

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Wade, Mara R., PI, Timothy W. Cole, co-PI, and Myung-Ja K. Han, co-PI; Thomas Stäcker, German PI, and Andrea Opitz, co-PI. *Emblematica Online. Other*

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**Wade, Mara R., PI, Timothy W. Cole, co-PI, and Myung-Ja K. Han, co-PI; Thomas Stäcker, German PI, and Andrea Opitz, co-PI.**

**Emblematica Online. Other.**

Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2003–20. Accessed 4 March 2022.

[emblematica.library.illinois.edu](http://emblematica.library.illinois.edu).

When I first learned about the existence of Emblematica Online, I was reminded of the concept of a “total” library that Jorge Luis Borges advanced in “The Library of Babel.” In the story, the narrator guides the reader through a library—a metonym for the universe—made of hexagonal bookshelves. Within the logic of the story, a combinatory algorithm registers not only every book ever written but also “all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols.”<sup>1</sup> The library stands out as the repository of all past, present, and future books destined to exist. Borges did not have the chance to search the Internet or live in the days of Wikipedia, a Borgean fantasy par excellence. Still, the tantalizing thought that by means of combinatory algorithms it would be possible to search a finite, and yet potentially growing, number of volumes is at the core of the story. In a similar vein, but limited to emblem books, Emblematica Online is an excellent digital project that provides a comprehensive and user-friendly tool for the study of early modern texts and images. It is both a curated digital library of facsimiles of emblem books and a portal for searching across individual emblems, that is, bimedial compositions that through the interplay of images and texts often convey allegorical meanings.

Broad in scope and academically curated, Emblematica Online is an indispensable point of reference for scholars interested in the cultural heritage of the Renaissance and the Baroque period. When it was first conceived, the site was responding to the need to preserve and at the same time provide remote access to emblem books, which are generally housed in the special collections of select libraries. The project was initially proposed by Mara Wade at an emblem conference in Glasgow in 2001. It was further developed between 2003 and 2006 when Mara Wade and Thomas Stäcker collaborated on the German Emblem Project, a pilot program that paved the way to Emblematica

1. Borges, “Library of Babel,” 115.

Online.<sup>2</sup> By the time it was launched in 2010, the project had grown in both scope and influence. Housed at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, it has secured key collaborations with institutions across North America and Europe to create an electronic platform that grants access to the most notable collections of emblematica worldwide: the Herzog August Bibliothek (HAB) in Wolfenbüttel, which was a founding institution for the project; the Stirling Maxwell Collection of Emblem Books at Glasgow University; the Emblem Project Utrecht, specializing in Dutch love emblems of the seventeenth century; the library of the Getty Research Institute; and Duke University Libraries. Although other institutions have now digitized and carefully annotated individual emblems, Emblematica Online is the only project that has been able to consolidate major collections of emblem books into a digital platform that is open source, academically vetted, and well-designed.<sup>3</sup>

The stated goal of Emblematica Online is to “present emblem books in an innovative digital environment and develop a portal for a key genre of Renaissance texts and images” (“Project Description”). To accomplish this goal, it engaged in a three-part initiative. First, the digitization of entire emblem books from the collections at Illinois and the HAB. Following proper conservation and preservation standards, the books are scanned at 300 dpi in colour to render high-quality facsimiles for research. An archival copy is kept at both institutions with the following specifications: JPEG 2000 at Illinois and TIFF at the HAB. To date, out of 730 emblem books at Illinois, 421 have been scanned. Likewise, out of 800 volumes housed at the HAB, 466 have been scanned and are also available through what was initially called the OpenEmblem Portal.<sup>4</sup> In addition, and in response to the potential unreliability of Internet sources, the HAB is committed to providing researchers with “long term availability and reliable quoting.” The second initiative was the creation of the German Emblem

2. Notable contributions from graduate students at University Illinois Urbana-Champaign include those by Paul Meyer, Susanne Kress, and Johannes Fröhlich, and from undergraduate emblem scholars Patricia Fleming, Heidi Heim, and Melina Zavala.

3. Other important digitally based platforms that are not part of Emblematica Online include the English Emblem Book Project at Pennsylvania State University, and in Munich the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitätsbibliothek connected to the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. Furthermore, and fundamental in my own area of research, is the Biblioteca Digital de Emblemática Hispánica established in Spain at the University of A Coruña.

4. Please note that the actual number of volumes in the physical collections at Illinois and the HAB continue to grow and may be higher.

Databases aimed at generating “extensive metadata with broad functionality for the German emblems of both institutions [Illinois and the HAB] in mirror websites” (“Project Description”). Finally, the creation of the OpenEmblem Portal produced one of the most helpful tools for the comparative study of texts and images across languages and traditions. The OpenEmblem Portal was aided by cutting-edge technologies such as Arkyves, the “Online Reference Tool for the History of Culture,” which makes it possible to search images using a specialized system known as Iconclass. Today, all of these features combine to make up Emblematica Online.

Emblematica Online allows scholars to search at various degrees of granularity. From its home page, users can easily browse either by “Books” or by “Emblems,” and then narrow their search according to “Keywords,” “Motto Transcription,” “Icon[c]lass Notation,” or “Iconclass Term.” The search can be done in English, German, French, or Italian (Fig. 1). For example, a simple search selecting “Emblems” and the Iconclass term “Babel” yields 18 thumbnails (Fig. 2). Then, on the left-hand side of the screen, additional filters that include “Date,” “Place,” “Collection,” and “Language” allow users to tailor their searches to individual needs or to engage in the exploration of new primary sources. Among the many images, I am drawn to a polychromatic *pictura* from a unique manuscript codex with the Spanish motto *En vano* (In vain) (Fig. 3). In this and other examples, the emblem “descriptors” or “Iconclass Headings” function on at least two levels: first, a primary level that incorporates terms void of cultural associations like “building” or “construction,” and a secondary level that points to abstract or culturally constructed concepts. In this case, the annotations read “Fortune and Misfortune,” “Tower of Babel,” and “Nimrod.” Like in Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths,” each Iconclass heading is linked to other enticing possibilities that allows users to “Find more emblems with the same heading,” “Find VKK [Virtuelles Kupferstichkabinett] images with this heading,” or “Browse Iconclass terms hierarchy” for particular emblems. Overall, Emblematica Online provides users with a strong philological foundation for the study of emblems and symbolic forms. While it supports scholarship driven by inquiries regarding sources, critical editions, and authorship, it also facilitates the transition from a more textual approach to one that considers broader interpretative research questions.

# Emblematica ONLINE

[Home](#)
[Browse](#)
[About](#)
[Help](#)

Resources for Emblem Studies

## Welcome!

Discover the early modern world of texts and images here!

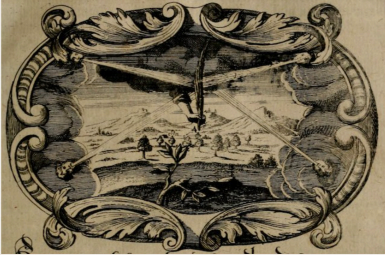
Emblems ▾

term ▾
Q +

☐ Keywords  
☐ Motto Transcription  
☐ Iconlass Notation  
☒ Iconclass Term

Language : English ▾
 

English  
 German  
 French  
 Italian



### The Collections

*Emblematica Online* draws from the most important collections of emblematica worldwide. It is hosted by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and its founding partner is the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel. Contributing partners include Glasgow University Library and Utrecht University, which contributed both book- and emblem-level data. Additional contributors include the Getty Research Institute Library and Duke University Library, both of which contributed book-level information. [Read more](#)

### What is an Emblem?

Emblems are concise yet potent combinations of texts and images that invite, and require, decoding. In a concise format, they reveal the mentalities and attitudes of the period from c. 1500-1800 in an assemblage of texts and images. Typically an emblem consists of a motto, an often puzzling image called the *pictura*, and a subtext called a subscription or epigram. [Read more](#)




Fig. 1. Emblematica Online home page (detail).  
<http://emblematica.library.illinois.edu>.

Resources for Emblem Studies

Emblems ▾ Babel term ▾ 🔍 +

Filters

Date

17th century (13)

16th century (2)

18th century (2)

uncertain (1)

Place

Frankfurt (2)

A Paris (1)

Amstelaedami (1)

Amsterdam (1)

Antwerpen (1)

Augsburg (1)

Augsburg (1)

Frankfurt, ad Moenum (1)

Gedruckt zu Amsterdam (1)

Heidelberg (1)

More...

Collection

HAB (8)

Illinois (6)

Glasgow (2)

Utrecht (2)

Language

German (10)

Latin (7)

French (6)

Multiple languages (2)

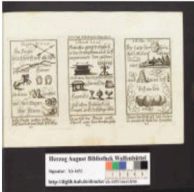
Dutch (1)

Italian (1)


Portuguese (1)

Spanish (1)


Viewing emblems 1 to 18 of 18




Wann die Welt übt böse Sachen, so verwirret Gott die Sprachen.




Parturient Montes Nascetur Ridiculus Mus.




Humana Consilia Vana.




En vano




QUID SUPEREST




QUID SUPEREST



Gedenke/ daß Gott sei.



QUID SUPEREST




QUID SUPEREST

Fig. 2. Emblem results using Iconclass term “Babel” (detail). emblematica.  
[http://emblematica.library.illinois.edu/search/emblems?query.  
term=Babel%7Cen](http://emblematica.library.illinois.edu/search/emblems?query.term=Babel%7Cen).

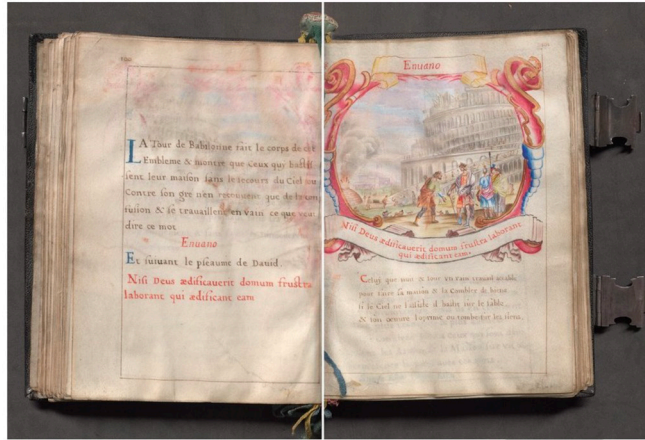


Resources for Emblem Studies

En vano

 **Book:** Emblemes et devises morales

[HathiTrust page link](#)  
[Illinois emblem link](#)  
[Illinois pictura link](#)



Descriptors for this Emblem (Iconclass Headings)

54F - Fortune and Misfortune +  
 71B421 - the building of the Tower of Babel; Nimrod may be present, supervising or assisting the construction +  
 86(EN VANO) - proverbs, sayings, etc. (EN VANO) +

Motto Transcription(s)

Spanish: En vano

Persistent Link: <http://hdl.handle.net/10111/EmblemRegistry:E023445>

Language: English

 **ILLINOIS**  
 UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

 **HERZOG AUGUST BIBLIOTHEK**  
 WOLFFENBÜTTEL

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 Portions of this Website were developed at the [Grainger Engineering Library Information Center](#)  
 Design by [Pixo](#)

 **ARXES**

 **Logo**

 **Logo**

 **Logo**

 **Logo**

 **Logo**

 **Logo**

Fig. 3. René de Bruc, Marquis de Montplaisir, emblem *En vano* (In vain). From *Emblemes et devises morales* (ms. codex). France, post-1650. Manuscript Collection at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Library. <http://emblematica.library.illinois.edu/detail/emblem/E023445>.

To date, a total of 1,407 emblem books and 33,233 individual emblems can be accessed through Emblematica Online. Aside from the volumes from Illinois and the HAB, two of the three emblem projects in Scotland—French Emblems at Glasgow and Alciato at Glasgow—have contributed 43 volumes. In addition, the Emblem Project Utrecht has added 30 volumes, the Getty Research Institute has provided 248, Duke University Libraries has contributed 197, and the Newberry Library has provided 1. Classical and modern European vernacular languages are represented with emblem books in Latin, German,

Italian, French, Dutch, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Individual emblems are presented with their transcribed motto(s) and persistent links. In several instances, the scanned images are enriched with emblem metadata generated either at Emblematica Online or at research institutions like University of Glasgow and Utrecht University.

The impressive number of emblems and emblem metadata hosted by Emblematica Online is the result of a collaborative effort from scholars at participating institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. Aside from their intellectual endeavors, they engaged in the difficult task of securing funding to materialize an emblematic utopia for everyone interested in the field. Like other digital humanities projects, Emblematica Online has changed the direction of scholarship by implementing technologies that allow for a more expedited and efficient dissemination of knowledge, and by securing free and equal access to scholars who cannot easily travel to study the physical copies. Aside from the volumes that for preservation and conservation reasons cannot be scanned, there are still a large number of books that have not yet been digitized and that remain in library archives around the world for on-site examination only. This digitization endeavor, and the endless task of developing academically reliable metadata for the investigation of early modern texts and images, requires human capital and financial support. There is an implicit invitation here for scholars to continue with the task of developing digital tools that could further advance the study of emblems and symbolic forms that Emblematica Online started more than a decade ago.

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