

**Zeitschrift:** Scholion : Bulletin  
**Herausgeber:** Stiftung Bibliothek Werner Oechslin  
**Band:** 8 (2014)  
  
**Artikel:** Collecting for classics: rare architectural books at the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library  
**Autor:** Yerkes, Carolyn  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-719995>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 09.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

COLLECTING FOR CLASSICS: RARE ARCHITECTURAL BOOKS  
AT THE AVERY ARCHITECTURAL AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY

*Carolyn Yerkes*

From Plato's projection screen to Quatremère de Quincy's primordial type, the cave has always had totemic status in architectural history. In architectural libraries, however, the cave has a more practical purpose: underground, books are safe from the light, and their great weight is supported by the earth beneath them. Avery Classics, which is the rare books department of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, and the Werner Oechslin Bibliothek have much in common, but perhaps their most distinctive shared feature is that both include subterranean bibliographical landscapes. Through their very structure, these institutions maintain that books are foundational to architectural history and practice. Caves may be ancient, predating human intervention, but they continually evolve through constant accumulation. This is another feature that the two rare architectural book collections share, because Avery Classics and Bibliothek Oechslin operate on the conviction that their vitality and relevance depend on their growth. To launch a scholarly exchange between the two libraries, Avery and Oechslin, this article will take *SCHOLION* readers spelunking in Avery Classics: it will provide a guide to the landscape and examine some of its specific features.

As one of the largest architectural libraries in the world, the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts library serves the students and faculty of Columbia University, of which it is a part, and also serves researchers in art and architectural history, design, and preservation from around the globe. Samuel Putnam Avery and Mary Ogden Avery founded the library in 1890 to memorialize their son, Henry Ogden Avery, who had been a promising young architect in New York City before his death that year. From the Avery family's initial gift of 2,000 books, the collection has grown to more than two million archival items and about 750,000 books, with comprehensive collections in architecture, archaeology, and art history, including painting, sculpture, and photography. (Cf. plate/Tafel XIII.) Even as the breadth of the Avery Library has expanded to the fine arts, the focus of Avery Classics – the rare books collection – has always remained on architecture and its related

fields, such as urban planning and decorative arts. Concentrating on those topics, the collection has a wide chronological range, reaching back to the fifteenth century: Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* (1485), the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), and three editions of Vitruvius (1486, 1496, and 1497) are among the incunabula. The collection's historical strengths in North American and European architectural history reflect its original focus, but today its geographical scope extends worldwide and includes areas such as Latin America and Japan, for example, which have become two major areas of expansion.

Although most of the books from the founding gift are now in Classics, Avery did not always have a separate division to house its most precious volumes. As the collection grew and antiquarian architectural books became more prized, the rare books department was created in the 1950s when a young student named Robert A. M. Stern was assigned to pull all the books published before 1800 from the open shelves. These now form the core of the closed-stack Avery Classics collection, along with nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century rarities that have been added to its holdings. Classics is not limited to printed books, however: the designation encompasses print suites and broadsides, ephemera, and photography, too. As might be expected at Avery – the library that created and maintains the *Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals*, a database of more than 800,000 indexical records – the rare serials holdings are particularly strong, including magazines, journals, and zines: the complete run of *Archigram* is a perennial favorite with students. Whereas Avery has a separate special collections department for large architectural archives – Avery Drawings and Archives has over two million drawings, letters, photographs, and manuscripts relating primarily to American architectural history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – bound manuscripts like sketchbooks, diaries, and account books are often found in Avery Classics.

Readers interested in a more thorough account of Avery's development and holdings do not lack for sources. In the nearly 125 years since its founding, Avery's directors have written its history many times, and these synopses often contain briefs on notable rare book acquisitions.<sup>1</sup> The treasures of the Classics collection were extensively chronicled in *Avery's Choice: Five Centuries of Great Architectural Books, One Hundred Years of an Architectural Library 1890–1900*.<sup>2</sup> Edited by former Avery Librarians Adolf Placzek and Angela Giral, this volume tells the history of architecture through books, with 427 catalog entries on key works and bibliographical essays by historians. American architectural history is a core focus of Classics, and the department's

significant holdings in this area are particularly well-documented, not least because the library of Henry-Russell Hitchcock now forms part of the collection. Hitchcock wrote the book on American architectural bibliography – his *American Architectural Books: A List of Books, Portfolios, and Pamphlets on Architecture and Related Subjects Published in America before 1895* is the standard reference on the subject – and that list also serves as a partial guide to what is in Avery Classics.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these texts, exhibitions have produced thematic explorations of certain highlights from the collection: for example, “Piranesi Architetto,” held at the American Academy in Rome in 1992, included a display of Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s presentation drawings for San Giovanni in Laterano that are housed in Classics.<sup>4</sup> Because such a comprehensive literature about Classics already exists, this article will provide an update by focusing on a few recent acquisitions.

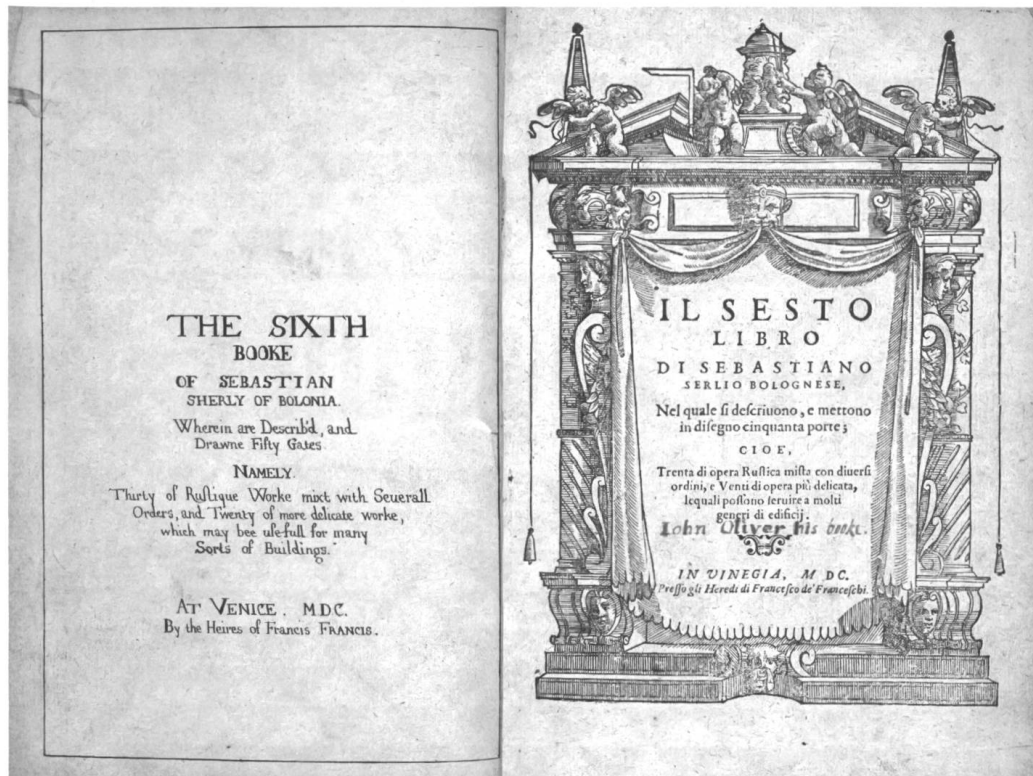
Singular copies of printed books are a collecting interest common to both Avery Classics and the Werner Oechslin Bibliothek. Architects making calculations in their field manuals, tourists making notes in their city guides, and scholars annotating their treatises: all produce unique examples of what otherwise might be considered typical architectural books. Manuscript markings provide insight into how a volume was used, thus generating evidence about its reception. Occasionally, annotations are so substantial that they should be considered independent works in their own right. This is the case with a recently acquired book by Sebastiano Serlio, the Italian Renaissance architect whose published and unpublished works are among the greatest treasures of Avery Classics.

While dividing his career between Italy and France in the first half of the sixteenth century, Serlio wrote an architectural treatise that was originally intended to be published in seven parts. He lived to see only the first five of these parts – along with the “Libro Extraordinario”, a book on doors – make it into print, and the seventh part was published posthumously, as was another extra book, on Polybius’s castrametation, or ancient military camp design.<sup>5</sup> One of the two manuscripts for the sixth book, on domestic architecture, is in Avery Classics: the facsimile publication of these large folio drawings of housing types and their accompanying texts finally brought Serlio’s project to completion in the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> The latest addition to Avery’s Serlio collection complements this manuscript, because it contains other parts of the same treatise, from a fragment of the 1600 Italian edition published in Venice by the heirs of Francesco de’ Franceschi.<sup>7</sup> The fragment includes two of the seven parts that appeared in that edition: Book VII, on

accidents, and the *Libro Extraordinario*, referred to here as “Il Sesto Libro.” It also contains an English manuscript translation of these two texts, completed in the second half of the seventeenth century, interleaved and bound together with the printed pages.

This is a significant discovery for several reasons. First, this manuscript is the earliest known English translation of Serlio’s Book VII and his *Libro Extraordinario*; the first printed English translation of them did not appear until 2001.<sup>8</sup> Thus this book and its manuscript demonstrate how Serlio’s influence spread north from Italy and France not only to the Low Countries – the fourth book, on the orders, was translated into Dutch by Pieter Coecke van Aelst in 1539, only two years after the first edition had been published in Italian – but also to England. Presumably completed by a scribe, the manuscript includes some endearing details, such as the translation of the author’s name as “Sebastiano Sherly of Bologna”. (Ill. 1) Second, the provenance of the volume itself also intrigues. The ownership signature on the title page is that of John Oliver (c. 1616–1701), who, along with Christopher Wren, Hugh May, and Roger Pratt, helped to survey the city of London after it was destroyed by the Great Fire of 1666.<sup>9</sup> Trained as a glazier, Oliver eventually became assistant surveyor in the construction of St. Paul’s Cathedral. His interest in Italian architecture evidently ran deep, as he once owned the collection of drawings by Andrea Palladio that had passed from Inigo Jones to John Webb and that today is owned by the Royal Institute of British Architects.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the Serlio edition now at Avery is not the only such volume that belonged to Oliver: he also had a copy of the first edition of Palladio’s *Quattro Libri dell’Architettura* (1570) with another English manuscript translation bound into it.<sup>11</sup> It appears that Oliver, too, collected architectural books.

When it comes to collecting in Classics, the antiquarian is complemented by the ephemeral. One of the department’s sub-collections, or groups of material associated by genre and form rather than by subject, is the trade catalog collection, largely assembled from the 1960s to the 1980s by Herbert Mitchell, the rare books librarian during that time. Mitchell recognized that trade catalogs – publications in which companies advertise their goods to customers – provide a view into American architectural history that is not available from other sources. Produced by manufacturers of everything from roofing to lighting and construction materials to furniture, these advertising catalogs provide a record of how buildings were made in the United States throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Classics now has over

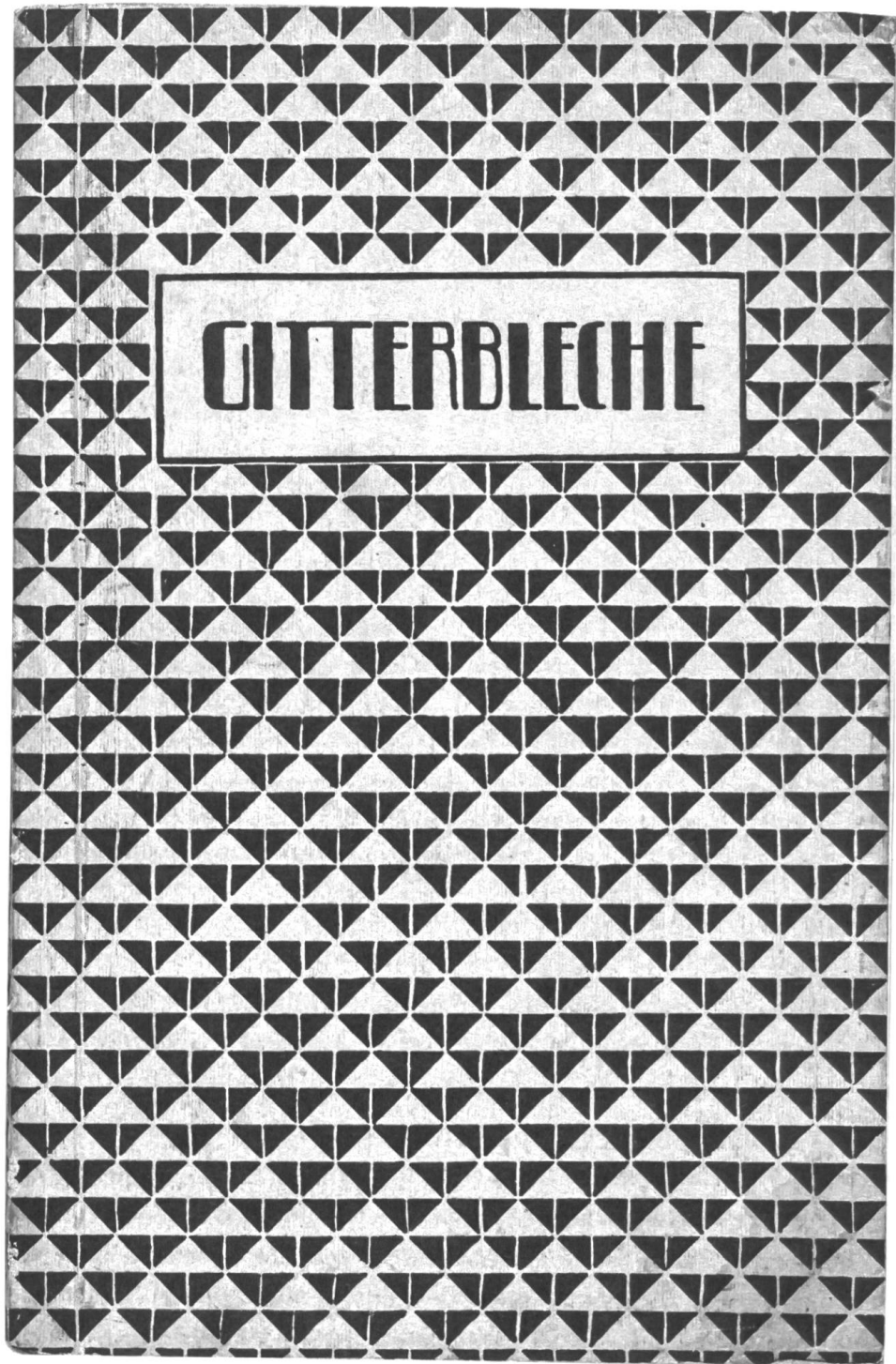


Ill. 1: Sebastiano Serlio, *Il sesto libro di Sebastiano Serlio Bolognese ...* and *Il settimo libro di Sebastiano Serlio Bolognese ...*, Venice: Presso gli Heredi di Francesco de' Franceschi 1600, bound with an interleaved English manuscript translation, title page and facing page

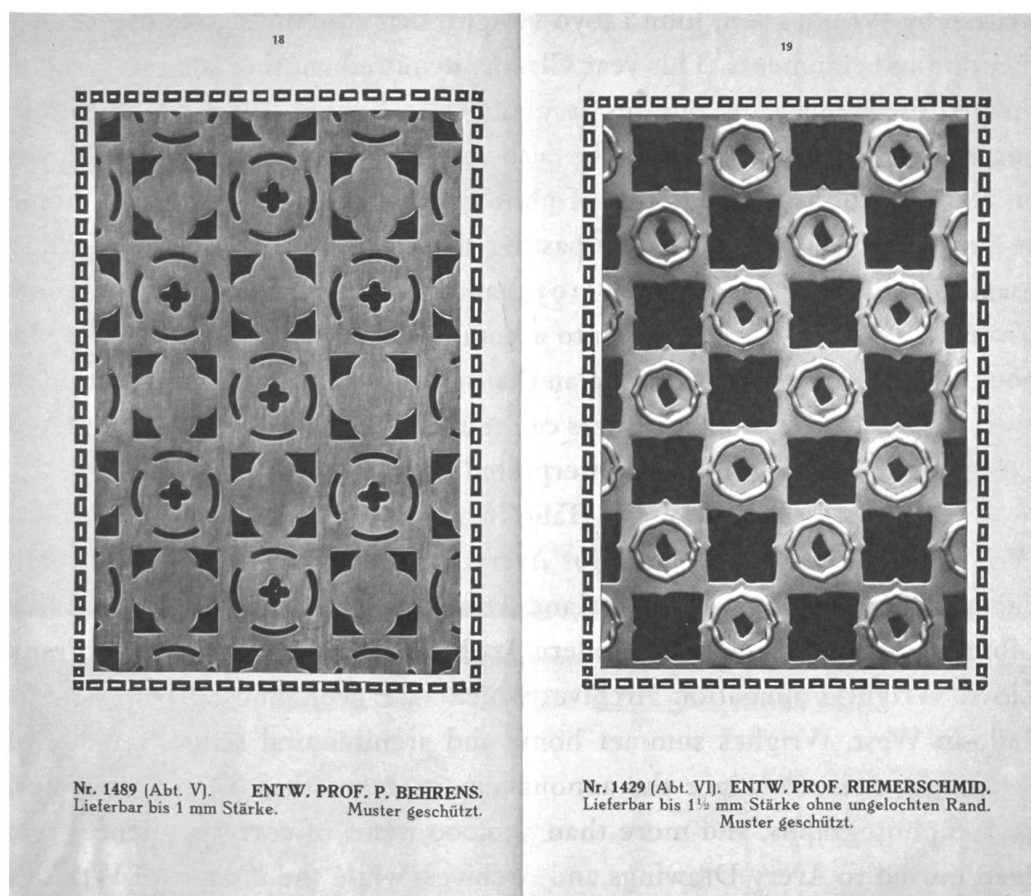
fifteen thousand catalogs of the American building trades, and they are among the most frequently used works in the collection. In addition to the historic preservationists who consult them to identify materials and architectural details for restorations, historians turn to the trade catalogs for the information that they include about buildings: the catalogs often include lists of architects who used the advertised products, and on which structures.

Although the trade catalogs in Classics provide a panoramic view of building across the United States, the items in this collection are not all vernacular and they are not all American. One striking addition is a catalog from the Dresden metalwork firm of Louis Herrmann, entitled *Fabrik für Siebe, Gitter und Horden aus Draht und Blech*. (Ill. 2) Published in about 1920, this catalog features mass-produced screens used by Peter Behrens and Richard Riemerschmid, both major figures in the Deutscher Werkbund. (Ill. 3) In Classics, this item joins *Metallgehänge*, another catalog from Herrmann's company featuring delicate designs for hanging ornamental screens.





Ill. 2: Louis Herrmann, Fabrik für Siebe, Gitter und Horden aus Draht und Blech,  
Dresden: Louis Herrmann c. 1920, front cover



Ill. 3: Louis Herrmann, Fabrik für Siebe, Gitter und Horden aus Draht und Blech,  
Dresden: Louis Herrmann c. 1920, inside pages featuring work by Peter Behrens  
and Richard Riemerschmid

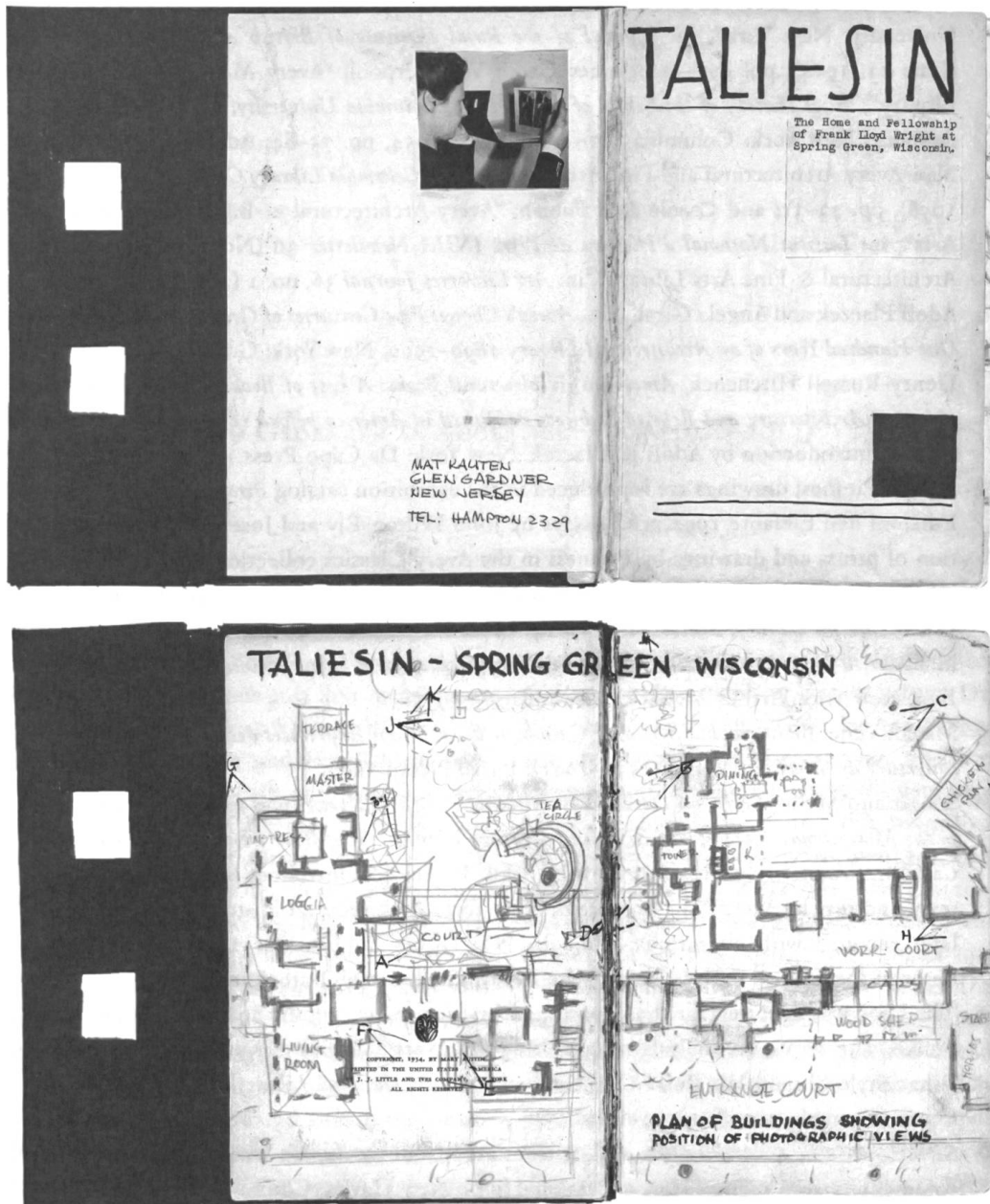
In the same category, Classics also recently acquired the second set of Le Corbusier's Color Keyboards, which were paint samples that he designed for Salubra in 1959.<sup>12</sup> The first set, from 1931, was donated to Classics years ago by Wallace K. Harrison.<sup>13</sup> Intended for commercial purposes, these trade catalogs exemplify how aesthetics that are often perceived as rarified were marketed for public consumption.

Sebastiano Serlio and Le Corbusier are two architects whose books Avery collects encyclopedically, and Frank Lloyd Wright is another. In Classics, singular works by and about this preeminent American architect include a copy of one of the special portfolios of the *Ausgeführte Bauten*, published by Ernst Wasmuth in 1911, that Wright produced using precious materials – gold ink, Japan paper, leather bindings – in order to give to friends, and include several copies of *My Father Who Is on Earth* (1946), the biography



written by Wright's son, John Lloyd Wright, that contain the architect's corrections and comments. This year Classics acquired another unique Wright-themed piece, made by one of his students, Mat Kauten. (Ill. 4) In the early 1950s, Kauten, an illustrator who also designed several modernist homes on the east coast, took a series of photographs of Taliesin, Wright's home at Spring Green, Wisconsin. By pasting these photos into a copy of Mary Austin's *Can Prayer Be Answered?* (1934) and inserting a pair of lenses into its cover, Kauten turned the book into a homemade stereograph viewer. In the book's opening pages he drew a plan that notes the location and direction of every view included so that readers can tour the site in three dimensions and experience how Wright's pupil interpreted the buildings. (Ill. 5)

Despite its charm, Kauten's Taliesin stereograph was not the central Wright acquisition of the year for Avery. In September 2012, Carole Ann Fabian, current Avery Librarian and Director, announced that the Avery Library and The Museum of Modern Art have co-acquired the entire Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archive, which had been housed primarily at Taliesin West, Wright's summer home and architectural school outside of Scottsdale, Arizona. Since the announcement, more than 26,000 drawings, 44,000 photographs, and more than 350,000 items of correspondence have been moved to Avery Drawings and Archives, while the models of Wright's projects have been moved to MoMA. Included in the archive are over 100 books, and these will be housed in Classics. This historic acquisition provides an impetus to revisit Wright's bibliography.



Ill. 4 and 5: Mat Kauten, stereograph viewer constructed from *Can Prayer Be Answered?* by Mary Austin, New York: Farrar 1934, front cover and inside pages, plan of Taliesin noting locations of photographic views

- 1 See, for example, Edward R. Smith, "The Henry O. Avery Architectural Library of Columbia University, New York", in: *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* 21, series 3 (June 13, 1914), pp. 497–512; James Grote Van Derpool, "Avery Memorial Architectural Library", in: *A History of the School of Architecture, Columbia University*, by Theodor K. Rohdenburg, New York: Columbia University Press 1954, pp. 75–84; Adolf K. Placzek, "The New Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library", in: *Columbia Library Columns* 27, no. 2 (Feb. 1978), pp. 23–31; and Carole Ann Fabian, "Avery Architectural et Bibliothèque de Beaux-Arts", in: *Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art INHA Newsletter* 36 (Nov. 2009), and "Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library", in: *Art Libraries Journal* 36, no. 1 (2011), pp. 28–34.
- 2 Adolf Placzek and Angela Giral, eds., *Avery's Choice: Five Centuries of Great Architectural Books, One Hundred Years of an Architectural Library 1890–1900*, New York: G. K. Hall & Co. 1997.
- 3 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *American Architectural Books: A List of Books, Portfolios, and Pamphlets on Architecture and Related Subjects Published in America before 1895*, expanded edition with an introduction by Adolf K. Placzek, New York: Da Capo Press 1976.
- 4 Avery's Piranesi drawings are reproduced in the exhibition catalog *Piranesi Architetto*, Rome: Edizioni dell'Elefante 1992, with essays by John Wilton-Ely and Joseph Connors. A selection of prints and drawings by Piranesi in the Avery Classics collection has been described in: *Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Drawings and Etchings at Columbia University: An Exhibition at Low Memorial Library, March 21–April 14, 1972*, New York: Columbia University 1972, and in: *Piranesi: Drawings and Etchings at the Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University, New York*, New York: Arthur M. Sackler Foundation 1975.
- 5 Magali Vène, *Bibliographia Serliana: Catalogue des Éditions Imprimées des Livres du Traité d'Architecture de Sebastiano Serlio (1537–1681)*, Paris: Picard 2007.
- 6 Sebastiano Serlio, *Serlio on Domestic Architecture, Different Dwellings from the Meanest Hovel to the Most Ornate Palace: The Sixteenth-Century Manuscript of Book VI in the Avery Library of Columbia University*, with a foreword by Adolf K. Placzek, introduction by James S. Ackerman, and text by Myra Nan Rosenfeld, New York: Architectural History Foundation 1978, later reissued with alterations, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications 1996. The other manuscript for Serlio's sixth book is in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich.
- 7 The book was acquired for the department by former Avery Rare Books Librarian Claudia Funke, who wrote an analysis of collecting for Avery Classics during her tenure: see "In What Style Should We Build Our Collections", in: *Harvard Library Bulletin* 15, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2004), pp. 99–107.
- 8 *Sebastiano Serlio on Architecture*, vol. 2, translated from the Italian with an introduction and commentary by Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 2001.
- 9 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, 3rd ed., New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 1995, pp. 714–15.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 This was last seen on the market at Sotheby's in 1972; *ibid.*
- 12 For these works see Arthur Rüegg, ed., *Polychromie Architecturale: Le Corbusiers Farbenklaviaturen von 1931 und 1959 = Le Corbusier's Color Keyboards from 1931 and 1959*, 3 vols., Basel/Boston: Birkhäuser c. 1997.
- 13 The archives of Harrison and his partner Max Abramovitz are part of Avery Drawings and Archives, and Harrison's "doodle books" – the nickname given to the books from his personal library, heavily annotated and filled with sketches – are housed in that department and Classics.