

Treasures of the World: Preserving Rare Book Collections

David Glauber

1 December 2016

Dr. Niu

University of South Florida

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Rare books and other cultural artifacts maintained by special collections librarians are of great importance to society. They are historical objects that reflect the development and growth of culture and are desired and sought after by collectors from around the globe (Rinaldo, 2007, p. 38). Books, such as a first edition of William Shakespeare's plays, the first English language dictionary, and surviving copies of the Gutenberg Bible reflect what may be considered rare books (Robinson, 2012, pp. 513-14). It is the collectable nature of the resources and their value that make a book rare, not just its age. Age is not sufficient to be considered rare, explains librarian Fred C. Robinson as there are "many books that survive in only a few copies [that] are of no value because they are inherently worthless to begin with" (p. 514). In addition to maintaining rare books, special collections librarians, also known as curators, oversee archival materials and fragile materials, which are housed in a special collections department. Within this department, curators create a protective environment for these resources, monitoring lighting conditions and air flow, with the goal of extending the shelf life of these cultural artifacts for generations to come (Cullison & Donaldson, 1987, p. 233). However, collections all over the world face great challenges, including budgetary and space shortages, negligence in recognizing cultural and historical value, challenges in preserving books that are already in fragile, deteriorating condition, and dilemmas over how to provide access to rare books and objects that are of a fragile nature.

For the general public, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt placed many important cultural documents, including manuscripts and rare books in display cases so that visitors to its museum showroom would be able to see examples of its holdings, including a gold embroidered Koran and a papyrus document that survived from the ancient Library of Alexandria. When original objects are too precious to be put on display, copies are made, so that the items can

be viewed by visitors (Ziedan, 2005, pp. 100-102). When creating an exhibit, it is necessary to be cognizant of environmental factors, such as room temperature, including humidity levels, and lighting conditions. Some materials may be safely exhibited for short periods of time, while others can be exhibited longer (Visser, 2004, p. 54). Scholars needing closer access to rare materials at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina can visit the rare artifacts department, where rare books, ancient coins, and other valuable treasures are housed. In this department, there is a reading room where scholars may conduct research in a protective environment that is not just temperature controlled but is "equipped with a number of SM200 fire extinguishers, which operate by means of oxygen depletion" (Ziedan, 2005, pp. 103-104). To ensure access to important printed resources that would be too fragile for constant handling, the library has a microfilm department that enables scholars to conduct primary source research, while preserving the integrity of the original (p.104).

Whereas the library in Alexandria has measures in place to protect their rare materials, that is not the case in most Chinese libraries. Most ancient Chinese books are not adequately protected in temperature-controlled environments, explain librarians Mingjie Li and Jinfang Niu (2010). Not only are rare materials not protected from sun, air, or potential fire damage but often they are de-accessioned as inconsequential when in fact they possess historical and cultural value. Used booksellers, aware of the library's negligence in discarding valuable rare books, seek out these discarded objects, since they are highly valuable, which is also what makes them rare (p. 268). Librarian Michelle Visser points out that most librarians do not receive adequate training to properly oversee special collections. Consequently, it may lead to librarians incorrectly weeding resources, and materials under their care can deteriorate, as evidenced by some Chinese books that became "infested with worms and rats" (Li & Niu, 2010, p. 268; Visser, 2004, p. 52).

Deterioration is not limited to China; it is common in India, and in libraries around the world.

Majumdar (2005) attests that one of the greatest challenges in preserving India's resources is that only a small number of them are catalogued and those that are, do not follow any metadata standard. Without adequate documentation and protection, manuscripts written on materials, such as palm leaves are not expected to last more than one hundred years (p. 184).

Mold is another problem that may beset rare book collections, especially if room temperatures are not adequately maintained. That's the issue that developed in the Rare Book Room of the New Library at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Due to rising temperatures from a summer heat wave in August 1995, 1200 books sustained mold damage. Responding to such damage required a labor-intensive process that led staff to isolate each book and place them on a flat surface in a separate room with fans and dehumidifiers running to eliminate the mold (Smith, 1997, p. 59). To prevent this issue from reoccurring, Manuscripts Curator Laura Katz Smith has a student worker remove all of their books once per year and clean the shelves with a "diluted Lysol disinfectant" in order to eliminate the possibility of mold (p. 61). She consistently monitors the air flow and contacts school officials, who remotely control the temperature in the special collections room. Unfortunately, as she attests, she only found out the intricacies of who was in charge of the air flow for the room after a problem emerged. Having an understanding of these issues ahead of time is crucial for the preservation of rare books.

Archivist Thomas Wilsted (2012) maintains that one of the issues with properly maintaining special collections is that they are often housed in older buildings that date back to the 1960s and 1970s before modern standards were implemented. These older buildings were designed with books in mind, not special collections. As such, these buildings meet neither the needed temperatures nor the air filtration requirements of special collections (p. 323). Given the

historic and cultural value of rare books and other artifacts in special collections, Wilsted argues that special collection buildings need to either be renovated, or if possible, the holdings need to be transferred to a new building constructed to meet the needs of the valuable collection. He recognizes, however, that making such changes can be challenging for institutions facing budget crunches, as renovations and/or separate facilities can be a major economic investment for a library or institution (p. 323).

As budget issues and storage space make it more challenging to preserve collection materials, it is important for curators to prioritize among resources. Librarian Jennifer Sheehan (2009) explains that "when the 'form' and 'substance' of a given object are indistinguishable, we are challenged to evaluate collection materials in terms of their inherent value" (p. 111). In other words, is it necessary to retain the original object or is it acceptable to digitize it? Would anything be lost by digitizing materials? A key consideration in this process is determining whether the original resource still provides value or was the value more in the content and information provided within the work. Considering the availability of the resource in other libraries is an important criterion as well. When mold threatened the collection at New Library at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, the head of their special collections department decided to weed half of an 800 volume collection that contained mold. The staff reasoned that since the materials were rarely used and since they were available at other libraries, it was acceptable to discard them (Smith, 2004, p. 60). While that may have been a sound decision, Sheehan contends that establishing criteria and assigning values to collection holdings may help to determine which materials should be preserved in their physical form and which may be digitized. In order to make this determination, she established a criteria of fourteen important elements, including, authenticity, condition, aesthetic value, special features, binding, textual

variants, value of materials, historical value, cultural value, provenance, availability, demand, production, and association. Sheehan argues that this is the best way to limit subjectivity in decision-making, meet budget requirements, and still preserve the most valuable treasures in special collections (Sheehan, 2009, p. 120).

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