Hosmer Special Collections at
Minneapolis Central Public Library
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Abstract

Digitization of archival objects allows archives and special collections to provide access to their collection to a wider audience. Creating digital finding aids at a collection level and tasking item level description to volunteer interns leads to huge cost savings. The Minnesota Digital Library, in partnership with Minitex, the University of Minnesota, and the Minnesota Historical Society have provided digitization services using heritage funding in an effort to assist public and independent cultural organizations in digitizing their collections.

keywords: library, archives, digitization, special collections, Minneapolis Athenaeum, rare books, archival collections, digital finding aids, digital processing, Minitex, resource sharing, accession numbers, Minnesota Reflections, Minnesota Digital Library, Minneapolis Central Library, Hennepin County Library System, OCR, ContentDM, Dublin Core
Hosmer Special Collections

at the Minneapolis Central Public Library

Digitization of library assets helps in preservation for future generations, maximization of storage, and increase in user access. The Special Collections Department of the Minneapolis Central Library, a part of the Hennepin County Library System is currently working on digitizing large portions of their collections.

The Central Branch of the Minneapolis Public Library is located in the Gateway District of downtown Minneapolis. Dedicated to acquisition and retention of important books, the library outgrew several locations and, in the 1990s, a new, larger Central Library building was built on the same site the library had occupied since the early 1960s. In 1859, a group of businessmen organized the Minneapolis Athenaeum as a private subscription-based library. The Athenaeum continued to operate as the city’s only library until the Minneapolis Public Library Board was formed in 1885 (Engebretson, 1957). The Athenaeum and the Library system have worked cooperatively ever since. The Athenaeum continues to exist as a non-profit private corporation, which focuses on acquisition and preservation of books and manuscripts for the library system. In 2011, the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution to merge the Central Library with the Athenaeum, providing no-rent space in Special Collections (HCLib, n.d.). The Athenaeum is now largely inactive, and remains intact, sharing space within the Special Collections.

Having evolved from a subscription-based library to a countywide public library, Minneapolis Central has undergone many changes. Entering a new century, it has now embarked on the digitization of its Special Collections. This new endeavor increases the reach of the system to a new global audience. Hosmer Special Collections has forged new relationships with
local and national partners in order to achieve this feat. In 2008, the Minneapolis Public Library system, which comprised Central Library and 14 branches, was merged with the Hennepin County Library system in order to save the financially insolvent metropolitan libraries. Hennepin County Libraries is now the largest public library system in Minnesota, serving Minneapolis and 26 suburbs with 55 branch libraries (Brandt, 2008).

**The James K. Hosmer Special Collections**

The James K. Hosmer Special Collections is located in a dedicated secure environment on the fourth floor of Minneapolis Central Library. One enters the area through doors framed by a large, ornately carved, wooden arch that was part of the original library. It is “comprised of ten collections, including five that belong to the library, four that belong to the Minneapolis Athenaeum, and one shared collection” (HCLib, n.d.). The Special Collections Department was formed in 1987, when the Library’s rare holdings were gathered together. Before that time, patrons could only access the materials included in the collections by visiting separate dim, small rooms on the top floor of the aging library building and many important items were stored off-site and required weeks of retrieval time. Minneapolis Central Library Special Collections holds the *Minneapolis*, the *Kittleson World War II, Nineteenth Century American Studies, Huttner Abolition and Anti-Slavery*, and the *Hoag Mark Twain* Collections. The Minneapolis Athenaeum’s collections include the *North American Indians, Early American Exploration and Travel*, and the *Heffefinger Aesop’s fables* Collections. Together, Minneapolis and the Athenaeum jointly contribute to the *History of Books and Printing* Collection. The Library Board created the *Minneapolis Collection* in 1940. It is by far, the most popular, with 93% of patrons accessing the collection. It includes building permits, Minneapolis High, School Yearbooks, newspaper clippings, maps, and manuscripts, and more than 10,000 photographs (HCLib, n.d.).
According to Bailey Diers, a Special Collections librarian, there are few access
limitations and restrictions placed on collections, other than that items must be viewed in the
Special Collections environment, treated with extreme care, and do not circulate. The library
rarely accepts collections with a requirement to be kept private for a period of time before public
release. Because the collections reside in a public library, the expectation is that the collections
sought after or donated are available to the public upon processing at the collection level. This
diffs from the Special Collections at the University of Minnesota. The U of MN places
restrictions on some records. For example, department records have access restrictions; a number
of years are required to pass before the records are available to the public. The whole purpose of
bringing the records to the Hosmer Special Collections is to provide access to the public. The
records here are from individuals, small- to mid-sized companies, non-profit organizations, and
small clubs. Large corporations maintain their own archives and those businesses, like General
Mills, will at some point, send items to the Minnesota Historical Society for permanent retention.

The archival collections in the Special Collections stacks are not open to the public,
unlike the rest of the stacks in the library. Special collections staff librarians retrieve items
requested by patrons in advance of their visit. Collections are stored in two closed stacks, in
addition to two vaults, one belonging to Special Collections and the other belonging to the
Minneapolis Athenaeum in agreement with the stewardship of the Hosmer Special Collections.
The vaults hold rare books, maps, and drawings. It is accessible only by the two main librarians
and head of security of the library. The vaults and stacks are humidity and temperature controlled
- the vaults have less variability allowed than the stacks. An alarm sounds if the humidity or
temperature rises above a desired level.
Tables in the Special Collections area are available to use when examining items from a collection. Librarians collect a driver's license from anyone who examines items from the vault, so there is some control and accountability. There are self-serve photocopiers available, and Thomas Reprographics, a local digital printer, will make copies of books or posters upon request for a fee.

**Processing New Collections**

The librarians create and maintain a digital finding aid available online of all the collections in the Special Collections Department. The finding aid is updated when a new collection is received. The collections are assigned unique identifiers called an accession number. The Society of American Archivists defines an accession number as “a number or code assigned to uniquely identify a group of records or materials acquired by a repository and used to link the materials to associated records” (2005). An accession number assigned by the Special Collections librarians indicates the year of donation (2011, 2012, etc.), followed by the collection number (if more than one collection is received in a year then the ascension number is numbered sequentially in the order that it was received (.01, .02, etc.). Each box in a collection is given a box number, and every item in the box is given its own number. The accession number is a unique identifier for each item in a collection.

Whether a librarian arranges a collection by subject or chronologically depends upon the collection. If a collection consists of lots of correspondence, photos, and drawings, then the collection would be organized in groups of like items. All the correspondence in one box, arranged chronologically. The photos would not necessarily be arranged in chronological order - each photo would receive an ascension number as described above, but would not be further sorted by the processing librarian. Photos are searchable through metadata. Therefore, until the
collection receives descriptive indexing at the item level, the photos would be un-indexed, and un-searchable, except by the collection as a whole. Drawings could be arranged using a mixture of chronological order and related subjects, again,Assigning every item its own accession number.

The Special Collections Web site contains item level finding aids that have been created by interns from St. Catherine's College of St. Paul, MN and the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Special Collections relies upon many interns to process collections. The Hennepin County Libraries offer semester- or quarter-long internships; the interns earn credit while working. These positions are unpaid, and the students receive no stipend. Students create descriptive information associated with accession number, the unique identifier assigned by the special collections librarians. In addition to creating item level descriptions for analog collections, the interns also add metadata at the item level after a collection is digitized. The finding aids are indexes to retrieve items. When a new collection is processed, due to time restrictions, the collection is added to the finding at the collection level. In this way, new collections don't always have box or item level descriptions. Until an intern creates the index for a new collection, items can only requested by collection or box level. The librarians retrieve the entire collections or box for the requester to sort through.

In the last decade, there has been a push to digitize selected collections in order to provide access to a wider public. As technology has advanced, patrons have come to expect access to archival materials. With this new expectation, Special Collections has formed partnerships with other organizations with similar objectives. Rather than rely upon ‘one-off’ projects that are created in response to a patron’s request, they have partnered with the Minnesota Digital Library, in partnership with Online Computer Library Center [OCLC].


Digital Collections

Hennepin County Library does not digitize in-house. The IT department includes software engineers, web programmers, database managers, and infrastructure specialists. When Special Collections gets digitized files back from an outside vendor, they send the master digital files to IT for storage. This allows digitization of more collections without a huge outlay of expenditures. By allowing OCLC partners to digitize and host content while retaining ownership, Hosmer Special Collections sees benefits and few challenges (Daigle, 2012).

The majority of digitization has been done through the Minnesota Digital Library’s [MDL] heritage resource site Minnesota Reflections. MDL is made up of Minnesota libraries, archives, historical societies and museums partnered with OCLC. It is a “statewide initiative funded the Arts and Cultural Heritage Legacy funds” (MN Historical Society, 2011); $500,000 was appropriated in 2010; this, along with other funding sources, enabled MDL to work with the MN Historical Society and its partners, the University of Minnesota and Minitex, “to create a repository for the permanent preservation of important historical materials converted to digital form” (MN Historical Society, 2011).

Minitex is the fiscal partner for MDL. Minitex is the information- and resource-sharing program at the University of MN created in 1969, and funded by the State Legislature in 1970. ‘Minnesota Interlibrary Teletype Experiment’ [Minitex] began participating in the OCLC online cataloguing system in 1976, when it was launched with 18 academic libraries, funded by a grant from the Bush Foundation (DeJohn, 2011). Minitex provides the infrastructure to host databases for online delivery of digital items. It provides digital best practices training opportunities for librarians. Minitex applies for and receives grants to purchase large and expensive digitizing
equipment. It provides digitizing services for all its partner organizations within a tri-state area, including Minnesota, and North and South Dakota.

**Minnesota Reflections: Digitizing a Collection**

Because Legacy funds are provided to help organizations digitize projects, MN Reflections only digitizes collections that will be freely available to the public. It is a database of simple and complex digital objects: images, documents, maps, sound (audio tape only, up to 2-tracks), and video (limited currently to VHS). Photographs are known as simple objects. Multiple page or 3D objects are considered complex objects; an example could be a plat book. More than 90 organizations have contributed to the site. MN Reflections only accepts submissions about, and originating in, Minnesota. The organizations generally reside in Minnesota, as well; however, if a significant outside organization is located outside of the State, they are willing to negotiate. They require that students must be able to freely use the objects without seeking additional permissions. This is not only a requirement because it is a public resource, but because there is a big push in MDL to work with students while they research National History Day projects.

They have two scanning centers, one based at the U of MN and operated by Minitex, the other based at the MN Historical Society. Organizations submit proposals for digitization projects. A selection committee reviews applications to approve the project or decline. They accept projects until they run out of money (annually). At first they focused on old materials, circa 1923 and earlier. The ‘old stuff first’ was the policy because the originals are deteriorating and because copyrights were usually expired.

Currently, they accept more modern materials; materials that tell ‘the story of the state.’ Marian Rengel, Outreach Coordinator for the MDL, advises organizations to “think about what
is most popular, then what is most valued to your organization” to get ideas about which collections to send (2010). Organizations are asked to select materials not only to provide access to users to the collection but to also consider older, more fragile materials, because digitizing reduces wear and tear on physical resources.

After a collection is selected and approved by MDL, the organization is asked to send the originals to one of the two scanning centers along with metadata at the object level. The objects are scanned to create digital objects. The original scan format is a 24-bit color TIFF, a commonly used archival format. Mechanical or computer text is scanned OCR. This technology doesn’t work on type that is not in straight lines – so maps with hand-lettered or curved text are not converted. Other file formats are created from the master TIFF files: JPG access images and the JPG thumbnails, which are returned with the original material to the organization. The contributing organization creates the metadata at the item level after digitization using the statewide guidelines (based on Dublin Core). Contributing Organizations also transcribe handwritten documents, or non-linear text. Transcription and OCR allows the text to be searchable in the database. Finally, organizations retain a set of the original scans for disaster recovery. The metadata is returned to the MDL, which adds the collection to the MN Reflections database.

When browsing the MN Reflections database, a user sees a low quality thumbnail image along with the metadata. They can click and see the largest file, which is a JPEG2000 (file extension JP2). Generally, you can zoom in to see the detail of digital objects because the files are of high resolution. JPEG2000 (ISO 15444) is both a lossless and lossy compression providing better image quality using smaller file sizes than a JPEG file (JPEG2000 Source, n.d.). Users can post comments to each item in a collection; the comments are moderated by the
originating organization. There is also a place for users to create tags. Users need to create an account before adding tags. The originating organization also has the option to add tags. Ironically, the tags are not searchable. Rengel states that in the future OCLC Content DM is considering an optional service to offer adding user created tags into the metadata so that they are searchable (Using MN Reflections, 2010). All collections contain links back to the originating organization.

The MDL maintains the master files at the University of MN. For storage and preservation a duplicate file is sent to OCLC partners at the Universities of Indiana, and Michigan. The MDL is a hosted instance using ContentDM, which accesses versions of the master located at the U of MN. The digital content belongs to the originating organization.

Summary

Hennepin County Libraries accounts for the largest amount of digitization projects completed by MDL every year. The ability to outsource the process using the MDL’s resources is an effective way to save costs. The equipment is very expensive to purchase and maintain. By strategically utilizing grant monies, Minitex now has the ability to scan objects as large as 40 x 60 inches. The U of MN, Minitex lab also invested in a book scanner to efficiently scan books without damaging bindings. It also takes time to build expertise in using high-end scanning equipment, so once an organization purchases equipment, it takes additional time, and, therefore, expense, to get training and master the process (Rengel, 2010). Essentially, the size of the organization’s collection determines whether it is worth the cost outlay. Costs savings are realized because training takes a lot of resources, and many organizations do not have enough projects to justify training at the organizational level.
TIFF master files can be upwards of 12MB each. An organization needs to consider if they have the digital storage capacity to store them. Plans need to be made to migrate them every three years. Some organizations do not want to work with the MDL because they believe providing free access to collections will reduce the number of people coming through their doors, but the MDL has found quite the opposite. They have found that the more images available online, the more people are contacting organizations for reprints (Rengel, 2010).

Building a collection of digital assets is a major strategic undertaking (Daigle, B., 2012). Hosmer Special Collections has been able to take advantage of its partnership with MDL to increase its presence online without having to give up valuable floor space to hardware acquisition.

Partner organizations host the content so that the databases are seamlessly connected to the Hennepin County Libraries web presence. Currently, library web site visitors can access the majority of the Special Collections photographic holdings, city directories from the late 1860s through the late 1890s, 2000 digitized propaganda posters from World War II, high school yearbooks from 1890-1922 and other historical maps and documents. In addition, working with partner sites, the collection provides access to historical newspapers and material used in the Minnesota Reflections Collection. Use and appreciation of the Minneapolis Central Library Special Collections is increasing both online and in person in a direct consequence of the valuable digital collections and finding aids available online.
References


