

Book Review

Miriam Vogelaar, *The Mokken Collection: Books and manuscripts on fencing before 1800*

MMIT Publishing, Amsterdam 2020, 208 pp.; 75€

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The publication of this carefully edited catalogue should be applauded for many reasons. Familiarity with and knowledge of historical sources concerning European martial culture as an *ars*, a body of individual competence transmittable through apprenticeship, remains sorely lacking even in academic circles. For many, this book may be a first introduction to this fascinating and important field. Firstly, because it can serve as an introduction to an incredibly rich and important, but still largely unknown, text corpus, the corpus of the so-called "Fechtbücher" or *fight books* documenting the history of European fencing and other forms of mostly civic combat culture roughly between 1400 and 1800.¹ These sources are part of a vast array of technical literature (*artes mechanicae*) in the European literary tradition, manuals in which individual practices and competences specific to certain arts and crafts are described in detail. The literature on "Fechtbücher" is to be distinguished from the much better known literature on military tactics and strategy, a genre that has been influential at least since Vegetius.

A second reason is that the book fills a gaping hole in our knowledge of this kind of technical fencing literature by giving us access to one of the largest existing collections on the subject, which until now has only been very sporadically accessible to researchers and other interested parties: the collection meticulously built up over the past decades by Wiebe Mokken in Amsterdam. Moreover, in doing so, the book also highlights the glaring lack of contemporary up-to-date catalogues for other major fencing-related collections, like Gotti's spectacular private collection held at the Museo dell'Arte Marziale in Brescia, Italy. Others, such as the Corble collection at the KU Leuven Libraries, recently published their catalogue on line.²

The book is extremely beautifully edited, with attention to both substantive and formal details that make it a feast for the eyes and at the same time pleasant and practically useful for the reader. The hard bound large format (27x21) and high quality of the lavish, full colour illustrations invite the reader to delve into stunning visual details, and give him or her a vivid sense of the evolving cultural context in which the source material was created. This effect is enhanced by a timeline at the end in which the books included in the catalogue are placed in chronological order. All entries are presented visually in alphabetical order and are accompanied by a detailed technical codicological and bibliographical description, as well as by a brief but informative substantive commentary with some bibliographical references and notes.

The book's content is organised in a clear, uncomplicated way. After a personal preface by collector Wiebe Mokken and a concise methodological explanation by the compiler and publisher of the catalogue, Miriam Vogelaar, items are presented and commented upon. In his preface Mokken,

¹ D. Jaquet, K. Verelst, T. Dawson, *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books. Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe (14th-17th Centuries)*, Brill, Leiden, 2016.

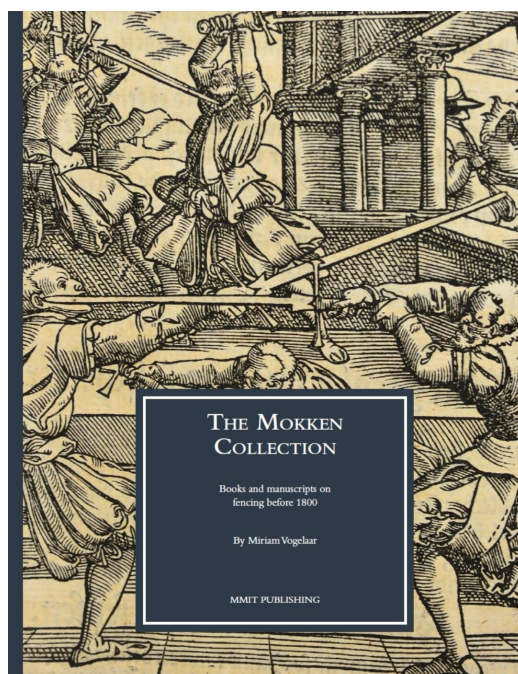
² Which is, of course, a great improvement and fills an important gap. Still, a hard copy version of a catalogue raisonnée to this important collection would be more than welcome. See <https://bib.kuleuven.be/english/special-collections/provenance/corble>

himself a former fencer and honorary member of the Royal Dutch Fencing Association (KNAS), explains the genesis of and rationale behind of his collection. We learn that the works presented in this volume cover some of his most cherished pieces, the oldest sources preserved in the collection, and that the intention is to publish a subsequent volume with more recent material. We find, e.g., representatives from the sixteenth century Bolognese School of Italian fencing, like Manciolino and Marozzo, as well as from the late sixteenth century German fencing school (Meyer).

It is nonetheless unfortunate that a more comprehensive scholarly introduction to the field, situating the collection within the corpus of which it is part, is lacking. Given the relative unfamiliarity of the concerned corpus even in academic circles, many potential readers may lack the background needed to frame the collection correctly in its cultural and historical context (which includes a centuries older corpus of German fencing manuscripts³) and assess it to its proper value. Now, for example, the unintended but wrong impression is created that the history of this martial tradition begins in Italy in the 16th century.

A related weakness is the book's limited and overly selective bibliography. With a few exceptions, it is entirely focused on bibliographical issues and related catalogues, and thus not really helpful for a reader who wants to learn more about the martial and cultural-historical context of the presented collection. The same goes for the very sparse index. This makes sense, of course, given the catalogue's design described earlier, but it is not therefore any less unfortunate.

Despite these few weaknesses, the publication of this catalogue, in a field where no other recent scholarly catalogues are available, constitutes an important milestone for this exciting and still relatively new subdomain in the field of European cultural studies, namely Historical European Martial Art Studies, by making accessible one of the most important collections of source materials dedicated to it.



³ H. Fröhmer-Voss, N.H. Ott, R. Leng, *Katalog der deutschsprachigen illustrierten Handschriften des Mittelalters*, Band 4/2, Lfg. 1/2: 38 Fecht- und Ringbücher, Verlag C.H. Beck, München, 2008.