

# Dating a Book by Its Cover: An Early Seventeenth-Century Dutch Psalter

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IN 1893 THE THEN highly regarded collection of medieval and Renaissance art formed by the Austrian art dealer and collector Frédéric Spitzer (1815–1890) was auctioned in Paris. This sale, perhaps rightly described as “la plus grande vente du siècle,”<sup>1</sup> consisted of an astonishing 3,369 lots and took place from April 17 to June 16. It grossed well over nine million French francs.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art did not participate in the feverish bidding and, therefore, did not acquire anything directly at the sale. Nevertheless, a number of objects formerly in the Musée Spitzer, as it was known—a collection now infamous for its many fake and altered artworks<sup>2</sup>—subsequently entered the Metropolitan’s collections. Finely wrought pieces of goldsmiths’ work, rock crystal, hard stone, ceramics, and sculpture were either purchased independently from others or were received from such well-known benefactors as Benjamin Altman, J. Pierpont Morgan, and George Blumenthal. Some of these objects have since proven to be forgeries, and on others, subsequent “improvements” and additions have been detected.

Among the genuine treasures, however, is a small printed book of Psalms with a splendid silver cover bought by the Museum in 1937 (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> The psalter was thought to date to the sixteenth century, but its provenance was not known at the time.<sup>4</sup> The object, lot 3044 in the Spitzer sale, was grouped with the illuminated manuscripts and catalogued as a Dutch seventeenth-century binding containing a book of Psalms, translated and published in Amsterdam. It was sold for 850 French francs to an unidentified party.<sup>5</sup>

The delicate openwork silver cover displays symmetrical grotesque decoration consisting of winged sphinxes, monkeys, exotic birds, coiling snakes, mascarons, vases of flowers from which crawl caterpillars, and bunches of fruit, all interconnected by slender scrollwork. Occupying the center of each side of the binding are oval medallions, finely engraved with the Annunciation, on

the front, and, on the back, with the Adoration of the Shepherds (Figures 1, 2). The frames beneath these biblical scenes are inscribed, respectively, *Luce 1 cap.* and *Luce 2 cap.* Although the verses are not indicated, the references to the Gospel of Saint Luke 1:26–38 and 2:8–19 are clearly intended. The rounded spine is divided by four molded ribs into three rectangular panels. The middle one contains a roundel in which King David is playing his harp; the other two panels are embellished with cherubs amid foliated scrolls. While the pierced-silver cover is lined with velvet, originally black and now

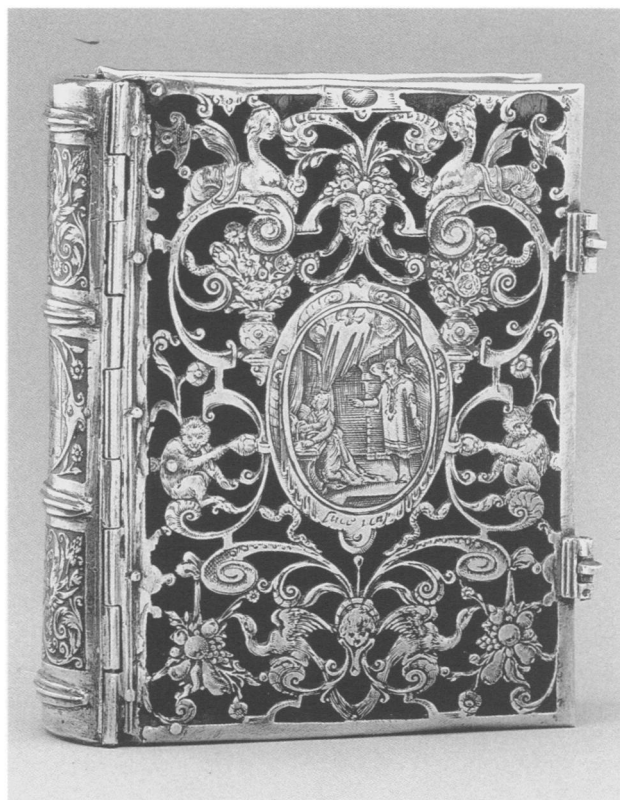


Figure 1. Book cover. Dutch, possibly Amsterdam, ca. 1610–20. Silver, 8.7 x 7 cm, containing a contemporary psalter: *De CL Psalmen Davids / Wt Den fransoyſchen / Dichte in Nederlant[s?] / Schon ouergheset / door / Petrum Dathenum* (Amsterdam: Abraham Huijbrech[t], n.d.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1937 (37.125)

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The notes for this article begin on page 159.

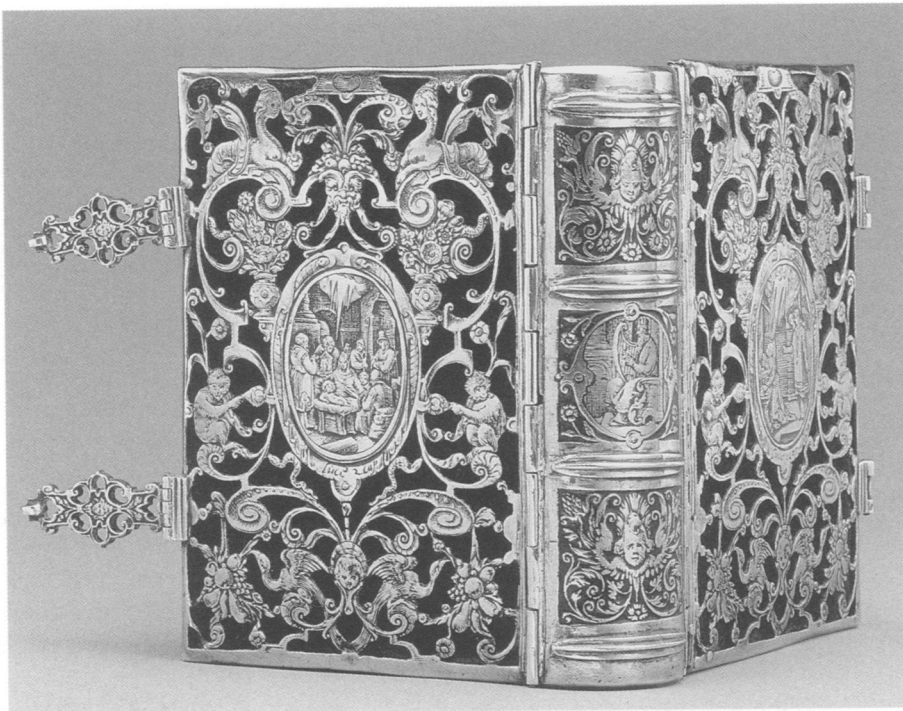


Figure 2. Back and front covers of the book in Figure 1

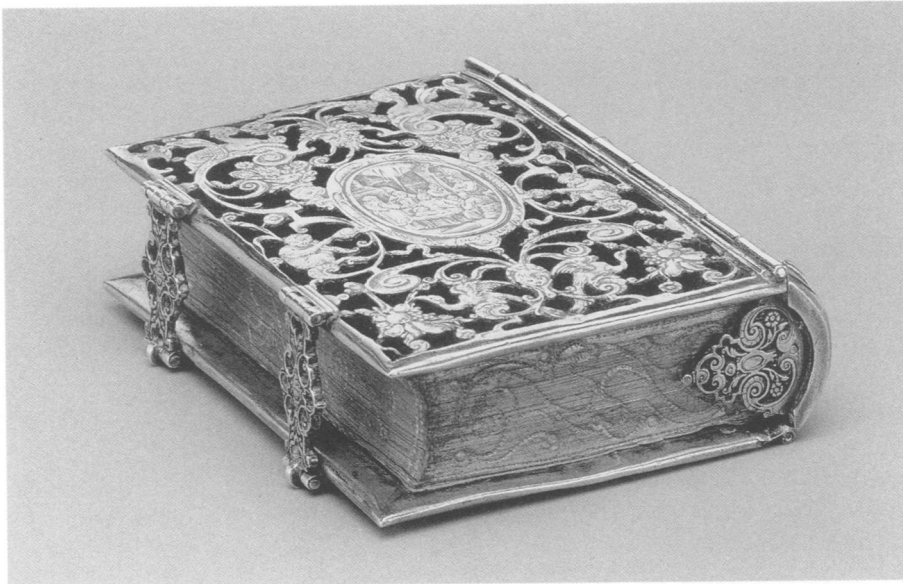


Figure 3. The book in Figure 1 showing the scrolled engraving found on all three outside edges of the pages

brownish, the background of the solid spine is darkened with black wax.<sup>6</sup> A striking contrast of light ornament against a dark surface was thus created, not unlike that achieved in contemporary prints. The book is closed with two clasps decorated with masks and openwork scrolls. The silver does not bear any hallmarks other than a small indistinct stamp, probably a dolphin, on one of the hinges; most likely this refers to a tax paid during the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

The Museum's object belongs to a small group of closely related Dutch bindings, all without hallmarks. At least two nearly identical book covers are known, pre-

sumably the work of the same unidentified master. Since each was made for a specific book, the dimensions vary. One is in the collection of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam.<sup>8</sup> It holds the *Psalterium Davidis*, published in Paris in 1547, and is about one-third larger than the Metropolitan Museum's piece (Figure 4). The silversmith skillfully adapted the design to the increased scale. The other, whose present whereabouts are unknown, is only slightly bigger than the one at the Metropolitan. It has lost its original contents and was converted into a box (Figure 5). Its spine is on the short side, causing the main decoration to face sideways.<sup>9</sup>

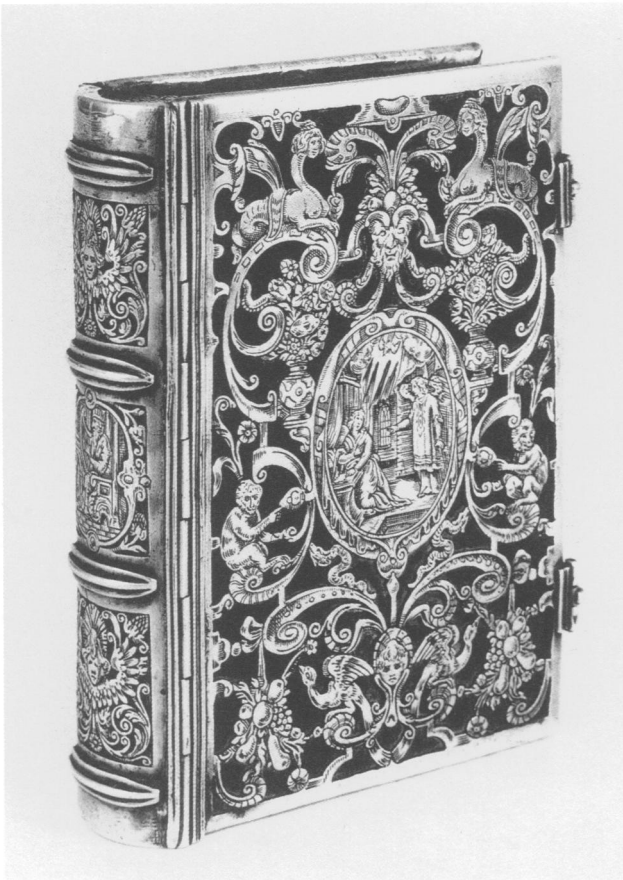


Figure 4. Book cover. Dutch, possibly Amsterdam, ca. 1610–20. Silver, 12 x 9.2 cm, containing an earlier psalter: *Psalterium Davidis carmine redditum per Eobanum Hessum, cum Annotationibus Viti Theodori Noribergeris, quae Commentarii vice esse possunt . . .* (Paris, 1547). Museum Boymans–van Beuningen, Rotterdam, M.B.Z. 1 (photo: Museum Boymans–van Beuningen)

Two additional book covers display similarities and might well come from the same workshop. One, privately owned, incorporates five oval medallions engraved with biblical scenes amid fine scrolls and grotesque ornament (Figure 6).<sup>10</sup> It contains the *Enchiridion. Hantboexken van de Christelijke Leere* (Haarlem, 1627). The second, in the Museum Boymans–van Beuningen, Rotterdam, has a larger engraved scene on a rectangular field with a semi-circular top in the center surrounded by grotesques and scrollwork borders.<sup>11</sup> It now encloses a nineteenth-century text, *Solide Dévotion, sanctifiée par la prière* (Turnhout, 1805).

Generally, these bindings are said to be in the style of the influential goldsmith, printmaker, and publisher active in Frankfurt, Theodor de Bry (1528–1598), or of one of his followers.<sup>12</sup> However, the work of the Antwerp engraver Adriaen Collaert (ca. 1560–1618) has also been invoked.<sup>13</sup> Both De Bry and Collaert supplied a variety of compositions with grotesque ornaments (Figures 7–9), of which certain elements, such

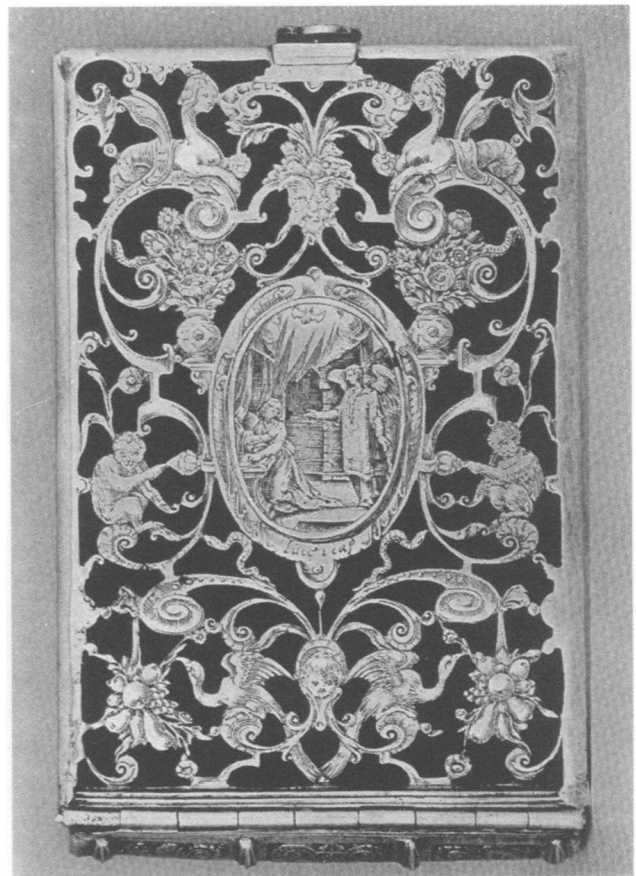


Figure 5. Book cover converted into a box. Dutch, possibly Amsterdam, ca. 1610–20. 6 x 9.5 cm. From Johan W. Frederiks, *Dutch Silver*, vol. 2, *Wrought Plate of North and South-Holland from the Renaissance until the End of the Eighteenth Century* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1958), pl. 58, no. 194. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library



Figure 6. Book cover. Dutch, possibly Amsterdam, ca. 1610–20. Silver, containing a contemporary book: *Enchiridion. Hantboexken van de Christelijke Leere* (Haarlem, 1627). From Johan W. Frederiks, *Dutch Silver*, vol. 2, pl. 58, no. 195. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library





Figure 7. Theodor de Bry. *Grotisch fur alle Kunstler*, late 16th century. Engraving, 6.8 x 14.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1951 (51.501.5793 [1])

as the monkeys and the clusters of fruit, are quite close. The exact designs for these book covers, however, have yet to be discovered.

Despite the absence of hallmarks on these bindings, the high quality of the work suggests that they were created in one of the flourishing Dutch cities, quite possi-

bly Amsterdam. On stylistic evidence, they can be dated to about 1610–20. The Metropolitan's silver cover still has its original contents, providing further substantiation of the date and place of origin. The book is titled *De CL Psalmen Davids / Wt Den fransoyſchen / Dichte in Nederlant[s?] / Schon ouergheset / door / Petrum*



Figure 8. Adriaen Collaert. *Juno*, from a series of mythological figures from the Judgment of Paris, ca. 1600. Engraving, 13.8 x 9.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1928 (28.44.129)



Figure 9. Adriaen Collaert. *Minerva*, from a series of mythological figures from the Judgment of Paris, ca. 1600. Engraving, 13.8 x 8.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1939 (39.95.6)

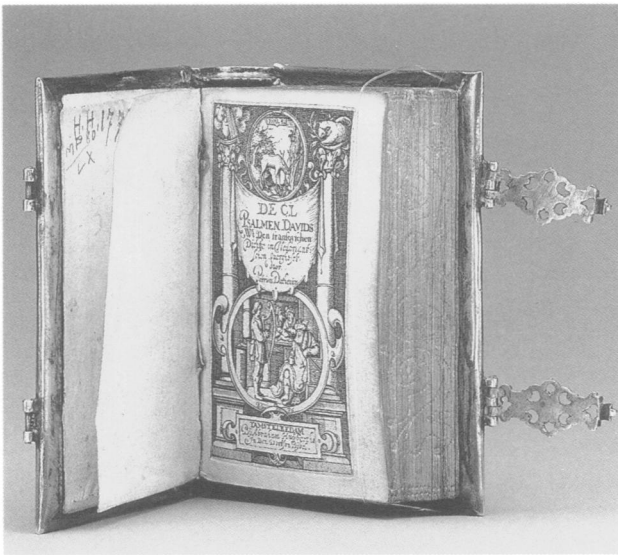


Figure 10. Title page of the book in Figure 1, engraved by Michel Le Blon, ca. 1610–20

*Dathenum* (The Hundred and Fifty Psalms of David beautifully translated from French into Dutch by Petrus Dathenus). The engraved title page informs us that it was printed by Abraham Huijbrech[t]s in his Amsterdam workshop called *In Den Dortsen Bijbel* (In the Bible of Dordrecht). Unfortunately, the date of publication is not given. However, the years of Huijbrechts's activity are known. Born in Antwerp in 1583, he settled in Amsterdam and joined the guild of booksellers in 1620. He worked in the city from about 1610 until his death in 1621.<sup>14</sup>

It is uncertain whether Huijbrechts, usually referred to as a bookbinder and seller, was the actual publisher. He may have obtained the printed text of the much-published Psalms to which he added a new title page, one that could have been designed specifically for him. In fact, the first signature of the psalter is incomplete; it starts with the number *aii*. The first page, which would have been marked *a*, is missing. This may indi-

Figure 11. Lucas van Leyden. *David Playing before Saul*, ca. 1508. Engraving, 25.4 x 18.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.65.7)





Figure 12. Aart Schouman. *Petrus Dathenus*, 1755. Drawing. Openbare Bibliotheek, Rotterdam (photo: Openbare Bibliotheek)

cate that the original title page, giving the date and place of publication as well as the name of the real publisher, was replaced by the one bearing Huijbrechts's name. The Psalms, supplied with musical notes, are bound with the text of the Canticles, the Ten Commandments, various prayers including the Lord's Prayer, the catechism, and other religious texts to be used either at home or during church services.

The title page is elaborately engraved, with the name of the psalter placed in a lambrequin suspended between two columns crowned with Corinthian capitals (Figure 10).<sup>15</sup> These capitals support a censer, as well as the stone Tables of the Law on the left and a recumbent lamb on the right. A medallion above the lambrequin encloses a stag drinking at a spring, with the inscription *Psalm 42*. An image of David playing his harp before King Saul (1 Samuel 18:9–11) appears in an oval cartouche below the lambrequin. This depiction is based on an early composition (Figure 11) of

the well-known painter and printmaker Lucas van Leyden (1494–1533).

The engraved title page was the work of Michel Le Blon (1587–1656), a goldsmith and engraver from Frankfurt, where he may well have been a pupil of De Bry and/or his son Johann Theodor de Bry (1561–1623). Le Blon was first active in Amsterdam about 1610,<sup>16</sup> corroborating both the date suggested here for the book and its cover—about 1610–20—and Amsterdam as the likely place of origin.

The psalter is one of many editions of a very popular work that became the de facto official hymnal used by the Dutch Reformed Church. The Reformation stimulated both new translations of the Bible and, especially, rhymed versions of the Psalms to be sung by the faithful during private or public worship. A very popular work in this respect was the translation of 1566 by Petrus Dathenus (1530/2–1588; Figure 12). At an early age, Dathenus had entered a Carmelite monastery in Ypres, Flanders, but having embraced the Reformation, he ended his monastic career about 1550 and became a zealous preacher of the new doctrine. To avoid persecution, Dathenus was forced to settle abroad, first in England, where he worked as a printer, and subsequently, between 1555 and 1562, in Frankfurt, where he ministered to the Protestant refugees from the southern Netherlands. Under the protection of the elector of the Palatine he moved the congregation to Frankenthal, where he translated the catechism from German into Dutch. This work, published in Heidelberg in 1563,<sup>17</sup> appeared in a revised edition three years later. Generally known as the catechism of Heidelberg, this handbook of questions and answers for the teaching of religious principles is still used in the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1566 Dathenus finished a rhymed version of the hundred and fifty Psalms, the first complete Dutch translation, which was considered appropriate for public devotion. Dathenus's text was based on the French edition of 1562, begun by the celebrated poet Clément Marot (1496–1544) and ultimately completed by the writer and Calvinist theologian Théodore de Bèze (1519–1605).<sup>18</sup> Dathenus's version of the Psalms became an instant success. It was used during open-air sermons and quickly evolved into a Protestant symbol during the struggle for religious freedom. The work was reprinted at least five times in 1566 alone.

Despite the fact that Dathenus's translation was very successful, it received its share of criticism and mockery. An early attempt to correct irregularities of rhythm and rhyme and to free it of its poetic infelicities was made by Philips van Marnix, Lord of Sint Aldegonde (1540–1598), who is perhaps better known as the

supposed author of the Dutch national anthem.<sup>19</sup> Although Van Marnix's *Het Boeck der Psalmen Davids* (Antwerp, 1580) was clearly a literary improvement, it could not capture the symbolic place that Dathenus's version held in the hearts of the faithful. Nor was the cause of Van Marnix's version advanced when protesting booksellers tried to suppress the printing of the work at the Synod of South Holland, held in Rotterdam in 1581. They were concerned that if this newer version became the preferred psalter of the churches, they would have great difficulty selling the extant copies of Dathenus's Psalms and thereby suffer substantial financial losses.<sup>20</sup> Their fears were not realized. Even when, at the 1586 Synod of The Hague, the delegates determined that Van Marnix's psalter should be recommended from the pulpit, it could not compete with the immense popularity of the earlier translation.<sup>21</sup> Dathenus's Psalms remained in general use for almost two centuries, until 1773, when they were replaced by a new rhymed version.<sup>22</sup> His work nevertheless continued to be republished until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Although many different editions are known, the Museum's book, with its engraved title page by Le Blon, appears to be a rarity. No identical copy of Dathenus's Psalms, sold and/or published by Huijbrechts, has yet been located.<sup>23</sup> With its original and exquisite silver binding, this precious early seventeenth-century work illustrates eloquently the esteem in which Dutch Protestants held the hundred and fifty Psalms, their oft-invoked hymns of praise and lament in times of thanksgiving and despair.

## NOTES

1. Title of Émile Molinier's introduction to the catalogue of the Spitzer sale, *Catalogue des objets d'art et de haute curiosité antiques, du moyen-âge & de la Renaissance composant l'importante et précieuse Collection Spitzer* (Paris: Ménard, 1893), vol. 1, p. xxi.
2. Yvonne Hackenbroch, "Reinhold Vasters, Goldsmith," *MMJ* 19/20 (1984/85), pp. 171–72. See also the entry for Frédéric Spitzer by Charles Truman, in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (London and New York: Macmillan, 1996), vol. 29, pp. 415–16.
3. It was bought from the French Book Corporation of New York.
4. The provenance was first mentioned in *Arti et Industriae, tijdschrift gewijd aan de bevordering der kunstnijverheid in Nederland* 2, no. 1 (1891–92), p. 1, pl. 1, where it was described as part of the Spitzer collection in Paris. It had previously been in the possession, for some time, of J. L. Schouten, a civil engineer in Delft. This information was repeated by Johan R. ter Molen, *Zilver: Catalogus van de voorwerpen van edelmetaal in de collectie van het Museum Boymans-van Beuningen* (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1994), p. 58.
5. *La Collection Spitzer: Antiquité, moyen-âge, Renaissance*, vol. 2 (Macon: Protat, 1891), pp. 362–63, no. 42; *Catalogue des objets d'art*, vol. 2, p. 228, lot 3044, described as "Livre des Psaumes, travail hollandais, XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle."
6. I am grateful to Clare Vincent and J. H. Leopold for examining the book cover and establishing that black wax rather than niello was used.
7. Elias Voet Jr., *Nederlandse goud- en zilvermerken*, 10th rev. ed. (Leiden: Nijhoff, 1982), p. 55.
8. Ter Molen, *Zilver*, pp. 58–59, no. 4. Said to be Dutch, ca. 1600. The book's dimensions are 12 x 9.2 cm.
9. Another example was sold at Sotheby's, Geneva, November 13, 1989, lot 12. Described in the sale catalogue as a Dutch book binding, ca. 1630, this object was changed into a box containing a notepad. Its width was given as 9.5 cm.
10. John F. Hayward, "Silver Bindings from the Abbey Collection," *The Connoisseur* 130 (November 1952), pp. 101–2, no. 2. Also illustrated by Johan W. Frederiks, *Dutch Silver*, vol. 2, *Wrought Plate of North and South-Holland from the Renaissance until the End of the Eighteenth Century* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1958), p. 69, pl. 58, no. 195; and by Henri L. M. Defoer et al., *De bijbel in huis: Bijbelse verhalen op huisraad in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1991), pp. 86–87, no. 31, fig. 97.
11. Ter Molen, *Zilver*, pp. 60–61, no. 5. Said to be Dutch, beginning of the 17th century. The dimensions are given as 8.8 x 6.3 cm. However, this particular piece was catalogued as Antwerp work in *Zilver uit de Gouden Eeuw van Antwerpen*, exh. cat. (Antwerp: Rockoxhuis, 1988), p. 138, no. 100.
12. Hayward, "Silver Bindings from the Abbey Collection," p. 102. Frederiks, *Dutch Silver*, vol. 2, p. 69, attributes two similar pieces to a silversmith working in the style of De Bry who was also subject to the influence of Hans Janssen. According to Ter Molen (*Zilver*, p. 58), a virtually identical book cover is thought to be related to prints by Theodor de Bry with some motifs derived from M. Gheeraerts.
13. *Arti et Industriae* 2, no. 1 (1891–92), p. 1, attributes the MMA book cover to Adriaen Collaert.
14. Jan A. Gruys and C. de Wolf, *Nederlandse boekdrukkers en boekverkopers met plaatsen en jaren van werkzaamheid* (Nieuwkoop: de Graaf, 1989), p. 94. Huijbrechts(z) is listed as active in Amsterdam between 1611 and 1616. However, in various other documents he was described as a bookbinder in 1605, and subsequently as a bookseller or binder in 1610, 1618, and 1620 as well. See M. M. Kleerkooper and Wilhelmus P. van Stockum Jr., *De boekhandel te Amsterdam voornamelijk in de 17e eeuw: Biographische en geschiedkundige aantekeningen* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1914–16), vol. 1, pp. 289–90; vol. 2, p. 1305.
15. The psalter contains no other plates, though it does have a few vignettes and several decorated capital letters.
16. In 1627 Le Blon went to Italy. See the *Dictionary of Art*, vol. 19, pp. 15–16. At least one other, nearly identical but larger, title page by Le Blon is known, also published by Huijbrechts in Amsterdam at an unknown date. See Johan Ph. van der Kellen, *Michel Le Blon, recueil d'ornements* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1900), p. 42, no. 191. See also F. W. H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca. 1450–1700* (Amsterdam: Hertzberger, n.d.), vol. 2, p. 153, no. 191.
17. *Catechismus ofte onderwysinge in de Christlycke leere, also die in den Kercken ende Scholen Kueruoerstlicken Paltz geleert werdt. In de*

- Nederduytsche Spraecke ouergeset* (Heidelberg, 1563). See Theodorus Ruys, *Petrus Dathenus* (Utrecht: Ruys, 1919), pp. 244–45.
18. Marot had translated some fifty Psalms from Hebrew into French in 1541–43. De Bèze finished the translation of the remaining Psalms some twenty years later. Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, vol. 2 (Paris: Larousse, 1867), pp. 666–67; vol. 10 (1873), pp. 1237–38.
  19. *Grand Larousse universel*, 3rd rev. ed. (Lizy-sur-Ourcq: Didier, 1989), vol. 10, p. 6686; Margaretha H. Schenkeveld and Maria A. Schenkeveld–van der Dussen, *Het is begonnen met David: De honderdvijftig psalmen in het Nederlands berijmd, vertaald, bewerkt door 47 (Nederlandse) dichters uit vijftiende eeuw* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1999), pp. 11, 354.
  20. J. Prinsen, “Uit het notaris-protocol van Salomon Lenaertszn. van der Wuert, II,” *Oud Holland* 28 (1910), pp. 137–38; Ruys, *Petrus Dathenus*, p. 239.
  21. Ruys, *Petrus Dathenus*, p. 239.
  22. Schenkeveld and Schenkeveld–van der Dussen, *Het is begonnen met David*, pp. 10, 349. A small number of congregations still sing Dathenus’s Psalms today.
  23. None is listed in David F. Scheurleer, *Nederlandsche liedboeken: Lijst der in Nederland tot het jaar 1800 uitgegeven liedboeken* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1912). There are no copies in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, or in any of the major libraries in the Netherlands (according to the *Short Title Catalogue Netherlands*). Neither are there any copies in the British Library, according to the *British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books* (London, 1965, vol. 17), or any listed in the *National Union Catalogue*.