

COLLECTING RARE BOOKS IN A “FIVE LAW” LIBRARY

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Description: For the past half-century, Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Librarianship have been a fundamental guide to the development of the rare book collection at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion Library, Cincinnati.

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When Hebrew Union College was founded in 1875, all of the books in its Library

could fit into a single metal trunk. Indeed, every night they actually were stored in a metal trunk--to keep them from being gnawed by the rats that plagued the Ohio river levee district of Cincinnati where the College was then located. From this modest beginning, the collection of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion’s Klau Library, Cincinnati, has grown in size to include 440,000 printed books, 2,420 current periodical subscriptions, 2,300 manuscript codices, as well as many thousands of special collection items including scrolls, computer files, microforms, recorded and sheet music, maps, broadsides, bookplates, cuneiform tablets, stamps, and archival collections documenting non-American Jewish communities. The Klau Library, Cincinnati, functions both as a campus library and as the main research library within the HUC-JIR Library system. It supports the teaching functions of the Rabbinic and Graduate programs of the campus, and provides its depth of resources and various library services—including microfilming and digitizing--to the other HUC-JIR campus libraries.

Today’s session, “Keeping Great Collections Great,” focuses on one of the three main activities that define the function of a library, that of collecting, with the others

being preservation and access. A library that fails to develop its collections may well become an information curio cabinet. One that is deficient in providing access may become nothing more than a growing bibliographic mausoleum. But one that is inadequate in preserving its resources will surely fail to be a library at all—and become only a bibliographic trash heap.

At the Klau Library, we believe that our greatest collection strength lies in our holdings of scholarly monographs, periodicals, and printed editions of Jewish texts. Between 1875 and 1950, this collection grew in size from one trunk-full to about 100,000 volumes. During the first fourteen years of Herb Zafren's tenure as Librarian, the size of the collection doubled to 200,000 volumes, and by his retirement in 1994, it had nearly doubled again to some 385,000 volumes. During the past decade, we have added about six thousand newly published items each year, but never more than 100 items per year to the Rare Book Room collections. Since 1987, I have held the post of Collection Development Librarian; I believe that I have spent far less time in the role of selector than other Judaica librarians working at smaller-sized libraries. In my early years at the Library, it was the custom for all of the professional librarians to be given stacks of catalogues for selection, and today we entrust certain types of selection to our paraprofessional staff. Almost all of our current Hebrew monographs and text editions are received via approval plans from a few established dealers. A great many English and European-language monographs are received through standing orders. Since we automatically purchase every single item published by certain presses, there is no selection involved. Dealers' catalogs from Europe and South America, as well as catalogues from dealers in out of print and "antiquarian" imprints are scanned, but

relatively little time need be spent on deciding whether to acquire or not. I have tried to make my selection “gray zone” of what must be selected and what is outside the collection development parameters no wider than a razor’s edge. A critical factor which allows me to be very focused in selection is that the Klau Library, Cincinnati, like the Klau Library, New York, and the Frances-Henry Library, Los Angeles, is situated within walking distance of a major university collection; in Cincinnati this includes a particularly fine Classics Department library. For example, the Klau Library collects all material in and about Hittite and Elamite, and relies on the University of Cincinnati to acquire all other Ancient Near Eastern Indo-European language materials. Our membership in the Greater Cincinnati Library Consortium provides our users access to the fine religion collections at Xavier University and several local Catholic and Protestant seminaries, as well as other local colleges and universities.

E-mail announcements have added a new dimension to the selection process, but a formal, printed prospectus always catches my eye, since I need to decide whether to pass it on for cataloguing. It is the long standing practice of the Library to save such materials, as well as certain auction and dealers’ catalogs, as important bibliographic items in their own right. Another long standing policy is to purchase all items recommended by professors that fall within the broad scope of our collection parameters. (I have distributed a sheet which lists what we collect and the varying intensity and depth of different collections.) Whenever a new member of the faculty arrives, I acquaint them with this policy and encourage them to peruse our holdings to find sub-areas that they believe need strengthening.

Of course, all of this activity must be carried out within a budget; and it must come as no surprise when I say that the budget allocated is inadequate to the breadth and depth of collection that the Klau Library has been charged to acquire by the Board of the College-Institute. In the late 1980's, we decided to acquire no resources in videotape format except those required by the teaching staff for classroom viewing. Users were referred to the Cincinnati Board of Jewish Education, which did acquire such resources, but now no longer exists. At much the same time, we decided to reduce our acquisition of recorded music, which had been a strength of the collection--though with 15,000 titles in our *Song Index* and 3,000 items in the Recorded Music Catalog, it is still an important collection, but one now less current. By the mid-1990's, the Library was spending about \$250,000 per year on the acquisition of new scholarly monographs and periodicals, and I made the decision to allocate special and endowed funds previously dedicated to the acquisition of Rare Book Room items towards the acquisition of current publications, periodicals and monographs.

The philosophical underpinning for this decision can be found in Shiyali Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science*: Books are for use; Every reader his book; Every book, its reader; Save the time of the reader; A library is a growing organism.¹ (Applying the fifth of these laws recursively, we might modify "reader" to "user" and "book" to "information," to reflect developments of the past seventy years.)

As some of you know, it has been my constant and regular practice as a librarian to apply Ranganathan's *Laws* to all facets of Library operation as a decision-making tool. Implicit in these *Five Laws* is a model of the fundamental goal of the Library: to serve as the dynamic interface between the universe of bibliography and the universe of

users. The library exists to serve the information needs of its users. Unfortunately, this is not the practice at all libraries. In a facetious, but not untrue, commentary on the operation of academic libraries, M.B. Line derived an alternative set of descriptive, rather than theoretical, laws: Books are for collecting; Some readers their books; Some books their readers; Waste the time of the reader; The Library is a growing mausoleum.² One might derive from these "laws" that the library exists for its own sake, not for the sake of its users. I apply Line's "laws" as a final check; which set of laws does my decision really follow?

One consequence of the decision to divert funds from Rare Book Room acquisitions to open collection acquisitions was to make the selection and acquisition process for Rare Book Room items a task that involved a greater amount of both my own time and that of other members of our professional staff. It's quick and easy to rely on blanket and standing orders, or to write "buy everything new" on the cover of a publisher's catalog; it is, of course, labor intensive and intellectually challenging to select, search, and finally decide on what rare items are worth purchasing.

When I was in library school at the University of Illinois, I was taught that up to 40% of a research library's collection might not go through a formal circulation "check-out" in any generation. In the Klau Library, all books are for use, it's just that the user might not yet be born. When I am involved in the selection process for Rare Book Room collections, I try to imagine a user who will travel to Cincinnati—perhaps a long-term professor, or an intermediate term student, or a short term researcher—and then try to place some intellectual value to the prospective acquisition in terms of Ranganathan's fourth dictum of saving the time of the user.

This usually equates to only purchasing items that add strength to an already strong collection, but not always. Some years ago, I was offered a mid-eighteenth century *heter me'ah rabbanim* originating in eastern Hungary. It was printed, but most sheets had copious manuscript glosses. I checked the collection, and found we had no example of such a document. I consulted with several professors to see if this might be a useful teaching tool, and they all encouraged me to acquire it. Clearly, such a document was not likely to be available via interlibrary loan. The price was not high, and I decided to purchase it. Perhaps it has even been used.

As many of you know, the Library has a particularly strong collection of printed responsa. The first copy of a work is always to be found in the stacks; the second copy is shelved in our Freehof Responsa Collection of over 3,000 volumes, which fills the first floor book cases in the Rare Book Room of our second Library building opened in 1925. (Of course, this room has been “wired” so that a researcher may connect a laptop and access the Bar Ilan database via the local network.) When an early manuscript containing responsa of Meir ben Baruch of Rothenberg was offered for sale at a Kestenbaum auction, it immediately caught my eye. The detailed cataloguing provided by our esteemed moderator, Dr. Menahem Schmelzer, helped convince me that this was an item that belonged in a library and not in the hands of a private collector; thus, it was an item that would greatly enhance an already strong collection. Indeed, “great” was an important consideration, since this was to be the single item for which the Library paid the highest price ever—and made possible due to the funds provided by the Judaica Conservancy Foundation. When the day arrives that a scholar comes to

consult—better still, publish—this manuscript, s/he will find other strong collections to support very specific research.

Right before convention, I made decisions about items offered for sale at today's Judaica Jerusalem auction. One item that I considered was *Sha`arei kedushah*, Calcutta, 1841, advertised as “the first Yemenite book to be printed in Calcutta.” We have the Calcutta, 1851 edition. We have a fine collection of Indian Judaica, both printed books and manuscripts, and it is a collection to which I have actively added over the past few years. But I was very conflicted about the purchase of this volume. Was it too much of a “collectible?” Its audience was likely the Jews of Yemen, not the Jews of India. If it were a liturgy, I would surely have bid, since we try to collect all editions of liturgies; likewise, if it had been responsa, I would have bid. I asked Dr. Dan Rettberg, our Rare Book and Manuscript Librarian, to check on our holdings for this printer. If this title added to a nearly complete set of imprints, it would justify purchasing the book under the rubric of “history of Hebrew printing;” if our holdings were spotty, then adding the printer's first book would not justify its purchase. Dan's check of our holdings against the *Otzar ha-sefer ha-`ivri* revealed that we owned nine of thirty-two titles, and I decided against bidding on this item.

Unfortunately, stealing from “Rare Book Room Peter” to pay “Current Imprint Paul” is not the end of our collection development problems. And surely by next week, new ones will have arisen. Serving as Librarian of the Madras University Library for over twenty years, Ranganathan knew of what he spoke when he talked of finance as one of three factors—the others being the “universe of readers” and the “universe of

documents"--affecting book selection: "Finance--pressure caused by the fact that it is limited and inadequate."³

Notes

1. *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (New York: M. Dekker, 1978), volume 25, p.66.

2. M.B. Line, "Use of Library Materials: The University of Pittsburgh Study," *College and Research Libraries*, 40 (1979):557-558, cited in F.W. Lancaster, *If you want to evaluate your library...* (Champaign: University of Illinois, GSLIS, 1988), p.12-13.

3. Op. cit., *Encyclopedia*, p.72.