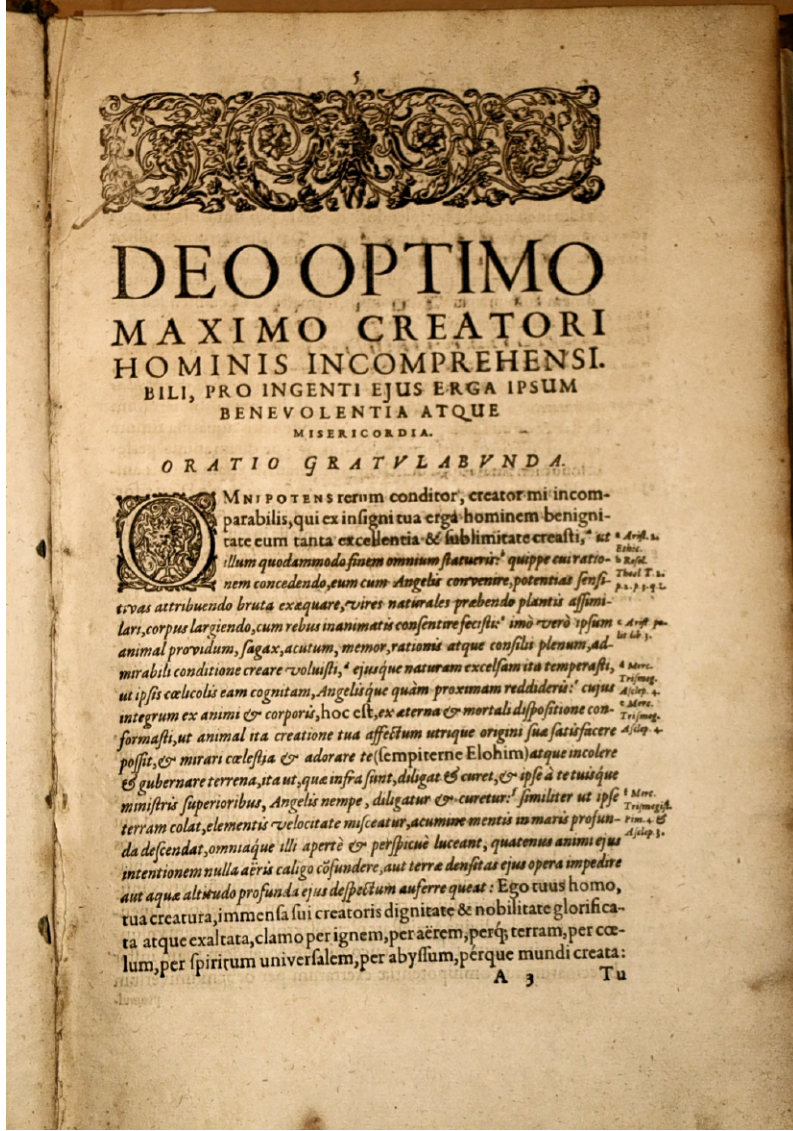


Vintage books



The Lenkiewicz Foundation Trustee Francis Mallett is overseeing the move of books from St Saviours; a rare find was the 1640 book by Robert Fludd. PICTURES BY ROGER MALONE



A new chapter beckons for unique Lenkiewicz Library

Roger Malone sees the end of an era and a positive future for the Robert Lenkiewicz Library

There is a palpable legacy of celebrated and controversial artist Robert Lenkiewicz as you enter St Saviours, tucked away amidst the back-streets of Plymouth's Barbican.

The dusty, almost Gothic building with crumbling bell tower and quaint observatory offering near-360 degree views of city and sea, was an ideal location for the artist's personal library of Art and Art History.

After Lenkiewicz died in 2002 the collection of 25,000 books passed to his estate – and finally, what still remained after the most valuable were sold by the Executor, to The Lenkiewicz Foundation.

Now the stacked shelves at St Saviours are being cleared of weighty tomes in what is the artist's last tangible link with the Barbican which had been his creative base since he arrived in the city in 1966.

Trustee of The Lenkiewicz Foundation, Francis Mallett and a team of helpers are packing the books, box by box, to be dispatched to their new home as part of the Plymouth College of Art Library.

"The first job was to catalogue them all to know what was there," says Francis.

Some interesting discoveries have been made – including a 1640 book by the celebrated physician and astrologer Robert Fludd who explored both science and alchemy.

"Robert was fascinated with science and magic and alchemy," says Francis.

"He had an interest in witchcraft and the supernatural – but he wasn't a believer in anything. He viewed all belief as being equally eccentric.

"He was interested in the idea of what people believed to be true, be it religious, moral or scientific – and especially how these beliefs become obsessional and fanatical."

The Lenkiewicz Art and Art History Library reflected a deep fascination with painters such as Rembrandt and Velasquez, along with many other artists who were not so well known.

"This is very much a specialist art collection, but for almost anyone that you could think of there is an appropriate book. The collection is extraordinarily researched," says Francis.

The part of St Saviours that Lenkiewicz used for his library was the former Sunday school – the actual church was bombed during the war and didn't survive.

"Robert modelled the space on the Bodleian Library in Oxford. That was very much a library aesthetic for him," says Francis.

"He loved the look of things, he loved the aesthetic. Things had to create a striking visual impression.

"Everything he did was thought through. Everything was carefully considered," says Francis.

"He loved spaces and creating something in them that was of a grand



scale. That was part of his character."

When Lenkiewicz took on St Saviours on a peppercorn rent from Plymouth City council it was virtually derelict. But despite improvements, the building, prone to damp, has proved problematic in the role of housing a library.

Without the funds to restore it properly, The Lenkiewicz Foundation felt it best to find a permanent new home where the books would be safe and benefit the community.

"An Art Library is entirely different from a research library, which can be on line, because it's visual – and actual books are a better way of seeing images," says Francis.

"Plus there is nothing quite like the feel of an actual book. And the antiquarian books that Robert collected are extraordinary – dating back to the Middle Ages. If you touched them they directly transported you back to that era. It's a direct route to a previous age when you didn't go looking at something on the screen."

As well as the books in his St Saviours library Lenkiewicz, also had libraries in his Barbican studio and elsewhere.

"A lot of his earnings went into buying books," says Francis.

"In later years it became an obsession. He was almost more obsessed

with his book collection than his painting.

"He had a lot of wisdom, and he was great in that he was very willing to engage with people without being condescending."

An artist with an insatiable interest in a broad spectrum of subjects covering all aspects of the human condition to the world of great art, he was also curious about the macabre.

Along with the 10,000 books in St Saviours there also some other interesting artefacts including a coffin, an old typewriter that was supposed to have been used to take evidence in the Nuremberg Trials – and even a Nazi Voodoo doll.

"The Nazis had a curious interest in spirituality, and Robert was interested in this mystical side," says Francis.

"Much related to his own background because his parents were both Jews who fled from Germany and came to London.

"He was brought up in an environment of awareness of cultural issues because they ran a home for Jewish refugees and many had fascinating backgrounds," he says.

"He would often talk about how such a civilised country, which had produced such great writers, philosophers, artists and composers could perpetrate such horrendous things."



Robert Lenkiewicz in his library – in latter years he was as passionate about collecting books as he was about painting

New home for collection