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WHAT'S THE USE?

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL about special collections is the people who use them. Without the people who use these materials to forward scholarship, to teach new generations, to serve as librarians, archivists, conservators, and curators, or simply to marvel at them, special collections are not special at all.

People who use special collections for research bring to them their own ideas and their own excitement. In the past month at the Ransom Center, a biographer was crafting a tale of a publisher's life by poring over the publisher's archive; three students were collating variant editions of a sixteenth-century text for a presentation in a graduate seminar; a researcher was studying book jacket designs, formulating an argument about twentieth-century marketing practice; a specialist on the occult was gleefully viewing the photographs of members of a tarot card reading union and images of occult figures such as Oom the Omnipotent from the morgue of a New York newspaper; and so on. Dozens of people visited our exhibitions, and even more called or e-mailed with queries about the collections. The interest and work of these individuals is what makes these collections special.

Special collections staff also make use of the materials in their care for exhibits, Web sites, and their own scholarship; and their daily work itself can be a critical form of use. Acquisition, processing, conservation, and public service are all interpretive acts—uses that can largely determine how and what materials are kept and made available for others to further interpret in the larger culture.

When I give presentations about rare materials, or tours of exhibits, showing anything from fourteenth-century manuscripts to twentieth-century comic books, it is easy to generate a sense of wonder over these materials for their beauty, rarity, or apparent cultural significance. But my goal is to convey an appreciation of the value of these materials in terms of all the ways people use them: for articles, books, lectures, exhibits, personal collections, even conversations. Inevitably, someone always asks, "Yes, but how much are these collections worth in dollars?" Though I generally do not offer a direct answer to this question, I do not discount its importance.

Certainly monetary value can make items worthy of attention. The people who trade similar materials in the marketplace and collect them as treasures also use them and contribute their status in our culture. These materials *are* valuable in many ways, but it is only because of the many people who use them, interpret them, value them, and make them special.