

## **A hand-colored sixteenth-century atlas by famed cartographer Gerardus Mercator**

Gerardus Mercator, *Atlas sive Cosmographicae Meditationes de Fabrica Mundi et Fabricati Figura*. Duisburg: Rumold Mercator, 1595. 17 1/4 inches x 11 1/2 inches (438 x 292 mm), 134 pages plus 107 maps.

Few fields reflect the evolution of human thought as clearly as does cartography. History's great mapmakers patiently collected and collated vast quantities of data, and organized this information into visually sumptuous works; in their charts we see a collective image of organized knowledge at a particular point in time. The viewing of antique maps offers immediate insights into the character of history.

Gerardus Mercator (1512–94) is without question one of the preeminent cartographers of all time, and perhaps the best recognized figure in the field. His most famous contribution to science is a technique of rendering the globe on a flat surface, still known as “Mercator’s projection,” that was first used for a 1569 world map. No less significant was the publication in 1595, one year after the author’s death, of the complete *Atlas*. With this volume, a collection of maps was linked for the first time with the figure of Atlas, the Greek Titan condemned by Zeus to carry the vault of heaven on his shoulders. For Mercator, geographical description was more than the practical matter of locating places or showing how to get from one point to another. The cartographer was able to split the world in unfamiliar and uncomfortable ways, but he also had the means, through mathematical reasoning, to bind it up so that it approached a divine unity.

Although the idea of bringing maps together into a book did not originate with Mercator, he can certainly be called the first modern, scientific cartographer. His early charts, used with a magnetic compass (and an awareness of compass declination) gave the sailor the most reliable guide he had ever possessed. No one else could claim the breadth of his understanding of terrestrial magnetism and map projection. Mercator also published the first manual of the italic hand to be printed outside Italy; he used italic extensively on his maps and it, too, has remained a staple of cartography up

to the present day.

This copy of Mercator's *Atlas* is from the peerless Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection at the Library of Congress; it is exceptional in many ways, but particularly for its contemporary binding and beautiful hand-coloring. The *Atlas* was bound at the time of publication, in brown calf over wooden boards, stamped in panels of blind and gilt. The date ANNO | 1597 appears at the head and foot of the central panel of the rear cover and there are similarly displayed two sets of initials T.D.N | G.M.S. at head and foot of the panel on the front. T.D.N. is believed to signify Tileman de Neufville of Wesel, second husband of Mercator's second daughter Dorothea. The second set of initials may possibly indicate *Gerardus Mercator Socer* ("Gerardus Mercator father-in-law"). The front pastedown bears the early-twentieth-century bookplate of F.E. Lauber, with the Lessing J. Rosenwald bookplate above. Rosenwald bought the book from W.S. Kundig of Geneva, a leading Swiss bookseller.

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