Some Notes on Charles de Geer’s Working Library

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At the end of the 1750s, two similar pavilions designed by Swedish court architect Jean Eric Rehn (1711–1793) were erected by the canal at Leufstabruk, one to the north and one to the south of the manor house. Both had an entrance hall, one large room, and two smaller chambers. These pavilions replaced two earlier buildings with manorial roofs. Charles de Geer the Entomologist used the northern pavilion for his book collection and the southern pavilion for his collections of natural history specimens. Not all books, however, were kept in the northern pavilion. The nobleman Daniel Tilas (1712–1772), who visited Leufstabruk in 1762, described the new buildings in a written eye-witness account:

The natural [history] cabinet is housed in the southern wing […] In one of the chambers Mr De Geer [the Entomologist] located the part of the library that treats natural history, such as botanists, mineralogists, zoologists, and so on, and the other chamber has been arranged as a writing and working cabinet. The library is installed in the northern wing, which has the same plan, with the difference that the entrances to the chambers are going directly from the entrance hall, lest the large library hall should lose any room because of the doors to the chambers.¹

¹ "Naturalie Cabinetterne äro inrymde i den Södra Sidoflygeln […] I den ena Cammaren har Hr De Geer placerat in den del av Biblioteqvet, som egentligen traiterar Natural historien, såsom Botanister, Mineralogos och Zoologos m:m: och den andra Cammaren är til skrif- och arbetscabinett inrättadt. Biblioteqvet är inrättadt uti den Norra Sidoflygeln af enahanda Indelning, med den skillnad, at ingången till Cammarne är directe ut förstugan, på det stora Biblioteqve Sahlen ej skulle förlora något rum"
These observations are interesting for several reasons. In the southern pavilion, as noted above, Charles de Geer the Entomologist kept his natural history books in one of the small chambers and a working office space in the other small chamber. These books, which were separate from the main collection in the other pavilion, presumably were his working library. That is, these books included the volumes he needed for his research. As we see, Tilas only mentioned what this working library contained in general terms. Thanks to extant eighteenth-century catalogues, we can see in more detail the titles in the library stored in the natural history cabinet and compare these with the titles in the main library building (Fig. 1).

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af Dörar til Camrarne” (D. Tilas, Sokne-Skrifvare, 2, Kungl. biblioteket. Quoted from Ehrensvärd [1968], p. 167).
The Catalogue

In the latest of the historical catalogues from Leufsta (Leufsta MS 48), which was in use until about 1800, shelf marks in the margins indicate where all the books were located. In several places on the shelves, we can see the word “cabinet” rather than the number that refers to the library pavilion shelves. In addition, we see in the catalogue that almost all shelf marks were crossed out at some point, and so has also the word “cabinet”. After the death of Charles de Geer the Entomologist in 1778, there was a major rearrangement of all the books in the library: the volumes in the working library in the natural history cabinet were moved to the library pavilion, where the main collection was housed. At this time, all the books received new shelf marks. Thanks to this catalogue, we know which authors and titles were once part of Charles de Geer the Entomologist’s working library, the subjects the books covered, and how many books were moved to the new location, these titles can be compared with the main collection in the library pavilion. We also know their formats and prices. All this information provides clues to the history of the library in general terms. It also gives insight into De Geer’s own research and what books he valued most highly for his practical work on natural history. Like the references he made in his magnum opus, Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire des insectes (1752–1778), knowing what books he kept in the southern pavilion, serves as evidence of the literature he found especially useful. Before coming to the subjects and some examples of titles belonging to the small collection kept in this chamber, let us look at some basic facts regarding the size of this group of books (Fig. 2).

The Books

The working library housed 275 titles (66 in folio, 114 in quarto, and 95 in smaller formats). However, since several titles were in many volumes, the actual number of physical books was 357 (100 in folio, 152 in quarto, and 105 in smaller formats). As the complete library collection at this time contained approximately 7,000 books, the
working library was only 5% of the entire collection. The proportions of the book formats in the working library were very different than the proportions in the main library. In the working library, about 30% of the volumes are folios, about 40% are quartos, and about 30% are octavos or smaller. In the main library, about 5% of the volumes are folios, about 20% are quartos, and about 75% are octavos or smaller. Although rough estimates, these numbers indicate an essential difference in character between the main collection and the working library.

Moreover, several books – mainly folios and quartos – both in the working library and in the main library had cost a small fortune to acquire. In the working library, many titles include hand-coloured plates with images of plants and animals. These images, which were expensive to produce, might in fact explain why some books were stored in the working library. De Geer probably found these titles essential as reference materials while working on his own collection of natural history specimens. For example, the catalogue includes the following titles: Johann Daniel Meyer’s *Angenehmer und
nützlicher Zeit-Vertreib mit Betrachtung curioser Vorstellungen allerhand kriechender, fliegender und schwimmender, auf dem Land und in der Wasser sich befindender und nährender Thiere (Nürnberg, 1748), in two volumes, bought for 60 florins; Philip Miller’s *The Gardeners dictionary* (London, 1759–1760), in two volumes with images of plants, bought for 182 florins; Albert Seba’s *Locuplettissimus rerum naturalium thesaurus*, four volumes. (Amsterdam, 1734–1765), bought for 176 florins and 12 stuivers; Hans Sloane’s *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, with the Natural History of the Herbs and Trees* (London, 1707), in two volumes, bought for 55 florins; Mark Catesby’s *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (London, 1731), in two volumes, bought for the incredible price of 255 florins; Johann Wilhelm Weinmann’s *Phytanthoza-iconographia* (Regensburg, 1737–1745) bought for 144 florins and 1 stuiver; and Maria Sibylla Merian’s *Histoire des Insectes de Suriname* (The Hague, 1736), which unfortunately is no longer at Leufsta, bought for 19 florins. When De Geer was acquiring titles, the basic annual salary of a minister of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands – a fairly well-paid position – was between 400 and 600 florins, a sum less than what he paid for Diderot and D’Alembert’s great multi-volume *Encyclopédie* (Paris & Neuchastel, 1751–1772) – 788 florins and 10 stuivers, kept in the main library collection at Leufsta.

Among the quarto volumes in the working library, there are several expensive natural history titles as well. For example, Charles paid no less than 172 florins and 19 stuivers for Eleazar Albin’s *A Natural History of English Insects* (London, 1720), *A Natural History of Spiders* (London, 1736), and *A Natural History of Birds*, 3 vols. (London, 1731), 82 florins for Mathurin Jacques Brisson’s *Ornithologie*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1760), 120 florins for Carl Clerck’s *Icones Insectorum Rariorum* (Stockholm, 1759), and 164 florins for George Edwards’s *A Natural History of Birds* (London, 1743), in three volumes, together with the *Gleanings of Natural History* (London, 1758), also in three volumes.
Since the percentage of books in the octavo format or smaller is very different from that of the main library, it is of special interest to see what titles in this group made their way into the natural cabinet chamber. Compared to the larger formats, this group of titles were far less expensive, often gifts or of not more than one florin or some stuivers. The following is a list of some of these titles: Petrus Arte-di’s *Ichtyologia* (Leiden, 1738), one florin and 16 stuivers; Charles Bonnet’s *Traité d’insectologie* (Paris, 1745), in two volumes, as well as Henry Baker’s *Essai sur l’histoire naturelle du polype, insecte* (Paris, 1744), both gifts from René Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur; Jean Etienne Guettard’s *Observations sur les plantes* (Paris, 1747), in two volumes, a gift from Guettard himself via Carl Linnaeus; and Jan Swammerdam’s *Histoire générale des insectes* (Utrecht, 1685). In addition, the collection includes Johan Gottschalk Wallerius’s work on mineralogy and more than 30 titles by Carl Linnaeus, predominantly in smaller formats, although a few are quartos or folios.

Finally, some natural history titles were kept in the main library, not in the working library in the natural cabinet – e.g., Buffon and D’Aubenton’s *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière avec la description du cabinet du roy* (Paris, from 1749 and onwards), in sixteen volumes, bought for the considerable price of 146 florins; Charles Bonnet’s *Recherches sur l’usage des feuilles dans les plantes, et sur quelques autres sujets relatifs à l’histoire de la vegetation* (Göttingen & Leiden, 1754), a gift from Bonnet himself; Nehemiah Grew’s *The Anatomy of Plants* (London, 1682), bought for 7 florins and 10 stuivers; and Juan Esebio Nieremberg’s *Historia naturae, maxime peregrinae* (Antwerp, 1635), bought for 4 florins and 4 stuivers. Thus, the entire section of natural history was not kept in the natural cabinet chamber, as Tilas had written. As mentioned, the titles De Geer placed in the working library presumably were the ones he considered especially useful and necessary for his regular work with the collections of natural history specimens stored in the natural cabinet, especially titles that would benefit his entomological research.
Concluding Remarks

Although the De Geer’s working library was only a small part of the entire library collection and kept in one of the natural history cabinet chambers, it deserves special attention. In this short article, I have delineated the main characteristics of this working library concerning numbers, formats, prices, and type of literature. The most important thing to remember, however, is that the books kept in the working library were not all his books that deal with natural history, as Tilas notes in his account from the early 1760s. That is, these titles seem to have been carefully selected. The assumption is that De Geer chose these titles because he found them useful when studying his own collection of natural history specimens in the natural history cabinet as well as in his research on entomology.

Bibliography

Manuscripts

*Catalogue of the Leufsta Library*. Leufsta MS 48, Uppsala University Library.


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