

# Introduction: A Renaissance for Alba Amicorum Research

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Today, social media have become an integral part of society. We use them to find a partner (Tinder), to keep in contact with friends and family (Facebook), to build and maintain a professional network (LinkedIn), to shape our image (Instagram), and to voice opinions and beliefs (Twitter). Politicians use social media to spread their political message to a broad spectrum of undecided voters, while companies use them to build a brand and increase their visibility.<sup>1</sup> In short, social media help to create and maintain connections that matter.

Network building and personal branding are not new. Humanity has always attempted to optimize these processes through the development and utilization of new social network mapping services.<sup>2</sup> In the early modern period, people used *alba amicorum* ('lists of friends'), to build and maintain cultural, social, and professional networks, as well as to remember people and past events. Around the middle of the sixteenth century, young men and women started to keep little books in which they had private and public relations put down short inscriptions, usually limited to their name, a dedication, and a maxim or quote by a famous author, but sometimes extending to images and poems. Although there are many differences between the social media of four hundred years ago and those of today, the principle of our social networks, and the need to both document and allocate meaning to them, does not appear to have radically changed.

While the *album amicorum* has been an interdisciplinary field of research par excellence for some time now, academic research into *alba amicorum* is still at a developing stage. In the various disciplines involved, the *album* is mainly used as a source for subject-specific questions, not as a knowledge object *sui generis*. Most researchers – with Werner Wilhelm Schnabel, June Schlueter, and Kees Thomassen as notable exceptions – have focused on individual specimens, limited collections, or particular groups of users. However, over the last ten years research into *alba amicorum* has undergone nothing less than a renaissance. Alba research is no longer focused on singular case studies and the 'best bits', but places

1 Highfield, *Social Media and Everyday Politics*.

2 Humphreys, *The Qualified Self*.

books of friendship within a larger body of expressions that map networks in which cultural phenomena manifest themselves.

Building on these recent developments, the articles in this special issue demonstrate that alba amicorum were not merely autograph alba. From their inception, they became a focal point that encouraged the formation and consolidation of ideas about friendship, community, and the self. They did this while serving multiple purposes: as memory boxes to recount experiences abroad, as maps of early modern knowledge networks, as organic collections, or even as promotional tools designed to help advance the careers of upcoming scholars. In the process of serving these aforementioned goals, the medium developed a unique visual and textual culture of its own.

### *Origin of the Album Amicorum*

To better understand the nature of the album amicorum, it is important to first revisit its origins. The keeping of an album amicorum, best translated as ‘a list of friends’, was a practice that in all likelihood started in the 1540s. Although it had its precursors, for instance in medieval noble armorials, the album amicorum first found a large audience outside the family sphere in the environment of the Protestant University of Wittenberg. There, famous Reformers such as Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon were often accosted by students who requested an autograph as a keepsake. These ‘celebrities’ would then write their entries in the margins of a book the student already owned, for instance a bible or an important scholarly text.<sup>3</sup> Quickly, the practice of asking people for an inscription extended to other academic lecturers, as well as fellow students. In the first instances of this behaviour, inscriptions tended towards brevity, including little more than a name, a date, and perhaps a classical or biblical maxim in Latin or Greek. Next to learned quotes and formal dedications, alba also embraced the insertion of painted coats of arms as contributions. An album amicorum became a booklet that documented a student’s relationships during his formative years, including both his professional and social network: his professors, tutors, fellow students, compatriots, people he met on his travels, relatives, and friends.<sup>4</sup>

By the second half of the 1550s, the custom of keeping an album amicorum had spread throughout most of the Holy Roman Empire. The alba almost always started when its owner attended university, and while many were abandoned soon after studies had finished, some students would continue to add to them over their entire lives: alba became a common possession for scholars, lawmakers, and other educated professionals. As the reach of the alba expanded, so they reached across denominational boundaries.<sup>5</sup> The popularity of the album amicorum in the earliest period is readily apparent from the online database Repertorium Alborum Amicorum (RAA), which contains no fewer than 572 alba

3 Schnabel, *Das Stammbuch*, 244-275; Thomassen (ed.), *Alba amicorum*, 10; Klose, *Stammbücher*, 11; Rosenheim, ‘The Album Amicorum’, 253.

4 Schnabel, *Das Stammbuch*, 249-250.

5 See for example Gömöri, ‘Some Hungarian alba’; Davidsson, ‘Einige Stammbücher’.

that date from before 1573. Their number grew exponentially after that point, reaching 2293 alba by 1600.<sup>6</sup>

### *Books of Friendship in the Low Countries*

The distribution of the album amicorum seems to have been limited to mainly northern and central European countries, such as the Holy Roman Empire, the Low Countries, Hungary, and Scandinavia. Although alba were frequently presented to residents of France and Italy during the *peregrinatio academica* of students from northern Europe, their use never really took hold in southern Europe.<sup>7</sup> In the Low Countries, the first alba amicorum emerge from the late 1550s onwards, brought back by students who had started to collect signatures during their travels in Germany and France. The influence of Wittenberg can be seen clearly in the album amicorum of the Deventer nobleman Stephanus van Rhemen, which dates from 1556 and, together with the album by Johan van Lynden, is the oldest known Dutch male album.<sup>8</sup> The first contribution in Van Rhemen's album was made by Johannes Bugenhagen, a confidant of Martin Luther. Two pages later we find an inscription by Philip Melanchthon (fig. 1).<sup>9</sup>

The first alba owned by women also emerge around this time. While some women may have picked up the habit from itinerant student brothers, they will also have been inspired by each other to start an album.<sup>10</sup> Not only were owners of those albas which have been preserved often in contact with one another, the alba of some noble women can also be dated as early as the oldest known male alba. For example, the oldest inscriptions from the album amicorum by Kathrynna von Bronkhorst, known by specialists as the *Darfelder Liederhandschrift* (Darfelder song manuscript), dates from 1546, some ten years before Stephanus van Rhemen began his album.<sup>11</sup> While men's alba were primarily a means of creating new ties during their *peregrinatio academica*, their journey through education, women's alba seem to have functioned more as a confirmation of pre-existing relationships.<sup>12</sup> This notwithstanding, alba amicorum were not as popular with women as they were with men – where thousands of male alba have survived, there are only a few dozen extant examples of those kept by women. The custom for some women to keep an album seems to have been limited to the Low Countries. Women's alba amicorum were also predominantly a noble phenomenon, a passing fashion that was hardly adopted in other social circles.

6 The RAA database is available via <https://raa.gf-franken.de/de/startseite.html> (Accessed on 18 December 2021).

7 Klose, *Stammbücher*, 53.

8 Arnhem, Gelders Archief, Archief Van Rhemen, Ms. 134, Album amicorum of Stephanus van Rhemen.

9 Thomassen (ed.), *Alba amicorum*, 45; Heesakkers, 'Das Album amicorum als Reisebegleiter', 138-140.

10 Reinders, *De mug en de kaars*, 22-23.

11 Darfeld, Droste-Vischering archives, Ms. 1, Darfelder Liederhandschrift of Kathrynna von Bronkhorst; Brednich, *Die Darfelder Liederhandschrift*.

12 Delen, 'Vrouwenalba', 129-130; Reinders, *De mug en de kaars*, 435; Oosterman, 'Die ik mijn hart wil geven', 194-202.

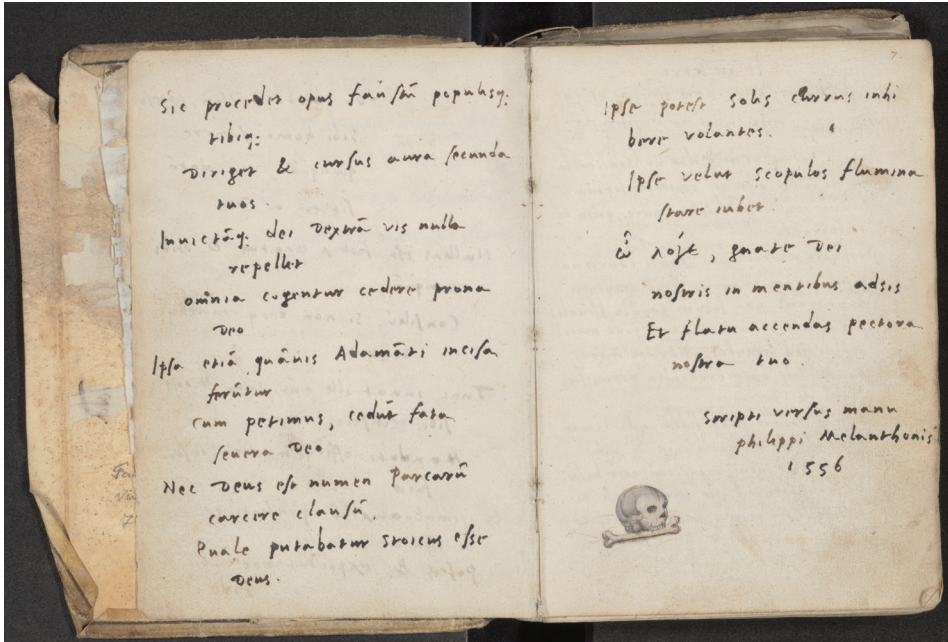


Fig. 1 Contribution of Philips Melanchthon in the album amicorum of Stephanus van Rhemen, 1556, Arnhem, Gelders Archief, Archief Van Rhemen, Ms. 134, fols. 6v-7r.

During the 1560s, the practice of keeping an album amicorum became increasingly common in the Low Countries, especially among students. The foundation of Leiden University in 1575 played an important part in their popularity. The massive influx of students in Leiden during the last decades of the sixteenth century was accompanied by a spectacular increase in the number of Dutch alba in the period between 1590 and 1620. The esteem of the alba faded over the following forty years, with the English historian Thomas Fuller even calling it a 'dull Dutch fashion' in 1642.<sup>13</sup> By 1700, it was a rare individual who kept an album. In the 1750s, however, the Dutch Republic saw the practice blossom once more, and its popularity continued well into the modern age.<sup>14</sup>

In the Netherlands, the National Library in The Hague (KB) has been compiling a database of pre-1800 Dutch alba amicorum since the 1980s. A preliminary list published in 1986 contained 1080 alba. Today, the database has 1939 entries for individual alba.<sup>15</sup> Most of these alba were compiled in one of two periods, namely the early seventeenth century or in the second half of the eighteenth century. The list grows longer every year, as new alba keep being added, mostly thanks to the digitization of archives in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

<sup>13</sup> Heesakkers and Thomassen, 'Het album amicorum in de Nederlanden', 14-15; Fuller, *The Holy State*, 151.

<sup>14</sup> Heesakkers and Thomassen, 'Het album amicorum in de Nederlanden', 19-20.

<sup>15</sup> 'Alba Amicorum in Nederland', <https://www.kb.nl/zoeken/jsru/alba-amicorum-nederland> (Accessed on 18 December 2021).

### *What is an Album Amicorum?*

One of the thorniest issues in working with *alba amicorum* is how to define them. This special issue proposes that we need to move away from generic classifications and consider the album as a hybrid genre – that is, if we can even consider the album to be a genre in any sense. As Werner Wilhelm Schnabel has demonstrated in *Das Stammbuch*, the words and concepts used to name and describe the album are heavily debated. Various terms have been used to describe this phenomenon since the early modern period: *album amicorum*, *liber amicorum*, *Stammbuch*, *Gesellenbuch*, *Philothek*, and numerous rarer words, translations, and paraphrases that emerged clearly after the custom was established.<sup>16</sup> However, as a rule they do not mention clear definitions that are relevant to the determination of the field.<sup>17</sup>

As Marika Keblusek points out in the opening article of this issue: ‘The basic form and characteristics of the early modern album amicorum have been agreed upon by social, cultural, visual and literary historians – that is, a manuscript or printed book of on average a hundred pages, in which inscriptions (name, date, place), mottoes, and possibly visual additions were gathered as mementoes of social and geographical acquaintances and connections’. Schnabel, however, turns to literary genres to find a trait shared by all the contents of an album, defining the album as anthology, as a collection of adagia, as memorial literature, or even as a general ‘documentation form’ – only to conclude that none of these terms sufficiently captures the essence of the medium.<sup>18</sup> Instead, Schnabel proposes that we should think of the album amicorum as a *Sammelform*, a collection format, of a variety of (mainly) texts.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the album amicorum was not a consciously created manuscript category with a clear set of rules. It was a combination of different older traditions, which were repurposed in a new way of combining collecting and manuscript culture.<sup>20</sup> Recent literature rightly emphasizes that, in essence, an album amicorum was designed to record memories of encounters.<sup>21</sup> One could say that an album amicorum is a manuscript miscellany even before it contains a single inscription. From its conception, the album is intended as a memorial object. It is embedded in the owner’s goal to collect contributions and to record memories of encounters for ‘now’ and for later. The collection is handed to others and can change tone and function with every entry. It is not only the researcher who tends to look for coherence between the texts brought together in a binding, the owners and the inscribers who leafed through them probably did as well. With each new contribution, new connections could be created, and old ones could be modified or even broken. Moreover, inscribers could give their own meaning to the collection as a whole, or to a collection of inscriptions on a single page.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Lilienthal was one of the first scholars to study *alba amicorum* (or *Philotheken*) in their own right, in his post-doctoral dissertation (*Habilitationsdisputation*) from 1711: Lilienthal, *Schediasma Critico-Literarium*.

<sup>17</sup> Schnabel, *Das Stammbuch*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> See the article by Marika Keblusek in this issue, 15; Schnabel, *Das Stammbuch*, 30–34.

<sup>19</sup> Schnabel, *Das Stammbuch*, 202.

<sup>20</sup> Schnabel, *Das Stammbuch*, 225.

<sup>21</sup> Bass, *Insect Artifice*, 82–83; Georgievska-Shine, ‘Kaleidoscope of the Self’, 182–183.

As such, it remains doubtful whether we should even perceive the album amicorum as a genre (*Gattung*) in itself.<sup>22</sup> The basic premise of this special issue is that the album amicorum is a collective form for specifically constructed texts that can be determined according to situation and function. The album amicorum is by definition a collaborative effort, a work in progress, instead of being created and established by the album owner well in advance.<sup>23</sup> As a collaborative endeavour, however, it differs from other works such as, for example, a theatre performance, an exhibition, or a jointly produced collection of articles. The different parties (owner and subscribers) all have their own intentions and – except maybe for the owner – are not necessarily interested in a coherent end result. Conceptually, however, the album as a tabula rasa to be filled, was quite sharply defined. Most owners and inscribers would adhere to some basic rules: the majority of alba have inscriptions that consist of a name, a date, a learned quote, and a formal dedication of friendship. Yet within this framework, there was a great deal of freedom to distinguish oneself from other inscribers.

In this special issue we use ‘album amicorum’, the term most commonly used in historiography and archives, when we speak of these sources. Instead of presenting one overarching definition, we show the definition and delineation challenges faced by researchers from different fields working with alba. The various articles gathered here demonstrate the close links (and sometimes overlaps) that exist with genres such as emblem books, books with heraldic devices, travel logs, song books, and costume books.

### *New Directions*

Over the past decade, scholars have tried to overcome the many obstacles encountered when studying alba amicorum. For a long time, the study of these sources was mostly confined to disciplines such as genealogy, heraldry, nobility studies, and antiquarianism, and they hardly registered on established university courses. This has hindered the formation of a general consensus regarding the phenomenon. The apparent incompleteness of the research process may also have a deterrent effect. The inventorying of alba, in particular the contributions they contain or the context in which they were produced, is still very rudimentary, and the formulation of more or less urgent research wishes is therefore one of the most popular closing remarks in relevant articles.<sup>24</sup>

This special issue has been created with the intention of showing the great research potential for multiple disciplines that lies within these alba. While each of the articles adopts a different perspective on alba amicorum from the Low Countries, all of the authors consider the source in relation to their own field – history, literary studies, book history, and digital humanities – while embracing the fact that, to make sense of their material, they must look beyond the boundaries of their own discipline. This point cannot be made strongly enough: to understand alba amicorum takes an interdisciplinary approach.

<sup>22</sup> See the article by Marika Keblusek in this issue, 15; Schnabel, *Das Stammbuch*, 25-35, esp. 24-26.

<sup>23</sup> Harris, ‘The Practice of Community’, 314.

<sup>24</sup> See also the desiderata defined by Clara Strijbosch in her article ‘The Many Shades of Love’.

Research into Dutch *alba amicorum* has also been limited because of four obstacles: debates concerning genre definition, an emphasis on famous *alba*, a lack of research into the images contained in *alba*, and a predominant national focus. First of all, scholars have concentrated disproportionately on issues of definition, in particular how to define an *album amicorum*, and the varieties within this supposed genre, such as students' *alba*, women's *alba*, and humanist *alba*.<sup>25</sup> Only recently have researchers decided that 'the' *album amicorum* as a genre does not exist.<sup>26</sup> *Alba* did not function in isolation but were part of a broad early modern culture of collecting and sharing 'cultural snippets'. People collected texts and images not only in *alba*, but also in commonplace books, songbooks, scrapbooks, artist journals, college notes, heraldic books, and in blends of these artefacts.<sup>27</sup> Keeping an *album amicorum* was one of many early modern expressions of the desire to collect cultural artifacts within a binding. Quotes, images, sayings, notes, and songs migrated between all these media, within a broad culture of collecting, of cutting, pasting, and adjusting. Nelleke Moser has suggested that these forms of text collecting can be studied as an appropriative practice – shaping both the meaning and the material form of texts – as well as a sociable practice – sharing the texts in the collection with other readers, using collections as a form of social capital and as a means for self-fashioning.<sup>28</sup>

As Marika Keblusek argues in her article, *alba* should be studied within these networks of texts, images, and people of which they were a part. Mixed forms are crucial and characteristic of the historical reality of the early modern period. By focussing on a particularly underexamined aspect of *alba amicorum*, namely their materiality, Keblusek argues that the investigation of material aspects, including an album's bibliographical make-up (paper, collation, and binding) and the systematic and chronological ordering of visual and textual elements, can tell us a great deal about the various ways an album might have functioned in its cultural context and how *alba* relate to other forms of manuscript and print collections.

A second obstacle in *alba* research is a tendency among scholars towards cherry-picking their subjects from on a relatively small group of (usually famous) *alba*: the *alba* owned by well-known men (Janus Dousa or Abraham Ortelius), *alba* containing the contributions of eminent scholars or artists (Rembrandt van Rijn in the *album amicorum* of Jacob Heyblocq, or Galileo Galilei in the album of Ernst Brinck), and *alba* that are atypical (those which are very large or contain a high number of illustrations).<sup>29</sup> In their focus on fame, researchers in some ways emulated the early modern people they studied – they became autograph hunters. *Alba* were not just kept by illustrious men, however, and those *alba* deemed 'uninteresting' often turn out to contain a wealth of information.

In recent years, scholars have attempted to shift this focus. Bronwen Wilson for instance has posited that *alba* were public-making media, inviting encounters with friends and

25 Schnabel, *Das Stammbuch*, 25-35.

26 Rosenthal, 'Fashions of Friendship', 620; Reinders, *De mug en de kaars*, 16-18.

27 Reinders, *De mug en de kaars*, 445-447.

28 Moser, 'Collecting Quotes, Connecting People', 620-624.

29 See for instance Heesakkers, *Een netwerk aan de basis van de Leidse Universiteit*; Thomassen and Gruys, *The album amicorum of Jacob Heyblocq*.



strangers. She considers the album amicorum as a space ‘in which a public is assembled and imagined’, and which therefore ‘fostered new forms of association’.<sup>30</sup> Along the same lines, Sophie Reinders has shown the wealth of information that can be found in the hitherto often neglected women’s alba. She has argued that by carefully contextualizing both the texts, the people who wrote them, and their mutual relationships, we gain important insight into the meaning and function of the alba for the owners and the social configurations in which they lived – a function that differed not only between alba, but also for each individual album over time.<sup>31</sup>

Emblematic of this new approach are the articles by Clara Strijbosch and Ad Leerintveld and Jeroen Vandommele. Both essays do not focus on individual alba, but instead explore the rich textual layers that surround the different types of contributions made to alba amicorum, focusing on worldly songs and Dutch poetry, respectively. Strijbosch studies the spread of songs across various media in the sixteenth century, such as alba and song books, both in print and manuscript. She emphasizes that making a distinction between an album amicorum and a handwritten songbook can be difficult. Furthermore, she argues that songs in alba of the sixteenth century fill the gap in existing theories about the development of tune indication and the actual use of worldly song at the dawn of the prodigious song culture of the Dutch Golden Age. Leerintveld and Vandommele study the advent of Dutch sonnets in alba amicorum of the Low Countries, in order to interpret the development, dissemination, and reception of this specific literary genre in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Although it is not always easy to understand why certain contributions were inserted in an album, they contend that one can come closer to the meaning of alba for their owners – and for the imagined community they were part of – by looking at certain genres and texts.

A third limitation in alba research has been the overwhelming focus on textual contributions – names, places, dates, and mottoes – at the expense of the roles and networks of images. Coats of arms, costume drawings, portraits, emblems, and watercolour paintings of everyday life litter the pages of many alba. Images were used as identity markers, as memories of cities and customs, and as carriers of hidden meaning. Often the same image will occur in different alba, but created by different inscribers. It is only recently that art historians have turned to alba to investigate this development of a shared visual vocabulary, and to view alba as vehicles for image cultivation and dissemination.<sup>32</sup> For instance, Tine Meganck and Marisa Bass consider alba amicorum to be central to the intellectual and artistic exchange that occurred within the sixteenth-century Antwerp network of artists, merchants, and humanists that flourished around Abraham Ortelius and Joris Hoefnagel.<sup>33</sup> For the seventeenth century, the individual drawings in the album of Jacob Heyblocq were recently the topic of an insightful article by Judith Noorman. She

30 Wilson, ‘Social Networking’, 207.

31 Reinders, *De mug en de kaars*, 433-434.

32 Georgievska-Shine, ‘Kaleidoscope of the Self’, 187; Wilson, ‘Social networking’, 211-214; Rosenthal, ‘Fashions of Friendship’, 619-641.

33 Meganck, *Erudite Eyes*; Bass, *Insect Artifice*.

concludes that alba drawings are a neglected but extremely rich object of study, specifically as a source for the study of amateur draughtsmanship.<sup>34</sup>

A fourth limitation of previous album research is its national focus. The history of this important genre has often been written from a narrow national perspective, with little research that really looks beyond national and even disciplinary borders. While the online database Repertorium Alborum Amicorum (RAA) – which contains the largest worldwide catalogue of alba, including those held in the KB, other research libraries, and private collections – is a first step in the right direction, much work remains to be done. As several authors in this issue demonstrate, album owners were part of international networks, travelled extensively, and used their album and the inscriptions it contained to communicate across borders. The study of these alba, then, must be similarly transnational.

Drawing on methods from the field of digital humanities, Manuel Llano's article shows the enormous potential of studying alba from this perspective. Through digital social network analysis, he analyses the practice of keeping an academic album amicorum as carried out in the Dutch Republic in comparison to the Holy Roman Empire, and reflects on whether self-fashioning and a Machiavellian career advancement were part of the album culture in early modern Dutch academia. The essay by Robyn Radway also overcomes the national focus of alba research, by connecting the culture of alba amicorum in the Low Countries to the international political and cultural climate of sixteenth-century Constantinople. Through the study of three alba from the Habsburg Netherlands, her article reveals the range of collecting practices of men from the Southern Netherlands employed by the Habsburg emperors. Radway considers alba amicorum as multifaceted objects that can only be truly understood when connected to other sources. As such, her research explores what it meant to be a part of an integrated imperial mission that represented Habsburg territory abroad.

### *Mirror of the Self*

One question that has never been conclusively answered is why the custom of keeping an album resonated on such a scale with young people (mostly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four), why at this specific time, and why in some parts of Europe in particular. Researchers all agree that the *peregrinatio* was the catalyst for the custom of keeping an album.<sup>35</sup> Preoccupied with ensuring that young men received a well-balanced and proper education, humanist scholars encouraged students to travel for a limited time and gather experience – study with eminent scholars at different universities, learn languages, enjoy art, make valuable connections, and experiment with love – before settling down permanently and thenceforth fulfilling a socially accepted role.<sup>36</sup> The album was a tool through which they might document their travels and studies abroad, as well as their encounters

<sup>34</sup> Noorman, “Schatten van de konst”, 14–15.

<sup>35</sup> Heesakkers, ‘Das Album amicorum als Reisbegleiter’, 137, 155; Georgievska-Shine, ‘Kaleidoscope of the Self’, 182; Wilson, ‘Social Networking’, 205; Rosenthal, ‘Fashions of Friendship’, 625.

<sup>36</sup> Enenkel and De Jong, ‘Artes Apodemicae’, 2–4.

along the way. On a higher level, the album highlighted the formation of personal identity – the creation of a self as it were. This was not only the case for alba kept by students during their time abroad, but for all variants and modulations of the album amicorum.

Stephen Greenblatt introduced the term ‘self-fashioning’ to describe the sixteenth century’s ‘self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulatable artful process’.<sup>37</sup> The album amicorum could be considered as an expression of that unease, an attempt to visualise the construction of one’s public persona through the mediation of personal relationships in tangible form. It could be argued that the album amicorum was the medium this era of self-fashioning had been waiting for, and that at the same time it was shaped by the great attention paid to the individual in society at this point. Moreover, the sixteenth century was the period in which the cultural style of friendship was altered. Humanist scholars, with their interest in Roman and Greek antiquity, accentuated the importance of friendship in ancient times. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle deemed a friend to be a second self, while Cicero described friendship in his *Laelius, de amicitia* as a fundamental part of one’s nature, a mirror image of oneself. Seneca saw friendship as an educational programme, that leads both friends to the virtuous path of self-fulfilment. Through the observations of a friend, one could reflect on one’s own image, gain introspection, and improve oneself.<sup>38</sup> Aneta Georgievska-Shine therefore considers the album amicorum to be an attempt to create ‘a composite mirror’. The inscriptions made by friends were ‘intended to reflect both each of them as individuals and a larger humanist ideal of friendship as a community of equals whose boundaries transcend those of language, ideology, space and even time’.<sup>39</sup> She considered the album to be ‘a kaleidoscope of the self’ and a vehicle of ‘the spiritual bond of two like-minded individuals’.<sup>40</sup> Although alba amicorum were not exclusively meant for intimate friends, and every album owner had a different, ‘personal’ way of selecting who might contribute to their album, there seems to have been an understanding between album owners and contributors that within the material pages of the album, they formed a select (imagined) community of likeminded individuals – whether they were teachers, fellow students, noble friends, colleagues, casual acquaintances, or other contacts.<sup>41</sup>

June Schlueter explicitly tackles the question of the album as a mirror of the self. In her contribution, which examines the two alba owned by Aernout van Buchell, a Dutchman from Utrecht with a long scholarly career, she asks two crucial questions: how much insight does an album amicorum offer into the owner’s personal life? And how much does it reveal about the owner’s perception of his own character and ambitions?

Almost two decades have passed since Werner Wilhelm Schnabel published his magnum opus *Das Stammbuch* in 2003. His study was the first attempt to integrate the various disciplinary approaches to alba amicorum into a systematic overall concept. In the afterword

37 Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning*, 2.

38 Classen, ‘Introduction’, 6-11; Burke, ‘Humanism and Friendship’, 265; Rosenthal, ‘Fashions of Friendship’, 625; Reinders, *De mug en de kaars*, 269-270.

39 Georgievska-Shine, ‘Kaleidoscope of the Self’, 184-185.

40 Georgievska-Shine, ‘Kaleidoscope of the Self’, 185.

41 Bass, ‘Monuments of Friendship’ 83; Keller, ‘Painted Friends’, 679-681.

to this special issue, Schnabel reflects on recent developments in the field of alba research. While he pays particular attention to the methods, questions, and opportunities presented in the essays gathered in this volume, he also considers the field as a whole. What was the state of the field in 2003, and where are we now? Which questions do we want answering in the future, and what infrastructure, new or otherwise, will enable us to do so? Schnabel rightly points out that writing an overarching history of the album amicorum is only feasible if and when heritage institutions – such as libraries and archives – properly catalogue and digitise their alba collections. Their efforts should be combined by more research into individual alba amicorum and their European connectedness. The contributing authors of this special issue provide a taste of the kind of work that can be expected in the future.

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