Gerard van Thienen, incunabulist of the Low Countries¹

G.A. van Thienen took up office with the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague in September 1969. At the time its librarian Dr C. Reedijk decided to appoint Van Thienen as a curator and Van Thienen himself never doubted the aptness of this decision. This article examines the activities carried out by Van Thienen over a period of 35 years. At the same time it is a contribution to the history of bibliographical studies in the Netherlands and of the role played by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

First of all attention will be paid to the activities from the beginning of Van Thienen’s career and the large inventory projects to which his name will remain attached once and for all. Then the collection building, the care for restoration and the presentation will be dealt with.

EARLY ACTIVITIES

Before the arrival of Van Thienen curatorship for the incunables and other early printed editions of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek was entrusted to Dr R. Pennink and then to Wim Post. On 15 January 1969 Post wrote to miss Kronenberg:

No doubt you will have heard from miss Pennink that for eighteen months already I have been taken out of the department of early printed editions in order to assist in the planning of a programme of requirements for a new building for our library. As a result, I have not been able to check regularly whether there were any attractive early printed works for us in antiquarian booksellers’ catalogues and auction catalogues.²

Miss Kronenberg was, to put it irreverently, a freelancer, with ample facilities provided by and through the KB. At times incunables and post-incunables were even delivered to her in her home in The Hague.³ Van Thienen speaks warmly and with respect of her, for instance in his contribution to the Groningen congress of codicologists of 1992.⁴ He also wrote a note to her which returned to...

1 This article is an adaptation of an address held on 4 June 2004 in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague on the occasion of Van Thienen’s retirement.
2 This letter forms part of the scholarly correspondence bequeathed by Dr Kronenberg to the KB, shelf mark 135 H 30.
the KB together with Kronenberg’s book-historical legacy: ‘Dear Dr M.E. Kronenberg’, he wrote: ‘Since September 1969 I have been in charge of the early printed editions. I am a pupil of Prof. Hellinga, under whose supervision I will graduate this year.’ He informs her of this on 27 February 1970, which is six months before her death.

So Van Thienen was appointed to succeed Post with the early printed books. From the first moment he took office in the KB he was keenly involved in the acquisition of early printed books – he tried for instance to acquire for the KB a copy of the first edition of the book in which Harvey published his discovery of the circulation of the blood, originating from the library of Constantijn Huygens. Van Thienen was also engaged in the history of the book in general. He was the first editor for the Netherlands of the ABHB, the Annual bibliography of the history of the book and libraries. In 1971 he was joined by Gruys and De Wolf and together with an administrative assistant they formed from then on the department of Early Printed Books.

With the names of Hellinga and Kronenberg the most recent eminent predecessors of Van Thienen have been mentioned. Of course the name of father Kruitwagen must be added here. This ‘frater Elephas’ died in 1954. The founders of incunable studies in the Netherlands, the KB librarians Holtrop and Campbell, must also be mentioned here to provide the historical context in which Van Thienen operated.

The scholarly career of Professor Wytze Hellinga was not only of great significance for the study of Dutch language and literature and textual criticism, but also for the study of incunables. The work he published together with his wife Lotte in 1966, The Fifteenth-Century Printing Types of the Low Countries is the standard work which, on the basis of the typefaces used, makes it possible for incunables that often neither record the name of the printer nor the year of printing, to be dated and ascribed to a printer. As a former student at Hellinga’s own Instituut voor Neofilologie Van Thienen contributed to the further research of the Hellinga’s. There was even mention of a ‘Hellinga school’. This is the school Gerard van Thienen comes from.

5 KB 195 H 90.
7 For a first orientation regarding the importance of Kruitwagen for bibliographical studies, see the cited literature in Hoftijzer & Lankhorst, op. cit. (n. 3), p. 27.
8 See this also Lankhorst & Hoftijzer, op. cit. (n. 3), p. 15 for a first orientation.