



## Libraries Gain Momentum

People must have felt that they were witnessing sorcery when they first encountered the movable-type printing press invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1440s. As the number of books exploded, knowledge spread like wildfire, igniting the Renaissance. In Florence, the Medici family invested in timelessly beautiful architecture and founded the first private libraries, while the Protestant princes further north began to amass important book collections. Having a library became a status symbol. In West Africa, the minor caravan post at Chinguetti (p. 170) became a place of pilgrimage for scholars thanks to its libraries. In the southern hemisphere, the Inca are believed to have recorded their rich knowledge on canvas and stored them in large archives. At around the same time, the first Europeans landed in South America and founded Western-style libraries, thus imprinting their books, ideas, and values on the continent. The Real Gabinete Português de Leitura (p. 272) in Rio de Janeiro is testament to that period and continues to engage with the historical legacy of the colonial era through genuine exchange and critical scrutiny. Even in the 20th century, libraries continued to spread western ideas all over the world. In 1920, for instance, colonial settlers from the Netherlands created some 2,500 libraries in present-day Indonesia, stocking their shelves with journals, reference books, technical manuals, and Javanese translations of adventure fiction from the West.

As early as the 17th century, the abbots of European monasteries started having exquisite baroque halls built specially to accommodate their growing collections of books and manuscripts. Scandalous and Enlightenment writings found their way into the infamous “poison cabinets”—sections of the library kept under lock and key and only accessible to librarians of impeccable moral standing. The number of secular libraries also increased. In 1712, Trinity College in Dublin laid the foundation stone for its Long Room (p. 258), which remains its crown jewel. In Vienna, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI spent a fortune on his court library, still one of the most beautiful national libraries in the world (p. 236). Meanwhile, thinkers like Diderot, Hume, and Kant were sowing the seeds of the Enlightenment, and they fell on fertile soil.

## Opening Up the Institution

The French and American revolutions turned the social order of the Western world upside down. The palaces and stately homes of the erstwhile rulers were opened up and their accumulated knowledge poured into the hands of the bourgeoisie. In France, the royal library became the property of the people. While still in its infancy, the United States founded the ambitious Library of Congress, today the second-largest research library in the world. For a time, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe worked as a librarian at the →



**A larger-than-life statue of Emperor Charles VI stands in the middle of the magnificent hall of the Austrian National Library (left). The monarch commissioned the beautiful building as his court library. The rococo hall of the Duchess Anna Amalia Library (right) in Weimar is just as impressive, and it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.**