

1. General overview

Looking to modern manuscripts it is easy to refer to works made not too far from actual times. In fact being correct to consider “modern” all that is pertaining to “modern age”, classically referring to second half of XVth century, even the modern manuscript belongs to this temporal class.

However, what is the transition point between a “modern” and a “contemporary” manuscript? Is it sufficient to draw merely chronological lines instead of considering the genetic mutation underwent by the writing use during last century till today?

I would like to propose for further discussion an efficacious and complete answer focused on this question.

Today I will mainly refer to the manuscripts modernity with regard to my personal curator experience, as responsible of an articulate collection of several “modern” manuscripts.

Therefore, I will refer to those volumes containing both archival nature documents and works written after Gutenberg invention, thus representing a different significance from medieval codex.

2. Old skills

Curators, like myself, cataloguing for many years such heterogeneous materials, could not define “a priori” an univocal kind of volume.

In fact, modern manuscript can include either one single text expressing author responsibility or various papers and documents. In the latter case the composite nature of the volume forces the expert to analyze single codicological units and to fix the appropriate methodology respecting the general rules.

He is forced to adopt common criteria to physical descriptions and analysis, focusing on those related to the manuscript category.

Physical characteristics of modern manuscript are in fact less important and less linked to codicology whilst inner contents are more relevant.

Let's take a practical case study.

For several years I studied a manuscript collection of XVII-XVIII centuries, referring to Chinese Catholic Mission History. In particular, I analyzed thousands of units referring to Charles Thomas Maillard de Tournon, Holy See legate by the Chinese emperor Kang-xi in 1704.

Books that I was picking up from shelves were bounded with a unique shelf-mark; however none of the 150 volumes composing the collection was described univocally. I run into so different materials living together: memoirs, autograph letters, passports, imperial edicts, minutes and copies, papal bulls, reports, summaries, draft text to be printed etc.

From time to time I followed the general rules, not to missing the whole context, and I treated with dedicated descriptions each item otherwise disappearing in future searches and studies.

My experience on medieval codex was not as fundamental as my investigation capacity on the history flowing in front of my eyes through written records.

Is exactly this the behaviour requested to manuscripts curators. For that the manuscript study represents a continuous universal acknowledgement whatever age the document belongs to. I would prefer to define it as an intellect attitude.

Chinese manuscripts of Casanatense Library are catalogued to be published and digitalized for the Library OPAC. The work is well progressing towards completion.

3. New skills

The above described case study allows us to make some reflexions on today topics.

- 1) First of all: can we agree to call our profession “special collections librarian” or is still more appropriate to define it as “manuscripts curator” when focusing on the professional skills required?
- 2) How can we cope with the specialized human resources shortage respecting the realization time of manuscript collections cataloguing?
- 3) Is that shortage due to the high level of technical requirements or to the investments lack towards the competences and skills required to manuscripts curators?
- 4) Is there a strict relation between students university choices and humanistic faculties programs?

The last point focuses on the lack, in Italy, of encouraging technical studies in the human science fields, probably due to the absence of didactic stimulus in this direction since the primary education.

The curator grows up and develops the human-historical- philosophical knowledge.

Furthermore, to date, he has to progress in his specialization with added values: the highest possible knowledge in information technology and the awareness of the relation between old and modern collections study and their preservation and promotion. This means that our profession requires a 360° approach.

This reminds us the Jerome Wilson words about manuscript cataloguing, defined “as an essential part of the major intellectual efforts of modern scholarship”, today still valid and appropriate.

This leads me to a wonder: how many people are willing to sacrifice themselves for a “universal “ learning, only partially granted by institutions and universities? They even know that they have to develop it in progress, sometimes at their own charge, and that work opportunities will not guarantee an analogous career.

- Training Offers

Coming back to my question on university choices, statistical data that I could retrieve, are deeply discouraging. Casanatense Library has the opportunity to cooperate with some Roman faculties to offer internal training chance. As Company Tutor, I followed some students willing to deep their knowledge on manuscripts environment through a training plan from 4 to 6 months long (a total of 100/150 hours).

All cataloguing experiences were extremely positive, both for students and for the Library. However none of them had an immediate possibility of employment in our area.

This situation is unfortunately widespread and affects several parts of our profession where the training represents a double challenge: more specific skills are required to a manuscript librarian and new team of human resources are needed to represent a real investment for the future to whom transmit our experience and enthusiasm.

Is thus difficult to define competences and tasks of a manuscripts curator, being deeply aware that:

- is not sufficient to understand our work,
- or to follow projects promoting such an incredible heritage like manuscripts,
- or to manage our job.

- Investments

A real interest from Institutions very often disappears when starting to speak about concrete investments. Public funds to support our projects are very limited, if not absent. Private support for manuscripts and rare books is limited too, as not rewarded as cultural marketing. Manuscripts cataloguing, in fact, does not represent an adequate cultural income.

Art exhibitions represent an area of bigger interest and fashion. They are in fact the main promotion moments for bibliographical materials mostly for manuscripts or printed books representing only a part connected to other cultural subjects and attracting a more global audience. Drawings, furniture, music, multimedia tools are parts of an overall where the books are an essential but not unique element.

It is then possible to obtain funds raising to promote books but not so easily to train human resources in the field and in my opinion this is a critical key issue.

- Cooperation

Let me refer once more to my practical experience. I'm responsible at the same time of various manuscript cataloguing works, almost at conclusion phase. In particular the one I mentioned at the beginning of my intervention is the result of my personal and complete undertaking and many experts are asking me the date of completion. The topic, China, is extremely actual and Oriental Studies Faculty of "La Sapienza University of Rome" has proposed me a collaboration by human resources to speed up the completion timing. Even Chinese Government seems very willing to finance works like this reflecting their interest on recovering the Chinese historical sources spread into the whole world.

This proposal is very interesting as it represents a common action between institutions of the same country or, even more, between different countries throughout their cultural bodies. The professional profile of the manuscripts curator is the common key point of this context. He perfectly knows the working material; he has performed a preliminary study of it and has all the tools needed to make its cataloguing. By a correct description of all papers he can promote its diffusion by underlining its value. Synergy with scientific community and Universities is mandatory to improve the research and the extension to various fields of scientific interest. The needed sponsors can thus be both institutional and international bodies.

The realization timing, normally quite extended due to shortage of research libraries resources, can be consistently reduced if the plan is carried out in the due way.

- Requirements

In reality, today, the manuscripts curator plays a role more articulate than in the past.

He is now sensible to ancient heritage not only for its cataloguing.

- He needs a technical knowledge in order to communicate and act on procedures together with information technology specialists, that take care of continuous software updating and of its interoperability through the web.
- He is able to manage cultural projects not only addressed to pertaining institution but also related to similar or wider projects; he must evaluate the additional resources need and be able to manage them.
- He knows the executive procedures to make projects involving his professionalism, showing his management skills to run financial supports or to get them from non institutional partners.
- He is skilled in communicating and dialoguing to involve a wider and intellectually different audience, through making the most use of the media tools.

- He is committed to his special collections not only for their historical value but also for their virtual representation through the digital technology, that allows to share them globally in the web.

The manuscripts librarian, who cannot forget in my opinion his basic studies, including special as well as general competences, embodies today the wider and more representative librarian model for Italian and general research libraries.

We can still refer to him as a curator, mostly in Europe, where US model had and still has the function to:

- encourage the continuous updating of standards description linked to the rapid IT progressing;
- create reference models simpler and adapted to global audience evolution;
- consider and promote international Core Competencies for Special Collections Professionals.

I understand that European realities are far from being merged and that the major difficulty is the dialogue not with technological but with “civilizing” systems, having their roots in each national cultural centenarian tradition.

Conclusions

The challenge is the following: to become conscious that the “relics of the past” as manuscripts are today, hundreds years ago were the “floppy disks” or the CD of the medieval Europe; they were the main communication tools as well the printed book was since the XV century and as PCs, CDs, USB keys are today.

Our drafted works are often held into actual technical supports. For example, my last publications are directly typed in; not recorded in a logbook or written on paper but stored on files.

A real revolution is happening in the handwriting studies and their supports, that we still don't fully realize.

Nevertheless I think that is not enough to run after technology or to change/modernize/convert our professional figure. It is mandatory to realize that communication tools are deeply and definitely transformed. We need to be ready to cope with such technological revolution effects on our study and preservation habits. Our mostly humanistic profession will be from now even more linked to suitable technology solutions.

However, in spite of such radical changes, my attention is focused on that “intellect attitude”, on the historical comprehension as learning “method” and not only as a knowledge spreading “means”. This is why I strongly keep on endorsing the parallel need not to leave the paper support, like the catalogue, even if not representing the real time elaborated data, essential and mandatory. The catalogue will always be the “*memoria scripta*” or maybe the “*memoria tradita*”

Some of you will smile at my conclusion as it can look contradictory.

This is a real provocation, as in my opinion the manuscript represents a media communication key role in the cultural history, even keeping its univocal nature.

So, in our times, where the serial and fast data transmission risks to erase the human operators identity, we must stop and fix the footprints of our intellectual acts and of our methodology patterns.

This pass on a printed catalogue, missing it our profession becomes a successful hi-tech special collections career.

