

*Meeting with manuscripts, today and tomorrow*

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*Which audiences for manuscripts?*

Manuscript collections and their curators are not accustomed to receive a general public. Up until yesterday it was a common and undisputed opinion that manuscripts were reserved for scholars. Nowadays everybody can look at a page or an illuminated initial sitting at home. So libraries have to decide whether their new task is to put the images of their treasures on the internet and go on admitting only scholars into the departments of manuscripts. According to a different choice they could reach a larger public by giving a wider information along with digital and accessible reproductions. And more people interested in manuscripts mean, with the future in mind, more public eager to study ancient books in the original. Are libraries ready for that?

We all are accustomed to seeing long queues at the entrance of the British Museum, the Louvre or the Vatican Museums. Thousands of tourists crowd exposed to sun or rain only to cast a rapid glance at paintings, sculptures, works of art. In some cases they already heard of them, but normally they are going to discover and forget them in a few minutes.

We can't imagine such a view at the entrance of the British Library, the Bibliothèque nationale de France or the Vatican Library (still in June and July 2007 hundreds of scholars formed a long queue at the entrance of the third one because they knew they were going to lose it for three years). We can explain the difference with the bigger appeal of the works of art kept in a museum compared to the ancient books of great value preserved in a library. A famous painting attracts more attention than a Carolingian evangeliary: the general public believes to know enough to understand the charm of a picture, very few persons have a simple idea of a medieval manuscript.

Everybody can flatter himself to perceive the significance of a masterpiece thanks the deceptive plainness of the human figure, the charm of colour and stroke, the general aura coming from the original, as Walter Benjamin stated in a well-known essay: «Even in the most careful reproduction we lack *one* thing: the very presence of the work of art, here and now, in the place where it is actually to be found». No copy can give the feeling of the physical presence of an artistic object that an observing mind believes to appreciate in a reasonable way, leaving aside its general knowledge of art history and that particular artist's production.

Nothing like that happens when a visitor is admitted to glance to an ancient or medieval manuscript, no matter how famous and studied it is. He can usually look at two pages of it (a verso and the following recto, if possible lavishly illuminated) in a glass showcase. The exhibition catalogue gives him some information about text, dating and origin: if he is so patient to read it, he gets an idea of the type of book he is facing. It depends on his education if he can put the codex in a right historical context. Unfortunately most visitors to such exhibitions don't know the language and script of the manuscript, so they go past the showcase, satisfied with the view of an object that was created to be leafed through and read.

Obviously, it follows that the public of the departments of ancient books is reduced to grown-up or growing scholars. According to local customs they are usually obliged to give different guarantees before handling manuscripts: in some place one should use gloves, in another library a bookrest is compulsory; somewhere else one is completely free or is convinced to accept some form of reproduction instead of the original.

The web has recently improved the offer of reproductions: one can appraise the details of writing, illumination and materials of manuscripts without leaving home and probably in a better way than with the naked eye. There are good reasons to spare time and money avoiding long journeys and expensive stays.

Libraries are being more and more convinced to put free on the web the images of their manuscripts, starting with the most famous and studied ones. This choice entails considerable financial and human costs that are not within the reach of all libraries. Moreover, in most cases on the web are showed the plain images, a profitable offer to those who are accustomed to codices. Only a few sites take care to provide common users with a body of bibliographical information in order to make their task easier. So it happens that the public of manuscripts on the web corresponds almost exactly with the usual readers of such books, who are obviously pleased and grateful.

We are today talking about possible different audiences for our codices, so I am going to suggest some solutions, which I don't consider as alternative.

According to a first option libraries should intensify their present policy of general digitization, until all their manuscripts are on line. The result would be, roughly speaking, something like Google Books, except an essential difference: we are still lacking the right software to read every type of handwriting. We can imagine a searchable body of information about every single manuscripts, and that has been already realized by some enlightened curators. It seems however difficult to reach more and different users, if possible not professional researchers who are trained to benefit to the utmost from the images so liberally offered by the libraries.

If libraries and librarians wish to get a wider audience, they should adopt a different strategy. They should put on their sites the maximum of information in an accessible language about the history of their collections, the number, nature and importance of their manuscripts. Besides that it would be useful to give a larger public the transcriptions and translations of some pages of their more important codices and a link to sites or books that can help learn to read medieval scripts and, generally speaking, come into contact with medieval books.

It is obviously impossible to give even simple tools to teach Latin and Greek or train a normal Western public to read different alphabets. But we should get accustomed to thinking that we can arouse the curiosity of a wider public about the mysterious world of the medieval book.

However, a site thought to serve different audiences doesn't offer that famous Benjamin's . aura. Libraries should therefore allow a direct contact with manuscripts, avoiding any reasonable risk for conservation. As we have seen, normal exhibitions don't seem the right way to arouse a deep interest.

According to a new possible and experimental formula manuscripts should be on display in rotation. Curators should change regularly the pages on exhibition, while the reproduction of a whole codex is offered on the screen in high definition images along with every useful bit of

information. It would be an appropriate practice if librarians or other experts might lecture before the manuscripts.

It's a long way to gain a wider audience for manuscripts: they are old objects which can captivate a lot of people, provided that libraries accept to consider them precious books, not glorious relics.

I am sure that librarians would prefer to run the risk of a queue instead of sticking up the usual notice: «Restricted access. Special card required».