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# Special Collections Cataloging: Rare Books

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What is a rare book? Age may be the first factor to spring to mind, but uniqueness of binding, edition (first or limited), inscriptions or annotations by authors or well-known owners, and size of print runs may cause more contemporary materials to be considered rare. While a standard AACR2 catalog record provides a general description of a book, it may obscure differences between different printings or "manifestations" of that particular work. (Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (Books), X.1.2) Researchers are generally more interested in the contents of a book than in the container. However, in the case of rare materials, the physical book itself may be an object of research. The aim of a catalog record for a rare book, then, is to describe the volume and its contents as thoroughly as possible. An individual copy of a rare book can be unique as to binding, annotations, pagination errors, illustrations, etc. Since all of these specifics may be of interest to researchers, rare book cataloging can include much more detail than a "regular" catalog record. The following brief summary outlines some descriptive elements in the creation of rare book records.

## Title.

Some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century books, in particular, may have very long titles; they may also include a summary of the work's contents on the title page, as well as mention of the author's other works, academic qualifications, etc. Transcription of lengthy title page information is much more complete for rare books than for non-rare materials. However, information on the title page that is not part of the title or statement of responsibility, such as an epigram, invocation, or statement of privilege (which states that the publisher has governmental permission to issue the work), is not transcribed as part of the title; such information may be included in a note if considered important. Despite the cataloger's itch to correct and improve, diacritics should not be supplied in the title transcription if they do not appear on the title page.

Archaic letters (use of I for J and V for U) are usually transcribed as they appear, with the following exception: if it is necessary to convert the letters to a different case (for example, if the title proper appears in all caps, it must be transcribed in lower case in the catalog record), the pattern of usage in the rest of the publication should be followed. The name Julius may appear on the title page in all caps as IVLIVS, and in the text of the book in lower case as Iulius. If the text consistently uses lower-case u to represent "u," the name should be transcribed in the title field as Iulius. DCRM(B) provides a table of transcription for the cataloger to follow when no pattern of usage can be identified. If no shift of case is involved, archaic letters should be transcribed as they appear on the title page:

Les poemes spiritvels dv sievr de Nerveze.

Give modernized form as variant title: Poèmes spirituels du sieur de Nervèze

## Imprint.

The place, publisher and date should be given in the catalog record as they appear on the title page. Note that dates in Roman numerals may be followed by the modernized date in parentheses.

A Amsterdam ; A Leipzig : Chez Arkstée & Merkus, 1754.

Venetiis : Apud Nicolaum Pezzana, MDCCL (1750).

Detailed printing statements, which may run to three or more lines, may be curtailed with a mark of omission:

London : Printed for W. Strahan, J.F. and C. Rivington ... [etc.], 1779.

### Physical description.

Unlike the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2), which has simplified physical description statements, a rare book's statement of extent should account for every leaf in the volume as issued by the publisher (DCRM(B), B1.1). This includes leaves of plates and blank leaves, though it does not include leaves added as part of the binding.

[3] leaves, ix, 273, 116 p., [2] leaves of plates : ill. ; 20 cm.

If the record is for a multi-volume set, the cataloger may include the number of volumes in the extent of item statement and give pagination for each volume in a note.

When looking at a bibliographic record for a rare book, one thing that may stand out is the signature statement. These combinations of letters, numbers and symbols resemble arcane mathematical formulas at first glance. DCRM(B) defines a signature as

A letter, numeral, symbol, or a group of such characters, printed at the foot of the rectos of the first few leaves of an intended gathering for the purpose of aiding binders in correctly assembling the sections.

*Gatherings* are defined as:

One or more pairs of leaves-made up of a folded sheet, a fraction of a sheet, or several folded sheets tucked one inside another-that together form a distinct unit for binding purposes.

Signature notes are formulated according to Philip Gaskell's *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (Oak Knoll Press, 1995). In addition to the signature note, the format of the book-i.e., whether it is a folio (two leaves per gathering), quarto (four leaves per gathering), etc.-may be given in abbreviated form at the end of the extent of item statement:

x, 256 p. ; 25 cm. (4to)

Here is a sample signature note:

Signatures: pi<sup>2</sup> A<sup>4</sup> B-H<sup>6</sup> chi<sup>2</sup>

The superscript numbers represent the number of leaves per gathering. The terms "pi" and "chi" are used to indicate unsigned leaves that fall outside the signature sequence; such leaves may be found at the beginning or end of the text, or between sections of text. This book has a gathering of four leaves "signed" with a capital A, followed by gatherings of six leaves signed with the letters B through H.

In some books, the signature sequence includes non-alphabetic characters (asterisks, daggers, etc.). These are given in the signature sequence as they appear on the page.

Signatures: \*-2\*<sup>12</sup>A-2Z<sup>12</sup> a-i<sup>12</sup> (-i11,12)

In this example, all the gatherings have twelve leaves. The first gathering is signed with a single asterisk, followed by a gathering with double asterisk. The alphabetic sequence runs from A-Z, then starts over with AA-ZZ (this is summarized by putting a 2 in front of the Z in the signature sequence). Then the signatures go to small single letters from a through i. In the final gathering, leaves 11 and 12 are missing, indicated by the minus sign in parentheses. Signature statements, like extent of item statements, are expected to account for every leaf in the published book.

In some cases pages may be signed with characters or illustrations that cannot be represented in a bibliographic record due to the limitations of the character set in use. The example below has pages signed with a section mark (§), which is not in the American Library Association character set used to create catalog records. In such a case, the symbol is represented by its spelled-out form.

Signatures, v. 1: [section mark]<sup>4</sup> A-2C(<sup>8</sup>2C-8)

While inclusion of a signature statement is not required, it is recommended for incunabula (books printed in Europe before 1500), and may be useful to researchers when given for later works as well.

#### Other notes.

Besides the signatures, other physical characteristics of the book may be given in notes, including characteristics that apply only to the library's copy:

Decorative head- and tail-pieces.

Title vignette.

McCain Library copy bound in calf over wooden boards with evidence of metal clasps now wanting.

Illustrators and engravers, whose names may not appear in the statement of responsibility, can be listed in a note:

Engraved illustrations signed variously I.P.F., Suor I.P.F., Suor Isabella P.F., Suor Isabella Piccini F.

The names of various illustrators (N. Blakey, Delamonce, F. Hayman, Ant. Walker, S. Wale) and engravers (C.F. Fritzsich, J. Punt, Sysang) appear on the plates.

Publishers' advertising material at end of text may be of value to researchers:

"Catalogue de livres qui se trouvent chez Arkstée et Merkus, Libraires a Amsterdam & a Leipzig": [23] p. at end of vol. 6.

Sometimes a book will contain enclosures inserted by former owners; these can range from scraps of paper used as bookmarks to printed advertisements to pressed flowers. An enclosure may have research value; if this is deemed to be the case, a note about the enclosure should be added to the catalog record:

McCain Library copy has insert: prayer card in Italian dated 1870-1871, marking the

25th anniversary of the pontificate of Pius IX.

Many if not most older books contain handwritten information: the names of former owners, marginal notes, etc. The cataloger should include notes about this information if it is deemed important.

McCain Library copy has bookseller's note on inside back cover: "Première éd.--très rare"

McCain Library copy heavily annotated with marginal notes in German.

Cataloging rare books is an adventure. Particularly with older books, each volume is unique, carrying impressions of those through whose hands it has passed. Whether the item to be cataloged is a manuscript prayer book, laboriously hand-copied with delicate floral illustrations; or a printed eighteenth-century book bearing a date from the French revolutionary calendar, working with these materials provides an opportunity to touch history.

Note: The basic reference tool for cataloging rare books is *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials* (Books), published by the Library of Congress Cataloging Distribution Service in 2007. DCRM(B) is also available online to LC Cataloger's Desktop subscribers.

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Kathleen Wells holds B.A. and M.S.L.S. degrees from Louisiana State University. She has held professional cataloging positions at Georgia State University, Agnes Scott College, Louisiana State University, Southeastern Louisiana University, and the Mississippi Library Commission. Since 1998, she has been Senior Catalog Librarian at the University of Southern Mississippi Libraries, where her responsibilities include authority control, cataloging for Special Collections, and serving as cataloging trainer and resource person. She has published articles on authority control, on cataloging state documents and electronic resources, and on the loss of personnel in technical services departments.

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