

## An Interview with Dr. Michael Knoche, Director of the Herzogin Anna Amalia Library

“Our motto is class, not mass.”

Since May, 2006, the Herzogin Anna Amalia Library in Weimar, Germany, has been online with its digitization project. EMC's *ON Magazine* spoke with the library's director, Dr. Michael Knoche, about the current status and challenges ahead.

**Q: Dr. Knoche, how does it feel to read Goethe's *Faust* on the Internet and not in a thick, bulky book?**

I hate reading onscreen. If I can't experience *Faust* in the theater, I'd rather read it in a beautiful print edition. Yet, we do need the online version: Libraries nowadays have a great opportunity to open their treasures, kept for centuries, to the broad public. Everyone who is interested (not just those “in the know” like in earlier days) ought to have access to an authentic copy of an original masterpiece. For us librarians, digitization means the original books are less-often used and thus, better protected. However, above all, the scientific community needs the digital copy of *Faust* in order to access this reference text comfortably to, for example, make comparisons among different editions or quickly find an excerpt of text.

**Q: The first volumes of the extensive *Faust* collection have been online since May 2006. What is the overall progress of the digitization process?**

About 100 pieces of the *Faust* collection have been digitized, but only about 40 pieces can be offered online because of copyright restrictions. About 5,000 *Faust* texts will be added over the next few years. Aside from the *Faust* collection, the library also is digitizing other important parts of its historical book collection. Altogether, about 300 volumes are currently accessible, and something is added virtually every day and can be looked at on our website under “Monographs, digital.” The titles also are linked to our electronic library catalog.

**Q: Who actually decides which books are to be digitized?**

The *Faust* collection project is part of a larger project to put the valuable book inventory of the Herzogin Anna Amalia Library on microfilm. This project—which unfortunately was initiated only after the September 2004 library fire—is financed by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Population and Disaster Relief and supported with two staff positions by the Hector Foundation in Weinheim, Germany. EMC came on board as sponsor of the technology. Another cooperative partner is the Thuringian State Archive.

On one level, if the originals pose no problems, black-and-white microfilms are made of the books. All microfilms are scanned, then stored in a mine shaft, the same as conventional analog long-term media. On another level, we proceed exactly the other way around: If the books contain relevant color information, high-quality color digitizations are produced and copied onto color microfilm. The color films also wind up in the mine shaft. However, the digitized version has an unbeatable advantage: It is usable immediately online. The processing order is established by the acquisition date, which means the books of the *Faust* collection are filmed or digitized in the order they wound up in the library inventory over time. We do occasionally move up titles asked for by users, but the idea is to work as efficiently as possible to keep the considerable expenses for the overall project manageable.

**Q: What are some of the highlights that a visitor on the Internet can look forward to?**

As an example, a postcard collection of the *Faust* collection will be offered, which should be of interest both to historians of art and culture and interested lay people. In the future, even incunabula and individual manuscripts will be available online.

**Q: Have there been changes for the library since parts of the archive became viewable on the Internet?**

Considering the approximately one million printed works kept by the library and the relatively small proportion of completely digitized books, it is easy to see what an enormous task lies ahead for the library in further expanding the digital offering. At this time, we only can say that we have created the technical and organizational preconditions for this task. But we have already noticed that, increasingly, we no longer work only for the customers who visit us locally in Weimar, but also for a large, international audience of scientists and lay people. This also changes our competitive situation. Only libraries that are able to offer interesting originals and, at the same time, have a presence on the Internet, will be able to survive in the long term.

**Q: How do your customers react to the new offering?**

The feedback is entirely positive. For example, customers are pleased that they now are able to use the desired books over the Internet, which often saves them long back-and-forth trips, expenses, and time.

**Q: The digitization of books is also high on the “to-do” list of providers such as Google. How is your project different?**

Google’s approach, while not without merit, is in need of broadening. We are offering the digital books not in the form of excerpts, but in complete versions and always with metadata. The original works and their digitized versions are listed correctly in the bibliographic catalog and can thus be searched, located, and cited. In contrast, with Google, it is often difficult to determine from which book an image originated.

Our images and metadata are stored in a data management system called “Monographs, digital,” an Oracle application developed by us especially for this purpose. This means that the internal structure of our digitized books—from the table of contents, to chapters and sections, to illustrations and tables and so on—is completely transparent. This is the only way one can navigate meaningfully within some very extensive digital documents. Conversely, Google only offers books as an agglomeration of pages. Google is only useful when you have specific questions about individual terms in the text.

A further difference is the higher quality of our images. With historical book inventories, what matters are often details and nuances. This is the only way to see the actual added value of the digital version. Libraries usually digitize homogeneous collections (e.g., *Faust*) and thereby support work in certain areas of research. In short, our motto is “class, not mass.”

However, I am the first to admit that we have to offer a little more mass before we can talk. Due to the lack of sufficient financing, German libraries are not anywhere near where other libraries in the Western world are, not to mention Google with its completely different philosophy.

**Q: Because of the fire two years ago, there also is now the problem of restoring thousands of books damaged by the fire-fighting operations. What challenges must be overcome in this area?**

The fire on September 2, 2004, destroyed 50,000 books and damaged another 62,000. First, we undertook the restoration of 11,000 lightly damaged books. They have been put back into the archive and are being used. The restoration of 29,000 very heavily damaged books, which were partially charred around the covers and sustained water damage, has been postponed. From this group, only a very small percentage could be salvaged, and at a very high cost. During the next 10 years, we

will concentrate on the 22,000 moderately damaged books which typically suffered only water damage. However, the approach differs depending on the type of material (leather, parchment, pasteboard, fabric), and often, we have to tread new ground because there are no standard restoration methods. Book restoration is a logistical challenge of huge proportions.

**Q: Most of the books in your library are several hundred years old. Must one follow certain procedures for the protection of these books when scanning?**

Before scanning, a restorer evaluates each book and specifies, in writing, the degree to which it may be opened so as not to destroy the cover. Some books only can be opened to 90 degrees, after which the book must be supported as needed. Some books cannot be digitized at all. The necessary care naturally takes time and must be taken into account when planning the project.

**Q: What is the remaining role of EMC now that the infrastructure for the project is implemented and functioning?**

We value EMC's expertise in long-term electronic archiving and would like to continue to benefit from EMC's know-how in this area in the coming years. Our partnership to date has been very promising.

**Q: Weimar offers a multitude of interesting destinations for visitors. Which three would you recommend to someone who has never been to Weimar before?**

Unfortunately, the Anna Amalia Library's historic building will not be restored and accessible before the end of 2007. Otherwise, it would, of course, be my main recommendation. After that, a visit to the very interesting house where Goethe lived is a must, and then the art collections in Weimar, from Lucas Cranach to Caspar David Friedrich, to the Bauhaus, are top attractions.

**Q: How did you become director of the Herzogin Anna Amalia Library?**

I answered an ad published in a specialized magazine in the summer of 1990, still during the time of the German Democratic Republic. For me, this is a dream job, to be allowed to work in the same library in which Goethe himself was at one time the librarian and which still has such a magnificent inventory of books in spite of the fire.

**Q: Does it bother you that two years later people still ask you about the fire?**

No. My own mind is still constantly occupied with the event, both at work and when I am not at work. To express my feelings about the catastrophe, I have, over the last few months, written a book entitled *The Library Burns: A Report from Weimar*. It will be published this summer by the Göttinger Wallstein-Verlag.

**Q: Over the next few years, your library will get further historical treasures. Will there ever actually be an end to this project?**

We have not given up the vision of regaining our lost holdings to the greatest extent possible—by restoration and purchase. But we will need 30 years to do that, plus the necessary financing. So far, only the years up to 2012 are secured, but we have already received so much magnificent help that I am not giving up hope.

This library has not stopped growing for more than 300 years. Even nowadays, we still buy new scientific literature to ensure that the research library concept is working as it should. The Herzogin Anna Amalia Library will still exist 300 years from now.

For more on the fire and its aftermath, see <http://www.anna-amalia-library.com/en/>

The library's website (in German) is at <http://www.klassik-stiftung.de/einrichtungen/herzogin-anna-amalia-bibliothek.html>

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