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Discovery of the Hidden Manuscripts

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Abstract:

    Slavic manuscripts present unique problems to the librarian, curator, and scholar. Slavic works are marginalized in Western library institutions and educational curricula due to misconceptions about their intellectual value, the difficulties in studying them in Soviet and then post-Soviet Eastern Europe, and their lack of documentation, preservation, and conservation. Cross-disciplinary interest, however, has expanded research beyond geographical and temporal boundaries to incorporate the technologies and viewpoints of literary criticism, historiography, and even information architecture and hypertext theory. This paper describes the author's discovery of Slavic medieval manuscripts and her efforts to preserve, catalog, digitize, study, and popularize them in a West that views the Middle Ages through the clouded lens of contemporary popular culture.

DISCOVERY OF THE HIDDEN MANUSCRIPTS

    Discovery. It means different things to different people. It rarely happens quickly. More often, it is a process of peeling away layers of hidden meaning. It may start with a revelation, but afterwards, like lapidary or like sculpting, it involves the hard work of revealing a hidden essence. I will share my story of discovery of medieval manuscript treasures.

THE QUEST FOR THE HIDDEN TREASURES (1999)

My quest started innocently enough as a class assignment; yet that assignment transformed my life into a treasure hunt. De Hamel's *A History of Medieval Manuscripts* provided the treasure map (C. De Hamel, 2001). The interplay of color and gold on the images illuminated my soul. De Hamel's *History* should live in every manuscript and art library. As a Slav living abroad, I sought my heritage in this land of hidden treasures. Seeking further clues, I searched the Internet.

The search led to Hilandar Research Center, the heart of Slavic manuscript studies in the Americas. Its founders, father and son Matejic, microfilmed more than a million pages of Slavic manuscripts at the Mount Athos monastery complex in Greece. Now, Hilandar Research Center boasts the largest microfilm collection of Slavic manuscripts in the world, revolutionizing the field of Slavic studies with universal access to treasures formerly remote and even forbidden to some scholars. Matejic, his staff, and visiting scholars nurtured me as a scholar and librarian and deepened my knowledge of manuscript studies.

Next, to my astonished gaze, the Internet revealed the Summer School for Digital Preservation of Slavic Medieval Manuscripts, held in my native Bulgaria. I enrolled immediately and studied digitization, digitizing equipment, and issues of preservation. We visited manuscript collections and talked with curators and manuscript scholars. And my fascination and inspiration grew.

Then, by accident, we visited a manuscript collection that resembled more an orphanage than it resembled a special library collection--the Historical and Archival Church Institute (HACI) in Sofia, Bulgaria. The appalling poverty devastated me, and I swore to preserve those orphaned treasure chests containing unknown gems of the past.

I was puzzled. Those gems reflected incredible dedication of the authors, and the manuscripts contained profound wisdom and artistic expression, and their format displayed a post-modern resemblance to electronic hypertexts. Why, then, did the Middle Ages bear the stigma of "The Dark Ages?" How could we librarians make available to unknowing patrons these artistic and intellectual treasures? Western civilization did not begin with the Renaissance! Behind the book of today, both the printed book of the Renaissance and electronic text of the Internet, lay a millennium of practice. Slavic manuscripts provided a foundation for this legacy, and our patrons should have access to these treasures. I resolved to re-draw the treasure map, to create on the Internet a virtual scriptorium that would enlighten seekers and, further, reunify the several dispersed national heritages.

THE VIRTUAL SCRIPTORIUM (2000)

To create the virtual scriptorium, I surveyed manuscript web sites, evaluating them against standards of quality and relevancy. The Internet did not reveal the Virtual Scriptorium of Slavic manuscripts that I had hoped to find, but only a few "webliographies" of links to other sites and institutions, online catalogs, academic programs, and personal web pages (D. Zubrinic, 1995). Many treasures remained covered in the shifting sands of lack consensus of electronic cataloging, transliteration, and digitization standards (M. Dobreva, 2003). Worse, Slavic and Byzantine scholars still largely dismissed the Internet as a research tool or

repository of images. Only a few brave souls supported my vision of having online images to enrich their teaching and research.

The more I looked, the more difficult the problems became. Non-standardization and hubris were augmented in the West by a lack of secondary sources dedicated to Slavic artifacts. Because of expropriation and dispersal, Eastern European libraries lacked access to their own country's Slavic artifacts (M. Dobreva, 2003). I persisted, because I felt that locating and documenting Slavic artifacts could challenge the image of the East and the Middle Ages as a dark world and serve as a resource for the international scholarly community as well. I found little cooperation among scholars, but without it, a virtual reunification of national heritages and provision of worldwide access could not occur.

PRESERVATION STATE OF BULGARIAN MANUSCRIPTS (2001)

Bulgaria birthed and nurtured Slavic literacy, transmitting Byzantine and classical Greek traditions throughout Eastern Europe. However, following that bright beginning, Slavic manuscripts suffered terribly, with a fraction surviving the ravages of Byzantine, Roman, and Central Asian invaders. An estimated 8,480 Slavic manuscripts currently reside in Bulgaria, with 5,466 in the National Library and 610 in the HACI, the two largest collections (A. Gergova & A. Dipchikova, 1997).

Within the corpus of Slavic manuscripts and early printed books in Bulgarian collections, the HACI collection stands out as a research institution, holding the first edition of the famous 1581 Bible and other beautifully gold-illuminated manuscripts and over 1,500 manuscripts from all of Christendom. However, the collection was not included in the latest Bulgarian national program for preservation (1997) and had no descriptive catalog or professional librarian or archivist. Due to lack of funding, the director, a Ph.D. in Bulgarian Orthodox Church history, heroically fulfilled those roles as he swept the floors.

My preservation assessment of HACI determined that almost 60% of the items required urgent preservation measures due to damage and aging. Seventy three percent of the manuscripts required special care and housing. For each manuscript, I entered descriptive and preservation data into a database. By identifying patterns, tracing paths of distribution, and changes from parchment to paper and manuscript to print, I gained an understanding of the history of Bulgarian book production. I began the virtual scriptorium with seven CDs of digital manuscript images, and these helped me to create a website and receive funding. With the funding, we completely renovated the HACI facilities and provided more than half of the manuscripts with new, archival housing. In spite of constant struggle with health hazards and contractors, we preserved manuscripts and increased access for the scholarly community.

THE MARGINS OF MANUSCRIPTS (2002)

The simple and sober Slavic manuscript style cannot compete with the intricate and elaborate illumination of, for example, the *Book of Kells*, but value rests on more than aesthetics. It rests on a holistic comprehension of texts, images, and marginalia. I realized that, to comprehend their value and ultimate meaning, I needed the right methods for interpreting these manuscript treasures. I turned to Art History.

Seeking the origins of marginalia, I discovered the Byzantine tradition, parent to the Slavic tradition. The margins of Byzantine Psalters hid a universe of political issues, issues

that were not at all marginal! Margins became an arena of "visual polemics" from the Iconoclastic period and proclaimed the triumph of Orthodox iconography and images (K. Corrigan, 1992). Beyond the Iconoclastic struggle, Byzantine marginal Psalters witnessed a new "strata" of liturgical and hagiographical themes and images "irrupting" into the margins, e.g., of the 11th century Theodore Psalter (A. Cutler, 1980-81). The Theodore Psalter contained twice the number of liturgical images of the 9th century post-Iconoclastic Khludov Psalter (200 to 400 total number of images, and 82 to 173 liturgical images). In addition to political statement, these marginal images served as mnemonics, reminding readers of a particular liturgical hymn or church feast (M. Caruthers, 1990). They also exemplified the phenomenon that we now call hypertext.

MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS AS HYPERTEXTS (2003)

Like hypertext web sites and electronic books, medieval manuscripts consist of interconnected components in the form of text segments, illustrations, marginal and interlinear glosses, and annotations. Medieval Bibles, chronicles, works of the law, and textbooks present a high level of hypertextuality (J.D. Bolter, 1990). The variable sequence of passages and the links between them constitute "open texts" in the terms of Bolter and Derrida, in which the "nuclear" text of the original author would be linked through a set of ligatures, colored marks, and pointers to an "extended work" including marginal additions and annotations (G. Landow, 1992). These medieval "hot links" resemble today's HTML web practices. In fact, I used the design of medieval manuscripts to inform my own web design theory and practices, as can others.

ART HISTORY METHODS AND THEORY (2004)

Still, my manuscript interpretation lacked something, so I turned to the librarianship of art history. Art librarians must know our primary sources in depth and catalog them to a level beyond the title page and beyond the text, to the point of the margin. Our users need this level of access! Art History theory and methodology presented a new method of interpreting manuscripts. Art historians admit that art history has an "elusive and methodologically imprecise character" (M. Ranta, 2001)and lacks a proper critical apparatus (O. Pacht, 1986). I felt that this imprecision might allow the discipline to encompass comprehensive manuscript cataloging.

Two paradigms, Old and New Art History, describe Art history. New Art History appeared in the 1980s (R. Cormack, 1986) and questioned the traditional Old Art History preoccupation with aesthetics and formal and stylistic features (O. Pacht, 1986). The New Art History paradigm suggested a radical reinterpretation of medieval images not as monuments but rather as documents of the past (M. Camille, 1992).

During this quest, I discovered the origin of the myth of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages. It originated in the 16th century with Giorgio Vasari who valued form, style, color, and other aesthetical features in art objects (M. Trachtenberg, 2001). Vasari perceived medieval art as primitive, calling Byzantine art "ugly and clumsy" (E. Panofsky, 1955; E. Gombrich, 1987).

Art History gradually moved away from the focus on authorship, dates, sources, and archetypes. After the Second World War, art historians began borrowing from textual criticism, philology, and archeology. Pacht (1902-1988) promoted a rational scientific Art

History for theory building that considered the context of art production, symbolism, meaning, historical analysis, and iconographic themes (O. Pacht, 1999). Weitzmann (1904-1993) developed a similar methodological positivistic approach and proposed a theory of the evolution of illustrated manuscripts from the Egyptian "papyrus style" through the Greek "continuous narrative" style (K. Weitzmann, 1947).

The philosophy of Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes penetrated other fields, introducing the New Art History paradigm in the 1980s. The deconstruction movement disclosed the previously marginalized and underrepresented issues, sources, and cultures. Art History became interdisciplinary, importing theories, methods, and concepts from other academic areas. Derrida's "open text" defocused attention to the margin, to marginalized sources, and to marginalized social issues.

Michael Camille (1958-2002) refuted the myth of Middle Ages as the ages of decadence, decline, and death, inverting the prevalent top-down elitism (M. Camille, 1996). His synthetic method incorporated literary critical theory, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and anthropology to illuminate previously taboo issues. Camille's theory of margin and edge informed hypertext and its iconography of headers and footers, links, and frames as vital elements of page arrangement (M. Camille, 1992).

SLAVIC MARGINALIA (2005)

And in 2005? Now I mine the margins of Slavic manuscripts for primary historical evidence from the Ottoman period of the Balkans. Does marginal writing imply social marginalization? To determine the answer, I am surveying 700 digitized marginalia and 120 Slavic manuscript colophons.

Thus far, I have discovered marginal notes revealing the hardships of everyday life. Storms, inflation, taxation, earthquakes, and locusts form pieces of the puzzle. However, the change from "Oh, oh, oh, me the sinful one!" to "Oh, oh, oh, from those janissaries!" reveals a profound change in the national consciousness. Corporeal suffering has surpassed spiritual. I believe that marginalia and colophons will constitute evidence of a socially marginalized people voicing with marginalia their reactions to historical events.

CONCLUSION

Is seven lucky for you? It has been for me! During the last seven years, layer after layer, seven discoveries unveiled to me the essence of medieval Slavic manuscripts. As a librarian, I tried to preserve these treasures from the dust and damage of time. As a scholar, I see beyond the physical features of the manuscripts to literary and historical dimensions. My discovery of the Slavic manuscripts might appear quite modest to you. However, it changed my life, and I hope it will inform others.

These poor orphans have revealed themselves as giants of human dignity. Although not always adorned in gold or silver, they represent the sufferings of marginalized people during a truly evil time. Yet, what are we without our past, be it evil or blessed? I humbly bow to the scribes and vow to continue to illuminate their words for others to read. I hope that some of you will join me.

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