

## DIBNER HALL *of the* HISTORY OF SCIENCE



BEAUTIFUL  
SCIENCE  
IDEAS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

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### BERN DIBNER, 1897–1988

The Dibner Hall of the History of Science is named after Bern Dibner, a scientist in his own right who designed and patented the first solderless electrical connector—a new way to join cable and wire—and founded the Burndy Engineering Co. in 1924. Dibner established the Burndy Library in 1941 to house his growing collection of rare books and manuscripts. (The name Burndy is a portmanteau, a word derived from blending two or more words or sounds—in this case, “Bern” plus the first initial of his last name.) By the time his family donated the collection to The Huntington in 2006, it had grown to 67,000 volumes.



As a young man, Dibner was fascinated by Leonardo da Vinci and enrolled at the University of Zurich in 1936 to study the history of science. It was during this period that he began his life-long avocation in the history of science and technology as a book collector, patron, and prolific author. Dibner wrote more than 100 books and articles on subjects as varied as the laying of the first transatlantic telegraph cable, 18th-century electrical experiments, Renaissance engineering, as well as da Vinci. Dibner’s best known work is *The Heralds of Science* (1955, updated in 1980), a selection of what Dibner considered to be the 200 most important books in the history of science. *The Heralds* has become a widely used reference tool among bibliographers, booksellers, and scholars.

In honor of the Bicentennial of the United States, Dibner presented the Smithsonian Institution with a gift of rare books that forms the core of the Dibner Library of the History of Science and Technology, located at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

Shortly before his death in 1988, Bern Dibner expressed his desire that an institute dedicated to the study of the history of science and technology be founded in the Cambridge area. In 1992 David Dibner, Bern’s son and only child, and David’s wife, Frances, set about to fulfill Bern’s dream by establishing the Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Realizing the importance of situating scholars close to their source materials, the Burndy Library was housed there to support the work of scholars at the institute. Anticipating the expiration of

## 2 DIBNER HALL *of the* HISTORY OF SCIENCE

the hosting arrangement with MIT in 2007, the Dibners began looking at other possible locations for the Library to ensure its continual use by scholars. After a national search, they decided on The Huntington.

Along with the gift of the Library comes \$11.6 million in support for managing the collections, conservation, exhibitions, fellowships, and related research activities. During discussions in 2005 between The Huntington and the Dibner family about the Library's future, David Dibner, who spearheaded the effort to move the collection to The Huntington, passed away unexpectedly. An accomplished businessman, philanthropist, and civic leader, David Dibner was chairman of the Dibner Fund, a family philanthropy in Wilton, Conn., as well as president of the Burndy Library. His son, Brent, and widow, Frances, are members of The Huntington's Board of Overseers.