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Preface

On October 21 and 22 of 2014, the Kelvin Smith Library of Case Western Reserve University organized and hosted a colloquium on the past, present, and future of special collections in libraries. At that highly successful event there were over 200 librarians, booksellers, book collectors, donors, and auction house representatives in attendance who came from nineteen states of the United States and two provinces in Canada. We believe the colloquium was a milestone event in assessing the past and projecting the future of special collections.

This book, while motivated by the excellent presentations given during the colloquium, stands apart from it, organized not chronologically around past, present, and future, but rather around a new set of themes. In addition, many of the authors have expanded significantly upon their original remarks. Nonetheless, you as the reader are likely to detect a bit of the flavor (and sense the excitement) of the original colloquium in each of the chapters.

No colloquium nor publication such as this is the work of a single individual. As one of the co-organizers and coeditors, I would also like to express particular thanks to some of the people who provided guidance and support along the way.

The cochairs of the colloquium, who are also now the coeditors of this publication, benefitted greatly from the work of a Planning Committee, whose members included Michael Clune (Associate Professor, English, Case Western Reserve University); Daniel Cohen (Associate Professor, History and Art, Case Western Reserve University); Jenifer Neils (Elsie B. Smith Professor in the Liberal Arts, Case Western Reserve University); Alice Schreyer (then at the University of Chicago, and now the Roger and Julie Baskes Vice President for Collections and Library Services at the Newberry Library); Joel Silver (Director and Curator of Books, Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington); and Jill Tatem (University Archivist, Case Western Reserve University).
Preface

I am also greatly appreciative of the support of the three collaborating partner universities that launched the colloquium, and their superb library directors: Mary Ann Mavrinac at the University of Rochester River Campus Libraries, Joseph (Jody) Combs at the Vanderbilt University Libraries, and my longtime colleague and good friend, Jeffrey Trzeciak at the Washington University in St. Louis Libraries. In addition to the very generous sponsors who made the original colloquium possible, I want to give very special thanks to our extraordinary staff at the Kelvin Smith Library, and particularly Gina Midlik, Angela Sloan, and Melissa Hubbard and the continuing members of her Special Collections and Archives Team: Nora Blackman, Helen Conger, Sharlane Gubkin, and Jill Tatem. It is these people and my other Kelvin Smith Library colleagues—too numerous to mention—who make coming to work each day such a delight.

One final personal note: I cannot thank enough my friend, colleague, and mentor in this endeavor, Robert H. Jackson, the Distinguished Visiting Scholar of the Kelvin Smith Library. It was his inspiration and constant encouragement that caused us not only to convene the colloquium, but to pursue publication of these very important essays.

I know you will find this book to be thought-provoking as we as a profession continue to forge the future of special collections.

Arnold Hirshon
Associate Provost and University Librarian
Case Western Reserve University
INTRODUCTION

Forging the Future

ROBERT H. JACKSON

This book grew out of a colloquium on special collections entitled “Acknowledging the Past, Forging the Future,” which was held in October 2014 and organized by the Kelvin Smith Library at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. The colloquium evolved from a Rare Book Forum at the Library of Congress that was given in April 2001, “Private Collectors and Special Collections Libraries,” which was organized by Mark Dimunation, Chief of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division at the Library of Congress, aided by Dan De Simone.

It turned out to be a very special occasion as librarians, book dealers, and collectors came together and exchanged a great deal of valuable information. The speakers on that program were Alice Schreyer, William Reese, and myself, and there were several panels.

In 2001, my talk, “Will the Collector of Today Be the Donor of Tomorrow?” seemed to hit a nerve. We were at the turn of the century. There was anxiety about the future of collecting, the future of rare book libraries, and the future of the book itself.

That was the heyday of the printed book, with millions of books coming off the presses every year. At the same time, things were about to change. The Internet opened up new horizons in book sales, but it was also stepping up the pace of digitization. Writers no longer had any use for handwritten manuscripts, typescripts, or the kind of notes and ephemera that formed the backbone of author archives. I noted that a page of manuscript in Charles Dickens’s own hand (from my own collection) was an example of what would be lost, and with that the loss of
insight that we gain from seeing revisions, additions, and the occasional ink blot or coffee stain.

I commented then that the field of book collecting had changed drastically in recent years. Book collectors were younger, more heterogeneous, and less clubby than their predecessors. Books and ephemera that were once considered marginal were now moving to center stage. I described the rise of library special collections, and their changing fortunes. At one time, libraries were the dominant purchasers of rare books, but by 2001 they were becoming more and more dependent on donors and endowments to fill out their collections.

I concluded that in the future, special collections libraries would need to act like other successful nonprofit organizations. They would need to assess their wants, survey the pool of potential donors, and target those individuals whose collections complement their own. They would need to build relationships of trust that would stimulate collectors’ altruistic impulses.

Today, we’re living in the future we speculated about in 2001. Many of the trends identified then have come to pass. The digitization of culture has been relentless. The ebook is now mainstream. The physical book persists, but it is far from the center of culture. Handwriting itself is on the way out, and the smart phone is the central fact of modern life. Library special collections continue to straddle the world between digital phenomena and the world of physical objects. All that is solid melts into air.

Now we are forced back to the existential questions. What is a book? What is it good for? Why do we collect and preserve books? Who’s interested in our special collections and who will use them in years to come?

Since 2001, the market for rare books and manuscripts has changed a great deal. The canonical works and their associated manuscripts are off the market. The Internet leveled the playing field, and the middle ground of collecting has been devalued, and lost much of its excitement and appeal.

Author archives used to be purchased by private collectors. My own collection has included several major archives, but this is becoming rarer. Authors and their descendants today are donating or selling their archives to libraries and special collections. Today’s private collectors are looking for something more rare and wonderful—their own private “blockbusters” that will create talk and publicity.
Introduction

The sheer volume of information available online means that today’s librarians have the opportunity to be more knowledgeable and better trained than ever. However, those who have been trained in the digital era are increasingly oriented to the digital world. Special collections may be losing their edge in the field of unique and rare books, and in the long-run special collections may suffer.

I stand by the original conclusion of my 2001 talk. The future of special collections is a matter of building and nurturing relationships between librarians and collectors. The more we learn about one another, the more we can help each other achieve our goals.

The papers contained in this book, which were inspired by the Kelvín Smith Library colloquium in 2014, are part of the process of redefinition and renewal. We chose to call this “Forging the Future” not “Waiting for the Future” nor “Wondering about the Future.” The implication is that the future is in our hands. We will control it. We will shape it. The decisions we make as readers, collectors, and special librarians today will determine what happens to our fields tomorrow. This is a hopeful message, and this book presents a hopeful future as well.

The 2014 “Forging the Future” colloquium appealed to a national audience and videos of the colloquium were watched extensively online. This book expands and enriches the ideas presented at the colloquium by including significant additional material from the contributors. The chapters are thoughtful, insightful, and provocative.

We are in the early stages of what Stephen J. Gould called “punctuated evolution” for special collections. Although it may be difficult to predict, I believe this book will demonstrate that special collections has a vigorous and lively future.

NOTES

2. The videos of the 2014 colloquium can be found at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBELrG1nZ2U5jXND2u48hv4RScC ZwngM5g.
The traditional relationships between collectors, booksellers, librarians, and archivists are changing rapidly.
Memories help us to make sense of the trajectories in which we live our lives. They anchor us in a changing and difficult world. What a person remembers from the mass of details saturating a specific moment, how he or she selects and places into long-term memory the pertinent facts of that moment, and how those memories are recalled and reconstituted over time, make for significant parallels with the mission of special collections in research libraries.

At the same time, the stories that a community attaches to historical objects and uses to hold itself together over time often are at odds with what special collections do with those objects. I have worked closely with communities in the preservation of cultural heritage, and this fact has permeated the way that I approach and undertake my work, even as the parallels between processes of interpretation over time clearly exist. In this short essay, I offer a few reflections on the meanings of objects in special collections, especially as they relate to memory, authenticity, and social practice. Our authority as stewards of cultural heritage increasingly stems from close connections with lived experience, and collecting community artifacts challenges older practices of evidence and order.

The processes of finding meaning in an artifact such as a book, sheet music, or military medal, of discerning the social configurations and agreements that are part of how we relate to artifacts, exist alongside our mastery of any intellectual content. It is fair to say that these processes
Part I: Communities

are more important than the object itself. We must analyze and interpret them, because the object cannot speak for itself.

An artifact matters, but not in the ways that we or donors often think it does. I know this because when someone hands me a brochure or a business card, I tend not to focus on the text. I’m very polite and make sure that I look at the name and the title. But when I look at your card, I’m primarily examining the printing process and figuring out how many people touched it, and in what ways, before you handed it to me. The writers, designers, and printers are the most obvious of those people. A printer measures samples off the press, and a bindery worker sets up the folding machine just right to make that gatefold work. Someone clamps and cuts those business cards (or, these days, more likely picks them up from the in-office printer, rubber bands a stack, and delivers the bundle to you).

I think of these processes because I have done most of them myself. I visualize the working out of production steps when you may think I’m reading the words printed on the card. It is much easier to be aware of each step and the hands that have made a thing possible when you see yourself, somehow, embedded in that document. My valuing of the card has relatively little to do with the text. Thick or medium-weight, one-color printing or embossed, the card tells me a story about each of the locations in which decisions about it were made, as well as the level of skill and the decision making of each person involved.

You certainly intend to convey your work title and institutional association with the card. You may expect that a recipient values the heavier cardstock and elegance, and often our understandings in that regard would coincide. I am aware of the conventions that your designer relied upon in aligning materiality with institutional prestige. And I would certainly exaggerate if I said that the text mattered not at all.

As communities, printers and book people have an advantage in the assessment of our place in history. We have had good control over the stories that are told about us, primarily because we have conceptualized and undertaken production of those narratives ourselves. We have glorified our work through romantic visions of printing shops, emphasizing the independence of printers, and enhancing the profession’s artfulness. In reality, printing is a dirty, nasty occupation. If we allowed others to tell the history of printing and our place in it, that would be more widely
known and the act of printing less valorized. In the hand-press era, common printers could be identified on the street by their lurching strides, developed from the constant and uneven strain upon their shoulders, backs, and legs as they daily pulled the bar of the press. We rarely think of misshapen printers when we make printers’ hats or purchase a rare broadside. But that is whose history we are actually collecting.

We have, instead, created stories about objects more from the context in which their continuity has been assured than from something inherent in the physical forms. Repositories have collected broadsides or the books of printers who are noted for success, when the object itself is prized. When the focus turns to literature, acquisitions have often reflected a highly refined view of the past. Retrospective selection emphasizes meaning to us in a later generation more than the past as it was. There is far less failure in historical collections of printing and literature than should have been recorded. The selection process rarely positions us, as professionals or those documenting our own kind, at the bottom of a social hierarchy.

And so we might ask: Whose hands touched this book before it came into our possession, and how? What experiences have been enabled and what meanings facilitated by its materiality over time? What does inclusion in special collections, and particularly the transfer of materials to institutions with no direct connection to creators, mean? We need to consider these things in order to negotiate the “object-ness”—or “object-ivity”—of an artifact.

We know that materiality is tied to meaning, but it is difficult to suss out just how that happens. One of my favorite things to do when teaching is to give students a printed object that is older than their great-great-grandparents and let them sit with it. I have yet to meet a student who did not come away with a sense of awe at how long that book has existed. They feel a connection with the past through this artifact, although the object cannot articulate its own meaning. The heft of an object and sense of solidity, smells and what students imagine them to resemble, or marks of apparent age provide cultural clues by which they intuit a possible past.

A book as artifact has, in its words, images, and signs of wear, something that represents continuity over time. The date, characteristics of style, and marks of its passage through hands indicate its age. They echo
what some students have read, been taught, or otherwise experienced about things that endure. All of this makes one think that the past is, indeed, a strange place, but one with outlines that are somehow familiar. These books are ghosts on a cultural landscape: material, yes, but meaningful. They are embodiments of the social practices that frame a student’s world, created in the past and lingering through the complicity of those in the present.

The immediate experience of holding a book can generate memories specific to the item at hand: its smell, the worn and stained book cloth, a recollection of having held and read novels before, engrossed while rocking in a porch swing. From a host of such recollections and other things learned in deliberate ways over time or breathed in like air from our interactions with those around us, we gain broad knowledge through which we filter and make sense of new experiences. Memory, then, travels intersecting paths between specific episodes and unremembered learning, with what we know about how the world works and our place in it influencing how and what we choose to remember.

At every moment, we take in a wide swath of details from our surroundings. These short-term memories must be translated. We do so retrospectively, selecting elements that seem significant or explanatory, suppressing others. We may, in time, revitalize what becomes relevant to another circumstance. Perhaps we have stood at this street corner before, and we now remember the way home from here. We are always reconstructing our memories, remembering the forgotten, suppressing the no longer useful. Even though a memory seems complete and factual as we recount it, what we articulate about it is mediated by a host of factors, from the bits and pieces that must be reassembled cognitively to reconstruct a full memory to the effects of a changed location.

We can compare the memories of one who offers the object to the processes of an archive. Rather than pulling a complete record of the past from a permanent mental repository, we reassemble the memories we wish to keep from bits stored here and there, available to a variety of memories. Our minds construct plausible bridges across the rocky streams of absent details, aiding us in integrating what we know, have experienced or forgotten, and need imagination to create.
Chapter 1: Reflections on the Meanings of Objects

If objects help us to tell stories, we must pay attention to those whose objects are not in collections and whose stories are kept alive by artifacts without textuality. Special collections professionals have a great deal of experience acquiring materials that have already been separated in time from their origins. We are very strong in our connections to traditional collectors, who have done the hard work of assembling coherent collections from the nooks and crannies of auctions, dealer catalogs, out-of-the-way bookstores and, sometimes, serendipity. The elimination of intermediaries between creator and repository fundamentally reshapes long-held acquisition practices of special collections. Engagement now is a cornerstone of cultural authority for the profession.

But the direct transfer of historical materials from creators can be challenging. An artist may refuse to have images released individually, asserting that the oeuvre is the only mode of true analysis of his work. The leader of an ethnic group who provides documents may stipulate that they cannot be translated into another language without her permission, because only the mother tongue, as she knows it, can convey concepts correctly. For each of these, the desire to have these objects accepted in their entirety, as assembled and with the same interpretive framework, represents a taxing demand.

An artifact in special collections exists at the juncture of memory and meaning, corroborating the veracity of these reconstructions of what was forgotten or has been pieced together. Like a load-bearing member of a bridge, it appears to be whole and solid, with no need for interpretation, carrying both the past and present. With the help of the associations and experiences that it calls to mind, such an artifact becomes a witness to the seamless truth of our memory.

Its unity serves to explain the intertwined lives of people who shared a book or many books clustered around a way of living and seeing the world, such as religious texts. As an object, a book can be loaded with the freight of the stories of entire communities. Special collections professionals have difficulty when a book, or a set of books, carries more weight than its constituent paper or words. When persistence is its own language, location and context also take on greater meaning. For each person and setting in which these books have existed before they find
their way into special collections, they have served as memory markers and makers within contextual circumstances.

To survive physically is less evidence of truthfulness than adaptability to interpretations varying, in large or small ways, from generation to generation. In common, each has said “yes” to the object, however. Objects have meaning because of their continuity. That continuity is a social decision, relating to power and access to resources over time.

We know that a donor or a member of a community viewing a heritage object in a repository brings a different perspective to its interpretation than a scholar with an entirely different emotional and intellectual approach. This relates to social practice. Books as objects and text are conduits of information, and interaction with them is the source of memory. The brain creates memories through the process of selectively retrieving facts and ordering them into useful narratives. Objects have meaning when they are used, not merely because of the continuity of their existence. And it could be argued that without use and the continual construction, sharing, and repeating of memories as stories, objects themselves have no meaning. Therefore they require interaction. Their physicality, smell, textures, and sounds all evoke past experience and collapse time. Ownership can extend beyond physical control and into the realm of a more diffused cultural sense, marked by distinct memories of and recollections triggered by objects. Elements of cultural appropriation remain and may cause ripples on the reconstruction of a donor’s related memories.

Could it be that the varied meanings of an object to a donor, a community member, an archivist, or a scholar reflect more than the diverse approaches, expectations, and questions that each brings to engagement? The meaning of an object may change according to its physical location, even for the same person. This involves more than the texture of contemplative encounters, though they are a cherished aspect of how special collections have come to distinguish themselves from research in other surroundings.

The very doorways that we wish to invite people to enter can alter how they remember an object and imagine its role as a part of their own frameworks for memory and meaning. Intriguing new research finds that simply crossing a threshold may disrupt a person’s capacity for managing the flow of details fundamental to accurate memory about objects.¹ Experiential assimilation becomes even more complex if the act of traversing
physical frames can reset aspects of what we remember about a specific thing. The memory bridge becomes an incomplete cantilever design, ends jutting into a gap between piers but failing to meet. Can such an object testify to the truthfulness of a worldview?

It would be a mistake to see donors as less than full participants in this process. In the phrasing of the social theorist Anthony Giddens, people are knowledgeable agents in creating patterns across time and interacting with these configurations. We form our identities through how we participate in producing and reproducing social structures that can facilitate or place limits on our actions. Rather than giving priority to human agency or social structure, he asserts a mutually constituting arrangement, which he calls the duality of structure. Our actions create, maintain, and change the patterns that make our activities recognizable to others. Special collections are one such place where activities extend across time and in which people act to produce and reproduce social relations, with effects that reverberate.

Special collections constitute systems that constrain or enable the (re)production of social structure, both inside and outside of their walls. We can see facets of the dialectic between donors and special collections in negotiations about how to select what is historical, over how to interpret objects, and regarding sources of authority in heritage activities. As a sphere for social action, special collections embody a double hermeneutic that Giddens predicts: the framework that heritage professionals create for understanding the meanings of objects over time comes to shape the legacy-seeking behaviors of the very people whose objects we must acquire in order to maintain cultural authority.

We are individuals acting within institutions, just as those who offer items for acquisition are actors within their own communities. As passionate advocates for heritage stewardship, we too are engaged in legacy-seeking behaviors. Special collections gain authority by adhering to professional standards and ensuring continuity, and they practice authenticity in stewarding materials most proximate to lived experience. At the same time, donors seek to align with or perhaps redirect the authority of a repository in order to better position and support their own worldviews and priorities. The donors and communities with whom we engage embed themselves within how we do our work, generate new possible
trajectories, and with us cocreate a system of authority, authenticity, and cultural persistence.

We might apply structuration as the process by which systems produce meaning from historical materials through the interplay of known meanings, particularly of those who create and have created practices around an object, as well as the discovery (perhaps uncovering?) of new meanings in different contexts, quite apart from those in the past. Rather than being completely free of or impossibly bound by the past or present, individuals make choices about and engage in perpetuating, resculpting, overturning, and creating anew the social practices that become guidelines and resources for us. We create the stories that objects tell, in the way that we place ourselves at the center of interpretation, in how memory works, in the reflexive establishment of our identities through social praxis. We have a responsibility to keep doors open, even when we choose to not walk through them ourselves, considering that to cross a threshold may change what an object means, and acknowledging that entrances also comprise exits.

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