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Book preservation still important in digital age

Despite the increased prevalence and popularity of e-books – those available in digital formats – the printing of books has not disappeared and their preservation is becoming increasingly important. They not only provide information, but they are also important for their aesthetic and historic value.

The interim director of the university museum at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Erin Vigneau-Dimick, is a book preservation expert. A native of Hartford Conn., she obtained her bachelor's of fine arts at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, and her masters' of fine arts from The University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She began her career as a photographer because her father, an architect, had a Nikon camera that he taught her how to use. She said that photography has played a large role in her career.

"I definitely use photography a great deal in my work," she said. "And I enjoy it as a personal pursuit. But my work has evolved from photography into print making, then into book arts, and finally into book conservation." Since some books are printed to serve as pieces of art, it's questionable whether or not e-books will end that practice.

"That's a really complex question," Vigneau-Dimick said. "Books as objects are still very important to us. One of the reasons that we teach books as a subject in art departments is that it really allows students to deal with a much more complex idea, both of space and of time." She pointed to an important reason why printed books will probably not disappear completely.

"It doesn't give you the same experience as holding the object in your hand," she said of the e-book, "and that personal nature and the relationship that you have with the book as an object. I think that artists that still work with books as an object are trying to get to that, to still increase that personal relationship, that one on one."

And the tangible nature of the printed book is not its only benefit, she added.

"We do make digital copies in order to increase their access, but there is stuff that does not come out in the digital copy, including the quality of print marks or



Professor Erin Vigneau Dimick.

plate marks, aspects of certain signatures and prints," she said.

Books can also reveal things about their owners. "You can really see the notations on a book that was owned by someone, not written by them, but used by them in their own practice, whether they are a scientist or a philosopher and you can't see that always in the digital images," she added. A major part of the mission of libraries and museums is to make material available to researchers. "Researchers real-

ly experience the object and really see the page and really understand, perhaps even experience, what a reader of that era felt when they once were holding that book," she explained.

According to Vigneau-Dimick, book preservation experts are becoming more in demand. "Overall, communities, states, and federal agencies are understanding more and more how important that preservation is," she said. "These certainly are items that will fall apart unless digitized,

so that's one way of preservation. There are items that people want to access in terms of records, and being able to see those papers is very important." She provided another example of when the skills of a book preservationist are needed.

"When I was at Princeton University, for example, the author Tony Morrison had a fire and many of her records got burned," she said. "We actually took everything out and formed piles and encapsulated what was left so all the notes from her novels

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could be kept for her and future researchers. And the only way that can be done is by trained professionals. We encapsulated every page so we could see how she made the notes, how she developed her novels."

Book preservation can be a slow, painstaking process. "There is both an object and physical inventory that you must do, and then you also have to do a historical inventory, because you really need to understand if it is an original binding," she explained. "One of the things we are always looking at in preservation is what is historical, what is not historical, and the choice we make on whether or not we keep that. Is that interim binding important to us?" When she works in libraries she has to decide whether a book has been rebound for decorative purposes.

"One of the things we always look at when pages are falling out and the cover is falling off is if the book can be handled," she said. "It is one of the most important things when I look at an item." She also looks at its history and at anything that is torn, broken, or falling out. "I want to not only put it together, but put it together so you can open it," she said. "Many books are bound very tightly and when you go to open them you can't see much in them."

She said that she tries to transmit her passion for book presentation among students. "I was really given a wonderful opportunity here at SIUE," she said. "Teaching my students that a book is not necessarily just this codex of pages. It can be a scroll, it can be a physical square object, and I sort of teach my students about what does a book mean. Does it have to have words? Does it have to have actual pages? And we sort of usually work down to a definition that it's about time and about the passage of time."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

Photo by Michael Nathe