The Ransom Center’s Permanent Exhibitions

The Harry Ransom Center offers visitors the opportunity to view its extensive literary and cultural holdings in the Ransom Center Galleries. Rotating exhibitions highlight the Center’s collections in thoughtful and innovative ways. The Ransom Center’s Gutenberg Bible and the First Photograph, “View from the Window at le Gras,” are on permanent display in the Ralph and Mary John Spence Lobby.

The Gutenberg Bible is the first surviving book printed with movable type on a printing press. It was printed in Johann Gutenberg’s shop in Mainz, Germany, between 1450 and 1455. The Ransom Center’s Gutenberg Bible is one of only five complete copies in the United States and 48 complete copies in the world.

Acquired in 1978 from the Carl H. and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation in New York City, the Ransom Center’s Gutenberg Bible is bound in two volumes, containing 1,282 illuminated pages. In addition to viewing the Bible, visitors can access an interactive display to learn more about the invention of the printing press, the history of the Gutenberg Bible, and the Ransom Center’s copy, and to view detailed digital images of each page.

The Ransom Center’s other permanent display is the First Photograph, which Frenchman Joseph Nicéphore Niépce produced in 1826. The 8” x 6.5” heliograph depicts the view from the workroom window of Niépce’s estate in le Gras in east-central France. The image, on a pewter plate sensitized with bitumen of Judea, took at least eight hours of exposure to produce. Niépce’s photograph forms part of the Gernsheim collection, a major photo-historical archive, which the Ransom Center acquired in 1963.

Housed in its original frame and sealed within an atmosphere of inert gas in an airtight steel and Plexiglas storage frame, the photograph must be viewed under controlled lighting for its image to be visible. Details in the original image are faint, due not to fading but to Niépce’s underexposure of the original plate.

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