

<https://www.facebook.com/Golem13.fr/videos/540615746538974/UzpfSTEwMDAwMzExMTIxMDcyMjoyODU5NjAwNjU0MTUzNjE0/>

## **Reveries of libraries, the thirty-third: Video Vacations**

The Middle Kingdom builds more stately pleasure domes than heretofore, tiers and terraces of books in sunny spaces reaching for the sky. Tianjin is an optical illusion in this regard as we cannot tell if engineers are reaching for the dizzy limits or it's all a split-level design masterpiece. Readers pace the levels, the cool white niceties of the post-nineties. Every month or so someone posts films of Most Beautiful Libraries of the World. Once again we are transported to the most beautiful that time decreed. The champagne music transports us in seconds to the Lello in Portugal. These spiral ceilings and plush spaces are redolent of the global heyday of empire, a world that looks out at unbounded oceans, inward at the fancies of stay-at-homes. Then back to China again, like an international traveller in the bygone days of international travel. Word from the East keeps filtering through. We stroll cylindrical rooms of Yangzhou, whether zoom room or tunnel vision best not to guess, too quickly forgetting how the ancestors burnt the libraries to eradicate an enemy's documented memory. Outwesting the West has resulted in the import of geometric extravagance, a groove tube of bending burden bordering on the baroque. Oxford is not for burning, though the selection process means documented memory holds on to what is Oxford, and what Oxford does not collect. Excludes is another word. What is not Oxford? A world without Beautiful Libraries. Volume up on bubble music. Trinity College Dublin, likewise, is a tall order. We climb together with the stack worker into the leather-bound reaches of further learning. Yet at TCD, as elsewhere, the real action happens in the modern library of high tech and nearing deadlines. While still, its most used book is under glass in a room next door. We imagine having the secure job of page-turner for the Book of Kells, curving over the curves each morning. Not that anyone will be seen in these Irish libraries this month. Except the very rare librarian, and the rare cleaner. The rarest sight to be enjoyed today is not the illuminated manuscripts, it's the people. Our film shows the well-dressed shadows of visitors past, where today the books remain as they stand, unopened. Now closed until further notice. Music soothes our fears. Our frames are not allowed through the front door. Our bodies, so frequently peas in a pod as we study for examinations under a library's green shades, must now enjoy in glorious self-isolation the glorious storeys of the George Peabody in Baltimore. What an incredible frame the Peabody

has, big as only America cares to be big. Spare no expense, the collection silently says. When, all too quickly, frothy music, we are taken into the Grimm of Berlin. The idea of a university library named after the Grimm Brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, gives pause for thought. One would not want to lose oneself forever in the Hansel and Gretel Research Room. Where are all of these students of life now, self-isolating in the black forest of the world. Thence Stuttgart, a library for modern dreamers who don't give a hang for a chandelier. Stuttgart knows what it's doing in this regard. Of course it does, but we do like a bit of flourish. It is smooth lines, flat surfaces, and metal railings, all the better to pick up invisible microbes. The Grimms would have a tale to tell. Some of the newest libraries on our visual vacation, those in China and Germany, remind us that not only are libraries not going away due to digital, they are being built bigger and better for the reading future. Digital and print, both are the future, like the reopening of the front door. Some of us have enjoyed a personal tour of what happens next, the Strahov Monastery Library in Prague, the fabulous collection of the very austere Premonstratensians. Surely, we think, this is one of the most wondrous interiors we will see in a month of Sundays. But is it really a working collection, or very much a showpiece? And who will use it now, now Prague and the world in general has gone into monastic shutdown? We travel by handheld Golem-13 camera across broad floors, along its ornate shelves and across twirls of roof, but no closer. More secure by a long shot is the elevator of the public library in Zurich. The floors go by with pinpoint timing. It is the twentieth century's gift of form and function, rising to the occasion then taking us down again with a satisfying silent landing. Even the champagne music seems to be sobering up, or is it that we have plateaued? Bnf Richelieu Paris graces the eye, the idealist nineteenth century's dream of rows of polished tables and slants of sunlight where Parisians could read to themselves at industrial scale levels. A couple of these vacation libraries would not have got a building permit in Australia, the Bibliothèque Nationale one of them. It's the high high shelving, don't you know? Beautiful and deadly. Paris should have known better. We don't want people falling off ladders and killing themselves. But before that can happen we are suddenly dropped into the Chetham in Manchester. Our interest is piqued by all those clinking chains attaching book to ledge, those darkly varnished cases in passage after passage. By remote chance, at the end of our holidays we will visit its website. Chetham's is the oldest public library in England, or in fact the English-speaking world. Theology abounds here, as it should. However, the fact that we cannot borrow books doesn't make it much of a public library, we might say. What they mean is it's not a private library because it was owned by Chetham. Logic is not called for under these circumstances. It says that the

first task facing Humphrey Chetham's governors was to purchase the medieval College House, which, after many years of neglect, was in a poor state. Our opinion of Puritans is not improved by the news that during the Civil War it had been used as a prison and arsenal, and it was remarked that 'the towne swine make there abode bothe in the yards and house'. Restoration began in 1653 and seems to have gone on ever since, though it's mainly a cultural centre and charity. Some of us have never been happy about chained books, but understandable if it's the only copy in existence of a certain scrutable folio. Not that we can touch any of these rare books this month, or secrete one in our handbag. And with this in mind, our own positive vacation attitude is temporarily restored by a rush tour of the Duchess Anna Amalia in Weimar. Truly, it's all very grand, but by this stage while we might envy those who waltz about such decorative compartments, who sprint through texts beneath spritzzy canopies, only marble heads stare blankly into space this month. Too, we are tiring of all the holiday overload. What, not another library? Mum, I want to go to the circus. Not that we can go to the circus this month, nor any other month in the foreseeable, nor any of the rococo libraries in existence. It's either back to our hotel room no questions asked, or perhaps rest up in an abbey. Waldsassen Abbey is an idea and it has a library. Those monks knew how to pass the time. Prayer and books and gardening, books and sleep and prayer, gardening and prayer and refectory. Whether we could do that for a whole lifetime is impossible to say, maybe it's a temperament thing, but there's no time to decide because the champagne music transports us to, Mum no please! not another abbey library living in a bubble like a stream of consciousness that is all book and no substance. Yes, dear, Admont Abbey Austria, to be precise, and though the walls are piled high with pink and azure, all very lovely dovely, and that's before we get to the books in whitest vellum, it's time for us to weave rapidly time running out toward a splendiferous cork-popping exit.

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