

Christopher de Hamel

## TANGIBLE ARTIFACTS

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SOME LIBRARIES CALL them ‘Special Collections’. Others describe the same remote rooms as ‘Rare Book Collections’. They are usually upstairs somewhere, along the end of untrodden corridors lined with posters of obsolete exhibitions. There is generally a minuscule reading-room with no windows and long tables, often with an even more minuscule librarian trying to appear inconspicuous and busy simultaneously behind boxes of uncataloged archives. With any luck, they will admit you into the book stacks themselves. The first thing you notice as the door is unlocked is the most wonderful smell—that intoxicating, exhilarating, overwhelming and irresistibly exciting smell of old dust and book leather. If I ever invented a women’s fragrance, I would call it *Old Books*.

I have no interest in rare books. I believe passionately in special collections. The great merit of books as human artifacts is that most of them, fortunately, are not at all rare. Books of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries are not necessarily any more expensive than modern editions of similar texts, and even imperfect incunables or medieval manuscripts can sometimes be cheaper than the upper end of the publication price for reference books today. You can cradle an old book in your hands, touch it, open it, close it, pat it, smell it, squeeze it, caress the curiously textured paper, turn its pages, admire its pictures (it is almost certain to have at least some ornament); you can try to judge its age and origin with a fair chance of success, you can detect how it was assembled and bound, you can look for clues as to how it has survived (for it has

always had owners), and you can enjoy that extraordinary sensation of actually holding in your hand a personal object that has far outlasted the span of human life. It is like that odd thrill of shaking hands with a very famous person, except that the book leaps across the centuries as well as the social divide. If all other benefits of the old book are finally played out, you could (just could) actually read it.

When I first began to visit special collections and bookshops, I could never understand the catalogers' fascination with the rarity as such. It seemed an unfair excuse to make a dull book more expensive. A text that is so unimportant that it was only published once in a few copies cannot be as culturally influential as a book printed in huge numbers over many editions. Every single published book had a first edition: that's nothing special, I used to think. Tenth or hundredth editions of a text make an important statement. Books that are less rare are easier to find and cheaper to buy. The more old books you can accumulate, the more you can study and immerse yourself in the whole history of bibliography and book culture.

This is where departments of special collections can differ so completely from the libraries of private bibliophiles. An individual collector may well build a wonderful cabinet of highspots. Books of absolute rarity are, in fact, quite fascinating in the context of private collection: the freaks printed on vellum, one-off commemorative books with royal provenances, one of a handful of large-paper copies, a vanity product of an exceedingly obscure private press, a chance survival from a suppressed edition, or a volume transformed by a jewelled Sangorski binding. These are books to pass around in the library after dinner at home, for the delight or the envy of one's fellow collectors.

A special collections library, however, would thrive on multiple copies of early but inexpensive editions, long runs of the work of individual printers or binders, the same works in the widest range of formats and

translations, archaic pamphlets in their hundreds, boxes of fragments (even) of manuscripts representing as many texts and scripts as possible, books worn out by scholarly annotation or documented misadventure, shelves and shelves of old books gathered into the retirement home of a research library. These are the books which are the raw material of bibliographical history. They are a magic door opening directly into the world of our ancestors. They are the tangible artifacts which will inspire our descendants with the love of books.

I do not necessarily believe in public libraries of rare books, but I vigorously support the building up of special collections. Let us hope that they can continue to collect massively and unceasingly, before special and rare become synonymous.