

Numbering more than 20,000 items, this prestigious collection is the result of dedicated effort on the part of Colonel



Richard Gimbel. Unrivaled in the world, it documents the history of mankind's dreams of flight from the earliest times to the advent of powered flight early in the twentieth century. Colonel Gimbel willed his collection to the United States Air Force Academy.

Born in 1898, Richard Gimbel was the son of one of the founders of the Gimbels department store chain. After leaving Gimbels in 1935, Richard turned his attention to flying. He learned to fly, bought an airplane and flew extensively around the country.

In World War II, Colonel Gimbel served in the 8th Air Force. While based in England, he made the initial acquisitions for the collection from items found in a bomb-damaged London bookstore.

In 1951 Colonel Gimbel was assigned to Yale University as Professor of Air Science. He retired from the Air Force in 1953. He then served as Curator of Aeronautical Literature at Yale University until his death in 1970.

The Gimbel collection is extraordinarily diverse. Five-thousand-year-old cylinder seals carved from semi-precious stones depict mankind's earliest dreams of flight. Rare coins and medals commemorate the great aviators and their achievements. Sheet music records aerial melodies. More than 5,000 books address every aspect of aviation, including early experiments with wings, balloon ascents, the first parachutes, rocketry, and detailed accounts of historic flights.

The collection is greatly enriched by thousands of prints, portraits, engravings, etchings, woodcuts, lithographs, drawings in black and white and in color, cartoons, posters, playbills, postcards, and photographs. Together they illustrate a wide variety of subjects associated with flight and constitute a unique pictorial history of aeronautics.

One of the many exciting and fascinating topics extensively covered in the Gimbel collection is the idea of space travel. Speculations on this theme abound in

many of the collection's books including Roger Bacon's treatise on wonders of the world, Cyrano de Bergerac's *Voyage*, Robert Poltack's *Peter Wilkins*, and several works by Jules Verne.

### Some collection highlights:

#### Daedalus and Icarus, 1493

Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of the mythological flight of Daedalus and Icarus is the first ever in a printed book, Friedrich Riedrer's *Spiegel*. Dürer draws an ironic parallel between Icarus' fall through a medium for which he was not naturally suited and a seabird's graceful dive.



#### Cylinder Seals, 2700 B.C.E.

In ancient times, seals served much as their modern counterparts and signatures do today. Colonel Gimbel selected seals for the collection that illustrate mankind's interest in flight.



#### Rarest Aeronautical Print Known

This print depicts the first public launch of a balloon by Joseph and Étienne Montgolfier in June 1783. No other eighteenth-century representation exists of this event.



### Ascent Viewed by George Washington

A handbill reports Jean-Pierre Blanchard's hydrogen balloon ascent in Philadelphia in January 1793. This event was witnessed by George Washington. After several ascensions in his native France, Blanchard decided to try his luck in America. He remained in America five years, but his ascents were not financially successful.



### Flight in Honor of Lafayette, 1825

This document announces a flight from Castle Garden, New York City, by Eugene Robertson in honor of the Marquise de Lafayette. Robertson is credited with planting "the seed of an American aerostatic tradition."

### Letters Sent by Balloon, 1870-71

Although twice besieged during the Franco-Prussian War, Parisians communicated with those outside the city by dispatching two million letters and journals in more than sixty manned balloons. This first-ever regular airmail service lasted four months.

### H.G. Wells Manuscript

One of the most visionary of science fiction writers, Wells drafted *The Argonauts of the Air* circa 1895. In it, Wells narrates the brave failure of the designer of a flying machine.

### Montgolfier and Wright Medals

These medals honor Joseph and Étienne Montgolfier and Wilbur and Orville Wright. In June 1783, the Montgolfier brothers were the first to give a public demonstration of a hot air balloon ascent. In December 1903, the Wright brothers were the first to make a



powered flight in a heavier-than-air machine.

Although Colonel Gimbel had intended the historic first flight of the Wright brothers to be the original terminal point of his aeronautical collection, he later expanded the holdings to include the post-1903 period. Among the additions are items on the accomplishments of Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart, materials for children on flight, and aeronautical fiction dealing primarily with the World War I era.

The Gimbel collection continues to grow through the acquisition of new items. These additions help to ensure that the collection will continue to be the premier accumulation of materials related to the history of pre-machine-powered flight, and an invaluable resource for the study and appreciation of mankind's desire to conquer the heavens.

Bibliographic information on the thousands of books in the Gimbel collection has been incorporated in the McDermott Library's on-line catalog which is accessible through The Friends' website. A beautifully illustrated overview of the collection, *The Genesis of Flight*, was published by The Friends in 1999.

## THE AERONAUTICAL HISTORY COLLECTION OF COLONEL RICHARD GIMBEL

The Clark Special Collections Branch  
McDermott Library  
United States Air Force Academy



Published by:  
The Friends of the Air Force Academy Library  
P.O. Box 188  
USAF A, CO 80840-0188  
[www.friends.usafalibrary.com](http://www.friends.usafalibrary.com)