

A rare blockbook from Lessing J Rosenwald's incomparable xylographic collection

Ars moriendi. Germany, 1466. 11 1/2 x 9 inches (293 x 228 mm), 80 pages, illustrations throughout.

The *Ars moriendi* or *Art of dying* was a popular medieval genre. It was a kind of menu for the inevitable, describing the states of mind and soul that were to accompany the Roman Catholic Church's rituals for salvation, culminating in the last rites. Such handbooks were perfect candidates for printing, for ideally every priest required this brief and convenient guide to ministering to the dying, to providing comfort and consolation, confession, and extreme unction. The earliest surviving printing of the *Ars moriendi* is not a typographical edition but a blockbook from the southern Netherlands, tentatively dated to 1450. (In a blockbook, the text is printed from carved wood, like the illustrations, rather than from movable type). The earliest blockbooks were essentially loose broadside leaves (with blank versos), assembled and bound into a narrative sequence, as here — although at least one copy of this edition is known (now at the British Library) with woodcuts printed on both sides of the leaves.

Collectors of blockbooks are as rare as the volumes themselves: gathering one or two specimens into a library is a very creditable achievement. Lessing J. Rosenwald was the ideal collector of such things, being a connoisseur of images more than of texts. With a fortune derived from the family firm of Sears Roebuck and Co., Rosenwald began his career by collecting engravings, easing himself painlessly into the world of printed books with the purchase of a few important incunables in 1928, followed by four blockbooks in 1929. This copy of *Ars moriendi* — from the collection of the French bibliographer A. A. Renouard — was bought by Rosenwald at the Clumber sale at Sotheby's in 1937. It is bound in nineteenth-century brown calf and bears the engraved book ticket "Bibliothèque A.A. Renouard" and Rosenwald's red morocco book label as well as his Library of Congress gift bookplate. An ink note in French in Renouard's hand describes not this book but the first edition of the *Ars memorandi*, and a later pencilled note in English above states that "M. Renouard inscribed the following note for his copy of the *Ars memorandi*. He must have taken up the wrong book."

The Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1977) no. 20.

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