Theft and Trafficking of Documentary Heritage

Key considerations and challenges

Launch of the Brazil Red List – Workshop
15 February 2023, São Paulo, Brazil

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Topics to cover:

• Unique Features of Documentary Heritage
• Challenges of Identifying Documentary Heritage Objects
• Challenges of Countering Theft
• Recommendations

Book curse, 12th-13th century manuscript of the Ter Doest Abbey, Gilbert de la Porrée, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

“Whoever takes it away or alienates or tears out a sheet, be damned. Amen.”
About IFLA

• 1400 members in 130+ countries
• Library associations, institutions, individual affiliates
• 60 Professional Units (Sections, Special Interest Groups, Advisory Committees)
• Covers topics across areas of library profession

IFLA’s Preservation and Conservation Centres
Documentary Heritage: Definitions

A Jain palm leaf manuscript from Rajasthan, India, 1260 CE
Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Defining a “document”

- Analogue or digital informational content plus its carrier
- Preservable and usually moveable
- Content may comprise signs or codes (such as text), images (still or moving) and sounds, which can be copied or migrated
- Carrier may have aesthetic, cultural or technical qualities
- Relationship between content and carrier may range from incidental to integral
Documentary heritage comprises those single documents—or groups of documents—of significant and enduring value to a community, a culture, a country or to humanity generally, and whose deterioration or loss would be a harmful impoverishment.

UNESCO 2015 Recommendation on the Protection of and Access to Documentary Heritage, Including in Digital Form
Threats to Documentary Heritage

Empty manuscript boxes at IHERI-AB, Timbuktu, Mali, 2013
UNESCO Bureau of Mali, CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO via Wikimedia Commons
What differentiates one copy of printed material from another?

How can you record all distinguishing features?

**Material Challenges**

- Published material is created in multiples
- Produced with intention of being sold
- Library catalogues focus on bibliographic information
Ownership Markings

Legal notes in book by Māwardī, ʿAlī ibn Muhammad, 974?-1058, Public domain, via UPenn Libraries (LJS 405 on OPenn)

Annals of the Ming Family (Taipei, National Central Library: 204.26 02205), folio 1 recto. ©National Central Library

Ex libris Albert Hahn (1907-1918) Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Bookplate for Hildebrand Brandenburg of Biberach, (Germany, 1480) Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Preventing Theft - Challenges

- Consider theft of individual pages
- Less detectible – staff may not know a theft occurred
- Difficult to return pages to original books
Preventing Theft - Challenges

- Theft can be opportunistic
- Sale on black market or tourist market
- Objects can be cut into pieces
- Lack of capacity to preserve and safeguard
- Economic need and lack of awareness on value
Preventing Theft - Challenges

- Theft can be internal
- Lack of security measures
- Libraries can be in religious institutions or personal collections within private homes
Recommendations
Documentation

• Establish a clear documentation protocol
• Document all movements of items – consider emergency situations
• Cohesive, comprehensive and up-to-date cataloguing
• Digitisation / reference photographs
What differentiates one copy of printed material (like an early printed book) from another?

How do you record all distinguishing features?

Awareness Raising

- Decisionmakers, professionals, general public, external partners
- Key topic: de-escalating stigma around reporting
- IFLA Rare Books and Special Collections Section and International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB) partnership
- missingbooksregister.org
Focus on Regional Context

IFLA PAC Centre at QNL

• Himaya (حماية) Project
• Countering the theft and trafficking of manuscripts in the MENA region and neighbouring countries
• Manuscripts, ancient Qurans are easier to traffic in region
• Need to work with law enforcement, customs officers and library professionals
Social Media Sales

• PAC Centre at Qatar National Library notes huge increase in online sales on dark web and social media
• See sales in dedicated Facebook groups
• Introduced smart content management system to automatically flag suspicious social media posts
• Cross-check flagged posts with library catalogues
What can be done?
In institutions…

• Focus on preparedness
• Monitor reading rooms, carry out regular stock checks or audits
• Use clear documentation practices
• Update catalogues & take good photos
• Keep records of ownership markings / unique identifiers
By decision-makers...

- Empower staff to report theft
- Consider preparedness a top priority
- Assign budget to cataloguing, targeting gaps in security, and digitisation
- Prioritise human resource management and training
By Partners…

- Include documentary heritage in training on cultural property protection
- Provide guidance to front line officers
- Raise awareness on ways to identify documentary heritage and how to question passengers to better understand the goods they carry
- Establish partnerships with subject experts
Sustained information sharing is critical.
Thank you!

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A book curse from the Arnstein Bible, W. Germany (Arnstein), c. 1172 Harley MS 2798, f. 235v, source: British Library

“A book of [the Abbey of] SS Mary and Nicholas of Arnstein: If anyone steals it… may he be roasted in a frying pan…”