



Curating print collections in the digital age

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**87 — Marketing of rare and special collections in a digital age
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Abstract:

This paper discusses the recent emphasis on McGill University's special collections and some practical steps initiated to maintain the relevancy of print in the digital age. By sharing our collections through exhibitions, and further extending our reach with an associated digital component, we are both increasing visibility of, and improving access to our collections. The benefits of digitization include improved access and long term preservation of the materials. This encourages collaboration, in particular between librarians ensuring collection and institutional the transference and sharing of collection and institutional knowledge.

Curating print collections in the digital age

In a time when research libraries' general collections are increasingly becoming homogeneous and 'e-preferred', it is our heritage collections that differentiate us and anchor our physical presence. These important resources, vital for teaching, researching, and learning, are too often inaccessible, uncatalogued, and ultimately, undiscoverable. By curating exhibitions of these hidden collections, we have an opportunity to share our collections beyond our library's walls while contributing to the continuity of our institutional knowledge.

These challenges are not new. In 2003, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Task Force on Special Collections¹ prepared a white paper describing "...the problem, the opportunities, and some recommendations for how our communities might proceed to expose

¹ ARL Special Collections Task Force formed 2001

hidden special collections and encourage their use". These concerns, outlined a decade ago, persist today.²

This paper will focus on the curation of hidden collections as a means of maintaining currency in the digital age. It will also explain the recent emphasis on special collections at McGill University as well as some practical steps initiated to maintain the relevancy of print in the digital age. We will describe our exhibition program by focusing on a recent display of rare Islamic material. By sharing our collections through exhibitions, and further extending our reach with an associated digital component, we are both increasing the visibility of, and improving access to our collections. The benefits of digitization include improved access and long term preservation of the materials. Moreover, a carefully curated project provides an opportunity for recently graduated librarians to work closely with senior colleagues, and offers a cohesive, global view, thus easily identifying lacunae and synergies with other collections.

McGill University Library

Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC) is located within the Humanities and Social Sciences library of McGill University, and maintains a wide breadth of materials, with some 500,000 bibliographic items that span the many disciplines offered by McGill University, both historically and contemporary. RBSC's collection strengths lie in the humanities and social sciences, particularly Canadiana, art and architecture, Islamic studies, the history of ideas, literature and the history of the book. The collection also houses holdings in zoology, ornithology, early agriculture, and entomology. Additional rare McGill collections are maintained in the branch libraries of Law, History of Medicine and Music, complementing and supplementing RBSC. Currently, RBSC staff consists of a manuscript curator, with three librarians³ and three staff members. A new program is being developed in which subject librarians working in other branch libraries that have significant collections housed in RBSC are being asked to work more closely with these rare materials (both in terms of development and curation) and with the curator of RBSC.⁴ This approach is the result of the Dean of Libraries' implementation of a new strategic plan, which puts special collections in the spotlight. The aim is to ensure that an awareness of the collection's breadth and depth is passed on to the university's newest librarians - McGill has hired some 25 new librarians in the past 7 years, most of whom are recent MLIS graduates. It is imperative for those who have been working at McGill for many years to share, teach and discuss their institutional knowledge with new librarians before retirement. Ultimately, these new focuses assist the development of the new librarians to ensure that the silos of old are not reconstituted.

The authors of this paper are two examples of the new program to ensure the collections in RBSC are maintained and exposed to wider communities of scholars, researchers, librarians

² See OCLC report 2010 <http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2010/2010-11.pdf>; Special Collections in ARL Libraries 2009 <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/scwg-report.pdf>

³ The three librarians are responsible for: Art & Architecture; Children's Book Collections and Popular Culture; and History of Printing Collections, respectively. A posting for a History of Science librarian recently closed.

⁴ Further, pre-1850 material from the McGill collection is currently being moved to RBSC.

and the general public. Sean Swanick, Liaison Librarian⁵ for Islamic Studies, currently works one day per week in RBSC with the rare Islamic materials. The Islamic collection of RBSC holds roughly 500 manuscripts, 700 lithographs and over a thousand rare printed volumes. Together this collection is one of the largest in Canada and offers researchers and scholars a wide variety of topics and disciplines. Liaison Librarian Jennifer Garland recently transferred from the main branch library to join RBSC as the liaison for Architecture and Art, in both rare and contemporary holdings. The Blackader-Lauterman Collection of Architecture and Art contains over 3,000 monograph titles dating from 1511, plus some 100 historical serials. This collection is particularly strong in Renaissance architectural treatises, iconography, and has a strong collection of catalogues raisonnées. Outreach is an important aspect of Jennifer's role in RBSC, both to students and faculty, but also to other liaison librarians. The goal is to share with all library staff the opportunities for study in RBSC, the availability of primary materials on campus, and increasing the number of class visits to special collections.

Library Exhibitions

Material from McGill Library collections is regularly displayed in exhibition cases of almost all branches. The largest of these display areas is in the entrance hall of the Humanities and Social Sciences Library. RBSC, located on the 4th floor of the same building, offers similar vitrines in the public area, as well as smaller cases inside the RBSC reading room.



Exhibition celebrating al-Ghazali, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, McGill University. Photo: G. Houston

⁵ At McGill, liaison librarians are responsible for: developing communication links with designated academic departments; Advising clients on discovering and using effectively the library's resources; Development of the library's collection.

The Islamic Studies Library (ISL)



Islamic Studies Library (Morrice Hall), McGill University. Photo: K. Fiedler

The Islamic Studies Library is located in Morrice Hall, a Gothic style building in the centre of the campus. The exhibition case itself stands at the heart of the first floor. It is centrally located between study spaces and the stairs leading to the second floor. The display cabinet is of Victorian architecture and holds a maximum of 16 items, and can accommodate material of varying sizes, from elephant folio to standard or regular sized monographs and leaves. Description cards for each item are usually mounted on both sides of the cabinet so as not to interfere with the displayed items. The Shahnameh collection of leaves and manuscripts held in RBSC was recently displayed in the ISL.



Islamic Studies Library, exhibition area Photo: K. Fiedler

The Shahnameh collection, hitherto unknown to the uninitiated user, is modest comprising approximately 40 leaves and one complete manuscript. Of particular importance are a leaf from the famous Demotte Shahnameh⁶ and two leaves from the 1341 Shahnameh⁷.

⁶ Named after Georges Demotte, the dealer responsible for its dispersion. Cf. Simpson, M.S. The illustration of an epic: The earliest Shahnama Manuscripts. Garland Publishing, Inc. New York. USA.



Shahnameh Exhibition: An enthroned ruler. Persian MS 15 McGill University Library

The Shahnameh is one of the foremost literary works to encapsulate the breadth and depth of Iran's historical trajectory. First composed by Ferdowsi to preserve Iran's cultural, linguistic and historical heritage, the Shahnameh, meaning 'the book of kings,' details the history of Iran prior to the Arab invasion in the 7th century. This literary work, a national epic composed in 52,000 couplets tells the story of heroes, villains, monsters and offers sage advice on moral lessons in governance. Legendary are the stories of its famous kings and heroes, especially of Rostam who so fearlessly defended the Persian kingdom in many spectacular battles against the hostile *Turanians* from the North. The epic also relates the important features of ideal kingship. It narrates the battle between Good and Evil, and is a constant reminder that life is just a transitory memento.⁸



Shahnameh Exhibition: Bahram Gur hunting. McGill University Library

Much of this collection has remained hidden until the recent exhibition and the subsequent digitization of the leaves and manuscripts on display. The digital exhibition, launched

⁷ Simpson, Marianna Shreve. "A Reconstruction and Preliminary Account of the 1341 Shahnama with some Further Thoughts on Early Shahnama Illustration." In *Persian Painting from the Mongols to the Qajars*. Robert Hillenbrand, ed. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 215-247.

⁸ Garland, Jennifer, and Swanick, Sean. "Shahnameh by Ferdowsi: Islamic Studies Library Exhibition." *Manuscripts on My Mind: Newsletter of the Vatican Film Library* 5 (2012).

concurrently with the physical exhibition, and will remain online permanently⁹. This online component serves as a convenient teaching tool for the material, which fits well with current course developments in McGill's Department of Art History. Dr. Cecily Hilsdale, McGill professor of art history, used both elements in creating an assignment for her introductory course on Medieval Art and Architecture. The assignment, a visual analysis of one of four selected items on display, required students to spend time with both the physical works and the digital images. Students were asked to describe the painting techniques of a leaf of their choice and provide a detailed description of the techniques, colours, and visual effects. The 2-3 page assignment also instructed students to comment on the different viewing experiences offered and to note any details of the illuminations lost when transferred to digital. The overlap between the physical display and its digital surrogate allowed for a stimulating student experience. Comparisons were to draw on the differences and similarities between the physical and digital realms as well as the layout of both the physical exhibition and the online exhibition.



Shahnameh Exhibition: Iskandar kills the Abyssinian monster. Persian MS 51

To view the Shahnameh exhibition, students visited the Islamic Studies Library, bound by its opening hours and affected by lighting conditions within the structure of Morrice Hall. The displayed items would appear differently depending on the time of day, highlighting new sections of an image as the amount of natural light changed by degrees.

⁹ This is the first digital exhibition in recent memory to launch with the physical exhibition. Typically the digital component appears later, or after the display has been dismantled. One may view the digital exhibition at: <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/shahnameh/index.php>.



Shahnameh Exhibition: Gurgin betrays Bizhan. Persian MS 26 McGill University Library. Photo: K. Fiedler

In contrast with visiting the exhibition display in person, the digital images provide another view, one where the miniature painting is isolated on a neutral background, free from distraction and (where possible) to zoom in on specific elements. Moreover, the digital exhibition also allowed for extended examination outside of library hours thus, providing more opportunities to inspect and reflect on a particular image or images. This contrast provided the students with the opportunity to grapple with current debates surrounding the digitization of rare materials: what are the positive and negative aspects of being able to touch and sense a physical object versus its digital surrogate; what can one learn by contrasting these mediums? What is lost or gained with such intersections and opportunities? These are questions that researchers, faculty members and librarians contemplate when making materials available to a wide audience while also taking advantage of the opportunities of the digital realm.



Octagon Room, Islamic Studies Library, Photo: K. Fiedler

In addition, Dr. Hilsdale arranged for a third viewing opportunity, a class visit to the Islamic Studies Library to view all the leaves out of the cases and for a brief lecture by the two librarians involved. The session witnessed some 90 students enter the Islamic Studies Library's ornate Octagonal Room, a beautiful space complete with stained glass windows and mezzanine. The session provided a unique experience for everyone involved. The exhibition had, by this time, been dismantled and with the leaves on display for the lecture, offering the students an opportunity to investigate, in person and up close, these rare materials, seen

previously through the glass of the exhibition case, or online. Each presenter prepared a ten-minute discussion on different aspects of the epic poem and the leaves on display. The presentation discussed some of the major characteristics of Persian miniature painting, paint pigments, paper processes used to produce the leaves, and an introduction to a history of the Shahnameh, the pieces in McGill's collection and the provenance of some of the items. The presentations were expanded by students' questions and observations, which ranged from the proper care and housing of such rare, paper-based items, to the style and type of headgear worn by the characters depicted in the paintings. As well, several students shared their delight, as the leaves were turned from verso to recto, in discovering that the paintings were not stand-alone images, rather leaves long since separated from a manuscript, enveloped in the epic tale with text on the verso.

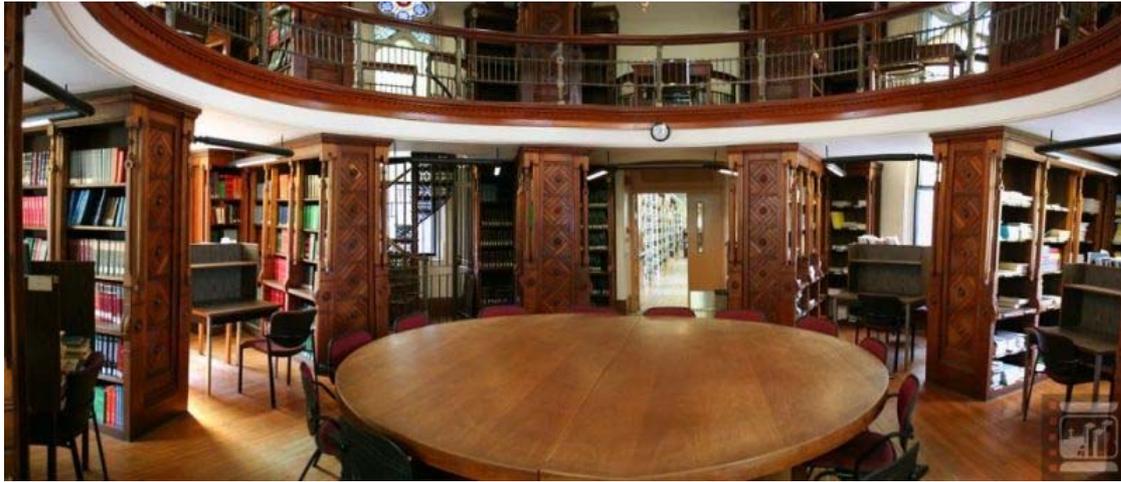


Shahnameh Exhibition, Islamic Studies Library, Photo: K. Fiedler

The in-library session, itself an extension of the original exhibition, benefitted these undergraduate students in several ways. First, the students were encouraged to examine closely and observe these primary documents through monitored touching and feeling, an opportunity of great importance to aspiring scholars. In this instance, it is, to quote Bahde, “sometimes compromising wisely and carefully on measured evils to find the lesser of the two--slightly increased handling, or unenlightened students?--can require us to examine what is really important in our dual missions of preservation and access”¹⁰. In this particular instance, the benefits outweighed the potential for injuring the items on display. To be sure, both librarians and Dr. Hilsdale were attentive to the care of the items on display so as to ensure their character. Secondly, it was, for many, a first introduction to the world of Rare Books and Special Collections. Though the session was not located in RBSC, it provided an opportunity to meet with librarians and appeared to alleviate many of the students' “archival anxiety” of RBSC as an unknown and, perhaps a library seen with trepidation due to its ‘archival’ stereotype of being a place for only select researchers rather than a library for any and all researchers¹¹. Furthermore, this exhibition offered the students seeking a thesis topic the opportunity to learn and know more about the Shahnameh collection and related avenues of research interests, no matter their linguistic background, and with up-close exposure to items that otherwise would have remained a hidden collection.

¹⁰ Bahde, 87.

¹¹ Bahde, 77.



Octagon Room, Islamic Studies Library, Photo: K. Fiedler

Future Directions

The success of the Shahnameh exhibition in both the print and virtual worlds, and the exposure of this collection to a new audience, is encouraging and provides McGill with opportunities to expand on such initiatives.

McGill Library's Digital Initiatives (DI) team is responsible for the digitization and website design of the online exhibitions. Digitization requests are submitted by librarians to the Collection Development Committee, in consultation with DI. Project proposals are prioritized based on uniqueness of the project, preservation needs of the item, and relevance to, in order, Montreal, Quebec, Canadiana and the world beyond our borders. The DI team is effectively organized for digital projects having templates, which can be slightly stylized to match content and can streamline digitization of exhibitions quite quickly. The only foreseeable delay, which is not unique to McGill would be due to lack of metadata on the part of the curator. As mentioned, the Shahnameh exhibition is unique in this sense, thanks to excellent curatorial notes. With this infrastructure in place, and other digital programs having been in place for the last 16 years such as the Digitize On Demand (DOD) which permits any scholar to request an item to be digitized at a subsidized cost, McGill is complementing its print collections with digital collections. This is culminating in greater exposure to some of the known and unknown, or less known, resources such as hidden collections being exposed. In order for all of this to take shape, librarians must recognise their role as, in part being an ambassador for their collections in a holistic manner.

Hidden collections remain a surmountable issue for academic libraries. With the continuing evolution of libraries, it is imperative that we strategically assess and curate print collections in the digital age. Innovative ideas for making these collections available are both necessary and advantageous. Facilitating the discovery of hidden collections remains a challenge for researcher and librarian alike. However, if afforded the opportunity to collaborate, the teaching, learning and researching of a given institution's potential will be maximized. Future endeavours such as this, will further our goals as curators of special collections in ensuring that scholars, and researchers remain actively aware of our dynamics as curators as well as making use of hidden collections.

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