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Collecting Histories

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Collecting Histories

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IN THE FALL OF 2014, the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies convened the Seventh Annual Lawrence J. Schoenberg Symposium on Manuscript Studies in the Digital Age to consider the question: what can the study of collecting habits and provenance tell us about manuscript culture?¹ Sometimes considered niche areas of interest, the history of collecting and provenance studies have broad implications for how we understand and interpret the manuscript book today. In the symposium, which we called “Collecting Histories,” our aim was to tease out some of those implications and provoke further thought on how examining patterns of collecting confirms or confounds assumptions about readership and the interpretation of texts and contexts of the premodern manuscript.

This issue of *Manuscript Studies* highlights the results of the “Collecting Histories” symposium and continues the conversations started during the event. As the contributions in this issue reveal, the life of a manuscript book only begins when a scribe puts down his or her pen. What happens from that moment to the present day can reveal a wealth of information about readership and reception across time.

1 The symposium was held 6–8 November 2014 at the Free Library of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania. For more information, see http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/lectures/ljs_symposium7.

Patterns of collecting can shed light on the cultural and intellectual values of societies, institutions, and the individuals who create, conserve, and disperse manuscript collections for a variety of reasons. At a fundamental level, these patterns can tell us about the changing role of manuscripts across time, from simple vehicles of textual transmission to revered objects of collectors' desires. For example, Megan L. Cook's essay highlights an early instance of how a manuscript copy of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (now Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.4.27) represented for its early sixteenth-century collector a better witness, and therefore more authoritative version, of Chaucer's original work than contemporary printed editions due to its perceived proximity to Chaucer's own time and to the author himself. Lisa Fagin Davis also considers how collectors' relationships to past ideals inform collecting habits in her exploration of the journey of an illuminated breviary made for a church in France in the fifteenth century that ended up in the library of a Hollywood movie star-turned-missionary in the middle of the twentieth century.

Other essays reveal how trends in scholarship as well as in the trade both reflect and shape the interpretive frameworks that motivate collectors to focus on certain types or groupings of manuscripts over others. For example, William P. Stoneman considers the effect that two key scholarly exhibitions in mid-nineteenth century England had on the dispersal of one man's collection and on the acquisition of another's. Similarly, in her essay on the motivations of Isabella Stuart Gardner, the great collector of the golden age of Venetian painting, Anne Marie-Eze argues that Gardner began to acquire Venetian illuminated manuscripts, which were otherwise largely overlooked by other North American collectors at the time, under the direct influence of her teacher and early historian of Venetian art Charles Eliot Norton, who also happened to be a dealer.

As was the case with Gardner, the forces that propelled the buying and selling of manuscripts could have a protective effect upon the books that passed through the trade. Gardner was determined to preserve her precious manuscripts intact for future generations to study and to appreciate as intended by the culture that created them. Other essays and contributions to this volume expose the deleterious effects that the trade can have on these books when they are taken, frequently by theft, from personal and

institutional libraries or broken up and sold as fragments or individual leaves for greater profit. Julia Verkholtantsev tracks, for instance, the provenance of a fragment of a Greek New Testament now in the University of California's Young Research Library's Special Collections back to the renowned library of St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai. She makes the strong case that it was stolen in the nineteenth century likely by a biblical scholar who may have wanted the fragment for his own study, or possibly for his own profit, as it appeared on the market relatively soon after its last appearance in a catalog of the library's collection.

The practice of breaking up books for profit is placed directly in the crosshairs of an essay by Eric Johnson and Scott Gwara. Their essay lays out in a series of revealing case studies the economic benefits reaped by dealers who take apart medieval manuscripts in order to sell individual leaves at a much greater profit than if the volume had been sold whole. While the more sordid facts of the trade in premodern manuscripts are disturbing and shameful, especially to modern scholars who place a high value on the material evidence that complete volumes provide, they are nonetheless a reality. More than just simply pointing out that fact and tallying up how sellers turn a profit from the sale of leaves, Johnson and Gwara also demonstrate how digital projects, including their own Manuscriptlink, enable the virtual reconstruction of fragmented manuscripts and manuscript collections for today's digital collectors.

Several authors in this issue, including Johnson and Gwara, have relied on the Schoenberg Institute's own provenance research tool, the Schoenberg Database of Manuscripts (SDBM), to track provenance history. Peter Kidd, for instance, uses data found in the SDBM to discover the origins of one manuscript, the Bywater Missal (now Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bywater adds. 2). Alternatively, Toby Burrows has been able to mine SDBM data to begin a reconstruction of one of the largest private collections of premodern manuscripts, that of Sir Thomas Phillipps, whose book stamp is featured on the cover of this issue.²

2 The book stamp of Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792–1872) appears on the first folio of an eighteenth-century Italian manuscript copy of *De rerum natura*, now held at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries (UPenn LJS 179).

The SDBM may be one of the oldest online resources for the study of the transmission of manuscripts across time and place, but it is hardly the only one. In this issue, we feature several projects that are in various stages of development; each one demonstrates the possibility and promise that open access and interoperable technologies hold for collaboration across individual and institutional platforms. As Hanno Wijsman reports, in France the Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes (IRHT) has long made the institute's hard-copy resources for provenance studies available to researchers interested in it, but they have in recent years undertaken the monumental task of making those resources available online through the Bibale project, which is one spoke in a hub of interoperable resources available from the IRHT for the general study of manuscripts.

Two other projects, Debra T. Cashion's Broken Books project and the previously mentioned Manuscriptlink developed by Scott Gwara and Eric Johnson, offer users the ability to gather and contribute images and metadata for the purposes of reuniting fragments in a digital environment. Through these virtual reconstructions that can be made available to the public, scholars are provided with an opportunity to study and assess the manuscripts in a way that would not have been possible even five years ago.

As this issue of *Manuscript Studies* demonstrates, the history of collecting and the study of provenance are not limited to their assumed niche inhabited by antiquarians interested in old books. Quite the opposite, such study has greater ramifications for the larger field of manuscript studies and for the study of cultural and intellectual life in premodern to modern history in general. Within the rich narratives offered in this issue, plots threaded with twists of acquisition and loss, disappearance and discovery, survival and destruction, lead us to a fuller understanding of our shared intellectual and cultural heritage as it is passed down to us from one generation to the next.