Indiana University’s Lilly Library is the repository of the Ruth E. Adomeit Collection of Miniature Books, which comprises thousands of Lilliputian volumes from a wide range of geographic and temporal worlds. Adomeit (1910–1996)—a native and lifelong resident of Cleveland, Ohio—not only amassed one of the world’s largest collections of miniature books, she was a significant contributor to the field during a critical period of its development and advancement. An active member of the Miniature Book Society, a lecturer, and an author, Adomeit was a tireless promoter of miniature books and a leading scholar of their history and provenance.

This chapter outlines Adomeit’s contributions to the realm of miniature books and explores her activities within the context of collecting as a personal avocation. My research draws on the Adomeit archives, also housed at the Lilly Library, to construct Adomeit’s professional biography as an aspect of her personal life. Adomeit’s publications, lecture notes, and correspondence illuminate her dedication to the world of miniature books and provide the opportunity to examine an influential collector at a rare level of detail. A working woman, not a society belle, and a self-made scholar, not a hobbyist, Adomeit is a rather unusual example among mid-twentieth-century American collectors; her story both contributes to a context for the fine miniature Islamic books in the Lilly’s collection and illuminates the activities of one of Indiana University’s most distinctive benefactors.

Adomeit termed collecting “an incurable disease” and claimed to have contracted the condition as a pre-teen, in a manner that seems nearly random: browsing a New England antique shop, she found a thin, four-inch-high chapbook from 1840 called *Father Shall Never Whip Me Again*. The same summer, she happened upon a wooden book about one inch high and later recalled, “I often wished it were a real book, but of course I knew no one could make a book that small. How wrong I was!” These early acquisitions seem to have sparked a curiosity in young Adomeit; the next year, she encountered an 1848 copy of *The Little Pilgrim’s Progress*, just three inches high.

In 1929, Adomeit entered a more concentrated phase of collecting, spurred by her father’s gift of a “real” miniature: a copy of *Addresses of Abraham Lincoln* that was less than one inch tall. Adomeit recalled, “when he gave it to me I was overjoyed for it was even smaller than *The Little Pilgrim’s Progress*.” Sometime later, Adomeit’s father presented her with another volume from the set: Coolidge’s autobiography. A decade later, Adomeit said, “I was ready to set to work on the next volume.” It was the beginning of a lifelong quest that would see her amass one of the world’s largest collections of miniature books.
later, Adomeit learned of a third book in the series—*Washington, His Farewell Address*—and obtained a copy. Soon after, Cleveland book collector Otto Ege, whom Adomeit met while enrolled in a calligraphy class under his instruction, saw Adomeit’s minute volumes and presented her with an English sales catalog that included a listing for a collection of fifteen miniature books. Adomeit ordered these works, and her collection began to grow. By the 1990s, Adomeit believed her collection to rank as the second largest in the world, an impressive feat for any individual, particularly for a woman from her milieu. Her vast miniature book collection competed for space in her Cleveland home with Mexican folk art, pre-Columbian art, Russian icons, antique paper cuts, early children’s books, and antique butter and cookie molds (Figure 2.1).

Adomeit’s collections formed but one facet of what seems to have been a rich and full life. In addition to her professional work as a fourth-grade teacher and a secretary for the Cleveland Institute of Art, she was involved with natural conservation efforts and studied history from various perspectives. She also served on the governing board of the Clarke Historical Library (Michigan) for many years and in 1983 was elected to the American Antiquarian Society. Adomeit never married, and her many pursuits seem to have been financed mostly through her (presumably) modest salaries—a somewhat unusual scenario for a mid-twentieth-century collector prominent within her primary genre of acquisition. Perhaps Adomeit’s household status as single-income prompted her to comment that collecting miniature books is “a wonderful sport on a slim budget.” Adomeit may have been struck by miniature books as a pre-teen—and bitten by the bug of collecting as a calling—but her focus on miniature books rather than more costly collectibles seems to have had a practical dimension as well as an emotional source.

Twice inflicted, Adomeit suffered from the incurability both of collecting and of wanderlust, a desire to travel the world and take pieces of it home with her. Adomeit’s travel experiences were as broad as her interests. She journeyed to Mexico several times and made domestic and international trips with the Society of Architectural Historians. She also spent time visiting friends and family in Germany, Switzerland, and elsewhere in Europe. Exhibiting an independent streak, in 1953 Adomeit traveled alone as one of four passengers on a freighter bound for the Middle East, where she visited Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Israel, and Turkey before heading to Europe.

The freighter’s first stop seems to have been Algeria, a place that captivated Adomeit. Her long letters to her parents describe the places she saw and particularly the clothing worn by those around her. Revealing an Orientalist bent not unusual for her time, Adomeit exclaimed, “Arabs are exactly like something out of Hollywood movies. You just can’t believe it—yellow, red, or white curtains, gay colored clothes, strange pantaloons . . . The women all covered but one eye . . . very graceful and striking.” Adomeit probably had in mind Hollywood portrayals of eastern lands and cultures (from North Africa and the Middle East
to Southeast Asia) that had become conventional early in twentieth-century cinematography; such depictions have been described as “titillating viewers with the thrills of unbridled passion, miscegenation, and wild adventure in a raw and natural setting.” Through film, Adomeit would have gazed upon generalized, exoticized treatments of her destinations, and it seems that the reality—replete with new geography and sights—did not disappoint her.

Although Adomeit loved the Middle East, her experiences there did not quite compare to what she saw in Mexico, which seems to have been her favorite destination. For instance, she described her visit to the pyramids at Giza: “It was wonderful, but really these pyramids are much less impressive than the Mexican.” Nevertheless, Adomeit wrote enthusiastically about her time overseas, particularly in Syria and Turkey. She ended her trip in Europe, which seems to have been a disappointment after her time farther east. From Greece she wrote, “I can’t say I like Greece—a great comedown after Asia—too civilized, uninteresting, full of tourists, no costumes, just like travel in the U.S.A.” Italy was a similar disappointment, seeming “so civilized that it is hard to get used to.”

As she collected experiences in the world, Adomeit sought to share them with others. Among her travel documents are long lists of family and friends for whom she purchased gifts and to whom she mailed cards. Similarly, Adomeit’s collection of miniature books had an undeniable social dimension. She believed that the miniature tomes could cut across social divisions and instigate conversation:

Even people who are not interested in books enjoy looking at the diminutive volumes and all collectors find some which interest them particularly, because miniature books cover a multitude of subjects, are in all languages, in all varieties of bindings, and have been made from the earliest times up through all the centuries and are still being produced today.

Adomeit seemed to delight in the fact that—because miniature books cover such a range of subject matter—she could discuss an aspect of her collection with anyone she met. In her writings and lectures, Adomeit highlighted the diversity of Lilliputian manuscripts, citing a range of subject matter from Cicero to erotic Japanese poetry. She enjoyed anecdotes and once wrote of miniature books used in China as cheat sheets: university examinations covered famous essays, and popular with students were miniature copies of the texts that could be slipped up their sleeves. Adomeit also revealed that, “the only book taken to the moon by our astronauts was a . . . miniature book about Goddard, the father of rocketry.”

As a woman interested in countless subjects and places, Adomeit could incorporate many interests into her miniature book collection and enjoy sharing her material with others. Her unwavering commitment to this range of endeavors—the collection and promotion of miniature books; traveling; maintaining social connections with her many friends
and contacts—reveals an intense personality, one that seems almost compulsive. That Adomeit committed herself to the world of miniature books came to benefit not only the many collectors who fell under her tutelage but also, through Adomeit’s generosity, the students and scholars of Indiana University.

As her collection expanded, Adomeit began to study miniature books more systematically, acquainting herself with the standards of the field and carefully considering the scope and direction of her own collection. More committed to defined standards, perhaps, than many collectors in her situation—enjoying collecting as a hobby, but not a vocation—Adomeit developed a rather firm opinion on the dimensions that define a true miniature book. On a study visit to the Library of Congress, Adomeit inquired with the head of the rare books division about the maximum size used to define a miniature book. She recalled his response:

Somewhat embarrassed by the question [he] said he did not know, but would phone the cataloger and inquire. After putting down the phone he turned to me and said, “They use the rule of thumb.” “And what is that?” I asked. More embarrassed he picked up the phone and again spoke to the cataloging department. When he put down the phone this time he had a clear explanation, or did he?? Choose a hand, hold the thumb of that hand at a right angle to the index finger of the same hand. Then set the book to be measured into that angle. If the spine does not project, the book is a miniature. Have you any questions? I did. Should the spine lie along the thumb or along the index finger? Actually you may take your choice (the cataloging department did) and the fact that your thumb, my thumb, and the thumb of the cataloger at the Library of Congress are all of different lengths, not to mention the lengths of our index fingers, makes the size of a miniature book as defined by the Library of Congress as variable as the size of a human being—it may be a giant or dwarf.17

Adomeit seems to have told the story of her visit to the Library of Congress in a humorous manner, expressing surprise at the lack of precision in cataloging standards at the national library,18 but her recollection reveals perhaps as much about the state of the miniature book field as about the Library of Congress standards. Adomeit was a relatively early collector of miniature books, becoming involved as the field was evolving into a professional one and defining its standards.

Despite her belief that the definition of a miniature book should be universal and consistent, Adomeit made exceptions to her standard in building her collection. As Lilly cataloguer Stephen Cape remarks, “To a purist the best definition of a miniature book was 2½ inches; however, she and everyone else in the practical terms of collecting broke the rule as it seemed to make sense.”19 Indeed, the maximum size at which a book could be considered miniature seems to have varied by collector, generally between two and four inches,20 according to the individual’s tastes and interests. Concerning her own collection, Adomeit recorded her standard of 2½ inches as established in part because, “it would include
Thumb Bibles and many other important books while eliminating many uninteresting 19th-century books.” As dedicated as Adomeit was to the idea of standardized collecting, her own collection’s parameters (like those of her peers) were established according to her own interests in addition to evolving practices among those who shared her avocation.

Adomeit’s vast collection was shared with the general public through several exhibitions, including two held at the Cleveland Public Library in 1972 and 1989 (Figure 2.2). The 1989 exhibition featured more than 3,900 books and was, at the time, the largest display of miniature books held anywhere in the world. It seems to have been a success: the exhibition was extended past its planned closing date due to popular demand. In 1992, Adomeit lent material to the Lilly Library’s exhibition of children’s books published by William Darton and his sons in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Her loan to the Lilly Library was only one aspect of a relationship with Indiana University that began in June of 1990, when Lilly librarian William Cagle wrote to Adomeit, having heard from rare book dealer...
Justin Schiller that Adomeit was considering the Lilly as the future home of her collection of miniature books. Adomeit’s friend Elisabeth Ball had gifted her collection of historical children’s books to the Lilly, and in doing so, it seems, given Adomeit the idea of following suit. Before she met Cagle or visited the Lilly, Adomeit had committed her collection to Indiana University.

Adomeit and Cagle wrote to each other for several years and exchanged visits. After the first of these, an impressed Cagle called Adomeit’s book room “a veritable library of libraries.” Adomeit began giving the Lilly selected books from her collection in 1991 so that the library could catalog the books more gradually than if the entire collection was received at once, and asked for a list of the Lilly’s miniature book holdings so that she might avoid purchasing books that would become duplicate copies in the Lilly’s holdings. Adomeit also gave a selection of juvenile books and games to the Lilly and endowed her collection, so that it could continue to grow. The Lilly Library celebrated Adomeit’s gift with an exhibition of nine hundred examples in 2001. Adomeit’s gift thus made her miniature book collection, comprising sixteen thousand items, by any standard one of the largest in the world.

In addition to sharing her collection through public exhibitions, Adomeit shared her knowledge of miniature books and examples from her vast collection in public talks. Her papers include preparatory notes for some of the lectures that she delivered on miniature books and on her collection. She spoke, for example, at garden clubs, at the Shaker Historical Society (1980), at a group she called the College Club (1981), and at the Cleveland Public Library (1989). Adomeit seems to have used a formula for developing such presentations as well as general written work. Again and again, she provided her audience with answers to questions that seem to have been posed to her repeatedly. These included, what is a miniature book? How many do you have? Where do you find them? What do they cost? How many collectors are there? Why collect miniature books? Aren’t small books made mostly for children? Why did you start collecting miniature books? What is the smallest book in the world?

Having addressed the questions she presumed her audience might have, Adomeit continued, describing specific books and telling stories that she hoped would be of interest to her addressees. When Adomeit spoke at garden clubs, she culled from her collection miniature books on flowers and plants, those with flowers in their titles, and those dealing with botanical matter, and brought examples to share with her audiences. When presenting in front of a more generalized audience, she described more fully the history of miniature texts, starting with Assyro-Babylonian clay tablets drawn from her own collection.

Sprinkling the history of miniature books with the anecdotes she loved, she described some of the diminutive tomes from the ancient
world, telling her audiences that, “Pliny . . . quoted from one of the lost works of Cicero a statement that the Iliad of Homer had been written on a piece of parchment so small as to be enclosed in a nutshell. There is also the record of a Spartan artist who wrote a poem in letters of gold enclosed in the rind of a grain of corn—a surprising occupation for the supposedly uncultured and matter-of-fact Spartans.” She described miniature manuscripts from the Middle Ages and particularly interesting examples in the British Museum, including a famous miniature belonging to Queen Elizabeth and one that was Anne Boleyn’s, “fitted with a ring so [that] it could be worn at the waist—a girdle book. This is a book of English psalms and contains a portrait of Henry the 8th. The story is that Ann [sic] Boleyn carried it with her to the scaffold, presenting it to one of her ladies-in-waiting just before she was beheaded.” Such stories must have helped Adomeit’s material come alive for the audience, at the same time as they legitimized the serious collecting of miniscule volumes to groups unfamiliar with their historical significance.

Adomeit also regaled her audiences with adventures from her years of collecting. Adomeit enjoyed the acquisition aspect of collecting so much that she maintained that “finding a rarity is always a high spot of one’s life.” By way of example, she recalled a visit to Providence, Rhode Island, where she visited a book dealer and asked him for miniature books. As the dealer showed her a file drawer, he said that he currently had nothing important. Sorting through a group of unremarkable books, Adomeit found Fruits of Philosophy, an extremely rare book on the subject of birth control that was printed in 1832. So rare was the book that Adomeit maintained that she had seen only three copies—all in poor condition—during forty years of collecting. Such exciting acquisitions not only rewarded Adomeit as a serious collector, they became the basis for interesting conversations and for education on all manner of topics.

In her lectures, Adomeit’s skills as an elementary school teacher were put to good use, as she presented her students with useful information in a lively, memorable manner. As she did in other aspects of her life, in these presentations Adomeit used miniature books as a means toward social engagement, entertaining her audiences with stories culled from years of seeking miniature books. Adomeit’s social charms and engaging manner as a writer and lecturer perhaps belie the gravity with which she approached her role as a collector and scholar of—as well as ambassador for—miniature books.

Adomeit not only used miniature books as a means of engaging local groups, she helped bring together miniature book collectors and enthusiasts into a national community through her involvement in founding a small publication called the Miniature Book Collector, whose inaugural issue appeared in April 1960. The publication’s issues featured short, 

“THE GRANDE DAME OF AMERICAN MINIATURE BOOKDOM”
themed articles by Adomeit and others, as well as clippings from other publications and checklists of miniature books from various publishers or produced in specific locations or time periods. The first issue, for example, comprised a list of foreign languages represented by miniature books in Adomeit’s collection—with a request that readers send Adomeit their own such lists—as well as articles on Dutch miniature books; on a series of miniature books published in Buffalo, New York; and on the definition of a miniature book.

This short-lived publication, which ended in 1962, sought to provide information that would be useful to the novice hobbyist and the seasoned collector alike, and, as editor, Adomeit encouraged readers to contribute and share texts. She later recalled the impact of the *Miniature Book Collector* on the miniature book world: “it revived the dormant interest in miniature books and best of all I was able to encourage a number of printers with private presses to do mini-books so that within 5 years over 80 new miniature books had been published.”

For example, Adomeit’s preparatory lecture notes recall that she wrote in an early edition of the *Miniature Book Collector* about a miniature copy of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address printed by William Cheney—and suggested that if the printer was still alive perhaps the miniature could be reprinted for new collectors. A book dealer living near Cheney, Glen Dawson, read Adomeit’s request and contacted the printer—beginning what Adomeit called the “avalanche of mini books published in California.”

By 1983, Adomeit would be instrumental in founding the Miniature Book Society, an international organization that still fosters the study and trade of miniature books, and a group with which Adomeit would remain involved throughout the rest of her life. Indeed, in 1986 the Miniature Book Society presented Adomeit (who in that year had co-organized the group’s annual meeting) with a plaque honoring her as the “Grande Dame of American Miniature Bookdom.” Evron Collins, who wrote a biography of Adomeit—in miniature book format, naturally—for the society in 2003, states that Adomeit was particularly eager to broaden an early, informal meeting of collectors to include other non-specialist members. During her term on the society’s board of governors (1983–1987), she also attempted to keep the organization’s proceedings somewhat unstructured. Collins recalled Adomeit’s habit of purchasing entire collections, resulting in the acquisition of duplicate copies within her library, which she sold to other (often new) collectors at “reasonable or ridiculous prices” or gave as outright gifts. Of course, as Adomeit was neither a book dealer nor an established collector expanding her activity to include a new sub-genre, she might have been particularly interested in maintaining the active participation of “non-professional” enthusiasts in the group’s proceedings.
In 1986 and 1987, Adomeit served as editor for the *Miniature Book Society Newsletter*, which was similar to the *Miniature Book Collector*. The newsletter published a letter from the editor; information about the group’s annual meeting (called the Grand Conclave); reproductions of articles published elsewhere; auction lists; news; and information to assist members in finding interesting books for sale. Many of Adomeit’s writings in both newsletters strike a balance between providing readers with practical and historical information about miniature books and giving them a light, entertaining read.

An undated manuscript in the Lilly Library’s collection of Adomeit’s papers is typical of her writings. This paper, entitled “Christmas Tree Ornaments,” introduces the minibibliophile to the production of holiday decorations in the form of miniature books. “If you are a mini-book fan then the ornaments for you to use are miniature books,” Adomeit suggests. Although she notes that many miniature book ornaments do not meet her exacting size standards for proper miniature books, she suggests that “your admiring friends will not be so size conscious as you and I are” and continues, over four typewritten pages, to present a basic description—including the book’s title, publisher, place of publication, date, dimensions, condition, page count, and number of illustrations—of each miniature book ornament she had encountered as a connoisseur of miniature books.

Although the paper is undated, we might assume that it was meant for publication in the *Miniature Book Collector* or the *Miniature Book Society Newsletter*. By the time of the paper’s writing, Adomeit was versed enough in the practices of collecting and connoisseurship to present each example’s specifications in an organized fashion. In sum, the paper is scholarly enough to provide the serious collector with solid data on a genre but retains a light-hearted tone appropriate to the hobbyist. In such writings, Adomeit used her own collection, as well as the vast array of miniature books that she had encountered during many years of collecting, as the foundation of her research. Her writings in miniature book newsletters thus represent the beginnings of Adomeit’s scholarly literature on the topic.

Adomeit’s other publishing ventures resulted in books. In 1960, Adomeit compiled thirty-one of her favorite cookie recipes into a miniature volume, *Little Cookie Book*, which she sold and gave away as a gift. The publishing arrangement was made with old friends: the book was printed by Frank Teagle, operating the imprint Lilliputter Press in Woodstock, Vermont. In letters between the two concerning the business aspects of the book, Adomeit wittily called herself “Polly Patter” and Teagle “Peter Putter.”

Not all of Adomeit’s publications were so light in tone. In 1980, Adomeit published a checklist of thumb Bibles. Adomeit’s collection is particularly strong in this genre, which was one of her main collecting interests.
interests. Thumb Bibles are not miniature Bibles, but condensed versions of one or both testaments, in prose, verse, or picture format. For example, in one of Adomeit’s volumes, the book of Genesis is condensed to: “Jehovah here of Nothing, all things makes, / And Man, the chief of all, his God forsakes.” As Adomeit explains in her introduction to the checklist, thumb Bibles—the earliest of which was published in London in 1601—are created for children, on the basis that the Bible is too long and too difficult for children to read and comprehend.

Garland Publishing first approached Adomeit about the book (which became volume 127 in their Garland Reference Library of the Humanities) in 1977, but illness prevented her from devoting herself to the venture full-time until 1979. That year, she made several study trips to examine relevant volumes firsthand. The resulting work, *Three Centuries of Thumb Bibles: A Checklist*, is an admirable piece of scholarship. Adomeit’s introduction surveys the history of thumb Bibles and introduces a lengthy checklist. Each of the 296 entries details—and, in most cases, illustrates—a thumb Bible’s table of contents; the number of illustrations it contains; the location of plates not included in the volume’s pagination; the work’s binding; differences among variant editions; and locations of copies. Adomeit also included a selected bibliography of the most important sources on thumb Bibles.

Adomeit’s project represents countless hours of tedious work, and her organization of the material demonstrates her understanding of the ways in which the information would be used. She seems to have wanted to make a serious contribution to her field and, according to the reviews her book garnered, she achieved her goal. Los Angeles book dealer Glen Dawson, in a review for *Bibliographical Society of America*, commented, “Miss Adomeit modestly calls her book a checklist, but it is actually a bibliography. . . . The forty years spent in study and aggressive search are a testimony to the unique combination of knowledge and enthusiasm Ruth Adomeit brought to her task. No one else was so well equipped and so dedicated.” Another reviewer called the book “a fascinating, serious reference book for collectors and students of antique miniature books . . . by a leading scholar in the field and the owner of one of the world’s great collections of Thumb Bibles.” Book dealer Anne C. Bromer, reviewing for *American Book Collector*, called Adomeit’s work the “most important bibliography of miniature books to be issued in nearly two decades and the only reference to treat an entire area of the field.” The accolades from Dawson and Bromer must have been particularly meaningful to Adomeit, as Glen Dawson and Anne Bromer were longstanding associates. In a letter to Dawson, Adomeit expressed her delight that his review would appear in such a prestigious publication: “I will really feel important if I can get my book reviewed there!”

Adomeit’s relationship with Dawson and his family was a long and fruitful one, which included collaboration on a 1980 Dawson’s Book Shop book, *An Original Leaf from the Newberry Bible, 1780*. Adomeit’s
short essay for this publication includes the history of and publication details for the Newberry Bible, a contextual analysis of thumb Bibles, and a short history of the Newberry family—who, in the eighteenth century, had been among the first publishers to create books especially for children. In addition to her essay, each of the 125 copies of this book contains an original folio from an “imperfect” Newberry Bible supplied by Dawson’s.

Adomeit’s final serious publishing project, completed in 1991 in collaboration with Dawson’s Book Shop, was An Original Leaf from the Kleine Print Bybel, ca. 1750. The Dutch book to which this project was devoted is very rare. When Adomeit first wrote to Glen Dawson to gauge his interest in the project, she knew of merely five copies, only three of which included both the Old and New Testaments. Adomeit owned both a complete, two-volume set and a fragment that comprised sixty Old Testament leaves. As had An Original Leaf from the Newberry Bible, 1780, each copy of the limited edition of Adomeit and Dawson’s book included one original leaf from a fragmented copy of the Dutch book.

Adomeit devoted much of her collecting, research, and publishing efforts to thumb Bibles, and her dedication to the topic might tempt us to make assumptions about her own religious beliefs. However, an examination of her papers reveals little to suggest that Adomeit held dogmatic religious convictions. In perusing a sample of her personal correspondence, I found only one brief mention of church membership and no allusions to Christian belief in letters to her parents or friends. In fact, Adomeit once described some of her traveling companions as “sort of missionaries, I guess . . . they are nice, but a little over-religious.” Writing from Jerusalem, she joked that “the old city is charming but so commercialized that it makes you want to turn Moslem.” Though this comment was light-hearted, Adomeit seems to have been open to exploring various religious traditions. She visited a mosque in Algiers and described the setting as “much more peaceful, calm and seeming closer to God than the cathedrals.” From Damascus she told her parents a bit about Ramadan, calling the holiday “the equivalent in importance to our Christmas.” We might also consider that Adomeit’s memorial service was held at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History instead of in a church.

Moreover, when Adomeit wrote about her group of Bibles as a favorite aspect of her collection, she stated that “I have over sixty-five different editions of these, mainly American, dating from 1693 to 1896, several of which are the only known copies, a phrase dear to any collector’s heart.” Adomeit’s words suggest that the value these books held for her came from their rarity, an issue central to both scholars and collectors. These Bibles’ value to Adomeit seems derived more from their status as rare treasures to be studied than as objects of religious devotion. In fact, to consider Adomeit’s checklist of thumb Bibles as a religiously motivated project might suggest that the work is something
other than the scholarly, serious contribution to the literature on a genre of miniature books that it is.

Thumb Bibles are not the only religious works in Adomeit’s collection: among seventy-two items of Middle Eastern provenance are sixteen so-called “banner” (sancak) Qur’ans, which are remarkable in craftsmanship and origin. Adomeit’s interest in such works seems to date at least to her 1953 voyage to the Middle East, where she viewed “banner” Qur’ans at the Damascus Museum and purchased her first such work in the city. In Istanbul she acquired three additional “banner” Qur’ans and sought more information about them. Writing for the Miniature Book Collector, she recalled:

In the Museum of Islamic Art in Istanbul I saw two more banner Korans in metal cases, but was unable to get any information about them. Then I visited the Topkapu Museum with its unbelievable treasures and found that they had not two or three miniature Korans, but cases full of tiny handwritten volumes. At last I arranged to be admitted to the library of the Museum. There the Director and his assistant admired my four octagonal books, dated them for me, and told me that these were all “banner” Korans. They also told me that in the library there were about 1500 miniature books, all handwritten and all Korans or parts of the Koran. . . . At a bookshop in Istanbul I was told that only a month earlier they had sold for about $250 the loveliest banner Koran anyone had ever seen. It had been taken to Korea by a group of Turkish soldiers to hang on their flag as they went into battle. Now whenever I look at my little octagonal Korans I think of that beautiful book facing the fire of a modern battlefield and only hope that it was carried back triumphantly to Turkey.

Because of their exquisite design and amuletic potential—as well as, perhaps, the romanticized notions conjured by the latter—Adomeit considered such banner Qur’ans in her collection “the most beautiful of all my miniatures” (Figure 2.3). Her admiration for these works, in fact, led her to make them the subject of her essay in the 1984 edited volume My Favorite Miniature Book: Nine Essays by Collectors of Miniature Books.

After returning home from her 1953 trip to the Middle East and Europe, Adomeit sought additional Islamic volumes for her collection. As early as 1954 she wrote to Dawson’s Book Shop, stating that she was “particularly interested in Bibles and Korans” as well as “oriental books, unusual languages, and in miniature Bibles or Bible Histories.” In 1985, Adomeit’s connoisseurship regarding such material was considered so advanced that Dawson sent her seven miniature Qur’ans, asking for her help in determining potential publication dates and other specifications. Upon examining the volumes more closely, Adomeit was able to provide Dawson with specific information on one book, approximate dates for several others, and to point out a detail that had escaped the dealer: one was not a Qur’an at all but a miniature Khordeh Avesta (Little Avesta), a Zoroastrian prayer book.

FIG. 2.3. Adomeit with a Safavid miniature octagonal Qur’an and its metal case (Adomeit mss. C12), setting up her 1989 exhibition at the Cleveland Public Library. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.
In amassing and studying Islamic material, Adomeit joined a trajectory of western inquiries concerning the “Orient” that accelerated substantially during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (alongside European colonialism) and continued throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, an estimated sixty thousand books about the Near East were written between 1800 and 1950. Many such studies treated the area as “a place of romance, exotic beings, [and] haunting memories and landscapes,” teeming with “sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, [and] intense energy.” Although Orientalist notions of the Near East sometimes evoked a sense of sublime terror, in artistic realms, Islamic art was regarded as a potential antidote to the stress and anxiety of modern life, a “palliative to refresh the spirit and soul.” Adomeit’s professed enthusiasm for the novel sites she encountered during her time overseas—and her romanticized imaginings concerning the (potentially) militarized histories of the sancak Qur’ans in her collection—are heir to the Orientalist tradition, which infiltrated popular (as well as intellectual) culture in Europe and North America.

Critical in introducing Islamic artistic culture to North American collectors were World’s Fairs held in Philadelphia in 1926 and New York in 1933; following the former, an expanded Persian exhibition was held in Philadelphia’s Memorial Hall. Museum exhibitions of Islamic art in the United States began with a 1910–1911 display of carpets at New York’s Metropolitan Museum, which also exhibited Islamic art in 1931, 1933–1934, and 1935. The same year, exhibitions in Brooklyn, Detroit, and Toledo were held, and by 1937 San Francisco’s M. H. de Young Memorial Museum hosted the first such exhibition on the West Coast of the United States. Exhibitions in the eastern United States included a large display in 1940 at New York’s Iranian Institute, but most significant for Adomeit would have been the Cleveland Museum of Art’s 1944 exhibition of Islamic art. Perhaps this display piqued Adomeit’s curiosity about Islamic art and culture generally.

As Orientalism spread, museum collections in the United States—including those of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and the Freer Gallery, Smithsonian Institution—encompassed Islamic art with increasing frequency, and many of these acquisitions were made possible by individual collectors. Charles Lang Freer (1856–1919)—whose collection of Islamic and Asian art joins his extensive holdings of American art in a gallery bearing the collector’s name, and who provided an endowment for the Smithsonian’s continued collecting of Eastern art—may have been an inspiration to Adomeit. Among western collectors seeking “Oriental” books and manuscripts was British historian and Foreign Service officer William Edward David Allen (1901–1973), whose collection of more than 150 items, including eight Islamic manuscripts, was purchased by the Lilly Library in 1976. Perhaps, too, Adomeit was inspired by the example of socialite Doris Duke (1912–1993), who in the 1930s built an Islamic-inspired home in
Honolulu that continues to house her collection of Islamic art. As Adomeit sought additional works for her collection while traveling abroad, she seems to have adopted the “adventurer-collector” role that such earlier collectors as Freer and Allen had played. In Istanbul, for example, Adomeit learned the phrase “miniature books” in Turkish and later remembered that, in spite of a population of over a million, Istanbul was like a small town as far as strangers were concerned. On a main street a man took my arm and motioned that I was to go with him, saying in Turkish the words for “little books.” After a long walk he led me into a shop, spoke to the owner, bowed to me, and left. I asked the owner, who spoke English, how the man had known I wanted tiny books. He answered, “Everyone in Istanbul knows that the American lady who walks alone wants little books.”

Also influential on the growth of Adomeit’s collection and scholarship were colleagues and friends who shared her specific collecting interests. Particularly relevant was Elisabeth Ball, who collected rare books and had a special interest in children’s books. Ball gifted her collection to the Lilly Library and the Pierpont Morgan Library, and seems to have been inspirational in convincing Adomeit to select the Lilly as a permanent home for her own collection.

Certainly Adomeit had a sense of her activities as part of a larger culture of collecting, in particular of miniature books. Keenly interested in the production and reception of miniature books around the world, she presented herself in lectures and writings as part of a global community of miniature book enthusiasts. Adomeit counted between four and five hundred collectors of miniature books in the United States, based on the Miniature Book Society’s membership (she noted, however, that the most active collectors, those who attended the annual meetings, numbered only one hundred). Adomeit contextualized the relatively small number of active collectors in the United States by citing the ten thousand active in Hungary and exclaiming that Japanese collectors were so numerous that “few Japanese books get into commercial channels.” Likewise, the market for miniatures was so demanding in Yugoslavia, Russia, and eastern Germany that texts from these geographic areas were nearly unobtainable in the United States.

Adomeit also boasted of celebrity collectors of miniature books. She listed collectors among European royalty, such as Queen Mary of England, Queen Mother Margherita of Italy, and France’s Empress Eugenia, as well as American president Franklin D. Roosevelt and such cultural figures as Jack Norworth and Walter de la Mare. American entrepreneurs who collected miniature books were also of interest; this list included Indiana industrialist George Ball (the father of Adomeit’s peer Elisabeth) and Stanley Marcus of the Neiman Marcus family. Among public collections, Adomeit called those at the New York Public Library,
the Library of Congress, and the Grolier Club “fine” and admired the “interesting small collections” at Harvard and Yale universities as well as the American Antiquarian Society, although she maintained that “none of these compare with the best private collections.” That her collection was one of the largest in the world placed her in fine company.

At first glance, Adomeit seems perhaps an unlikely candidate for amassing a superior collection of miniature books and establishing herself as an expert and scholar in the field. Unlike those of the wealthy men who dominate most histories of collecting, Adomeit’s avocation seems to have been financed almost entirely through her professional work as a secretary and grade school teacher. Adomeit never married, and perhaps dedicated time and energy that otherwise would have been invested in a family to the world of miniature books. In fact, she seems to have believed that marriage had the potential to distract women from other pursuits. She once wrote to Karen Dawson—a college student involved in her family’s bookstore and, as a hobbyist, in miniature book publishing—after having heard from a mutual acquaintance of Dawson’s engagement. Adomeit wrote, “I am happy to hear it, but hope it won’t keep you from various miniature book projects.”

Adomeit’s own marital status seems to have been significant to her in some way. Responding to a 1981 review by book dealer Anne Bromer, Adomeit addressed scholarly concerns but used a significant amount of space in her letter reacting to the title “Ms.,” which Bromer used, rather than the “Miss” that Adomeit preferred. She cautioned in no uncertain terms: “I was horrified that you called me Ms. all the way through. I have resigned from several organizations that insist on this form of address as I feel that it is very insulting. If space is so short that one more space is needed then I think there must be a better place to gain that needed space. . . . I beg you not to ever do that to me again—I am not the only person who feels that way so I would tread more cautiously if I were you.” Adomeit’s insistence on the title “Miss,” indicating an unmarried status, rather than the more neutral term “Ms.,” suggests a certain pride in her identity as a single woman navigating the world according to her own desires and abilities.

Many examinations of collecting take wealthy men as their subjects, and when, for example, Frederick Baekeland’s study attributes to “the rich industrialist, especially if he is a self-made man with a limited background” the collecting motivations of “vanity and a desire for social advancement,” “the pleasure of buying a work from under the nose of a rival,” or even (though Baekeland gives these suggestions less credence) “emotionally empty lives at home, acquisitiveness, and the need for immortality,” we must consider the extent to which such statements can be considered true for the seemingly middle-class, female Adomeit. Baekeland maintains that, “most adult collectors in the formal, public sense of the word are men,” and differentiates between men’s and women’s collecting:
many women privately amass personal possessions far in excess of any practical need, without any thought of public exhibition other than adornment: we rarely think of accumulations of dresses, shoes, perfumes china and the like as collections. They consist of relatively intimate and transient objects intended directly to enhance their owners’ self-image . . . Men’s collections, however, be they of stamps, cars, guns or art, tend to have clear-cut thematic emphases and standard, external reference points in public or private collections. Thus women’s collections tend to be personal and ahistorical, men’s impersonal and historical, just as, traditionally, women have tended to have a relatively greater emotional investment in people than in ideas and men to some extent the reverse.  

Baekeland perhaps would categorize Adomeit’s miniature books as of the same milieu as adornments and bibelots. Although books have long been collected by men and may be seen to represent the Academy—a patriarchal institution, one could argue—the miniaturization of the tomes (stereotypically) feminizes them, aligning them, in a sense, with the dolls and dollhouses (miniaturized versions of domesticity) that have traditionally been popular among women who collect as young girls. However, even leaving aside the fallacy of Baekeland’s unsupported generalizations about gendered approaches to collecting (and life), one cannot fail to notice that Adomeit’s collecting activities could be categorized as nearly opposite Baekeland’s model of the woman collector, as her collection had both clear parameters and a history of public presentations.

Like Baekeland, Russell Belk and Melanie Wallendorf, in analyzing the societal functions of collecting, employ gendered stereotypes, differentiating between women’s “achievement in the world of connection to other people” and “the powerful achievement of masculine control over nature.” Unquestionably, Adomeit appreciated the personal connections and friendships garnered through collecting, but her activities also earned her a renown within the world of miniature books that stereotypically would have been reserved for male collectors. Indeed, Paul van der Grijp attributes to male collectors a business model, in which “men tend to collect valuables and signifiers of maleness and . . . are proud of their ability to purchase cheaply and sell expensively.” Considering the savvy that Adomeit demonstrated in her dealing and trading, her activities, were she a male collector, would probably be considered emblematic of this mode of activity. Just as arguments for miniature books to be gendered “male” or “female” could be made with relatively similar credence, Adomeit, a female collector, seems to have shared attributes generally associated with both male and female collectors. Her case study suggests that the male/female dichotomy used in several sociological and psychological studies of collecting is too simplistic to account for all collecting activity. Certainly Adomeit’s collecting career encompassed aspects of both models, and her example is a useful addition to discussions of gender and collecting.
As she built her collection, Adomeit wrote and lectured with increasing frequency about the field and her own collection. Several times, she answered the question, “Why do you collect miniature books?”—perhaps an inquiry to which she was frequently subject. In a 1952 article for Antiquarian Bookman, Adomeit offered her standard answer in the opening lines: “Either you are a collector or you are not and it is usually the non-collector who says to me, ‘Why do you collect miniature books?’ He really means, ‘Why do you collect?’”

Adomeit’s quip expresses a sentiment that is perhaps not unusual among collectors of Adomeit’s generation or milieu. In preparing his (rather personal) 1974 examination of collecting, British archaeologist Ivor Noël Hume found the response, “Why does anyone collect anything?” a typical retort to the question, “Why collect?” Perhaps, Hume suggests, collecting is a “fundamental human instinct,” one that, to collectors, begs no explanation; indeed, Adomeit wrote, “I am a born collector.” The suggestion that Adomeit might have agreed with Hume’s analysis is strengthened by Hume’s description of collecting as “an incurable habit.” To Adomeit, and likely to other avid collectors, the world was divided into two categories of people: those who collect and those who do not.

Among collectors, Hume has written of a competitive “sporting nature,” and certainly Adomeit recalled particular finds with what seems a slightly boasting manner, sometimes having conquered a “rival” in the form of a book dealer. She recalled, for example, the acquisition of a rare American thumb Bible:

The dealer brought out a number of interesting miniatures, but none of great rarity. I gathered those I wanted into a pile while he searched for others. Finally he came up with a few and told me the prices. I took one look at the leather binding of the last one he handed me and opened it as casually as I could and put it with the others and asked what price he could make on the lot. It totaled close to $60.00 but he rounded it off to $50.00.

The book she had tossed into the pile casually was a rare 1766 Thumb Bible, then worth $100–$150, and by the time of Adomeit’s lecture fetching $1,000. Success in Adomeit’s “sport” required not only the ability to quickly gauge the value of proffered books but also the presence of mind to maintain a sense of nonchalance.

Perhaps the collector competes against himself or herself as much as against other collectors and dealers. In identifying various collecting strategies, Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel identify the allure of completing a set, acquiring an entire series of an object. Similarly, Russell Belk and Melanie Wallendorf posit that the completion of a collection can foster feelings of personal wholeness, and that collections considered to be well rounded provide the collector with a sense of the same quality in himself or herself. Adomeit, of course, set for herself the goal of attaining a copy of every book whose size did not exceed 2½ inches.
Although that goal is seemingly achievable, the continued production of miniature books meant that her collection likely never could have become fully complete. Thus, the goal seems to have provided Adomeit with a measure by which to gauge her success as well as a motivation (should she have needed one) to continue collecting.112

Further, Hume’s phrase “sporting nature” is telling not only because of the sense of spirited competition that “sporting” conveys but also because the word “nature” reveals a notion that the hobby of collecting is an innate aspect of a collector’s personality. In keeping with the attitude that collectors are born, not made, Adomeit wrote that when seeking miniature books she followed her intuition; she claimed that the process encouraged her to believe in extrasensory perception (ESP).113 Adomeit’s mention of ESP encourages a reading of her collecting tendency as not only innate but otherworldly, almost inevitable. Adomeit’s belief in the innate quality of her collecting habit is in keeping with the attitudes of the many contemporary collectors who liken collecting to an addiction and searching for additional items to obsession or compulsion.114

Also consistent with recent scholarly literature on the topic of collecting is the manner in which Adomeit’s collection began. Adomeit’s earliest acquisitions—small books happened upon as a pre-teen browsing antique shops—seem to have been more the result of chance encounters than a dedicated pursuit, a hobby that began so naturally that Adomeit’s incipient collection had formed organically before she was aware that she was a collector. Susan M. Pearce, among others, has written of just this phenomenon: “the study of collectors makes clear that collections can creep up on people unawares until the moment of realization . . . a collection is not a collection until someone thinks of it in those terms.”115

Adomeit may have believed that collecting was an innate aspect of her personality, but she also had practical reasons for selecting books as her primary collection: “Books seem to me to be the most satisfactory of all things to collect. They don’t break easily (I used to collect wine goblets); they are easy to store (just try handling a mold collection sometime);116 they are not so scarce as to discourage the collector (consider Russian icons); and yet you can limit yourself to a particular field of books and not be discouraged by the impossibility of ever having a really good and outstanding collection (postage stamps discouraged me years ago because I can never keep up with all the various issues.).”117 Among books, Adomeit found miniature books ideal because they are easy to store, do not take up much space, and are not too fragile but “can be attractively housed and displayed in small cases at home where they can be enjoyed, but not mistreated.”118 Although miniature books were readily available, they were not too available, prompting what Adomeit called “the fun of searching for them.”119 Miniature books also held appeal for Adomeit because of their relative affordability.120

Despite all of the practical qualities that made the collecting of miniature books appealing, Adomeit’s chief interest in them seems to have
come from their aesthetic qualities and their diversity of subject matter. As she stated, “[Miniature books] attract me because of the craftsmanship which has gone into their making and because of the great variety in subject matter and format.”

Of the multitude of miniature books in Adomeit’s collection, the Islamic examples that she so admired are especially emblematic of these two qualities: particularly fine examples of skilled craftsmanship and representing an array of subjects—distant lands and times, as well as distinct religious traditions—that were new and exotic to Adomeit. The *sancak* Qur’ans that Adomeit deemed her favorite miniature books especially enriched her collection, with their unusual format a novelty among the more familiar western volumes and an intriguing subject for Adomeit to explore via research and writing. These exquisite works in the Lilly Library at Indiana University offer a fine testament to Ruth Adomeit, a seasoned collector and accomplished scholar, and to her deep and lasting impact on the field of miniature books.

NOTES

For her sage advice and tireless support, I thank Dr. Christiane J. Gruber. Additionally, I am appreciative of the staff of Indiana University’s Lilly Library. For her contributions to my research for this article, I would also like to thank Christine Bentley, Ph.D. student in the Department of the History of Art at Indiana University Bloomington and Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Indianapolis.

Many of Adomeit’s general writings and lecture notes repeat anecdotes, stories, and examples, and sometimes are nearly identical. In most cases I cite only one or two examples.

1. For an extended discussion of Adomeit’s miniatures Islamic books, see the chapter by Heather Coffey in this volume.
2. Adomeit, “My Lilliputian Library,” Box 9, f. 9, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana (henceforth, “Lilly Library”). Such chapbooks would not meet the size standards that Adomeit later set for her collection; nevertheless, she maintained a small collection of “American juveniles” printed before 1840 (ibid.; and preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library).
3. Adomeit, “My Lilliputian Library,” Box 9, f. 9, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Adomeit remembered being “about ten years old” when she purchased this book (ibid.; and preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library).
4. Adomeit, “My Lilliputian Library,” Box 9, f. 9, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Unfortunately, Adomeit did not specify the year in which she acquired the Coolidge book.
5. For one recollection of this exchange, see Adomeit, “Collecting the Smallest Books in the World,” Box 9, f. 2, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.
6. In a letter to the Lilly Library’s William Cagle, Adomeit remarked that her collection was “at present . . . the second largest collection of miniature books in the world, so far as I know. The largest collection is that of Julian Edison of St. Louis. The largest collection in Europe is that of Irene Winterstein of Zürich, Switzerland. Our collections are similar, but having visited her last year I realized that mine is larger than hers and she is not adding to [hers] as much as I am to mine. We used to think that ours were about the same size.” Adomeit to Cagle, 13 August 1991, Box 5, “Lilly Library,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.
7. Adomeit studied bats (from 1987) and gave an endowment to Bat Conservation International. She was also a donor to the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, the Nature Conservancy, and the Heifer International Foundation, in addition to Cleveland-area service and civic organizations. See Evron S. Collins, Grande Dame (Cincinnati: Miniature Book Society, 2003), unpaginated.
10. Adomeit to her parents, May 1953, Box 8, “Adomeit’s correspondence with her parents,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.
14. Adomeit to her parents, 5 September 1953, Box 8, “Adomeit’s correspondence with her parents,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Adomeit’s writings sometimes reveal a sense of self-consciousness about the manner in which she encountered the larger world: “I wish I knew enough to dig for pre-historic Inca or Mayan culture—or even enough to do as others have done—marry an archeologist and be allowed to go along on those exciting
treasure hunts, and experience the thrills of finding relics of those lost civilizations. But I am neither wise enough, brave enough or rich enough to join that group I envy, in fact, I am what they all deplore in such certain terms, that most scorned type of traveler, I am a TOURIST.” Untitled travel writing, Box 10, f. 9, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


17. Preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Adomeit recalled this conversation as taking place between herself and “Mr. Goff”—likely Frederick R. Goff, then chief of rare books. Unfortunately, Adomeit did not provide a date for this exchange, describing it only as “some years ago.” The Library of Congress still follows the standard that miniature books are measured as ten centimeters (ninety-nine millimeters) or smaller, a rule that the Lilly Library currently uses to catalogue Adomeit’s miniature books.

18. This story appears, for example, in preparatory notes for lecture dated 16 November 1981 to College Club and 16 March 1980 to Shaker Hist. Soc., Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library; and preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. The “rule of thumb” anecdote is even mentioned in passing in one of Adomeit’s letters to William Cagle: “I was interested that the Library of Congress uses 10 centimeters as their definition of miniature books. Be sure to ask me to tell you what they used to use!” Adomeit to Cagle, 27 February 1991, Box 5, “Lilly Library,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


20. Concerning contemporary practice, the Miniature Book Society’s web site states that in the United States, most collectors consider a book to be miniature if it is no more than three inches in height, width, or thickness. Outside of the United States, many collectors consider books up to four inches in height to be miniature. Web site of the Miniature Book Society (www.mbs.org), accessed 20 September 2008.

21. Preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Concerning her folio collection (those volumes “over 2½ inches and up to 3 inches with a few between 3 and 4 [inches]”), Adomeit stated: “I will try to get a copy of every book ever printed that is not over 2½ inches (original page size), but I do not attempt to make the folio collection complete, I just acquire rarities or easily available items of interest or books with some particular charm.” Preparatory notes for lecture dated 16 November 1981 to College Club and 16 March 1980 to Shaker Hist. Soc., Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

22. Preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Unfortunately, this exhibition was marred by the disappearance of several of Adomeit’s books during installation. Newspaper clippings chronicling the event can be found in Box 14, f. 11, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


26. Adomeit to Cagle, 10 February 1991, Box 5, “Lilly Library,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. In another letter, Adomeit explained to Cagle that she had hoped to give her collection to Wellesley College, her alma mater, but had realized that the collection was too large and that the Wellesley library had little interest in rare books, including miniatures. Adomeit to Cagle, 7 August 1990, Box 5, “Lilly Library,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


29. The Lilly was to receive its selection of juvenile books after the American Antiquarian Society and Wellesley College had made their selections. Adomeit to Cagle, 30 September 1991, Box 5, “Lilly Library,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

30. In 2008, the Adomeit Collection contained 16,000 printed books 3½ inches or smaller and 172 miniature manuscripts. Telephone conversation between Sondra Taylor, former curator of manuscripts at the Lilly Library, and Christine Bentley, 24 March 2008.

31. In preparatory notes for lectures at garden clubs, Box 9, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library, Adomeit, describing her books related to gardens, stated, “I have many of them
here.” Adomeit also wrote appreciatively of the ability to bring miniature books with her when visiting other collectors. See Adomeit, “Collecting the Smallest Books in the World,” Box 9, f. 2, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


33. Ibid. For a discussion of European girdle books, see Heather Coffey’s chapter in this volume.

34. Adomeit recalled the following experience in connection with her purchase of Fruits of Philosophy: “I was visiting a friend whose husband is a doctor and that evening we had a party. Many of the guests were doctors so my little book was shown to them and the interesting thing was that they all agreed that the book was most unusual as the methods described were thought not to have been known until around 1890 and this book was printed in 1832.” Preparatory notes for lecture dated 16 November 1981 to College Club and 16 March 1980 to Shaker Hist. Soc., Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

35. The Miniature Book Collector was published by Adomeit’s friend Achille J. St. Onge, who also published miniature books.


38. Preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Adomeit’s telling of this story is also recalled in Caroline Y. Lindemann, Many Littles Make a Much (Cincinnati: Miniature Book Society, 2004), unpaginated. In this recollection, Adomeit makes the request directly to Glen Dawson.

39. The Miniature Book Society remains active; the group’s web site is www.mbs.org.

40. The plaque belongs to the archive of Adomeit’s papers housed in Indiana University’s Lilly Library, Box 12, f. 26, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


42. Collins, Grande Dame, unpaginated.

43. Adomeit, “Christmas Tree Ornaments,” Box 9, f. 1, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

44. Teagle had also printed the Miniature Book Collector and was a “former Clevelander.” Preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

45. Box 9, f. 4: “The Little Cookie Book Accounting,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. In an undated letter to Adomeit ca. January 1963, Teagle insisted that Adomeit accept some of the book’s profits: “You once said you weren’t going to accept any of the Cookie Book profits. This is NONSENSE, girl; you did the MBC as a labor of love and I am not going to capitalize on all the work you did on the Cookie Book. The press got paid for printing it, remember, you’ve got nothing so far but a sink-full of dirty cookie sheets, and this is the day you get yours!” Such correspondence is typical of the friendly relationship that Adomeit and Teagle seem to have enjoyed.


47. Adomeit’s 1980 Christmas letter is one of several documents that mentions these trips. Box 8, “Christmas letters from Adomeit,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

48. In fact, in her introduction Adomeit insists that her work is not a bibliography but a “descriptive checklist for collectors.” Adomeit, Introduction to Three Centuries of Thumb Bibles: A Checklist (New York: Garland, 1980), xxix. Reviewer Anne Bromer also noted the modesty of Adomeit preferring the term “checklist” to “bibliography.” See Anne C. Bromer in American Book Collector 2/3 (July/August 1981), Box 10, f. 5, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

49. Glenn Dawson, review in Bibliographical Society of America, undated, Box 10, f. 5, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


51. Anne C. Bromer in American Book Collector 2/3 (July/August 1981), Box 10, f. 5, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


54. In an undated manuscript, Adomeit noted that "Surprisingly, more copies exist today of this Thumb Bible than of any of the others in either the 18th or 19th centuries." Adomeit, "My Lilliputian Library," Box 9, f. 9, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

55. Correspondence between Adomeit and editors at Garland between 1980 and 1982 indicates that the publisher was interested in a potential project of Adomeit's, on "miniature sets & series." Adomeit's responses indicate that illness prevented her from working on the project as she would have liked. Box 3, "Garland Publishing," Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


57. Adomeit's 1985 Christmas letter records helping a friend clean up an estate and that "I also delivered many carloads of useful materials from this estate to my church for the many Cambodian families we have sponsored." Box 8, "Christmas letters from Adomeit," Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


60. Adomeit to her parents, 13 May [1953], Box 8, "Adomeit’s correspondence with her parents," Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

61. Adomeit to her parents, before 9 June [1953], Box 8, "Adomeit’s correspondence with her parents," Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


63. Figure taken from Adomeit's catalog of her miniature book collection. Box 10, f. 15, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. The list marked "Arabic and Turkish and Persian and Indian" comprises seventy-two entries, although many Indian examples appear to have been cataloged in another list.


66. Ibid.


68. Adomeit to Dawson's Book Shop, 29 November 1954, Box 2, "Dawson's Book Shop, 1939–1965," Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. At this time Adomeit estimated her collection to be between five hundred and six hundred books, of which approximately sixty were miniature Bibles....

69. Adomeit's first piece of advice to Dawson was basic, but critical: "One thing to know is that almost all of the tiny printed Korans are miniature facsimiles of large manuscript Korans and so the date and place, if given, refers to the original manuscript rather than to the tiny printed copy." Adomeit to Glen Dawson, 27 October 1985, Box 2, "Dawson's Book Shop, 1984–1988," Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


73. Said, Orientalism, 1, 118.


75. For an overview of Islamic art as displayed at the World's Fairs, see Vernoit, "Islamic Art and Architecture," 14–18. For exhibitions in the United States, see ibid., 16. Although Vernoit does not consider them as significant to Islamic art as those listed, international exhibitions were also held in Philadelphia in 1876 and Chicago in 1893.


78. Ibid., 21–22.

79. Ibid.

80. Moreover, Adomeit's cousin Frances Adomeit seems to have been living in (or visiting for an extended period) the Middle East during Adomeit's 1953 visit; a closer examination of her activities might reveal an influence on Ruth Adomeit's interest in Islamic cultures.

81. Vernoit, "Islamic Art and Architecture," 25. Regarding the development of the Metropolitan Museum's Islamic Collection, see Jenkins-Madina, "Collecting the 'Orient' at the Met."

82. Allen's collection at the Lilly Library includes a 9th-century Kufic Qur'an fragment (see Figure 1.6) and 18th-century Ottoman books printed in Constantinople. Information concerning Allen's collection at the Lilly Library was provided in a telephone conversation between Sondra Taylor, former curator of manuscripts at the Lilly Library, and Christine Bentley, 24 March 2008.

83. On Duke’s home and collection of
Islamic art, see Sharon Littlefield, Doris Duke’s Shangri La (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts; Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, 2002).

84. Jenkins-Madina, “Collecting the ‘Orient’ at the Met,” 76. Jenkina-Madina differentiates between the “adventurer-collector,” epitomized in her article by James F. Ballard, the “artist-collector” (e.g., silversmith Edward C. Moore), and the “great collectors of the time who relied upon the advice of one or more important dealers whom they trusted” (e.g., Henry O. and Louiseine Havemeyer).

86. Adomeit to Cagle, 7 August 1990, Box 5, “Lilly Library,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Correspondence between Adomeit and Ball dates as early as 1961, with a thank-you letter from Ball to Adomeit, who had hosted the former during a visit (see Ball to Adomeit, 27 June 1961, Box 1, f. “Ball, Elizabeth,” Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library).

87. Preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Adomeit, “My Lilliputian Library,” Box 9, f. 9, Adomeit mss II, Lilly Library, also accounts for Hungarian and Japanese collectors.


89. Preparatory notes for lectures at garden clubs, Box 9, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.
90. Adomeit, “My Lilliputian Library” lecture notes, Box 9, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


92. Adomeit, “Collecting the Smallest Books in the World,” Box 9, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Handwritten at the top of this document’s first page is the note that it is a copy of an article written for Antiquarian Booksman that appeared in January 1952.

95. Given Adomeit’s objection to the title “Ms.,” it is interesting to note that she seems to have found the Miniature Book Society’s description of her as their “Grande Dame” insulting as well. A letter to Adomeit from Caroline Y. McGeehe, then president of the Miniature Book Society’s board of directors (who seems to have been trying to gather information on past award recipients), raises this issue: “I don’t remember thinking the [sic] your inscription was insulting, but I do believe it was written by Msgr. Weber, as he was Chairman that year. Didn’t he call you ‘the grande dame of the miniature book world’ or something like that? I think that is a compliment!” McGeehe to Adomeit, 15 February 1990, Box 12, f. 24, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.


98. Ibid. 207.
101. The familiar, and sometimes casual, nature of much of Adomeit’s correspondence concerning miniature books reveals that many of her correspondents and contacts became personal friends; Adomeit called friendship “one of the delights of collecting.” Preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.
103. Adomeit, “Collecting the Smallest Books in the World,” Box 9, f. 2, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library. Handwritten at the top of this document’s first page is the note that it is a copy of an article written for Antiquarian Booksman that appeared in January 1952.
105. Ibid.
107. Hume, All the Best Rubbish, 290.
108. Ibid., 17.
112. The election of an unattainable goal


115. Susan M. Pearce, “The Urge to Collect,” in Interpreting Objects and Collections, ed. Pearce, 158. Pearce’s article first appeared in S. Pearce, ed., Museums, Objects and Collections (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 48–50. The tenet that “collections seldom begin purposefully” is elaborated in Belk, “Collectors and Collecting,” 318. Indeed, Belk cites research concerning collections beginning after a gift or a “seemingly serendipitous discovery” of a particular item and contends that “many collections are ‘discovered’ by their creators long after the materials have been gathered” (ibid.).

116. On this point, Danet and Katriel argue that small objects also “facilitate the creation and perception of a small, coherent world” and that “a miniature world is a more perfect world; the blemishes visible to the naked eye in life-size objects are no longer visible.” See Danet and Katriel, “No Two Alike,” 232.


118. Ibid., 2.

119. Ibid.

120. The relative affordability of miniature books is an aspect on which Adomeit elaborated in remembering the very beginnings of her collection, and her decision to purchase the group of miniature books suggested to her by Otto Ege: “This was in depression days when I was lucky to have a job and earned the great sum of $60 a month and needed it all, but 15 tiny books for $45 was most exciting. I decided that I must have the books even if it meant going without lunch for several months so I cabled for them.” When Ege presented Adomeit with a catalog listing for a collection of forty or fifty miniature books, Adomeit had to give financial considerations further thought, but she “finally decided that even if it cost me 2 months salary I had to have them.” Preparatory notes for lecture at Cleveland Public Library, 17 September 1989, Box 10, f. 6, Adomeit mss. II, Lilly Library.

121. Ibid.
Fig. 3.1. Alem of Sultan Selim I (r. 1512–1520), Ottoman Turkey, early 16th century, 45 cm, gilt silver or gilt copper, Topkapi Palace Museum, Env. no. 1/824, Tezcan and Tezcan, Türk Sançak Alemleri, fig. 34.