

1-1992

Review of Scribes, Script, and Books: The Book Arts from Antiquity to the Renaissance, by Leila Avrin

Fred W. Jenkins

University of Dayton, fjenkins1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/roesch_fac



Part of the [Book and Paper Commons](#), and the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Fred W. Jenkins (1992). Review of Scribes, Script, and Books: The Book Arts from Antiquity to the Renaissance, by Leila Avrin. *College and Research Libraries.* , 88-89
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/roesch_fac/33

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Roesch Library at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Roesch Library Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

learning new concepts in library school may become confused when encountering old and new terms in the literature. He explains that the computer revolution has changed the nature of many parts of bibliographic control and made new terminology desirable. Generic terms are replacing those whose primary meanings are related to books and to print. Hagler explains such old/new terms as entry/record, heading/access point, and collation/physical description, putting the definition of the old terms into historical perspective and showing why they are now too restrictive.

Part 2 of the book, "Library Standards," includes clear explanations of such concepts as name authority work, controlled subject vocabularies, uniform titles, and superimposition. Hagler stresses the importance of standardization for adequate identification of a document and consistency of description to avoid unnecessary ambiguity. In the past, a library created its own rules of practice independently. Common standards and practices are now widely followed by libraries in creating and communicating their catalog records. With common rules, institutions can contribute records to a useful union catalog, use each others' records interchangeably, and acquire records produced from a central source. Compatibility is needed, not necessarily uniformity. A library obtaining some of its records externally naturally adjusts its internal cataloging practices to conform. Idiosyncratic variants tend to disappear.

Rapid changes in the nature of bibliographic control led the author to begin this revision of the 1982 edition in 1985. Future changes will probably lead to subsequent editions. The present edition quite adequately describes what the bibliographic record is today and how it came to be that way.—*Elaine A. Franco, University of California, Davis.*

Avrin, Leila. *Scribes, Script, and Books: The Book Arts from Antiquity to the Renaissance.* Chicago: American Library Assn.; London: British Library, 1991. 356p. \$60 (ISBN 0-7123-0245-X). LC 89-18024.

Readers interested in the history of books before the advent of printing previously either had to be content with brief preliminary surveys found in histories of the printed book or had to work through numerous specialized publications. *Scribes, Script, and Books* is an attempt to remedy this situation. While it primarily focuses on manuscripts and books, it touches on such areas as epigraphy and numismatics as well. Some general historical and literary background material is included also to set the development of writing and books in context.

Avrin sets the stage with a brief introductory overview. She then treats in detail the early history of writing and the development of the alphabet. Individual chapters are devoted to books and to writing among each of the major ancient civilizations: Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek, and Roman. The discussion of Roman books leads directly into a survey of Latin scripts from early Roman inscriptions to modern calligraphy. Avrin next deals with medieval manuscripts and illumination. Islamic books are discussed separately. Chapters on papermaking, bookbinding, and block printing round out the work.

The chapters on Hebrew and Islamic books are particularly useful, since these topics have seldom been treated in any detail for the nonspecialist. Avrin's discussion of Hebrew manuscripts is comprehensive and extends from ancient and medieval scribes and manuscripts to the modern preparation of Torah scrolls and other texts for religious use. Her coverage of Islamic book arts draws attention to the many influences that these have had on Western bookmaking. In addition to preserving and later restoring to the West many classical Greek scientific and philosophical works, the Islamic world introduced to Europe the Chinese inventions of paper and marbled paper. Islamic binders also heavily influenced the techniques and materials used by Western bookbinders.

Avrin stresses the essentially conservative nature of bookmaking throughout her work. Innovations occur in materials and technique and are duly noted, but

many of the basic characteristics of the book arose at an early date and have persisted. For example, Avrin traces the development of the author's portrait from royal portraits at the head of Babylonian inscriptions through late antique Roman and medieval manuscripts to modern books. Similarly, colophons were found in ancient Egyptian and Greek manuscripts and persist even in some printed books today. Avrin also relates the modern practice of printing reference works with multiple columns per page to the appearance of the ancient papyrus rolls with their multiple columns. Those who wonder how new electronic formats might influence the presentation of text will note that it has so far changed very little, despite thousands of years and many technical developments.

Avrin discusses many interesting topics, such as the manufacture of parchment and the mixing of inks in different eras, and she includes much useful supplementary material. Numerous maps and chronological tables help the reader to set developments in geographical and historical perspective. The brief summaries of historical and cultural developments that appear in most chapters are helpful, although there is some oversimplification and the occasional inaccuracy. For example, the history of Roman provincial administration and the development of the equestrian order are oversimplified to the point of being misleading (and might be better omitted altogether). The Greco-Persian wars concluded in 479 B.C., not 489, as stated in one of the tables. Avrin incorrectly implies that a number of well-known authors of the Roman Republic (Plautus, Terence,

Lucilius, and others) actually lived during the imperial period. Such mistakes do not affect the central concerns of the book, but readers should still be wary.

Footnotes are few, which adds to the readability of the text, but also hinders the reader's further pursuit of particular topics and anecdotes. This is partly remedied by the division of the bibliography into sections by chapter, with repetition where needed. Avrin's bibliography is generally a good guide to further study, although there are some surprising omissions, e.g., Bernhard Bischoff's *Paläographie des römischen Altertums und abendländischen Mittelalters* (now available in English) and Arthur E. Gordon's *Illustrated Introduction to Latin Epigraphy*. Avrin has also made a practice of citing only first editions, although some (e.g., those of Sir Eric Turner on papyrology) have been superseded by substantially revised and expanded later ones.

As befits a work on the book arts, *Scribes, Script, and Books* is handsomely produced. The type is clear and attractive, the margins generous, and the binding appealing and functional. Typographical errors are few and minor. The illustrations are both numerous and well chosen; it is a pity that none could be printed in color, especially for the chapters on manuscript illumination and the Islamic book.

Avrin's work is a remarkably readable synthesis of the vast scholarly literature on the development of the book in the Near East and Europe before Gutenberg. It will provide a real service to the non-specialist reader and student and will undoubtedly be widely used as a basic text in book history courses.—Fred W. Jenkins, *University of Dayton, Ohio.*

Build Your Future

**SIXTH
NATIONAL
CONFERENCE**



SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

APRIL 12-14 1992

**ACADEMIC LIBRARIES
ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE
IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

For More Information:

50 East Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611-2795
Toll Free 1-800-545-2433
Ext. 2516

ASSOCIATION OF
COLLEGE
& RESEARCH
LIBRARIES

A DIVISION OF THE
AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION