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Penn Libraries to Launch New Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies with \$20 Million Manuscript Collection Gift

PHILADELPHIA, PA – The Penn Libraries have received a major collection of 280 Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, valued at over \$20 million, from long-time benefactors and Library Board members Lawrence J. Schoenberg (C’53, WG’57, PAR’93) and Barbara Brizdle Schoenberg. To promote the use of this and other manuscript collections at Penn, the Libraries will create the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies.

“Through their extraordinary philanthropy and vision, Larry and Barbara have helped build the foundation for a strong medieval studies program at Penn,” said Penn President Amy Gutmann. “This new gift of an unparalleled collection of Medieval and Renaissance artifacts builds on that foundation. For generations to come, the collection and Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies will have a profound impact on the study of human knowledge and creative invention.”

The Lawrence J. Schoenberg Collection reflects the passions of its collector—art, science, mathematics and technology—and is utterly unique, comprising early manuscripts in Eastern and Western languages and illuminating the scope of pre-modern knowledge of the physical world in the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions.

“The overarching reason why I collect,” Larry Schoenberg reflected, “is the opportunity it affords me to participate in the history of human intellectual activity and the exchange of knowledge. Now, by giving my Collection to Penn, I know that students and scholars will share this experience and further transform knowledge.”

The Collection traces the reading and interpretation of ancient authorities who had central importance in the history of ideas, including Aristotle, Euclid, and Ptolemy. It prefigures the advances of Copernicus, Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz, and it illuminates lesser-known figures like Nastulus, the inventor of astrolabes, and al-Zahrawi, deviser of medical instruments.



“This is a remarkable gift from two people who, over the years, have had an invaluable impact on how we think about and position research libraries in a digital age,” said H. Carton Rogers, Vice-Provost and Director of Libraries at Penn. “We’re enormously grateful to Larry and Barbara for this gift that is sure to attract scholars from across disciplines and from around the world.”

Items from the Schoenberg collection have already attracted graduate students completing doctoral dissertations, undergraduates writing class papers, and scholars engaged in research and instruction in History, English, Music, History of Art, Religious Studies, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, East Asian Languages and Civilizations, and South Asian Studies, from Penn and abroad.

A principal reason behind the Schoenbergs’ decision to donate their collection to Penn was the Libraries’ reputation for providing digital access to rare materials and for supporting the hands-on use of primary sources in research and teaching. In response to this gift, the Penn Libraries will create the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies. Through collaboration with faculty and scholars, and led by a future Schoenberg Curator, the Institute’s mission will be to promote the active use of manuscripts in the Schoenberg Collection and in Penn’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, and the Penniman-Gribbel Collection of Sanskrit Manuscripts. The Schoenberg Institute and Collection, and the Special Collections Center currently under construction at Penn, reflect the Libraries’ support of collaborative humanities research and a strategic decision to leverage historical collection strengths by investing heavily in the area of the study of Medieval and Renaissance manuscripts.

The gift of the Schoenberg Collection to the Libraries represents a high point in years of philanthropy and counsel by the Schoenbergs. Previous financial and material gifts include support for the creation of the Libraries’ Digital Humanities presence through the Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Image (SCETI); the Schoenberg Database of Manuscripts, which tracks manuscript sales and provenance; as well as the annual Schoenberg Symposium on Manuscripts in the Digital Age; and the Lawrence J. Schoenberg & Barbara Brizdle Manuscript Initiative, established in 2006 to support the acquisition of manuscripts, preferably produced before 1601.

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