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The Library: A World History



Synopsis

A library is not just a collection of books, but also the buildings that house them. As varied and inventive as the volumes they hold, such buildings can be much more than the dusty, dark wooden shelves found in mystery stories or the catacombs of stacks in the basements of academia. From the great dome of the Library of Congress, to the white facade of the Seinäjoki Library in Finland, to the ancient ruins of the library of Pergamum in modern Turkey, the architecture of a library is a symbol of its time as well as of its builders' wealth, culture, and learning. Architectural historian James Campbell and photographer Will Pryce traveled the globe together, visiting and documenting over eighty libraries that exemplify the many different approaches to thinking about and designing libraries. The result of their travels, *The Library: A World History* is one of the first books to tell the story of library architecture around the world and through time in a single volume, from ancient Mesopotamia to modern China and from the beginnings of writing to the present day. As these beautiful and striking photos reveal, each age and culture has reinvented the library, molding it to reflect their priorities and preoccupations and in turn mirroring the history of civilization itself. Campbell's authoritative yet readable text recounts the history of these libraries, while Pryce's stunning photographs vividly capture each building's structure and atmosphere. Together, Campbell and Pryce have produced a landmark book—the definitive photographic history of the library and one that will be essential for the home libraries of book lovers and architecture devotees alike.

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Customer Reviews

Sophisticates used to say they bought Playboy to read the articles and paid no attention to the pictures. I bought this book for the opposite reason: to look at the gorgeous pictures of libraries through the years and they are gorgeous! However, I deigned to read a few words of the text, and discovered that it was fascinating and beautifully written, so I read it in detail. While it speaks about libraries, it also treats the various external factors that affected libraries, including their shifting patrons – the state, the church, the nobility, the plutocrats, the philanthropists, and the democrats. It also considers the effects of technology – the invention of books, paper, movable-type printing, gas lighting, electricity, and computing. Not to mention the evolution of architectural styles from classical to medieval, renaissance, baroque, rococo, neoclassical, Victorian, and modern. And, of course, the incorporation of the fine arts into library design. Although enjoyably readable, the book also includes all the scholarly apparatus necessary for a true student of libraries. Any lover of books, libraries, or beautiful buildings will delight in this volume.

As of this entry every review has been five stars. And should you decide to purchase this gorgeous book you will immediately understand why. This truly is a spectacular work. It covers the history of the library from ancient times to the very present. While the majority of the focus is on Continental Europe and England there are a number of Asian and American examples included as well. The Medieval and Baroque libraries are stunningly beautiful and are certainly my favorites. And, fortunately, they are very well represented in this collection. The last seventy pages are dedicated to contemporary libraries, and although impressive, they just don't evoke the same measure of appeal. The photography here is awe-inspiring. The views are crystal clear and perfectly chosen. A cloth binding would have been an improvement but it's a small consideration and outweighed by a very attractive dust jacket. I have a copy of "The Most Beautiful Libraries in the World", and although quite nice, it is not anywhere near this book's equal. I can't imagine any lover of books, libraries or architecture not thoroughly enjoying this outstanding production.

This may be the most beautiful book I have ever seen. If you love books and libraries, buy it and revel.

What can be a more fitting tribute to libraries than a book? And books do not get much better than this one. It is a must have for anyone interested in the history of books and learning. It is also a complete joy for anyone else. The physical book is a delight to hold and leaf through. Will Pryce's

images are rich, sensitive, and atmospheric. They are given a generous amount of space, and the result is a luxurious volume that transports the reader effortlessly into a spellbinding collection of libraries most of us will never see. Although the images are mesmerizing, this is not a picture book. It is an illustrated history of the world's learning. As we are guided through the development of the library, we are introduced to who was making and storing books, and where and how they chose to do it. The list of libraries therefore reads like a history of world culture. James Campbell's explanatory text is clear and revealing. It is stuffed full of fascinating scholarship, but always joyfully light and easily accessible. As he takes us effortlessly through the evolution of the library, he gleefully reveals wonderful nuggets of information -- like the use of paper for furniture and armour, and debates on whether it is good for monks to study books at all. The variety of libraries covered is astounding, and there is something here for every taste, from ancient Mesopotamia to the grandiose modern facilities designed to cope with the vast numbers of volumes now requiring storage. The author's unprecedented access to so many of the world's most beautiful libraries makes this the most definitive history of the subject available. Overall, this is a tribute to libraries and their readers. It is inspiring, uplifting, beautiful, and rich with fascinating detail. As James Campbell acutely observes: libraries celebrate the act of reading and the importance of learning. This book, too, does just that.

I bought this book as it was offered by another book club I belong to: The Folio Society. It was highly recommended, and they weren't wrong, it is a great book to read and browse. I also have a small library in my house and wanted to improve the look of the book cases (I am also a wood worker) and thought this would provide some wonderful inspiration, and that it did. But the vast number of libraries in the world, nearly all I would never, but would love to, see, is astonishing. A few of them I have seen talked about on various TV shows lately, the History channel for one if memory serves me, and it was also great to see in this book, very old library's that have been in existence for centuries, like one in Turkey since AD 155, although not sure it has books in it any more, or what they used for books back then. Then there is one in South Korea from 1251. Still in use! But one of the things I love the most is the huge libraries, seemingly stories high made of beautiful wood carvings, citing one example: The Library of the Abbey of St. Gall, St. Gallen, Switzerland, 1765. A beautiful book that will keep you enthralled for ages, especially if you are a book lover as well as someone who will get excited over the magnificence of the architecture of libraries, inside and out.

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