

Strahov Library - Theological Hall, Philosophical Hall, (Strahovská knihovna)

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The Strahov Library is the library of the Royal Canonry of Premonstratensians in Strahov, Prague. Its beginnings go back to the middle of the 12th century, when the Strahov Monastery was founded, and since several original volumes from that period have been preserved, it can be stated that the history of the Strahov Library has been continuous since then, despite all the calamities and misfortunes of war. Over the centuries, the library has had to deal with adversity many times. The fire of the monastery in the 13th century, the escape of the convent during the Hussite wars, the looting of the library by the Swedes in 1648, and the temporary expropriation of the library by the communist state gives an overview of the biggest disasters in its almost nine hundred year history.



[Image 1] Theology Hall (image provided by the author)

The lack of written sources, lost in the 15th century, means we cannot know how the book collection was stored during the Middle Ages. At the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, Abbot Johannes Lohel began systematically buying books and then proceeded to build a special 'library hall', which was completed by his successor Casper Questenberg.

This original hall was replaced in 1671 by a new one, today called the Theological Hall. The painted wooden shelves, partially transferred from the original Lohel's Hall, have survived to this day. The Theological Hall, which was built by Giovanni Domenico Orsi at the request of Abbot Jerome Hirnhaim, was also decorated with frescoes describing the rivalry between Reason and Faith by Siard Nosecký, a member of the convent, before 1727.



The second hall, today called the Philosophical Hall, was built at the end of the 18th century. Architect Ignatius Palliardi adapted the new building to the wooden interior, which was purchased by the then Abbot Wenceslas Mayer from the abolished monastery of Louka in Moravia. The fourteen-meter-high vault was decorated by the Viennese painter Franz Anton Maulbertsch with a monumental ceiling painting depicting the spiritual development of mankind. Today, over 70,000 volumes are stored in both halls, but this is only about a quarter of the book collection. Although in the earlier period the library served only the needs of the

[Image 2] Philosophical Hall (image provided by the author)

conventuals, at the end of the 18th century Strahov librarians (especially the late revivalist, philologist, expert on Czech literature, and poet Jan Gottfried Dlabač) made it available to the scientific community.

Today, the Strahov Library is both one of the most important libraries in Central Europe, due to its holdings, and one of the most beautiful in the world, due to its historical premises.

The total number of book volumes exceeds 250,000. Among them, manuscripts take the leading place, of which there are about three thousand. The oldest and most valuable manuscript is the so-called 'Strahov evangeliary'. It contains the text of the Gospels, inscribed in Tours (now France) in the years 860–865, with, a hundred years later, full-page illuminations of the Evangelists bound into it in the spirit of the Ottonian Renaissance. Its binding is also remarkable, as it bears a rich decoration that represents all three artistic styles of the Middle Ages. Beautiful in terms of design and significant in terms of content, the North Italian edition of the Arabic scholar Al-Sufi's astronomical atlas with early Renaissance depictions of the constellations from the mid-14th century. The collection of Renaissance drawings – new designs of arts and crafts objects – created by the famous painter and architect Giulio Romano and his workshop is also famous.

Jarloch's chronicle from the beginning of the 13th century is the only Czech medieval chronicle that has survived in its original form. Its author (and, in part, scribe) was the Abbot of the Premonstratensian monastery in Milevsko.. Additionally, among the wonderful manuscripts of local origin, the library also holds the Pontificale of Albert of Šternberk from 1378 and the Louka Missal from 1483.

The Strahov Old Prints (1501–1800) is a collection of books that are thematically related to basically all scientific fields. Undoubtedly, the most famous titles include a copy of the first edition of Nicolaus Copernicus's work *On the revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* (Nuremberg 1543), in which the author formulated the heliocentric theory, as well as the German edition of Andrea Vesalius's anatomical atlas *On the fabric of the human body in seven books* from the mid-16th century and *Instruments of Renewed Astronomy* (Wandsbeck 1598) of the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe with his portrait *supralibros* on green satin binding, with a dedication in his own hand and a pasted portrait.

The library staff is a small but qualified team. Librarians are dedicated not only to the processing of old book collections and new additions, both current scientific book production and newly acquired historical books, but also to making them available in the form of professional publications and other outputs. Here we can name a publicly accessible online catalogue, a printed catalogue of Strahov first prints, an inventory of illuminated manuscripts, and an inventory of book bindings, and last but not least, many scholarly articles, monographs, and catalogues which were compiled during cooperation at important domestic and foreign exhibitions. Since 1995, the Strahov Library has published 14 volumes of the almanac *Bibliotheca Strahoviensis*, which focuses on monasteriology and historical book collections. In addition to the aforementioned book collections, historic library halls and newly built or adapted depositories, the Strahov Library also manages a collection of historical maps, a collection of graphics, a picture gallery, and a monastery archive. The library also includes one of the rarest collections of historical terrestrial and astronomical globes in Czech Republic, as well as the so-called 'cabinet of curiosities', actually a small museum of natural history and archaeological finds and historical monuments, which was created at the end of the 18th century. The Strahov Library is fully involved in the *Memoria Mundi* project of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic for the digitisation of manuscripts and prints with an online output on the portal manuscriptorium.com, as well as the digitisation of the archive funds on the portal monasterium.net.

In the last thirty years, both library halls have undergone a major renovation. First, the Theological Hall was restored between 1992-1994. The wooden interior was rehabilitated and restored, earlier a historical interventions were corrected and the ceiling frescoes were cleaned. In the years 2008-2010, the Philosophical Hall was completely restored with the support of Norway grants.

Now the library is open daily throughout the year from 9 am to 5 pm offering free entry to members of the religious orders and congregations and school children.