

FOCUS

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Theatrum Orbis Terrarum
Abraham Ortelius
1570

Boston Public Library
(Boston, MA)

◀ Left: Map of the World, as 16th century cartographers believed it was arranged / Below: Title page, featuring goddesses who represent each of the continents



As European mapmakers worked to stay current with explorers' discoveries in the second half of the 16th century, the map business relocated its center from Italy to Antwerp, a wealthy trading center. At around the same time, Antwerp resident Abraham Ortelius settled into a career as a professional illuminator and map illustrator. One of Ortelius's clients, a merchant who had grown frustrated with having to constantly roll and unroll his many sheets of maps, asked Ortelius to compile them into a single bound volume. Ortelius published a version of his creation—considered the first geographical atlas—in 1570.

Although Italian mapmakers would assemble collections of maps according to an individual customer's order, they had never published a complete volume. Ortelius's atlas, called *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* ("Theater of the World"), differed from its Italian predecessors in that Ortelius gathered together a huge number of existing maps from other geographers, combining some (for example, his world map was a synthesis of many versions). He then reduced the maps to a uniform size, sorted them into a logical order, and bound them in a single volume that included text and a list of sources. Altogether, the *Theatrum* was the most comprehensive summary of cartography and the best depiction of the world available at the time.

The *Theatrum's* commercial success came as somewhat of a surprise to Ortelius, but stemmed from the public's growing appreciation for recently discovered lands and information and from improvements in printing methods, which made publication easier. Its popularity inspired Ortelius to make frequent revisions based on new geographical findings. Publication of the *Theatrum* did not end until 1612, well after Ortelius's death in 1598.

The Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts recently treated a *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* volume from the Boston Public Library's Norman B. Leventhal Map Center. Its spine was damaged, with its leather peeling and its front cover detached. The pages were heavily soiled, discolored, and brittle in places, with losses to many of the corners. Conservation Assistant Richard Homer could not wash the plates, as some of the media was water soluble, but he surface cleaned them before repairing tears and bridging losses with toned mulberry paper and wheat starch paste. He then repaired the cover, consolidating the leather with micro crystalline wax. The volume will be returned in a custom-made clamshell box to Boston Public Library, which plans to digitize the plates.



Right, middle: Detached cover, before treatment / Bottom: After treatment ▶

