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A Taste of Recent Acquisitions

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A Taste of Recent Acquisitions

Abstract
Contextual essay about items in the exhibition of recent acquisitions at the Penn Libraries, Fall 2013.

Keywords
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Every day the Kislik Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts at the Penn Libraries acquires new and exciting material from around the globe. To help bring these items to the attention of a wide audience, Rare Book and Manuscript Library Director David McKnight and a team of curators and exhibit specialists have put together a fantastic exhibit showcasing some of their acquisitions over the past five years. For the next three months these items will be on display in the Van Pelt-Dietrich Library Center on the sixth and first floors. Some of these collections and materials have been highlighted here on the blog in the past, including the Fez collection of Lithographs and the Asylum for Orphan Girls Records. To encourage people to take a closer look at the exhibit I thought I would do a quick rundown of some of my other favorites now on display.

Upon entering the exhibit it’s hard to miss the item above which hangs on the back wall of the Goldstein gallery. An original 1926 tent revival banner measuring more than 10 feet across and four feet high, it was produced by Clarence Larkin, a baptist minister and former professional draftsman with a knack for integrating his millenialist theology with his design background. This particular banner, used in Harrisburg, Pa., depicts Larkin’s vision of salvation history and provides a sense of how visual and oratorical cultures
combined in the world of the tent revival.


Another favorite from the exhibition is this wonderful seventeenth-century uncut sheet of 52 playing cards with each suit representing a different continent (Europe: hearts, Asia: diamonds, Africa: spades, and the Americas: clubs). The cards contain facts about locations on the continent as well as portraits of leaders and other figures. Below are several uncut cards from clubs including the three (Florida), five (New Mexico), and Queen ["D" for *Dame*] (Virginia). The idea of Elizabeth I representing the “Queen” of the Americas is particularly striking, especially for a game produced in France.

The Penn Libraries have a strong collecting interest in the history of reading and the book. The new acquisitions gallery is full of
great items in this vein but one of my favorites is this collection of circulating library labels. The bookplates and labels on the left come from circulating libraries in Reading, Liverpool, Manchester, and Dover, and are just a small sample of a striking collection of 219 such labels acquired by Penn in 2011 with the assistance of the Allan G. Chester and Florence K. Chester fund. Circulating libraries sprang up in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to serve a growing populace of avid readers and these labels help document the spread of the libraries and their clientele. Some of the labels include detailed rules for borrowing and provide warnings against “tearing out Leaves, Prints, &c.”

As is the case with book labels, the most interesting aspect of a book might not be its textual content but its material form. Perhaps my favorite example of this amongst the new acquisitions on display is a copy of an eighteenth-century printing of a classic of canon law

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Label from the Pitt Street Library in Liverpool (c.1800).

Examen Juris Canonici Juxta V libros decretalium (Vienna: Georg
What sets this volume apart of course is the contemporary recessed compartment provided for a pair of spectacles! This item came to Penn recently as part of the fascinating Dr. Daniel and Eleanor Albert Medical Ephemera Collection which has a special focus on ophthalmology and the human eye.

The photograph on the right is one of many items from one of the most substantial new acquisitions here at Penn, the records of the Vermont Marble Company. This collection contains hundreds of linear feet of documents, drawings, photographs, and other records from the 1870s to the 1970s. On display in the gallery are pay records and company store ledgers from the 1870s, advertisements for marble and its uses, and mesmerizing photographs of quarrying work as shown here. The Vermont Marble Company supplied stone to countless building projects across the world with a special focus on monumental architecture. The National Gallery of Art, Lincoln Memorial, and United Nations Building, among others, all used marble provided by the company.

Finally, no visit to the new acquisitions exhibit would be complete without seeing the colorful and physically impressive 15th-century Genealogical Chronicle of the Kings of England purchased by the Penn Libraries in 2007. The roll is 37 feet long in its entirety and provides a detailed if often fanciful genealogy of the English kings leading back to Adam and Eve. If you can’t make it to Penn to see the roll in

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Marble Quarry in West Rutland, Vermont (c. 1910s-20s)

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Detail of Noah’s Ark from membrane one of Penn Ms. Roll 1066.
person, scholars here at the
Schoenberg Institute for
Manuscript Studies (SIMS) have made it available online in several
different formats. A full facsimile of the manuscript is available both
with and without annotation describing each illustration and name on
the roll. In addition, SIMS has filmed a video guide to the
manuscript that helps explain it in more detail.

Ed. Note: This post would not be possible without the assistance of
Andrea Gottschalk and her team of exhibit specialists who mounted
the exhibit and provided many of the images used here.

Come visit the exhibition which is on display in the Goldstein Family
Gallery (sixth floor) (closes December 13th) and the Kamin Gallery
(first floor) (closes January 24)
Van Pelt-Dietrich Library Center
3420 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA
Goldstein Gallery hours: Monday-Friday, 10am-5pm; Wednesday,
10am-8pm (after 6pm email rbml@pobox.upenn.edu for guest pass)
Kamin Gallery hours: Monday-Friday, 9am-6pm

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.
View all posts by Mitch Fraas »
Suzanna Barucco said:

Thank you for this post—the first I've read from the Penn Libraries Blog (via Penn News Today). The wider university community should know more about the Library's collection and acquisitions.

Mark Mandel said:

Fascinating! I'll make a point of seeing this exhibit.

Regarding Elizabeth I as the “Queen” of the Americas: I was struck by the region that the creator of the deck chose for her to represent. On the other cards shown, Florida (3) “is of 3 types” and New Mexico (5) “has 5 regions”. Elizabeth was known as “the virgin queen”, so it’s hardly surprising for her to represent Virginia.

Mitch Fraas said:

Thanks so much – it’s a fantastic exhibit. Mark – I had also puzzled over the breakdowns of regions on the cards too. What surprised me about Elizabeth wasn’t so much placing her with Virginia but that a 17thc. French card maker would have elevated an English monarch to the status of Queen of the americas. Would have expected a bit more nationalism there!

Catharine Findiesen Hays said:

As a born and raised Vermonter, I knew Vermont Marble as a proud part of our state’s economy and legacy throughout the US and the world, I was happy to learn of this acquisition and hope that the rich history of this American cultural treasure is brought to life in its new home.
The conclusions and views presented on posts within “Unique at Penn” reflect those of their writers and do not represent the official position of the University of Pennsylvania or the University of Pennsylvania Libraries.