3-14-2013

Moment in Time

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Abstract
Contextual essay about an image of librarians cataloging books in 1948 at Penn Libraries.

Keywords
Libraries, Book History, Cataloging

Disciplines
History

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Moment in Time

Just a brief post this week inspired by the University Archives Digital Photo Collection hosted by the Penn Libraries. I could get lost for hours browsing through some of the 7,000+ photos from Penn's history available online, finding images of everything from Zane Grey in his Penn baseball uniform, 1896 to the women who programmed one of the world's first computers. Working at the Penn Libraries though I was fascinated by this photo taken around 1948:

I like the clutter and commotion of the card catalog drawers, the books ready for processing, and the eerily-lit ambiance. On a lark I thought I would dig up one of the books waiting for processing that day in 1948. One of the goals of a library is to hold knowledge and enable its easy retrieval so I figured it would be a fitting example of the ways libraries stand the test of time.
Despite all the books in the picture I was only able to spot one with a legible title (position indicated above).

On further examination, after rotating the image, the title looked like “Dance Observer” and I headed to the online catalog to see if we still had it in the stacks. The first hit in the catalog, the Dance Observer turns out to have been a periodical published between 1934 and 1964, more importantly the issues were here in the library only a few floors above me. Figuring the issue in question would have been published in or before 1948 I went browsing through covers to see if one matched. Only a few minutes later, there it was:
Easy to identify because of the striking photo of Doris Humphrey on the cover, this issue is today on the 5th floor of the Van Pelt-Dietrich Library Center. It’s traveled over the years though, when it first came out in January 1947 it went to the Maria Hosmer Penniman Education Library at Penn which served as the departmental library of the School of Education. According to a small pencil mark inside the cover it was transferred on January 8, 1948 to the Furness building, which was once the main Penn library, and bound with other 1947 issues of the magazine. In the 1960s it then of course made the move over to the new Van Pelt library which celebrated its 50th birthday last year. It’s nice to see this magazine of dance reviews and news still right where it should be, thanks to the constant work of catalogers and library staff from the photo 65 years ago to today.
About Mitch Fraas

Mitch Fraas is the Scholar in Residence at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. He is also the interim director of the Penn digital humanities forum. At Penn, Mitch works on a variety of projects cutting across general and special collections, with a special focus on digital humanities. He holds doctoral and master's degrees in history from Duke University and earned his bachelor's degree at Boston College. His doctoral dissertation examined the legal culture of British India in the 17th and 18th centuries, arguing for the existence of a unified early modern British imperial legal culture whether in Philadelphia, Bombay, or London.

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