Mainz Psalter Returned

THE MAINZ PSALTER of 1457, one of the great cultural treasures of Germany, has been recovered in the United States by the US Government and returned to the American zone of Germany.

The world-renowned Book of Psalms, which was in the Sächsische Landesbibliothek (the State Library of Saxony) in Dresden, is the earliest example of printing in colors. It is valued at over $250,000. It was shipped to Germany on March 13, 1950, in the plane which carried the Hon. John J. McCloy, US High Commissioner, back from a brief visit to the United States.

The book will remain in the temporary trusteeship of HICOG pending final return to German ownership. Plans for its display to the public will be announced later.

The Psalter was probably looted from the wartime repository of the Dresden Library and then disappeared from view. Passing through trade channels it was illegally imported into the US and was discovered in New York City by US Government authorities. It was recovered and has been returned to Germany under the International Agreement of July 8, 1946, which was formulated by the United States, the United Kingdom and France to carry forward the program of the recovery of missing works of art dispersed during the war. Almost all of the European nations are participating in the agreement.

THE US GOVERNMENT through its monuments, fine arts and archives officers has already recovered and restored to Allied nations 500,000 objects of art and 4,000,000 books and all the public collections in the American zone have been returned to German museums, universities and libraries.

The great Mainz Psalter of 1457 with 121 pages of the 176 printed is 12 1/2 inches by 16 1/2 inches in size. It is a book of the greatest rarity and importance as there are only 10 copies in existence. It was the first book to be printed in three colors: red, blue and black, on vellum. The colors appear in the beautiful, woodcut initial letter of the first word of the psalms.

The original binding of the Psalter is stamped with fillets and fleur de lis with five large brass bosses on the front and back covers. The clasp and catches are wanting and the binding has been rebacked in the past with white leather of the 16th century. There are other signs of early use in the Dresden copy as many of the vellum leaves are worn and discolored.

The Mainz Psalter was also the first book to contain the names of the printers: Johann Fust, a citizen of Mainz, and Peter Schoeffer of Gernheim, both of whom were colleagues of Gutenberg. It was probably printed in Mainz, Germany, from which town it takes its name.

It is also the first book to carry a colophon and the day of printing, which was on the Vigil of the Feast of the Assumption on August 14 in 1457, almost 500 years ago.

At the end of many of the psalms in the Mainz Psalter, there is music, the notes and staff supplied in manuscript, as well as additional liturgical material used in the singing of services in the Diocese of Mainz.