A ‘codicological unit’: Peter Gumbert

After more than twenty-eight years, Dr J.P. (Peter) Gumbert retired from the University of Leiden on 31 December 2000. Throughout his academic career Peter Gumbert has been closely associated with his Leiden Alma Mater. Long though that association may be, his association with books is even older. He was born, in January 1937 in Nijmegen, into a book-oriented family: his father was the antiquarian Dr Hans Ludwig Gumbert (1903-94), who worked in Nijmegen from 1935 and from 1947 until his death was the manager of J.L. Beijers, the Utrecht bookshop and auction house. After leaving school (Stedelijk Gymnasium, Nijmegen), Peter went on to Leiden to read classics, remaining spiritually and physically true to both city and university until shortly before his retirement. It was there, too, that he met the woman who would later become his wife, the classicist Marijke Hepp; and it was there that they married and had their three children, Eline, Max and Barbara.

In the fifth year of his course Peter Gumbert was offered the post of assistant to Gerard Isaac Lieftinck, who was then professor of Western Palaeography & Codicology. After taking his degree he joined Lieftinck’s staff, and later, having taken his doctorate in 1972, succeeded him (though the post was now that of Reader rather than a professorship). Peter himself gives an account of his path through academia – including a remark about this matter of his appointment – which to some extent is written for an international audience. Prompted in part by the sombre outlook for manuscript studies in Europe, in the course of the nineteen-nineties the Gazette du Livre Médiéval, a periodical of which Gumbert was one of the founders and which he greatly admired and widely promoted, published a number of articles about the situation in various countries.¹ In his farewell lecture, delivered shortly before the turn of the millennium in December 2000, he was able to build on this theme.² In 1996, under the title ‘Teaching the Medieval Book in Holland’, he was concerned mainly with the history and practice of palaeography and manuscript studies at Leiden University; for what in the late Middle Ages was the important phenomenon of the printed book Gumbert has never quite felt the same affection.³ As for the emphasis on Leiden –


³ J.P. Gumbert, ‘Teaching the Medieval book in Holland’, in: GLM, 29 (1996), pp. 18-23. As bibliographical details of Peter Gumbert’s output after this time are readily available, extreme restraint has hereinafter been observed in the notes.
which of course lies in that province of the Kingdom of the Netherlands that is called Holland – there is a reason for that, too: Leiden was the first university at which the study of script and manuscripts was granted a regular place in the curriculum, and it has remained the only university ever to have codicologists occupying full-time chairs of manuscript studies. All the sadder, then, that with Gumbert’s departure the discipline has lost its last full-time professor in Leiden, in the Netherlands and in Europe. There have been and still are other lecturers, even professors, but they have always had other duties to attend to in addition.4

But it is not the purpose of these lines to strike a minor chord: that would do less than justice to Peter and to the profession. Peter Gumbert is unquestionably one of the most prominent codicologists the Netherlands has produced: he is held in high regard both professionally and personally, both at home and abroad, and with his many penetrating and extraordinarily wide-ranging studies he has contributed greatly to the survival, advancement and standing of the discipline. As a witty and learned conference speaker he is always a welcome guest, and has been invited to take up research scholarships by many institutions not only in Europe but also in the United States and Israel. That as a palaeographer-codicologist he should be elected to the rarefied circles of the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (KNAW, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences) underlines this recognition from an unimpeachable quarter.5

For those who didn’t know, it should be pointed out that in Leiden palaeography can be studied as a subsidiary subject only, not as a main subject. In other words there is no palaeography degree as such, but for many students of modern languages, classics, history, art history, theology or philosophy who concern themselves with late classical or medieval sources it is a singularly agreeable subsidiary subject. Peter has never been part of any department or course that obliged him to participate in teaching anything that he did not himself wish to teach or was unable to teach as he wished.

4 For the sake of completeness, this is the situation in the spring of 2003 in the Netherlands: at the University of Amsterdam courses in codicology are given by Dr Jos Biemans, curator of mss at the UL; Dr Hans Kienhorst teaches codicology at the Universities of Nijmegen and Utrecht; courses in codicology are also given in Leiden by Dr André Bouwman, curator of mss at Leiden University Library and in Utrecht by Koert van der Horst, curator of mss at Utrecht University Library; at the University of Groningen Prof. Jos M.M. Hermans is Extraordinary Professor of Western Codicology and Medieval Bibliology in the interdisciplinary Department of Medieval & Renaissance Studies. The chair in Leiden has not been filled. Incidentally: Biemans read Dutch in Utrecht where he took his doctorate under Gumbert and W.P. Gerritsen, Hermans read History and Art History in Nijmegen and took his doctorate in Groningen under Gumbert and Johan Gerritsen. Cf. Gumbert, art. cit. (n. 3), pp. 20-1.

5 Incidentally: on 10 February 2003 he gave a stimulating and lucid lecture to the KNAW under the title ‘Codicologische Eenheden’, a lecture that he reworked in English as ‘Codicological Units’ in May 2003 at a conference in Cassino. The text is soon to be published (in both languages); it has not yet been included in the bibliography. This is a key concept in codicology as Gumbert conceives it: hence, with a wink, the title for this sketch.