

Geneva's unique collection

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): **- (1949)**

Heft 1119

PDF erstellt am: **25.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-693333>

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GENEVA'S UNIQUE COLLECTION.

(This article is reproduced from the Educational Supplement of "THE TIMES" by courtesy of the Editor).

Visitors to the Permanent Exhibition of Education at the International Bureau of Education, Geneva, who take the trouble to climb the stairs to the upper floor, are rewarded by coming face to face with a magnificent display of some of the most recently published illustrated books for children. The books are written in over 30 languages and come from a great many countries and all five continents.

Among the books they will no doubt find new editions of old favourites, but the majority on show represent the modern outlook in thought and presentation. Yet all are characteristic of the countries in which they are published. Differing in style, format, and subject-matter, these books invite further study and a comparison of children's literature in many countries.

Closer examination of the numerous books displayed usually leads to an inquiry about the origin of the collection and the reason for its inclusion in the permanent exhibition. Visitors then find to their great surprise and delight that this display is but a small part of the full collection of children's books of a recreative character housed by the International Bureau of Education. This collection now numbers over 9,000 volumes (9,043 on June 24, 1949); no less than 51 countries are represented, some by just a few volumes, but most by several rows of books comprising in some cases hundreds of volumes — a priceless find for the student of children's literature, the author seeking new ideas for future books, the artist searching for inspiration for new illustrations, or for the parent wondering what type of book to give his child for a Christmas or birthday present.

During 1948 no less than 1,423 volumes were added to this unique and valuable collection, an average of 120 new books a month. During the first six months of this year the collection has expanded by an average of 150 a month.

How came this collection into being? In the autumn of 1928 the bureau undertook to inquire into "Children's Books and International Goodwill." The first result was an exhibition of children's books from 26 countries, organized in Geneva at the time of the Conference of the World Federation of Educational

Associations. From that time the exhibition became permanent and the bureau found itself obliged to inaugurate a children's literature to pursue the various supplementary studies to which it gave rise.

The section aimed to make known what was being written for young people and to collect as many documents as possible on the subject. The Bureau got into touch with publishers of children's books, in many countries, a number of large children's libraries, associations of librarians and individual authors and experts on children's literature, and began to receive — and still receives annually — lists of the best books published for children. Publishers supply copies of the books listed, and the bureau puts the latest additions on show for some time before adding them to the general collection in the library.

Besides numbering and cataloguing all these books the children's literature section is called upon to answer numerous requests for information or to aid students in their study of certain aspects of children's literature for, as well as the 9,000 volumes already mentioned, the section has a library of reference books on the subject. On one occasion it was asked for a list of books in French, adaptable for easy translation, containing true stories with a religious background, but lively and interesting as well as uplifting, which would be suitable for children of about nine years of age preparing for their first Communion. Later, an Austrian social worker sought help in obtaining lists of books in French and German containing short poems and easy playlets for children of six to eight years.

The collection of children's books has also led artists and authors to spend weeks, or even months, studying the books. One well-known author realized that a certain type of illustrated album did not exist; the result of his study was the publication of a remarkable series of books on animals which have had a great success. It is probably true to say that this collection has contributed in no small way to the happiness of a host of children.

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