Book Fair Catalogues

Book fair catalogues were published in Germany twice a year, at Easter and Michelmas (September 29); this practice started in the 16th century. The “Messkataloge” indicated which books would be offered at the fairs or were due to appear soon. The significance of the book fair catalogues as a source of information on the German book market and the history of German publishing can hardly be overestimated. Since there was no national bibliography in those days, this marketing instrument of German book vendors also served as a periodic general bibliography, even though it did not list, for example, any dissertations or reprints. This state of affair lasted until the first appearance of Hinrichs’s semiannual directory in 1798.

Usually these non-descript, inornate book fair catalogues were lost or discarded rather soon after use. Today, the State Library’s collection holds a total of about 560 book fair catalogues. This includes all the Frankfurt catalogues from 1568 to 1695 (those from 1696 to 1750 were never in the library’s stock). Most of the Leipzig catalogues from 1595 to 1728 have survived, with some gaps between 1603 and 1613. Those from 1731 to 1794 are currently kept in the Biblioteka Jagiellonska in Kraków, Poland, following evacuation during the Second World War.