

CONSERVATION

ON COLLECTING

The von Büllingen album of watermarks

Invented in Italy in the thirteenth century, a watermark is an image of a paper mill's unique logo permanently integrated into paper during the manufacturing process. In 1994, a rare watermark album assembled in the first half of the nineteenth century by Canon Ludwig von Büllingen, a clergyman and scholar from Cologne, Germany, entered the NGV Collection. The compromised condition in which it arrived at the NGV indicates that the album had several owners since von Büllingen first assembled it. Tracing back its ownership has not only uncovered fascinating insights into the way watermarks were collected, used and researched, but has guided how NGV paper conservators have been able to formulate an appropriate treatment that embraces its chequered past.

BY LOUISE WILSON

The Canon Ludwig von Büllingen album contains approximately five hundred European paper fragments, each bearing a unique watermark. Watermarks are simplified, often religious, symbols, fashioned from copper wire and attached to the mould on which the paper was formed. Paper is thinner in the area the wire form is placed, so when viewed using transmitted light, which involves shining light through the paper, this more transparent region becomes visible. Watermark albums such as this are extremely rare and preliminary study of the designs indicate they date from the thirteenth century through to the nineteenth century. Watermarks can help establish the time and place a piece of paper was made, which can ultimately aid in dating and authenticating works of art on paper. The von Büllingen album is a highly valuable resource because it provides an overview of watermark design in Europe across five centuries

while offering an insight into the history of letterpress printing, papermaking, the paper trade across Europe and ink manufacture.

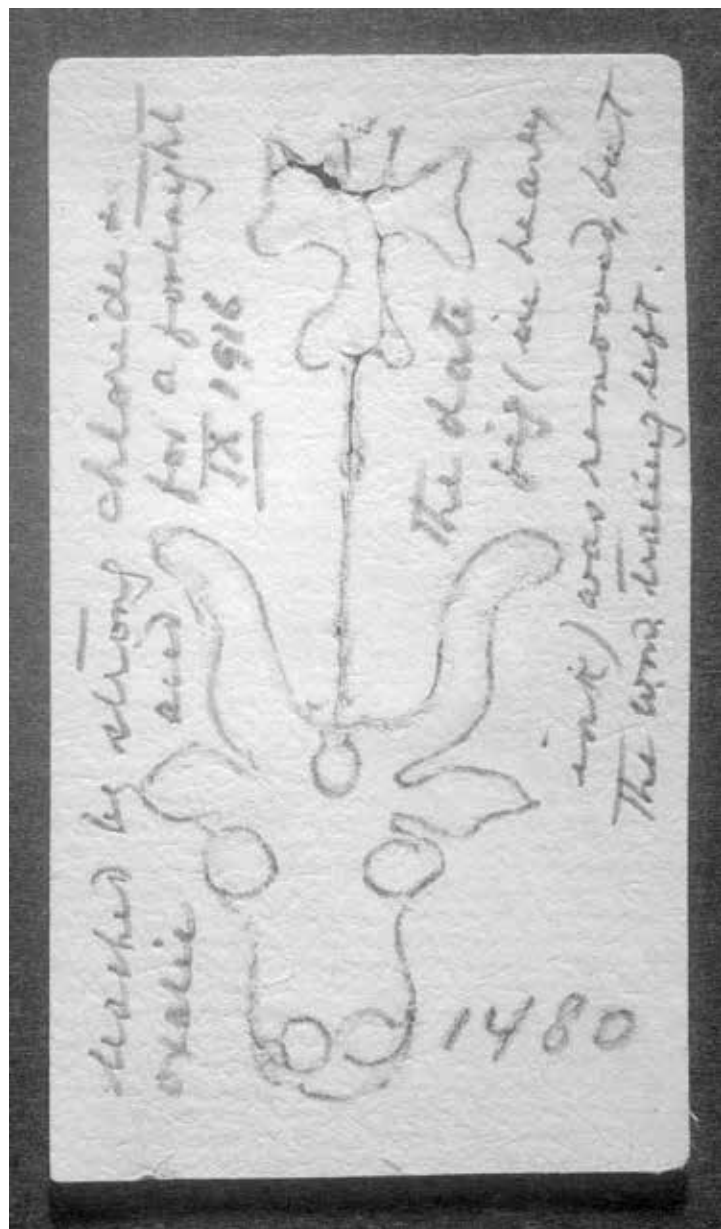
Canon Ludwig von Büllingen was a clergyman and scholar of letterpress printing in Cologne, Germany, with an impressive personal collection of incunabula (books produced in the infancy of printing before 1500), manuscripts and printed books. His scholarly legacy includes cataloguing the immense book collection of Canon Ferdinand Franz Wallraf (now in the Wallraf Richartz Museum, Cologne) and writing *Annales typographici Colinienses*, a five-volume bibliography of letterpress printers operating in Cologne from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.¹

While the original *Annales typographici Colinienses* is believed lost, von Büllingen's album of watermarks demonstrates his dedication to the study of printing and paper history. The

album is thought to contain watermarks from Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands, and includes designs such as bull's heads, crosses, serpents, orbs, two-headed eagles and unicorns. In addition to their interest in terms of papermaking history, von Büllingen may have appreciated the religious symbolism of watermarks. For example, the bull was thought to symbolise Christ and all those who selflessly work for the good of others.²

Each watermark was cut from an original manuscript, incunable or printed book, and traced over with pen and ink to articulate the design. The watermarks were arranged by emblem type and spot adhered to the album pages. His manner of arranging the album is at odds with the way watermarks are studied, that being with transmitted light, so the design becomes visible. There are many aspects of his approach that are jarring, particularly to me as a paper





conservator. While it is disconcerting to picture von Büllingen cutting into pages to extract watermarks, he certainly wasn't the first collector to make mistakes assembling a unique collection. This potential reality is slightly softened by the possibility he was sourcing material from his private library rather than damaging public collections. Unfortunately, attempts to locate his extensive collection to confirm this hypothesis have been unsuccessful. Von Büllingen donated the so-called 'Büllingen Collection' to the City of Cologne ten years before he died in 1848. It is highly likely his

manuscripts were lost when the Historical Archive of the City of Cologne collapsed in 2009, due to the construction of a new metro tunnel under the old city centre.

Inscriptions and ephemeral material slipped into the album ultimately helped piece together its provenance. This research was an essential step in developing a treatment proposal to stabilise the album. A label adhered to the front paste-down indicates the first owner after von Büllingen was Nicholas Trübner, a book dealer who became involved in the book trade in Germany during the 1830s and worked for

various companies including Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, specialist dealers in theological publications.³ In 1843 Trübner was offered a position working for Longman publishing house in London and it is likely he took the von Büllingen album with him. The label adhered to the front paste-down is from the *Caxton Celebration Exhibition* of 1877, an event staged to mark four hundred years since the first book was published in England by William Caxton. Like von Büllingen, Trübner was a collector of material related to papermaking and printing. He involved himself in the organisation of the Caxton celebrations and lent several items for display including the *Collection of Ancient Water-Marks formed by Canon Von Büllingen*.⁴ He contributed a lengthy description of the album to the exhibition catalogue describing the type and number of watermarks present, whether they were represented in published watermark references and explaining, 'The whole of the water-marks have been carefully covered in ink by Canon von Büllingen'.⁵

Trübner's detailed description was copied verbatim in bold, neat handwriting onto the front flyleaf of the album. Other examples of this writing are scattered throughout the album, most notably on items of ephemera relating to papermaking and experimental photographs attempting to capture watermarks. This handwriting has been traced to the third owner of the album, Reverend Thomas McCall Fallow of Yorkshire, a scholar of archaeology who was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and who wrote *Memorials of Old Yorkshire*.⁶ Fallow was editor of *The Antiquary, An Illustrated Magazine Devoted to the Study of the Past* and it is likely he was the reviewer of William Blades's *Enemies of Books* who recounted:

The writer is in possession of a collection of old water-marks which once belonged to Mr. Trübner, and were exhibited at the Caxton Exhibition. These have been cut out of pages of old service books and other works, from the beginning of printing to the present century. Each



one of these small scraps of paper tells a sad tale, that for the sake of securing it in an album, a certain 'Canon von Bullingen' destroyed no less than five hundred old books of various kinds, the majority of which were printed prior to the year 1500!⁷

Fallow's transcription on the album's flyleaf was later annotated in neat, minute handwriting of another owner. Trübner's assertion the watermarks had been 'carefully' covered in ink was corrected to 'very care-lessly' by the pencil-wielding inscriber. The same handwriting appears on page markers throughout the album noting the location of the various watermark symbols, their probable date and origin. The markers were written on letterhead reading 'Penghana', the Tasmanian residence of Robert Carl Sticht, the last owner of the album prior to it entering the NGV Collection. Sticht was a mining and metallurgical engineer who immigrated to Tasmania from the United States to work at the Mt Lyell copper mine in Queenstown. A highly regarded metallurgist, he was also an avid collector of artefacts and art.⁸ After purchasing the album from James Tregaski, a London-based book dealer in 1906, he studied the watermarks in detail, cross-referencing them with

examples in the key reference of the time, *Les Filigraines* which was published in 1907. He also attempted to make the album a more useful watermark reference by undoing some of von Büllingen's original work.⁹

Sticht undertook highly interventive treatment on numerous watermarked fragments, removing them from the album pages and immersing them in aqueous solutions hoping to remove the ink covering the watermarks. On one sample there is an inscription in Sticht's hand describing the treatment he conducted; '[B]leached by strong chloride and oxalic acid for a fortnight ... the date ... was removed, but the watermark tracing left'. While this seems like a radical and high-risk treatment today, both chlorine and oxalic acid were recommended to book collectors in the nineteenth century to remove unwanted ink inscriptions.¹⁰ While Sticht's treatment enabled the watermark to be viewed, his unsentimental approach failed to retain the context of the watermark specimens within von Büllingen's album.

The discovery that the album may be one of the few surviving items from von Bullingen's collection adds extra weight to the necessity to preserve it. Since entering the NGV Collection, the album has been carefully documented

and stored, however, interventive treatment is necessary to enable it to be studied and displayed. Research into past custodians has helped formulate a conservation treatment that is sensitive to von Büllingen's original layout while retaining the layers of history added by subsequent owners. Although it is difficult to accept the damage that has been done to countless books and manuscripts to create the album, it is the task of the paper conservation studio to stabilise it and ensure this sacrifice has not been in vain. Once treated, this rare album will be a useful resource for research into European watermarks and technical examination of samples representing five centuries of printing, ink and papermaking.

LOUISE WILSON IS NGV CONSERVATOR OF PAPER.

(p. 24) A page from the Canon Ludwig von Büllingen album showing double-headed eagle watermarks with a page marker inserted by Robert Sticht and an experimental photograph inserted by Thomas Fallow sitting loosely on the page (left) A watermark specimen removed from the album and treated by Robert Sticht to remove Canon Ludwig von Büllingen's tracing. This image was taken using infra-red light to enhance the appearance of his inscription, which was written using a carbon-based pencil (above) The Canon Ludwig von Büllingen album