

1-1-2001

# University of Paris Libraries: Sainte Genevieve Library

E. Stewart Saunders

*Purdue University*, [ssaunder@purdue.edu](mailto:ssaunder@purdue.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/lib\\_research](http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/lib_research)

---

Saunders, E. Stewart, "University of Paris Libraries: Sainte Genevieve Library" (2001). *Libraries Research Publications*. Paper 24.  
[http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/lib\\_research/24](http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/lib_research/24)

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

**Copyright 2001 From International Dictionary of Library Histories by David H. Stam. Reproduced by permission of Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.**

## **BIBLIOTHEQUE SAINTE GENEVIEVE**

10 Place du Panthéon

75005 Paris, France

Web URL: <http://Panoramix.univ-Paris1.Fr/bsg/indx.html>

### **Significant Dates**

ca 508: Church of Sainte Geneviève founded.

8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> cent.: Period in which library founded.

1619: Library defunct.

1624: Library refounded.

1790: Library nationalized by revolutionary government.

1839: The Sainte Geneviève, Mazarin, and Arsenal Libraries joined under common administration.

1930: Library attached to the University of Paris.

1972: Interuniversity library for all campuses of the University of Paris.

### **Significant Collections**

The Sainte Geneviève holds around 3 million volumes. In the general collection there are 1,100,000 monographs, 12,800 serials, and 2,800 subscriptions. Special Collections houses 4,230 manuscripts, 1,450 incunabula, and 120,000 special editions. The Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, housed in Special Collections, is a collection of avant garde French literature. A Nordic collection of 163,000 volumes is also housed separately. The manuscript collection is rich in illuminated manuscripts. Collection of musical scores for the 16<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Collection of editions of De Imitatione Christi. Books and papers of Romain Roland. Collection of the Union Culturelle Française of books published in French by foreign authors. Collection on Brazil, Portugal, and Spain.

### **History of the Sainte Geneviève Library**

The Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève has been called the oldest library in Paris. Whether this is true depends on how one juggles definitions, but age is not its distinguishing mark. Rather it is the ability to survive change, sometimes cataclysmic in proportions, and to adapt to new circumstances. Born as an abbey library, reconstituted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a scholarly library, it has evolved into an encyclopedic library for scholars, students, and the general public. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century it had one of the largest collections in France; for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries it attracted perhaps more patrons than any other library in France, thanks in part to its convenient location in the Latin Quarter adjacent to the Panthéon.

## The Library before the Revolution

Little if anything remains of the mediaeval abbey library. Sainte Geneviève Abbey had students and its chancellor granted the *licentia docendi*. One may suppose that an active teaching function for the abbey would lead to the need for a library. It is conceivable that a library existed as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but of existing manuscripts known to have belonged to the Sainte Geneviève, none can be dated before the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the library held around 200 manuscripts and allowed outsiders to use them. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the abbey was involved with the political factions contending for the crown, siding first with the League and then with Henry of Navarre, and disregarding its monastic rules and religious vocation. The library gradually disappeared, some of it being sold. When the abbot died in 1619 the library was empty. Cardinal Richelieu appointed François de la Rochefoucauld in 1624 to carry out a reform of the abbey. Seeing the need for a library, Rochefoucauld in 1630 donated 600 volumes from his personal library to start an abbey library. This is the beginning of the library as we know it today.

Louis Jacob's description of over 30 libraries in Paris, published in 1644, does not even mention the Sainte Geneviève. Yet 80 years later the Sainte Geneviève was among the largest in France. By 1673 the library had grown to 6,000 volumes; by 1687, 20,000 volumes; and in 1710 it reached 38,000 volumes. The major factor for this growth was the receipt in 1710 of a legacy of 16,000 printed books from the estate of Charles Maurice LeTellier, Archbishop of Reims. The LeTellier library was strong in theology and ecclesiastical history, as one would assume, but it also contained books on geography, medicine, and the sciences.

The thrust of Sainte Geneviève before the Revolution was collection building. In support of this effort were a number of devoted scholarly librarians and reasonable financial support from the abbey. The first librarian, Jean Fronteau (1636-1662), was an expert in middle eastern languages. He was later dismissed from his chair in theology for Jansenist views. Claude DuMolinet (1675-1687) had a fascination for antiquities and built a collection of medals, antiquities, fossils, zoological specimens, etc. to create a museum as part of the library. Claude Prévost (1718-1752) initiated work on a classified catalog for printed books. The classification system was based on the one used by Nicolas Clément to classify the LeTellier collection. During the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the library was dominated by two librarians, Alexander-Gui Pingré (1754-1796) and Barthélemy Mercier (1757-1772). Pingré, an astronomer, was often away to make observations, leaving much of the work to Mercier. Yet the library is indebted to Pingré for the purchase of many books in the exact sciences. Pingré also gave to the library journals he received as a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences. During their tenure the city of Paris gave 750 *livres* a year to support acquisitions. Mercier maintained a ledger in which he recorded the books he purchased, the amount, the bookstore, and the reason for purchase.

In 1790 the collection stood at 60,000 printed books and 2,000 manuscripts. This made it equal with the Mazarin Library but smaller than the Arsenal and Royal Libraries. At that time the Sainte Geneviève was an encyclopedic collection, 44% religious in subject and 56% secular. The sciences and arts accounted for 23%, belles lettres 20%, and history 18%. Theology of course dominated with 31%.

The abbey was not prepared for all of this growth. Construction was begun in 1674 on a gallery inside the abbey to house the collections. The gallery was aesthetically pleasing, containing wood armories with grills for the books, busts of notable thinkers and statesmen, and set off with decorative woodwork. When the LeTellier collection was added in 1710, there was not sufficient space. Another gallery was added between 1726 and 1733. The two galleries formed a cross with a dome above their junction.

From whence came the urgency to build such a collection? When Sainte Geneviève Abbey was reformed in 1624 and its library reestablished, Europe was in the throes of the Catholic Counter Reformation. It was important not only for the religious houses to be pure and devoted in their duties, but they must also become intellectual arms in the fight against heresy. The political and religious worlds were closely intertwined, and proof of precedence and citation of authority carried great weight in the war of words. First and foremost the library was for the use of the canons of the abbey. It would be a mistake, however, to see in this library growth an automatic reflex to enforce orthodoxy. Sainte Geneviève carried within it strains of Jansenism. Jansenism, which took extreme positions on predestination and grace, was out of favor in Rome and was proscribed by the Bull, *Unigenitus*, in 1713. Pingré was a Freemason. René Descartes was buried in the abbey. Besides the canons, many scholars and students had access to the library. Corneille used texts of the Imitation of Christ from the collection to write his versification of the work. Le Voyageur fidèle stated in 1716 that the library was open to all "honest men." By the 1750s public hours were set: 2-5 pm on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Begun as an arm of the faith, it had evolved into a repository of knowledge to promote the general good. This image would see it through the revolution.

## **The Revolutionary Era**

The abbey chanted a *Te Deum* to celebrate the fall of the Bastille. Whether a reflection of its true colors or a cynical bow to reality is hard to say. When the revolutionary government nationalized the religious houses in 1790 and monastery collections were sent to "literary depots," Pingré approached the government and requested that the Sainte Geneviève collection be left intact as a state library. The wish was granted and the Sainte Geneviève was renamed the Bibliothèque du Panthéon. Pingré continued as its librarian until 1796. Pierre Daunou (1797-1804), a man well connected to the politics of the revolution, followed Pingré. Along with the chief librarians for the Arsenal and the Mazarin, he had first choice on the books in the "literary depots" of Paris and Versailles. Over several years the Panthéon added around 20,000 volumes from these depots. Because of his political skills, Daunou was sent to Rome in 1798. While there he appropriated the library of Pope Pius VI for the Panthéon.

With the restoration in 1815 the library resumed its old name, Sainte Geneviève, but kept the books gained through the upheavals of the revolution.

### **The Modern Era**

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Sainte Geneviève was plagued by low book budgets and administrative problems. On the other hand, readers flocked to the library and services were expanded.

The national government was concerned about the effective allocation of public money to three major public research libraries in Paris: the Sainte Geneviève, the Arsenal, and the Mazarin. Several times during the century commissions were established to investigate these libraries and to make recommendations. One concern was the jealousies among the three; another was the extent to which they overlapped in their collections. Too much was being expended on personnel and too little for books. In 1831 Sainte Geneviève had 16 employees; the expenditures for staff was 38,000 francs a year but materials received only 3,000 or 4,000 francs. The libraries were criticized for having too many high level staff. A report in 1833, referring to all three libraries, states:

As for the 23 librarians of all sorts, 4 or 5 meet their responsibilities, and these are from the lower levels. If some of the others come to work it is to read the newspaper... Most of the budget for the three libraries is devoured by these "honest monks," leaving little for books...

An ordinance in 1839 organized these libraries under a common set of regulations for personnel and administration.

Despite poor funding, the collection continued to grow. In 1828 Sainte Geneviève began to receive one of the legal deposit copies for books on science, theology, philosophy, law, and medicine. In 1868 the French envoy to Denmark gave the library 1,500 books published in Scandinavia. The governments of the Scandinavian countries added to the collection over the years. By 1850 the Sainte Geneviève had attained 100,000 volumes, distributed between theology 26%, history 21%, belles lettres 20%, science and arts 20%, and jurisprudence 11%. Toward the turn of the century acquisitions increased dramatically. In 1882 only 1,694 volumes were added, but in 1907 12,367 volumes were added. In 1929 Sainte Geneviève received the library of Jacques Doucet from his estate. It was a collection of manuscripts and first editions of France's avant garde authors. For most of this period there were only hand written catalogs of the collection, and only librarians could consult the catalogs. In 1881 there were 12 different manuscript catalogs for printed books, and inserting new acquisitions was impossible. In 1886 the library began to recatalog the collection onto card stock.

The Sainte Geneviève was popular. The daily number of visitors in 1831 may have been 250. Evening hours from 6 to 10 pm were inaugurated in 1837, and patron numbers went quickly to 200 or 300 during the day and 500 or 600 in the evening. There were few if any formal qualifications for admittance, although women were not admitted

during evening hours. Not all patrons were serious scholars; many came for light reading or socializing. The Collège Henri IV had dormitories on floors below the library and complained for years about the evening hours kept by the library. In 1844 the decision was made for a new building nearby. Henri Labrousse designed a rectangular building of stone, iron, and glass. It later served as a model for the Boston Public Library. At a cost of 1,775,000 francs it could house 250,000 volumes and seat 500 readers. When it opened in 1851 there was still a wait for a seat. In 1910, 223,682 readers were admitted to Sainte Geneviève. In comparison 10,000 to 12,000 visitors per year were coming to the Mazarin and 20,000 to 25,000 to the Arsenal. In 1928 Sainte Geneviève received 244,979 visitors compared to 188,243 entering the Bibliothèque Nationale in the same year.

Perhaps more than any library in Paris, Sainte Geneviève had a true cross section of the population in its halls. There were inhabitants of the neighborhood, university students, scholars, exiles, romantics, revolutionaries, and a few vagabonds when it was cold. In 1887 and again 1894 women attempted to gain admittance for evening sessions but were refused with the quip, "the library would become a more convenient rendez-vous than the cafés or even the sidewalks of Saint Michel boulevard." A new administrator in 1898, however, agreed that women 18 years or older should be admitted in the evening on the consent of their parents and professor. Sainte Geneviève continued to be a home for the scholar. The naturalist, Georges Cuvier, used it frequently as did the philosopher, Henri Bergson. It was here that Balzac read and Louis Menard would rendez-vous with Baudelaire and Gerard de Nerval. Marcel Duchamp worked as a librarian in the Sainte Geneviève, 1913-1915, more than likely to access its good alchemical collection, a resource for artists and writers of the Symbolist school. Clara Setkine, the grand matron of the German Communist Party, frequented the library in the 1880s. Before 1914 Lenin and Trotsky could be seen at the reading tables. The *Te Deum* for the fall of the Bastille was prophetic.

University students had used Sainte Geneviève since anyone could remember. The Sorbonne Library was no longer considered adequate for the growing student body. It was only logical then that a decision was made to detach Sainte Geneviève from its loose union with the Arsenal and Mazarin. In 1930 it became a library for the University of Paris, although it retained its status as a public library. At this same time the library building was renovated. Steel stacks replaced the wooden ones, and the seating capacity of the main hall was increased to 725. Multiple copies of textbooks were added to the collection. The library was enlarged again in 1954 and 1961.

The library had two card catalogs in the 1930s, one by author and the other classified. A catalog of iconographic themes was also initiated, and in the 1980s miniatures were recorded on videodisc. Today one can access the Sainte Geneviève collections using the internet. The OPAC BSG retrieves all monographs acquired since 1970 and all serials. Anyone over 18 may obtain a readers card. The Salle de Lecture Labrousse is still the principle reading room and maintains its 19<sup>th</sup> century ambiance.

The nature and uses of libraries have always changed, and Sainte Geneviève has adapted. Today the 13 campuses of the University of Paris have over 300,000 students; Sainte Geneviève is an interuniversity library for all campuses. This affects how the library is used. In 1928 the library had 244,979 visitors and communicated 378,579 volumes to readers; in 1991 it had 396,009 visitors but communicated only 265,815 volumes. The use of the collection has declined, but not the use of the library. Sainte Geneviève is adapting to mass education and the electronic age.

### **Further Reading**

Boisard, Geneviève, "Le Système d'Affectation de Place à la Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève," Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France 38 (1993) 55-62.

Bougy, Alfred, Histoire de la Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève, Paris: Comptoir des Imprimeurs-unis, 1847.

Franklin, Alfred, Anciennes bibliothèques de Paris, Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1867-73.

Gerard, Henri, "Histoire de la Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève," Revue des Bibliothèques 40 (1933) 5-33; 289-310.

Histoire des Bibliothèques françaises, 4 vols. Paris: Promodis-Éditions du Cercle du Librairie, 1988-92.

Kohler, Charles, Catalogue des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève, 2 vols. Paris: Librairie Plon, 1893-96

Wintzweiller, Marguerite, La Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève de Jadis à Aujourd'hui, Paris: Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève, 1972.