

Just Say No?: Special Collections and Interlibrary Loan

by Megan Mulder

The caller on the other end of the line was an eager young graduate student at a school in Colorado, who was interested in the papers of a well-known author, which are housed in my department. The student seemed quite pleased as I described the scope and content of the collection.

"So how can I access this collection?" she asked. I described our reader facilities, our photocopying policy, our hours of operation. There was a pause.

"But can't I get these materials through interlibrary loan, or on the Internet?" the student asked. I replied that it was not our policy to send original manuscript materials out on interlibrary loan, and that legal restrictions and the sheer size of the collection in question made it unlikely that online access would be available any time in the near future. A longer pause, and a distinct note of incredulity in her next question:

"You mean, the only way I can use this collection is actually to come all the way to your library?"

I replied in the affirmative, and never heard from her again.

I regretted not being able to help that graduate student. Contrary to popular opinion, the average special collections librarian is not an ogre, jealously guarding her treasures from the grubby fingers of the general public. We are as eager as any librarians to provide the widest possible access to the materials in our care. But since these materials are often rare, valuable, fragile, or unique, we

must weigh the need for access against the need to preserve and protect our collections for future use. It is this need for security and preservation of old and rare books, and of archival and manuscript materials, that prompts many special collections to adopt a "just say no" policy when it comes to interlibrary loan requests. Most special collections, whether academic, public, or private institutions, place restrictions on lending special collections materials, and some prohibit it completely.

There are many valid arguments to be made for a strict no-lending policy. The purpose of most special collections is twofold — to provide extra security and protection for rare, fragile, and valuable items; and to create in-depth subject collections to support research in selected areas. To some extent, both of these functions are compromised when special collections material is sent out on interlibrary loan. Anyone who has had a package lost or mangled in the mail knows that sending out a rare item, even one well packaged and insured, can be risky. And there is no guarantee

that the item will be cared for properly once it reaches its destination. As Sidney F. Huttner, Curator of Special Collections at the University of Tulsa, observes in a recent article, "Best efforts notwithstanding, not all Interlibrary loan transactions are successful. Books are returned uninsured, poorly wrapped, sometimes damaged. Advance agreements to restrict photocopying are ignored."¹ And the second function of a special collection — the creation of coherent subject collections — also suffers when many items are loaned out of the institution. On-site researchers, who come to the collection because of their interest in its subject specialty, may not have access to important materials. Thomas V. Lange, Associate Curator of Rare Books for Early Printed Books at the Huntington Library (whose policy prohibits the loan of any material), observes that "Without a doubt the greatest virtue of our policy of not participating in any form of loan arrangement is that all Huntington Library materials are available at one time in one place. This can be said of few institutions containing scholarly material of any kind."²

Even lending of special collections materials for exhibitions, an established procedure among libraries and museums³ is not without its dangers. A recent article in the *New York Times*⁴ describes the unhappy experience of a private collector who loaned his prized collection of autographed

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photos of jazz musicians to a California university for a Black History Month exhibit. When the collector arrived to view the exhibit, he found to his horror that the original photographs had been cut, trimmed, and pasted into a collage. Because of a miscommunication between library staff members, the person preparing the exhibit had not realized that the photos were originals. This is an unfortunate and, one hopes, a rare occurrence; but stories like these lurk in the back of a librarian's mind when he receives a request to lend rare or unique materials.

With all the problems inherent in special collections lending, one might well wonder why it is even an issue for librarians. Why not institute a "just say no" policy for every special collection, and insist that researchers use materials only on-site? The answer lies, in part, in the conversation I had with the Colorado graduate student — and in the many similar conversations that take place in special collections around the country every year, and in the ever-growing number of interlibrary loan requests for special collections materials. Decreased funding for graduate and post-graduate research makes it difficult for researchers to travel to distant libraries, while at the same time trends in scholarship demand more and more research in original source material. Meanwhile national databases like OCLC and RLIN, as well as Internet access to library catalogs, have made people more aware of the resources available beyond their own city or institution. Library users of today expect to have access to a national — indeed, a global — library of information, and they expect this information to be delivered to their desktop. Whether or not these expectations are always realistic, the special collections librarian must deal with them.

Even aside from patron expectations, most special collections librarians want to provide global access to their materials whenever possible. Librarians generally are quite happy when a researcher displays an interest in the materials that they have so painstakingly organized, cataloged, and preserved! This desire to provide access leads many librarians to explore alter-

natives to lending special collections materials.

Traditionally, the most popular alternatives have been photocopying or photographing materials, or, when facilities are available, microfilming of items or collections. In the past few years, electronic technologies, such as digital imaging and full-text databases, have emerged as alternative means of access to special collections materials. Many World Wide Web sites now exist to provide Internet access to documents previously available only in a limited number of copies (the University of Virginia's Electronic Text Center is a good example — you can find it at <http://www.virginia.edu/etext/ETC.html>). And even in cases where it is as yet impractical to provide electronic access to special collections material itself, it is often possible to make a finding aid available on the Internet. A good example is the inventory of the Walker Percy papers at UNC-Chapel Hill, available at <http://sunsite.unc.edu/wpercy>. By accessing an online inventory, a researcher at a remote site can determine whether the materials in question are applicable enough to her research needs to justify a trip to the collection.⁵

For many patrons of special collections, Internet access provides a perfect answer to their interlibrary loan requests.

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For others, a photocopy or microfilm can satisfy their needs. But there is not a practical alternative to every interlibrary loan request. Many items are too large or too fragile for photocopying or photographing. Microfilm projects require a great deal of time and expensive equipment; making texts, graphics, and other formats available on the Internet requires as much time and even more expensive equipment. Perhaps in the future all special collections material will be available in an alternative format. However, a patron who needs a

book today is unlikely to be impressed by a librarian's assurance that it should be on the Internet sometime in the next decade. And there will always be those patrons whose scholarly endeavors require that they examine actual materials. For the foreseeable future, special collections librarians will still have to consider many interlibrary loan requests for which only the original item will suffice.

Concern about interlibrary lending in special collections prompted the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of ACRL to form an Ad Hoc Committee on the Loan of Rare and Unique Materials. In 1993 the Committee put forth its guidelines for the loan of special collections materials.⁶ The first basic assumption underlying the Committee's guidelines was: "Interinstitutional loan from special collections for research use is strongly encouraged but must be conducted in a manner that ensures responsible care and effectively safeguards items from loss or damage."⁷ The guidelines themselves reflect this tone of cautious encouragement of special collections lending.

Detailing the responsibilities of borrowing institutions, the guidelines specify that the would-be borrower should make every effort either to travel to the collection for on-site access, or to find the item in another format. If the loan of original material is deemed necessary, the borrowing institution must demonstrate that it has appropriate facilities and staff to ensure the security and safe handling of the material. The borrowing institution must also comply with any photocopying or other restrictions specified by the lender. The guidelines conclude: "If a borrowing institution fails to comply with the conditions of a loan, including proper care and packaging of borrowed items, that institution can expect that future requests to borrow special collections materials will be denied."⁸

In setting forth the responsibilities of lending institutions, the guidelines urge prospective lenders to be "as generous as possible, consonant with their responsibilities both to preserve and to make accessible to their on-site user community the materials in their care."⁹ Lenders should also be prompt in replying to interlibrary loan requests and should investigate the possibility of photocopying or other means of reproduction for items which cannot be loaned.

Perhaps the most significant point comes near the end, where the guidelines state: "Refusals either to lend or

copy a requested item should include a specific reason (e.g., fragile paper, tight binding, too large to ship safely, etc.) That an item is part of a special collection is not a sufficient reason."¹⁰ In other words, a blanket policy of refusing any and all loan requests for special collections material is not appropriate. Rather, loan requests "should be considered on a case-by-case basis by the individual with curatorial responsibility for the requested material."¹¹ The special collections librarian must evaluate each requested item, weighing the pros (furthering scholarly activity, participation in the global library) and cons (possible loss of or damage to rare or unique material) of approving its loan. As James Wooley observes in an article on the topic, "It is true that there are risks associated with special lending. On the one hand, the risk of loss or damage in transit and the risk that the book won't be on the shelf when an on-site reader calls for it. On the other hand, a less easily quantifiable risk that the book will sit on its shelf unused and that the book and the library will not have contributed as they should to the advancement of learning."¹²

In many cases special collections librarians may conclude that the risks of

lending an item or collection outweigh the benefits. It is not likely that large manuscript collections or priceless incunabulae will ever be routinely packed up and sent out on interlibrary loan! But what we can gather from the RBMS guidelines and from recent discussions of the topic is that the special collections librarian must be *prepared* to deal with interlibrary loan requests. She should be open to the idea of participation in the global library, should have a set of criteria by which to evaluate loan requests, and should be aware of the alternatives to lending original material. In this way we as special collections librarians can provide the best possible access to our collections, even when we must say no.

References

¹ "Generous but Responsible: The Unique, the Rare, and Interlibrary Loan," *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* 3 (Fall 1988): 2, 103-104.

² "Alternatives to Interlibrary Loan," *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* 3 (Fall 1988): 2, 108.

³ Cf. "Guidelines for Borrowing Special Collections Materials for Exhibition: A Draft," *College & Research Libraries News* 49 (Dec. 1988): 11, 750-54.

⁴ "Rare Photos are Mutilated by Library," *New York Times*, Sunday, 30 April 1995, 34.

⁵ The development of electronic technologies has had a great impact on all aspects of special collections librarianship. The general implications of this are far too complex to examine here; however, the UVA E-text Center Web page provides useful information in its "Selected Articles" section on the implementation of an e-text project in a research library and the likely future effects of electronic technologies on libraries.

⁶ "Draft Guidelines for the Loan of Rare and Unique Materials," *College & Research Libraries News* 54 (May 1993): 5, 267-269.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "Special Collections Lending: A Reader's View," *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* 3 (Fall 1988): 2, 123.

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