

66 FABLES CHOISIES

FABLE XL.

LE LION ET LE RAT.

Il faut, avant qu'on peut, obliger son le monde.
On a souvent besoin d'un plus petit que soi.
De votre vœux dans l'Inde, dit-on, lui,
Tant le chât et prison abonde.

Entre les pannes d'un Lion,
Un Rat feroce de nez, alla à l'étréme.
Le roi des animaux, en cette occasion,
Mieux se qu'il étoit, à lui donna le vœu.
Ce bestiot ne fut pas petit.
Quelques années il jamais eut.
Qu'un Lion d'un Rat eût affaire!
Cependant il avoit qu'on feroit des fables.
Ce Lion fut pris dans des vœux,
Dont les ragotiers ne se passent d'être.
Son Rat accourut, & fit tant par ses vœux,
Qu'une seule sergent emporta tout l'ouvrage.

Patience à l'empire de temps
Faut plus que force si que rage.



[FAB. XXXVI.]



LE LION ET LE RAT FABLE XL.

Jean de La Fontaine, *Fables choisies*, *mises en vers*

Rare Books Collection RARESEF 841.4 L13F (1755-59)

Acquired 2003

For a century and a half the Library has been acquiring – by gift and by purchase – outstanding examples of illustrated books published in France at various periods. Given the role played by the Paris trade since the time of Louis XIV in catering for the international luxury market, it is to be expected that a library aspiring to be among other things a museum of the book should build up a representative collection of works printed and illustrated in the French capital. In 2003 the State Library Foundation made it possible to fill one of the most notable gaps by funding the purchase of a set of the four folio volumes of La Fontaine's *Fables* spectacularly decorated with 275 full-page plates engraved after drawings by Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755).

The original Oudry creations, which passed through many hands before being dispersed in the late 20th century, were the basis for a reworking by Charles-Nicolas Cochin (1715–90), from which the engravings themselves were done by a large team. The whole enterprise was complex and enormously expensive, depending in the end for its completion on a substantial gift from Louis XV. The evidence is widely scattered: archival documents put together by the ostensible promoter, Montenuault; prospectuses that show clearly that three paper sizes and qualities were to be used; fragmentary records of sales; and the sets themselves with their provenances and often sumptuous bindings. Although the Melbourne volumes are bound in contemporary mottled calf rather than in red morocco, they are a good example of the medium paper size and thus a fair representation of what has been justifiably called 'one of the landmarks in French decorative bookmaking'¹ and 'one of the most ambitious and successful of all illustrated books'.²

Ultimately, the clues to the fate of the whole undertaking will have to be drawn from a census of all of the surviving sets held in many libraries across the world. Melbourne will be part of this effort, not only because of the Library Foundation's judicious acquisition, but also because a unique prospectus for a reissue is already promised as a gift in the not-too-distant future.³