

*Pro amore liborum*: Rare Book and Special Collections Librarianship [Session]

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Submitted by Speaker: Neal Turtell

This will be a rather free-wheeling talk on various aspects of rare books of interest to art librarians. One of the topics I have been asked specifically to address is the issue of just where in an institution rare books should go. Of course there many answers to this question, none of them absolutely right or wrong. To some extent it really doesn't matter as long as your users have access to the materials they need. But let's look at some of the permutations of which I am aware.

In Museums the tug of war is usually between the print department and the library. In academic settings there may be an art library and also a rare books collection. In my own institution both the print department and the library have extensive rare book collections. For us the deciding factor comes down to whether the item is best considered a work of art--in which case it usually goes to the print department; or is it primarily research material in which case it goes to the library. Our print department has no desire for unillustrated books so some of our most important items automatically go to the library, for example the 1486 first edition of Alberti's *De Re Aedificatoria* has no illustrations so it is in the library. But what of important illustrated books which can be considered both works of art and research material? An interesting case is a book that both the print department and the library tried to buy at roughly the same time. It is a sammelband of first editions of everything Durer wrote, in a contemporary binding and in just about perfect condition.

To make matters more interesting each department had an important donor ready to provide the funds. In this case it went to arbitration and was decided by the then Deputy Director, who was an expert in early German art, that it was more research than art so the library got it. The library did have something of an edge in that it was I who first found the book and had it on hold with the dealer, and it didn't hurt that my donor happened to be the Chairman of the Board of Trustees but it could have gone the other way and would that necessarily have been wrong? Hard to say as no one doubts the beauty of the Durer illustrations and it was also a magnificent object. I bring this up just to note that there are often no hard and fast rules.

In a University setting the question of who should have what often is between the art library and rare books and special collections. In that context the question may come down to which department can better care for the item. Rare books departments have dedicated storage areas with often better security and environmental conditions than the art library. But that is not always the case so again no necessarily hard and fast rules.

But I suspect that is not what you came to hear. So I will offer some advice based on years of experience. The National Gallery of Art Library was not always the large and respected organization it is now. For many years it was a small reference collection housed in one room. Yes it did have some rare books, mainly gifts from the Widener family but nothing remotely approaching what it has now. Even when the library started its great expansion with the opening of the East Building, rare books were not part of its mission. What happened?

First the library became much more open to researchers. They are after all your best advocates. How do they become your advocates? One word: SERVICE. Do everything you can for them. Be flexible in your policies, make exceptions when you can and they will be your friends for life. And do it cheerfully, don't feel like it's a burden. When done with the right attitude it's even fun. You and your staff will get great satisfaction from knowing that the library is a help to research. You will be gratefully mentioned in the acknowledgements of publications and in that way others will learn that your library is a wonderful place to do research. In the small world of art research the word of mouth endorsement of art historians goes a long way.

Outreach is very important and one of the best ways to do this is to mount exhibitions from your collection, and lend items to others when they ask for loans to their shows. Even a small vitrine in the library can expose your users and visitors to the interesting things you have. Ideally you may even be able to get some space outside the library to mount your shows. The National Gallery Library for decades only had an exhibit space in the library, but the shows were considered interesting so when a tiny space became available in the West Building it was offered to the library. In what was formerly a storage room for cleaning supplies (I said it was tiny) 4 vitrines were built into the wall giving us room to display 12-16 books. This turned out to be a nice size for us. Small enough that finding enough good material for each show was not a terrible burden, but giving us a public face open to everyone 7 days a week. We change this show only twice a year so the amount of work is not too difficult. There are so many topics you could cover.

So I assume that you are considered essential to the mission of your institution. But you still don't have the resources necessary to build the collection in the ways you would like. Those art historians that love you so much usually are not your prime donor base. Yes they may give you their libraries, and that's a wonderful thing, but most art historians are not wealthy. You need to go where the money is.

Work with your development office. You may need to persuade them that the library is a worthwhile beneficiary. Make sure that the staff in the rest of the organization love the library so the development office is hearing from several sources that the library is a good bet. Also most development offices will like to hear that relatively small amounts of money go a long way in the library. A gift of just a few thousand dollars can let you acquire marvelous things. Ideally they will let you go after donors on your own when you convince them that library donors are not the same people they are after for the major gifts. Will they poach some of your donors? Probably but that's ok, the institution has made a friend from your diligence and that only increases your stature in the institution.

One of the best ways to find donors is to try to get yourself invited to your institution's social events. This may be difficult to start. But when your events department discovers that you are a charming conversationalist able to get along with a wide variety of people they may start including you in their lists. If you can't achieve this meet people on your own. Most of you already give tours so start inviting people you meet to special tours geared to developing a donor base. Start small and work up. Yes, it works.

Soon you will have a nice amount of money to buy rare books and you can start to fight with your print department or special collections library as to who gets to keep them!

Thank you.