

Perusing a Medieval World Chronicle in Alberta

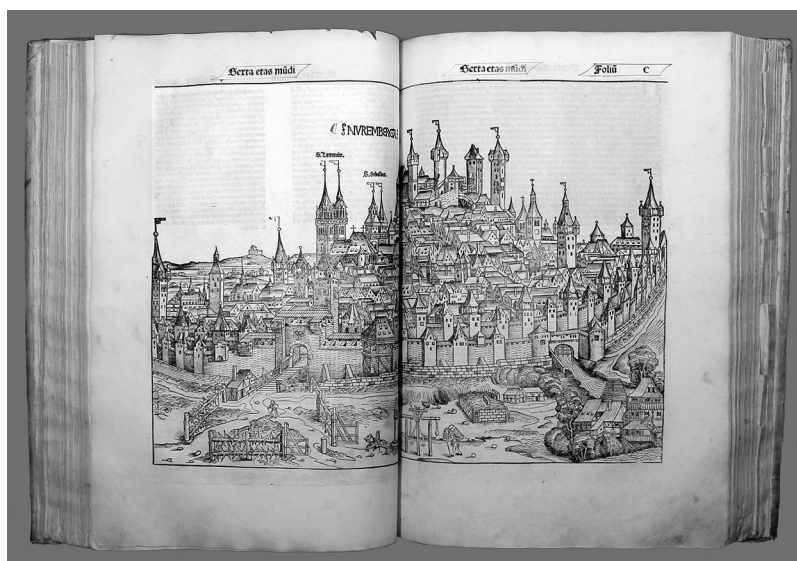
Librarian ROBERT DESMARAIS reflects on the wonder of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, one of the University of Alberta's prized books.

ONE OF THE MOST TREASURED items in the University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Special Collections is the folio-sized *Liber chronicarum* (1493), known more commonly as the *Nuremberg Chronicle*. Written in the tradition of a medieval chronicle within the arc of biblical history, it begins with the Creation and ends with the Last Judgment. Compared to other medieval compilations, the content is not particularly original—it was largely copied from other sources—but it is a complex illustrated book that deserves close study for its attractive mingling of text and image. Commonly regarded as the first printed encyclopedia, it also includes stories from classical history and mythology, descriptions of cities, accounts of contemporary wars, and a chronicle of rulers, saints, popes and prominent citizens.

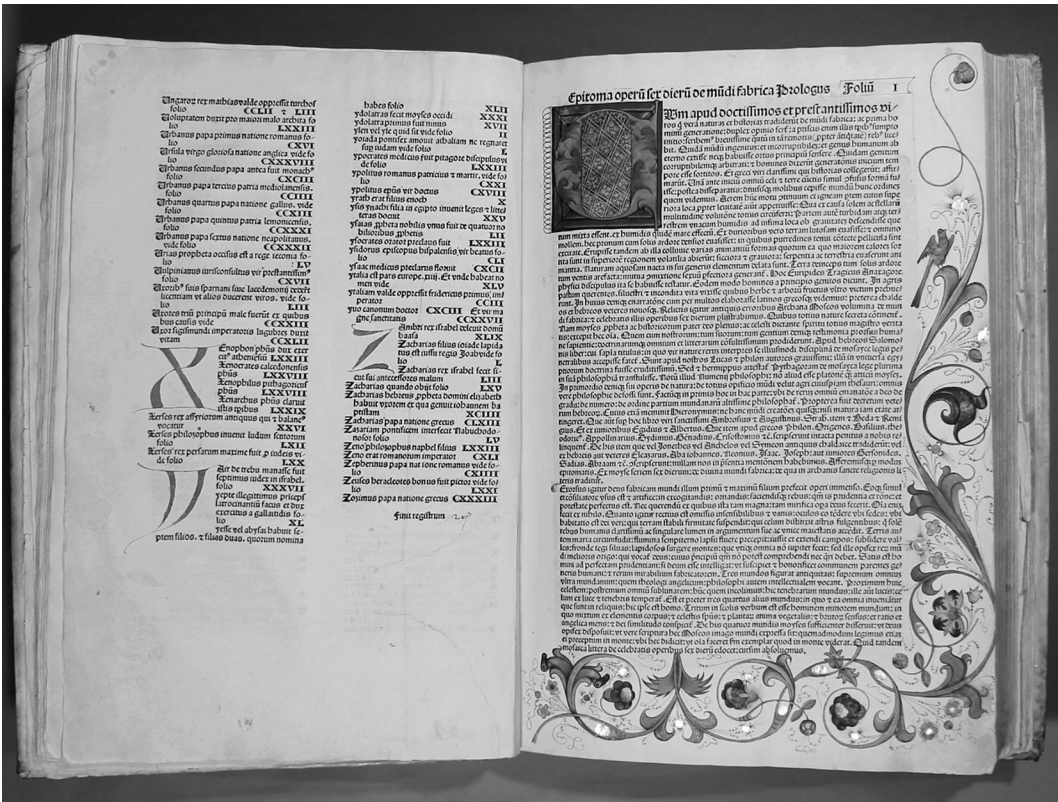
The Peel library acquired its copy in 1980 with the Gregory S. Javitch Collection, a half-donation, half-purchase including more than 2,500 rare books related to North and South American Indigenous peoples. For nearly

four decades, Peel staff have shown the epic tome to students, faculty and visitors. During that time, we have had the satisfaction and pleasure of pointing out its many significant features. Seeing the *Nuremberg Chronicle* is an experience that never fails to delight.

Compiled by humanist physician Hartmann Schedel (1440–1514), the *Nuremberg Chronicle* is a remarkable book for many reasons, but chief among them is its exquisite printing. It was an ambitious project carried out with immense care and attention to detail by Anton Koberger, godfather of Albrecht Dürer. Koberger completed the printing in 1493 in Nuremberg, where the book was first published in Latin; a German edition appeared later the same year. Astonishingly, and against all odds, the exemplars (manuscript layout volumes) for Schedel's *Weltchronik* (as the book is known in German) that Koberger and his pressmen used to print the book survived and are housed in the municipal library of Nuremberg. They were closely studied by American book designer and printer Adrian



A double-page woodcut of Nuremberg. (Photo from Bruce Peel Special Collections, University of Alberta)



Pages from Folium I. (Photo from Bruce Peel Special Collections, University of Alberta)

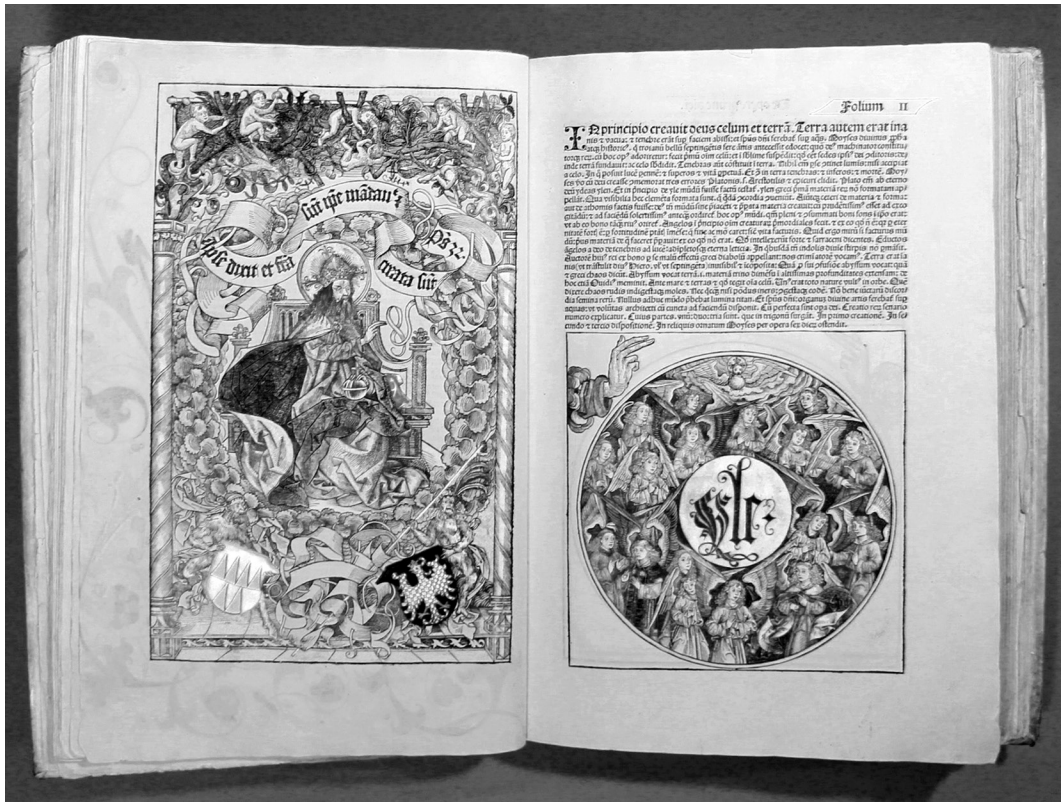
Wilson and his wife, Joyce Lancaster Wilson, who collaborated on an impressive book called *The Making of the Nuremberg Chronicle* (1976) that traces the planning, design and production of Schedel's famous incunabulum.

The woodcuts used to illustrate the *Nuremberg Chronicle* were created in the workshop of Michael Wolgemut (1434–1519) with the assistance of fellow engraver Wilhelm Pleydenwurff (circa 1450–1494) and several apprentices. The young Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) was apprenticed to Wolgemut from 1486 to 1489, but many scholars posit that Dürer left the workshop before Wolgemut's team commenced engraving work for the *Chronicle*. Other scholars maintain that Dürer contributed to the *Chronicle's* woodcuts by preparing some of the preliminary drawings in the course of his apprenticeship.

The book features 1,809 woodcut illustrations made from 645 original woodblocks; accordingly, readers will see some repetition in the pictures of people and cities. The double-page woodcut of

Nuremberg is truly extraordinary in its depiction of medieval dwellings, residents and walled fortifications. Nicholas Basbanes explains in his book *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History* (2013) that German entrepreneur Ulman Stromer set up the first paper mill in Nuremberg in 1390, and a contemporary image of his mill survives in the lower right-hand corner of the double-page woodcut of Nuremberg in the *Chronicle*. It is reasonable to assume that Stromer's mill provided a reliable and reasonably priced supply of paper for the book's production. Indeed, Schedel's remarkable book could not have been printed without a healthy supply of good paper, which was the very foundation of the newly emerging world of printed books.

The Latin and German editions of the *Chronicle* were printed when printing was in its infancy, making it all the more impressive that the total print run for both editions is estimated to be approximately 2,500 copies. Koberger's Nuremberg print shop was one of the largest in



Pages from Folium II. (Photo from Bruce Peel Special Collections, University of Alberta)

the incunabula period, and for him to supervise a large and complex operation with numerous compositors, proofreaders and pressmen in his employ was no small feat. Hundreds of copies of both editions are preserved in libraries and private collections, so the *Nuremberg Chronicle* is not a particularly scarce book. One or two copies are usually available for sale in any given year. It is nevertheless a beautiful, tangible example of the artistic and commercial achievements of the celebrated printer Anton Koberger, who had printed hundreds of books before 1500, including many large editions.

For anyone interested in how books were designed in the early period of printing, the *Chronicle* is worthy of study and consideration, possessing numerous interesting and unique characteristics that reveal clues about how it was used and regarded. For example, the printer inserted a few blank leaves after the section on the Apocalypse for future owners of the book to record scenes from the last days. The

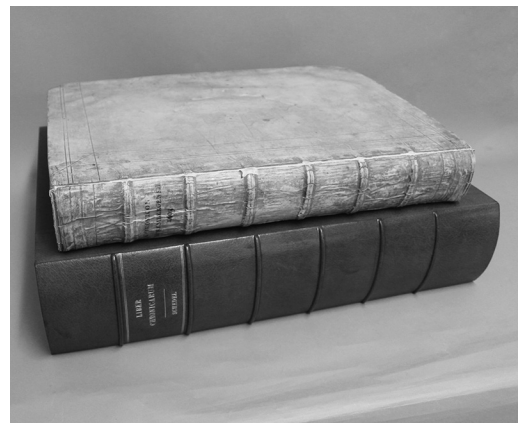
blank leaves of the Peel copy have not been marked, reassuring evidence that despite all that's happened in the past five, let alone 500 years, the end of the world has not yet arrived.

Another feature of the Peel copy is the notorious woodcut of Pope Joan and her baby, which has not been removed or defaced, as in certain copies in other library collections. The life of Pope Joan was regarded by some as fact and others as fiction, but when she was removed from the list of popes by the Catholic Church, some deeply pious readers followed its example and mutilated her image in the *Chronicle*. Others added handwritten notes denouncing her as an imposter. Reflecting on historical evidence found in physical books—such as vandalism, marginalia, ink stamps, bookplates and the like—reminds us that much can be learned about a book's history from the marks its owners and readers left behind.

Unique attributes of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* in the Peel library include a rather plain Downing Library bookplate stuck inside the cover (the



Woodcut of Pope Joan and her baby.
 (Photo from Bruce Peel Special Collections,
 University of Alberta)



The Bruce Peel Special Collections copy of the
 Nuremberg Chronicle is bound in full vellum
 and housed in a custom box.

location of the “Downing Library” referenced is unknown). The Peel copy is bound in full vellum, blind-tooled, and housed in a handsome custom clamshell box created by Edmonton bookbinder Alexander McGuckin.¹ Some of the illustrations that appear early on in the book are coloured by hand, and aside from some occasional minor water staining, the book is in very good condition. If you reside in Edmonton or are ever in the vicinity, do plan to visit the Peel library to have a look at the *Nuremberg Chronicle* and appreciate the ways it can illuminate our understanding of early printed books. It is one of the most acclaimed books of the incunabula period, and as you look at its beautiful woodcut illustrations, the world as it was more than 500 years ago will come to life.



ACCESSING THE CHRONICLE

Bruce Peel Special Collections is located on the lower level of the Rutherford Library (south side) at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. The library is open on weekday afternoons (excepting holidays). To view the *Nuremberg Chronicle* or other material in the collection, please complete an online retrieval request form at least 24 hours in advance of an anticipated visit at bpsc.library.ualberta.ca/info/visit.

1. Peter Mitham profiled Alex McGuckin and his work in *Amphora* 153 (Fall 2009).

~ Robert Desmarais is head of Bruce Peel Special Collections at the University of Alberta as well as the University of Alberta Archives. He also teaches History of the Book at the university’s School of Library and Information Studies.