double shelves running in the middle of the room from one end of it to the other; the remainder in cases or shelves against the walls. The MSS are locked up, and the printed books secured by a row of wooden rails running all along each alley, so that you receive the libri impressi from the hands of an under-library keeper, the MSS from the library keeper himself.

[58] In one part of it stands a noble instrument of the Orrery kind, whereby all the motions of the planets may be seen performed within a large armillary sphere. Peter, Czar of Muscovy, examined it with so much wayward curiosity as to render it quite useless; it has since been repaired by [blank] and locked up in a glass case. The only ornament[s] of the library are a full-length of William I, Prince of Orange and the heads of several literati; none of the very modern ones. Each case of shelves has a leaden ledge upon it to receive water from a reservoir at the top of the building in case of fire.4

Besides 'many musty old books', the Scottish engineer Thomas Smeaton (1755) also noticed the 'large Copernican sphere', a picture of which could be seen in the 1716 catalogue. The Swede Bengt Ferrner (1759), his countryman J.H. Lidén, who did not get to see the valuable manuscripts (1769), and the German Johann Beckmann (1762), all thought the room was too small for the well over 25,000 volumes. According to Johann Jacob Grabner (1790) they were stacked in three or four rows on each shelf of the bookcases that reached up 'as high as the ceiling', so that many volumes had 'not seen daylight in fifty years'. Two French tourists consulted the catalogue in a bookshop in The Hague and concluded there was really nothing of interest to be found.5

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