Curating print collections in the digital age

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Abstract

Purpose – Purpose: As collection development in research libraries becomes increasingly homogeneous and “e-preferred”, it is our heritage collections that differentiate us and anchor the physical presence of our institutions. These valuable heritage resources, vital for teaching, researching, and learning are unfortunately too often inaccessible, uncatalogued, and ultimately undiscoverable. This paper focuses on the curation of special collections as a means of exposing hidden collections and discusses practical steps undertaken to highlight unique print materials in the digital age.

Design/methodology/approach – This case study describes the transformation of a hidden collection into a teaching collection through the exhibition of uncatalogued Islamic manuscripts, their associated digital component and the resulting faculty–librarian collaboration.

Findings – By sharing print collections through exhibitions with an associated digital component, we are both increasing the visibility of, and improving access to the material.

Originality/value – This case study outlines a successful approach to exposing hidden collections to support an innovative teaching and learning environment.

Keywords Exhibitions, Hidden collections, Islamic manuscripts, Primary source literacy, Special collections

Paper type Case study

Introduction

As collection development in research libraries becomes increasingly homogeneous and “e-preferred”, it is our heritage collections that differentiate us and anchor the physical presence of our institutions. These valuable heritage resources, vital for teaching, researching and learning, are unfortunately too often inaccessible, uncatalogued and, ultimately, undiscoverable. The challenge of hidden collections is not new. Association of Research Libraries (2003) Task Force on Special Collections prepared a white paper describing “[. . .] the problem, the opportunities and some recommendations for how our communities might proceed to expose hidden special collections and encourage their use”. This paper describes the transformation of a hidden collection into a teaching collection at McGill University Library (2011) through the exhibition of uncatalogued Islamic manuscripts, their associated digital component and the resulting faculty–librarian collaboration. The benefits of this approach include increased visibility, improved access and long-term preservation of the materials. Further, as we share these hidden collections with communities of users both locally and beyond our library’s walls, we are simultaneously contributing to the continuity of our institutional knowledge.

The project under study emerged from a physical and digital exhibition of Persian manuscripts and miniatures from the Shahnameh (Book of Kings) collection in the Islamic Studies Library (ISL). Upon discovery of the physical exhibition, art historian Dr Cecily Hilsdale contacted the authors to discuss a dynamic, hands-on teaching exercise for her undergraduate students with the exhibition material at its core. The authors, the Islamic Studies liaison librarian and the Art History liaison librarian, having previously worked together at the intersection of the history of European painting and Iranian lacquer-painted works, jumped at the chance to collaborate and share their subject specializations and to promote these collections to new scholars.

McGill university library

The authors of this paper are enthusiastic about sharing and promoting special collections. Sean Swanick, Liaison Librarian for Islamic Studies, currently works one day per week in Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC) with the rare Islamic materials. The Islamic collection has 700 manuscripts, as well as substantial holdings of lithographs and...
Shahnameh exhibition

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 details the history of Iran prior to the Arab invasion in the seventh century. This literary work, a national epic composed in 52,000 rhyming couplets, tells the story of heroes, villains and monsters and offers sage advice on moral lessons in governance. Legendary are the stories of its famous kings and heroes, especially of Rustam 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 (Figure 1).

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 Shahnameh (ca. 1350, Tabriz) and two leaves from the 1341 Shahnameh. Much of this collection remained hidden until the exhibition and the subsequent digitization of the leaves and manuscripts on display. The digital exhibition, launched concurrently with the physical exhibition, serves as a convenient teaching tool and was of particular interest to the course instructor who used both elements in creating an assignment for her introductory course on Medieval Art and Architecture. In the assignment, a visual analysis of one of four selected items on display, students were asked to describe the painting techniques of a leaf of their choice and provide a detailed description of the techniques used, the paint colours and the artistic visual effects. The two-page assignment also required that students spend time with both the physical works and the digital images and consider the two different viewing experiences, drawing on the differences and similarities between the physical and digital realms. To view the Shahnameh exhibition, students visited the ISL, bound by its opening hours and affected by lighting conditions. The displayed items appear differently depending on the time of day, highlighting new sections of an image as the amount of natural light changed by degrees. 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 with the ability 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(s). 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, professors and librarians contemplate when making materials available to a wide audience while also taking advantage of the opportunities of the digital realm.

In addition, the professor arranged for a third viewing opportunity, a class visit to the ISL’s ornate Octagonal Room. The exhibition had, by this time, been dismantled allowing the leaves to be on display for the lecture, offering the students an opportunity to investigate, in person and up close, these rare materials. The two librarians each prepared a ten-minute presentation 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 and paper processes used to produce the leaves and provided an introduction to a history of the Shahnameh, the specimens 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. In addition, 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 (Figure 2).

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 hands-on viewing, an opportunity of great importance to aspiring scholars. In this instance, it is, to quote Bahde (2011, p. 87):

[. . .] 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.

In this particular instance, the benefits outweighed the potential for damaging the items on display, though to be sure, both librarians and the professor were attentive to the care of the items on display. Second, it was, for many, a first introduction to the world of special collections. Although the session was not located in RBSC, it provided an opportunity to meet with librarians and appeared to alleviate student “archival anxiety” and shift the perception that archives and special collections materials are reserved for only select researchers. Furthermore, the exhibition offered students seeking a thesis topic the opportunity to learn and know more about the Shahnameh collection and related avenues of research, no matter their linguistic background, and provided hands-on exposure to items that otherwise would have remained a hidden collection.

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 Library with a case study from which to expand on such initiatives. Indeed, by engaging the community to make use of these collections in new and dynamic ways through projects such as this one, we are maximizing the subject knowledge of librarians and encouraging cross-disciplinary collaborative research opportunities.

With the continuing evolution of libraries, it is imperative that we strategically assess and curate print collections as tools for teaching in the digital age. Innovative ideas for making these collections available are both necessary and advantageous as facilitating the discovery of hidden collections remains a challenge for researcher and librarian alike. Future endeavours such as this case study will further this goal in ensuring a vibrant collaboration between faculty, librarians and hidden collections.

References

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