

**CURATING A MANUSCRIPTS
COLLECTION
AN OVERVIEW OF TASKS AND OTHER ASPECTS
RELATING TO MANUSCRIPTS
IN A MODERN LIBRARY**

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ABSTRACT

The paper sets out with a description how the curating of manuscripts is integrated into a modern library and information network and enumerates the tasks implied by the curation of a manuscripts collection in a research library: collection awareness (types of materials); collection development (by which is meant the relationship to donors and vendors); different aspects of the description of manuscripts (texts, illustrations, the challenges of archival material); reference materials and the reference environment; research surveys and the implications of research on the description of manuscripts. It gives an overview of user services both in situ and remotely, and the administrative issues of digitization, exhibitions and co-operation. Conservation, preservation and restoration are touched upon but are not considered in detail.

KEYWORDS

management issues for a manuscript department, curation for manuscripts in today's librarianship, manuscript exhibitions, digitization of manuscripts

Introduction

In reading this article, please note that it is not an academic paper. No attempt has been made to acknowledge relevant literature in the field. Instead, it is a very personal account based on my professional experience in the Bavarian State Library, where I have been responsible for the Department of Manuscripts and Rare and Early Printed Books since 2004, after a professional career which began with thirteen years' responsibility for (alphabetical) cataloguing followed by nearly five years as Head of User Services. The article is based on a presenta-

tion made to the Summer School audience in Zadar 2011. I hope that it may inspire some readers to some approaches or actions and make the range of options visible. I am very much aware that many issues could be added and should be discussed, and that consequently, as it stands, this is by no means a full account.¹

Management issues

This overview is given from a management perspective as opposed to that based on research or cataloguing experience. It is strongly influenced by the context of the major library environment of a universal research library. The Bavarian State Library defined its mission in 2008 (its 450th anniversary year) in a “three-pillar profile” using an image of three columns (inspired by the columns on the Library’s staircase): it is a “treasure trove of written cultural heritage, a multimedia information service provider for research and teaching, an innovation centre for digital information technology and services”.² It is very difficult to define the mission of such a major library very precisely: it is an important sign of the overall appreciation of its cultural heritage collections that its function as a treasure house is the first to be listed. By comparison with the other two, it must also be considered as the most permanent in the Library’s long history.

A managerial perspective suggests that it is mostly about the work of others, although the overall organization of the work is part of management. Management implies that behind all these detailed actions there is a plan, a strategy, an aim. To be successful, management must make the best of the available resources in people, finance and collections and try to influence these factors for the greater benefit of the organization. Management must try to reconcile different and diverging interests and find a means of combining different skills and options. Manuscripts are unique and individual items. The term covers a range of very dissimilar materials. People dealing with them tend to be rather like the items in their care. In order to shape what they do, it helps to understand their tasks, not necessarily as a specialist, but appreciating and evaluating their specialisms and knowledge.

Within a library context today a manuscripts collection is rarely a stand-alone organizational unit. It is usually integrated into larger con-

1 For more detailed reading, see Cullingford, Alison. *The special collections handbook*. London : Facet, 2011.

2 Bayerische Staatsbibliothek – Information for excellence, Munich November 2007.

texts, uniting all manuscripts (medieval and modern, archival papers, as is the case, for example, in Berlin State Library) and rare or early books. It is difficult to define where the early printed book ends: around 1830, the end of the hand press period, in the year 1900 or nowadays sometimes as late as 1950, after the Second World War. The term 'rare' also includes recently published modern bibliophile and artist books, as is the case in the Bavarian State Library, for example. Sometimes manuscripts are part of a department called Special Collections, as happens in many university libraries in Germany at present. Responsibility for particular types of manuscripts (music, maps, oriental, etc.) may lie with other separate units. Still the manuscripts curators must keep a watching eye over them. The physical care of manuscripts (restoration, conservation and preservation) is sometimes integrated into the same department and sometimes it is part of a separate unit. If the latter is the case, this unit will be a primary partner for close co-operation in the shared concern and ongoing care for these unique items. Whatever the exact scope of the organizational unit for manuscripts, it is always part of a larger institution – a library or an academy of science, a university, a museum or an archive. It is very rare for a manuscripts collection to stand completely on its own except perhaps within a monastery or in a private collection. And even in these cases it is important to find partners first within, then outside the organization, in similar institutional contexts.

Curation and advocacy

Management issues for a manuscripts collection are often described in terms of 'curation' and 'advocacy'. To my mind advocacy implies that individual strengths and tasks arising from manuscript curation are contributed to the general benefit of the institution and share in its overall identity and strategy. This seems self-evident since manuscripts are highly estimated today, not only because of their value but also because they are truly unique and distinctive items in a library's collection, which is otherwise becoming more and more homogenous. This integrated approach allows for true advocacy of the interests and concerns of the organisational unit for manuscripts and thus of the collection, in curating it and in making it flourish. An important aspect of the management of today's manuscript collections is an awareness that this activity does not stand alone: there are no islands, no ivory towers and no paradise gardens. Everyone shares and contributes to general policies, everything is networked. In the Bavarian State Library

we are proud of successfully applying what is called a ‘matrix structure’: the Manuscript Department is involved in acquisitions, cataloguing, user services, digitization, public relations and so on (all self-standing units) in order to reflect its impact. It thus relies on specialized partners and exerts this function itself whenever it comes to concerns for heritage collections.

Institutional memory

A particular remit for a manuscripts collection within an organisation is keeping an eye on the history of the institution. This not only means keeping alive the memory of the past, to ensure the study of the library’s history and the provenance of collections but also involves making sure that the ongoing activities of the institution are archived and well preserved in the institutional memory. Today’s activities are the history of tomorrow. Especially at a time when the memory function is shifting from paper to born-digital material, particular attention must be given to this ‘self-documentation’.

Asset and core: the collection

One distinctively characteristic aspect of the management of a manuscripts collection is the core value and the asset of the collection itself. It is therefore of primary importance to know, to describe, to present this collection, its contents and the state of conservation. The task is to reassemble information and assessments of the collection, to compare, to find out about its strengths and weaknesses and to identify development aspects. The collection is historical and at least parts of it have been in the library for centuries. On the basis of what we know about the collection and through ongoing activities, its needs can be identified and a wish list established, even although this may turn out to be longer than a professional lifetime. It is important to look carefully at every shortcoming with a view to improvement. And again even in the case of manuscripts we live in a time of networking: within the library, with external partners, especially in the research area and with other collections. We must evaluate the cultural impact of the collection. This implies co-operation with research in many areas, with cultural organisations and, for example, with tourism. As the collection is at the heart of everything, its maintenance must be one of the library’s most important concerns. The collection must be protected and conserved: this ranges from shelving to boxes and comprises restoration and safety issues. Every need in this

field must be identified and addressed, again on a long term scale. These issues are not dealt with once and for all – on the contrary, they need constant and regular monitoring and repeated addressing.

Library tasks

The manuscripts collection participates in all the classical tasks of the library, acquisition, cataloguing and user services. Exhibitions are a particular responsibility and digitization has become a new task and growing concern.

Acquisitions

Although it may sound unlikely nowadays, manuscripts should continue to be part of the regular acquisitions policy within a library. Manuscripts are still on the market, sold by auction houses, antiquarian booksellers, not only in shops, but increasingly on the internet in professional and more informal ways.³ Acquisitions take place inside and outside the country. It is important to ensure a budget and to keep a presence in the market. The field of collection development must be defined to some extent. In this area of extremely expensive investment, it is helpful to participate in existing development plans at a local, regional or national and sometimes even at an international level. This helps to avoid uncontrolled duplication of effort in trying to find funding for a particular item and in the worst case bidding against another publicly-funded institution at auction and contributing to raising prices. For outstanding acquisitions, external funding is usually necessary, sometimes from several funding bodies at the same time.

Manuscripts are sometimes offered to libraries by private individuals, as a gift, a legacy or as a commercial offer. Besides, collections can be reallocated, for example, during restructuring within a university or as a consequence of the dissolution of libraries, as is the case with a number of religious orders.

It may be worthwhile to create a network around the collection in the hope of attracting donors. This requires distributing clear information about relevant material in your collection. If offers are invited, the decision and selection must nevertheless be retained by the institution so that it remains the master of the collection. It might be possible to allow for exchanges, for example, of duplicates received with private

3 E.g. Zentralverzeichnis antiquarischer Bücher: ZVAB [cited: 2012-05-10]. Available at: www.zvab.com

libraries. Gifts and donations are very welcome, but they are never without cost since they represent a long-term financial commitment for the library: at a minimum, they require cataloguing, preservation and conservation.

Whatever the investment in the collection, acquisitions help to show that the collections are living and vibrant. Acquisitions in this area have an impact on the standing of the library. They can be marketed, announced in the press and celebrated in a presentation or an exhibition. In this way, they are welcomed even by directors who might not be enthusiastic at first about spending money on heritage collections.

Cataloguing: description and presentation

The cataloguing of manuscripts is an outstanding academic and research activity, which demands significant and, depending on the items, varying expertise. It takes usually a long time. This form of cataloguing is an investment for decades, if not for centuries. It is sometimes carried out outside the library, in a specialized research institute of a university or an academy of sciences. Beyond and before undertaking this academic cataloguing, a general description of the collection is necessary. This is a valuable service in itself to potential users. In describing the collection the need for further, more detailed analysis can be identified and worthwhile parts or approaches defined. The cataloguing of manuscripts can be undertaken as a puzzle or mosaic. Pieces of information which are available and valuable can be put together. Basic and detailed available descriptions can be put on the internet. Existing catalogues should be converted into machine-readable form in order to provide up-to-date access. The analysis can proceed by provenance, list marks of ownership, bindings, illuminations, types of texts. In thus evaluating the collection, it is useful to identify interesting items to attract specialist interest and research and to plan for digitization or the production of facsimiles. If items are identified for digitization, their basic cataloguing metadata must be retained or established. A survey of this kind also allows identification of conservation and preservation needs, whether it is shelving or the use of boxes for protection. Existing or forthcoming restoration protocols should be collected since they are also an interesting part of the collection description.

A reference environment should be created to surround and explain the collection. Books and articles published about the manuscripts should be collected and particular attention should be given to

unpublished material gathered in close association with readers. Reference material should also include information on comparable manuscripts. The cataloguing of this reference material should be related to the individual items in the collection.

User services

Service is the core activity of the modern research library. For manuscripts a balance has to be found between the duty to preserve these centuries-old valuable documents for succeeding centuries, thus ensuring their preservation and protecting them against deterioration through use, and the duty to allow access to them, making them useful for today's research, knowledge and culture.

The first issue for in-house user services is therefore to provide safe access to individual manuscripts and, if possible, where required and necessary to the collection as a whole (which may even imply access to the stacks). In the reading room temperature, light and the handling of items must be monitored to defined standards, such as wearing gloves, washing hands, use of pencils, etc. Users can be admitted carefully according to established rules. There is a particular demand for presentations for visitors, seminars, schools. The staff in the manuscripts department should understand research interests. They may thus be seen as research partners, being able to collect, retain and seek research information from visiting scholars and students and enter into discussion with their users.

Internal use is usually only one and often the smaller part of the use of a manuscripts collection. Remote usage and correspondence are typical. Correspondence should be retained and archived in order to make best use of the information resulting from these consultations and in order to be able to share the most useful knowledge with users everywhere. Manuscripts departments receive heavy demand for reproductions: photographs, (digital) copies and publication of images. A policy and fee structure must be set for these services, and regulations on copyright or licensing issues must be defined bearing in mind demands for open access and free downloading of images. Contracts may be necessary for commercial use or particular publications, e.g. facsimiles, calendars, postcards, granting particular rights which must always be limited in time. Even although this area may create some income, the overall scope for revenue should not be overestimated but balanced against staff costs and the library's own interests. A facsimile

edition, for example, allows control of access to the original, permits a core element of the collection to be exhibited without harming the original, enables a valuable resource to be studied in detail, and provides a number of (digital) images, and this should not be prevented by a deterring cost for the publisher.

Exhibitions loans

Exhibition loans are a particular issue for manuscripts. In this context a lot of legal issues need to be addressed. Before lending a manuscript to an exhibition, particularly one abroad, the overall situation should be carefully considered: some issues are questions of unclear ownership, war, risks of transport, the impact of the exhibition and loans from other institutions. There must be a formal contract and questions of customs and export licences may arise. If a manuscript leaves the collection, the question of insurance has to be addressed and the actual market value has to be assessed. The transport of the item needs particular care and often the manuscript must travel not only in a special art transport but also in the company of a curator who will help to install it safely in the exhibition. Before allowing a loan to be made, the situation in the receiving exhibition should be clear, and facility reports should be obtained in order to judge all the major issues relating to presentation and security. The handling and display of the manuscript can be prescribed by the lender: the form of presentation, the page to be opened, the angle of opening, the turning of pages and so on. The duration of an exhibition must be set in line with the condition of the item – usually a period of three months is acceptable. Special prerequisites may be given concerning the description of the manuscript in the exhibition catalogue. And, in addition, rules for photographs, television, flyers, press, posters and so on must be indicated by the lender.

A request for a loan is not merely a risk or danger for a manuscript. It can also show its value and impact and give an opportunity for collection care with external funds. The manuscript needs a box to protect it during transport and this will later protect it in the stacks. A digital copy should be made for safety reasons and this can then be put on the internet. Any restoration needed should be undertaken before allowing the manuscript to go on loan.

Manuscripts only usually travel for exhibitions. Other exceptional cases must always be ruled by particular agreements respecting the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the item. Exceptions may be made

for central cataloguing projects, restoration or digitization activities outside the collection and long-term loans (deposits) to other collections. Before permitting such exceptions, the benefits to the item and its impact must always be carefully assessed.

Curating exhibitions

The remit of a manuscripts department often implies curation for exhibitions, at least those in which manuscripts are displayed. The library's own exhibitions need to be defined and initiated, curated and promoted. Again, knowledge of the collection is essential for defining topics for exhibitions. It is equally important to know and assess the location and space for the exhibition, the furniture (exhibition cases) and the environmental and light conditions which are necessary for conservation of the items. In deciding on an exhibition, there must be a clear understanding of its impact, the number of visitors expected and its duration. It is useful to find different partners: in the cultural life of the city, in the university or other research environment, and to be aware of other exhibitions locally or regionally which the library's exhibition might complement or show a completely different side.

Before curating an exhibition, the financial options and the scope of involvement should be quite clear. Should the exhibition have a poster, flyers, an exhibition catalogue, a press campaign, a 'virtual' exhibition and loans from other institutions? All these factors determine the budget just as much as the time frame for the planning phase.

First of all, curation implies the selection of items and their meaningful and attractive presentation. This includes their preparation, choosing the pages to be opened (eventually deciding on the turning of pages during the period of the exhibition) and the form of display in the exhibition case, usually in close co-operation with a skilled member of preservation staff. Light plays a fundamental role here: a balance has to be found between not putting too much light on the valuable items while at the same time illuminating them to show the full scope of their beauty, and making the descriptions in the exhibition cases and the room legible. The captions must not be too short or too long and questions of multi-linguality and the size of the characters must be settled. The exhibition must be guided by a framework in which the individual items play a role which needs to be explained. The content for the flyer, the catalogue and the press release should be decided upon. An exhibition catalogue is usually a team effort, involving the best specialists

on the various exhibits as the catalogue has a long-term impact well beyond the exhibition. Photographs that are required must be obtained a long time in advance.

The curator should also be involved in questions of security and exhibition opening hours, especially at times outside normal working hours. The preparation of an exhibition is time-consuming and display itself puts particular stress on the exhibits. Still, it is the best means of making known the contents and impact of the collection. An exhibition which passes unnoticed is a waste of effort.⁴ Curation involves responsibility for promotion, starting with a poster and flyers, ensuring their widest distribution, making sure there is an announcement on the website and trying to involve the press and other media. An opening ceremony gives emphasis to the event. During the period of the exhibition a range of accompanying events may help to attract visitors: for example, seminars, music performances and films. If a large public response is expected, an audio guide frees staff from taking too many tours. Nevertheless, guided tours by the curator and other knowledgeable people are very much welcomed by the public and attract visitors. They enable the sharing of information beyond the exhibition and thus help curators to know and understand the interests of the public better.

Although nowadays a lot of manuscripts are available online – and an exhibition is always the best opportunity to make a full digital copy of particularly valuable and sometimes fragile item – still the fascination for the aura of the original and the testimony of the past continues to grow. In order to maintain or to increase the impact of a manuscripts collection, everything should be done to avoid hiding or closing away ‘for ever’ items of this kind. Their display in an exhibition can be celebrated as something special and rare. All our curatorial efforts and conservation knowledge should be invested to ensure this kind of face-to-face encounter with cultural heritage.

Digitization

The reproduction of manuscripts has been on the agenda as long as photographic methods have existed. Most manuscript collections have photographic and microfilm archives. With the rise of digitization the reproduction of manuscripts has gained a new previously unknown

⁴ Nevertheless it might be a particularly asset for the library to ensure exhibitions which are of interest only to a small research community. The effort and the cost for this kind of important exhibitions must be carefully balanced.

quality and impetus. While the role of a digital copy as a reliable means of preservation able to replace microfilm is still disputed, digitization has given a new life and value to manuscripts collections. Digital copies of a manuscript in colour available on the screen, wherever and whenever, not only permits one to admire the beautiful images but also gives unlimited access to studying the manuscript in all its aspects, regardless of any preservation concerns for the original once the digitization procedure (which must be handled in a careful, item-specific, optimal way) has been completed. Digitization raises a lot of administrative, technical and strategic issues. The curation of a manuscripts collection involves defining a wish list with a long-term vision: the ultimate goal is to have all copyright-free manuscripts online and to take a step by step approach to reach this goal. A decision needs to be taken on internal or external service options and a cost framework must be devised and established. If originals are subjected to digitization, the long-term archiving and survival of the digital copies must be considered by the curator. As the process is stressful for the original, it is important to ensure that it does not have to be repeated in the foreseeable future except should more advanced methods giving even higher quality images be developed. The best available method must be applied to these documents with a long-term perspective (i.e. for some decades) since we have realised from our earlier decisions on microfilms and facsimiles that the time span of a secondary format is not very long. It is also in the interests of the manuscripts curator to ensure the best possible presentation and access to the digital copy both in the context of various presentations in digital collections or libraries and via catalogues. Ongoing care must be dedicated to these procedures and the various options for display. Much help is being received from the technical side since engineers love to see the most modern technology applied to historical testaments of culture.

Within the manuscripts collection there are several reasons for digitizing, and every effort should be made to have a single administration of metadata, long-term archiving and presentation of digital copies arising from different approaches. We can distinguish user-created digitization in the context of demand for copies or loans from digitization in the context of different projects, digitization of single or several items and digitization for preservation. A particular issue is the reuse of secondary formats, particularly digitization from microfilm. When digitization was begun in the Manuscripts Department of the Bavarian

State Library, we applied a strict policy of using all existing microfilms. But we have learnt since then that this is rarely the last word, and we are very willing to go back to the original for high-quality colour digitisation if the manuscript allows it from a preservation perspective and if the costs are covered. Nevertheless, digitising from microfilm remains a valuable interim solution, cheaper for the paying user, non-invasive for the original and helpful as long as the microfilm is of good quality (not too much used), complete (and with images in the right order) and from a text manuscript.

Another typical issue is single images – especially in user-driven digitization. People usually want individual pages, individual images and not the whole manuscript. For the manuscript one-off complete digitization is better in some cases, while in others it is well known that only some pages of the manuscript are of interest. The best solution would be to allow for a single image presentation as well as for the presentation of the whole manuscript. Nevertheless, in my own library this often articulated wish has not been fulfilled even after seven years of intense digitization. Single images of manuscripts are digitized and long-term archived in the same way as full documents, but they are not displayed in the digital library and are thus not available to the user and are only accessible through internal administration tools. Digital copies of manuscripts are there to be shared, and a number of portals take great interest in these documents. It is up to the manuscripts curator to identify the best options for sharing the collection, for example, the CERL portal, Manuscriptorium, Europeana, World Digital Library, and there are many more.

Digital copies also allow the addition of features which contribute to making the collection or the manuscript known and interesting. Sometimes they may seem more of a game or a means of advocacy and propedeutics: from bookmarks, to calendars, postcards, books and school material to turning the pages applications, apps, virtual exhibitions and exhibition display, digital copies serve multiple purposes without having to touch the original. They therefore need care and require more and more description: from table of contents information page by page to full text transcription, translation, preservation reports, comparisons with other manuscripts, other editions and much more. Web 2.0 features may allow for users' input and discussion of research topics; in effect, the digital copy lives its own life but it is up to the curators to make this life useful to the original manuscript.

Networking

In order to be useful a manuscripts collection must be firmly embedded in a network. This can be research-directed towards a university or academy but can also be more generally culture-oriented, at a local level in the city to programmes for tourism, senior citizens, schools, churches and the memory institutions of museums and archives. For the manuscripts curator there are also lots of professional links, working groups, interest groups and ways of sharing. At a European level, the Consortium of European Research Libraries brings together research libraries interested in cultural heritage and smaller libraries can join this group through cluster membership. The CERL portal is open to all manuscripts collections accessible via OAI. LIBER has a Steering Committee for Heritage Collections and Preservation since its most recent restructuring in 2009 with a very active Manuscripts Group. IFLA has a section of Rare Books and Manuscripts. There are also many interesting projects at a European level, for example, Europeana Regia, which is digitizing more than 870 manuscripts, and many conferences. Internationally, the World Digital Library focuses on the most important cultural objects worldwide, the UNESCO Memory of the World lists on submission and acceptance national treasures. In the world of manuscripts we have a long-standing tradition of sharing and making our collections known. We live in excellent times for continuing this tradition at a high technical standard and for making sure that our centuries-old manuscripts maintain their impact on our own day.

English language editor Dr Ann Matheson

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Biographical sketch

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She is member of the Consortium of European Research Libraries (Advisory Task Group and Executive Committee) since 1990, IFLA's Rare Book and Manuscripts Section since 2009, and LIBER's Steering Committee for Preservation and Heritage Collections and member of the LIBER board since 2010. She is chair or member of various national and regional bodies for manuscripts and early printed books. She is involved in a number of national or regional projects in the area of manuscripts and early printed books, co-responsible for the mass digitization projects funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for manuscripts and early printed books, and responsible for the EU funded project Europeana Regia under the leadership of Bibliothèque nationale de France since January 2010.

SKRB ZA ZBIRKE RUKOPISA PREGLED ZADATAKA I DRUGIH ZNAČAJKI VEZANIH UZ RUKOPISE U MODERNOJ KNJIŽNICI

Sažetak

Članak započinje opisom integracije skrbi za zbirke rukopisa u modernoj knjižničnoj i informacijskoj mreži te nabroja zadatke koje skrb za zbirke rukopisa u znanstvenoj knjižnici podrazumijeva: poznavanje zbirke (vrste građe); razvoj i stvaranje zbirke (gdje se podrazumijeva odnos s darivateljima i prodavačima); različiti aspekti opisa rukopisa (tekstovi, ilustracije, problemi s arhivskom građom); referentna građa i referentno okruženje; pregledi istraživanja i utjecaj istraživanja na opis rukopisa. Daje se pregled korisničkih usluga in situ i na daljinu, te administrativnih pitanja digitalizacije, izložbi i suradnje. Zaštita, čuvanje i restauracija se spominju samo usputno, ali se ne razmatraju detaljno.

Ključne riječi: upravljačka pitanja odjela za rukopise, skrb o rukopisima u današnjem knjižničarstvu, izložbe rukopisa, digitalizacija rukopisa