NSM Report: Stacks Services (Rare Books in the Stacks)

In response to the revised General Policies Governing Materials under the Care of The Rare Book & Manuscript Library and to the direction of both CDC and Executive Committee, a working group was established to determine how best to identify and preserve early printed and artifactually significant material in the Stacks circulating collections. The committee considered early printed material (pre-19th-century), 19th-century literary journals containing original contributions by important authors, books in original 19th-century decorated publishers’ bindings, and significant illustrated books and journals of the 19th-century.

Most (but by no means all) material published before 1800 has already been removed to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML) or to Rare Book Oak Street (RBOS). As we examined the problem, the working group determined that there were two distinct categories of material that required some level of review.

Pre-1820 Imprints
The first category includes material printed prior to 1820. Ideally, this material would be identified and then transferred from circulating collections either to RBML or to RBOS. Experience with processing material of this kind has shown that a good percentage (about one-third) of items will require some kind of bibliographic or holdings record upgrade before physical transfer can be completed. With approximately 16,500 volumes identified for potential transfer, a very modest cost of $5.00 per volume means that bibliographic work alone will cost about $25,000. Additionally, barcoding is required as is the cost of physically transferring these items into Oak St. As the working group discussed the relocation of this material, the membership clearly recognized that the expense of physical transfer would prove prohibitive and, in effect, delay action.

In order to avoid such costs in relocating the pre-1820 materials and begin the transfer of potentially rare and valuable items from the custody of the central Stacks to that of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the working group recommends the following:

1. Run a report to transfer all STOS books printed before 1821 to RBOS, with circulation by local request.
2. Run a report to change the status of all STX books printed before 1821 to “16/4 Local Request”. When online requests are made or when the material is brought to the circulation desk, the material will be flagged for use in the RBML Reading Room.
3. Once material has been used by patrons in the RBML Reading Room, it will be evaluated for transfer either to RBOS or RBX, depending on current criteria.
4. Relevant material identified through projects or by bibliographers may be sent at any time to RBML.
5. In order to assume responsibility for public services for over 16,000 stacks items as well as all pre-1820 materials in Oak St, a half-time graduate hourly (or equivalent staff) is requested to help support the RBML’s operations.
Artifactually Significant Volumes
Artifactually significant material presented a much more daunting challenge to the working group as there are few automated ways of identifying the items. After several weeks of reviewing catalogs, bibliographies, and other sources for identifying artifactually significant materials, the working group concluded that the size of the collection and difficulty of identifying individual items required that this process of identification be conducted through the efforts of the Library’s Curator of Rare Books with the assistance of subject specialists as resources are available. The aforementioned grad hourly (item five above) would also provide assistance in the identification of artifactually significant volumes.