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Ed.

Book history scholarship: creation, transmission of knowledge and archives

Danné Ojeda and Mathieu Lommen

Abstract

This text takes the form of a conversation between Danné Ojeda and Mathieu Lommen with a preliminary introduction by Danné referring to book history and the history of reading. The talk took place on 14 May 2014, in the Special Collections (Bijzondere Collecties), that house medieval manuscripts, books, prints, among other heritage materials in the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Through the introduction and the following conversation, we will examine books' materiality and form as they define both the history of the book from its infancy and that of reading. The former will help us to understand how books have influenced not only thinking but also human ergonomic behavior towards these artifacts. The text also highlights the development of book forms by examining why certain transformations or deviations to the traditional book form took place and their impact on the history of book development and reading. This is in order to ascertain the consequences of the book's physical transformation on the reader's use and appreciation of it as a *basic object of knowledge*. In this regard, first the introductory text offers a succinct overview of the changes and transformations of the book's physical forms. Second, the conversation focuses on the Special Collection of the University of Amsterdam in order to expose the criteria, guidelines, and parameters which classify a book as a "collectable object", to be archived for the preservation of a record of the history of books and their forms.

Key words:

Book definition; knowledge creation; knowledge transmission; book archives; designer as author; History of book and history of reading.

When writers die they become books, which is, after all,
not too bad an incarnation.

Jorge Luis Borges

Introduction by Danné Ojeda

Books are artifacts that communicate and preserve a specific kind of human knowledge; they are time capsules that survive in myriad formats, materials, and platforms. David Pearson calls them *emblems of our culture* while regarding them “as one of the defining characteristics of developed civilizations” (Pearson, 2012, 7). History provides compelling examples of the significance of books as empowering artifacts that transmit knowledge whereby the burning of books flares angrily as an exercise of power to erase political, cultural, or religious dissent. We might recall the Qin Shi Huang Dynasty who in 213 BC ruled the burning of any book that excluded subjects such as agriculture and medicine; the annihilation of Maya codices deemed heretical by Fray Diego de Landa in the sixteenth century; and the destruction of Jewish texts in 1933, as they were considered disobedient to the Nazi idea of Nation. The complete destruction of libraries during the last century remains scorched into our memory: the Jaffna Public Library in Sri Lanka, the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Iraq National Library and Archive, Al-Awqaf Library in Baghdad, and the Saeh Library in Tripoli, Libya, are *emblems of culture* that have recently been reduced to ashes.

These events occurred as a book’s content is generally perceived as the carrier of unorthodox thinking. Leslie Howsam notes, however, that the book is not only a *text* — a point of interpretation between authors and readers — but also a *material object*. He also remarks how this latter quality is frequently overlooked as a result of the power of the former and signals its importance as follows:

‘...the book-as-object holds the evidence of its own making; it carries not only the obvious text on pages but a further “text” in its formats, materials, design and impression... Such design elements are sometimes called the ‘paratext’, a useful concept introduced by the literary theorist Gérard Genette. Paratextual elements (bindings, blurbs, design, and so forth) supplied by editors and publishers can affect the meaning of the text... It is the combination of textuality and materiality, perhaps unique among human-made artefacts, that gives the book its power to convey a sense of its past.’
(Howsam, 2015, 4)

In this text we will examine books’ materiality and form with its paratextual elements, as they define both the history of the book from its infancy and that of reading. The former will help us to understand how books have influenced not only thinking but also human ergonomic behavior towards these artifacts. Danné Ojeda will look into the development of book forms by examining why certain transformations or deviations to the traditional form took place and their impact on the history of book development and reading. This is in order to ascertain the consequences of the book’s physical transformation on the reader’s use and appreciation of it as a *basic object of knowledge*. Following this line of thought, Danné will first offer a succinct overview of the changes and transformations of the book’s physical forms. Second, she will focus on the Special Collection of the University of Amsterdam — which hosts an extensive archive of historical printed books — and converse with the design historian and curator Mathieu Lommen, in order to define the criteria, guidelines, and parameters which classify a book as a “collectable object”, to be sheltered and archived in order to preserve a record of the history of books and their forms.

Pearson states that the book form as we know it “emerged in the Near East in the first centuries AD” with the appearance of the first codex (Pearson, 2012, 34). Codices were usually made of papyrus, and they almost immediately began to substitute the scroll, which was the common written format of the time. It was the codex’s ease of reading that established its spread; the scroll had to be rolled upwards and downwards with both hands, in a fashion similar to that of a computer screen’s scroll function today. The reader had access to a fragment of the scroll’s information, but was unable to visualize it in its totality. The codex amply overcame this impediment by allowing the reader to have a better sense of the content as a whole. It also made browsing easier and allowed the possibility of cross reference. Codices grew in number of leaves and size, enabling a vast amount of information to be stored, while parchment or vellum progressively replaced papyrus.

When looking at the book as object from the viewpoint of the history of reading, Robert Escarpit defines it as a “reading machine” (Escarpit, 1968, 15). Alejandro E. Parada adds that the book is indeed a machine, a maker of different readers based on a textual script (Parada, 2010, 95). Alternatively, in the same decade, Alberto Manguel referred to the book as the result of the evolution of formats that have been adapted to their intended use: reading (Manguel, 1996, 125). This reminds us of the maxim “*Form follows function*”, a Modernist principle and almost a manifesto that defined “good design”¹.

¹ Form follows function is a well-known principle associated with Modernist design and architecture in the twentieth century. Many designers have adopted this way of doing as a mantra. For example, Dieter Rams revealed in his Ten Principles of Good Design: “Good Design Makes A Product Understandable: It clarifies the product’s structure. Better still, it can make the product clearly express its function by making use of the user’s intuition. At best, it is self-explanatory.” See Rosenfield, Karlissa. 2012. Dieter Rams Ten Principles of “Good Design”. <http://www.archdaily.com/198583/dieter-rams-10-principles-of-%25e2%2580%259cgood-design%25e2%2580%259d> (Accessed December 31, 2015).

The incunable: the infancy of book forms

The increasing use of paper for writing between the tenth and twelve centuries, together with the advent of printing around 1440–50, gave the final impulse to the production of current book forms. The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg — born in Mainz, Germany — triggered the mass production of books in a magnitude never before seen. These first printed books, produced before 1501, were called incunables² as Nicole Howard explains in her timeline drawn in *The Book. The Life Story of a Technology*. Transitional forms produced in this period of the infancy of the book were intermediate versions between the manuscript and the book format as we know it today. Their pages served as an experimental platform on which to examine different printing and letterpress techniques and to test new materials and sizes that would define the physical form of books in the years to come. Although printed with movable metal type, one of the most visible characteristics of the incunables was their fondness of handwritten letterforms, and they may therefore be regarded as manifestations of a longing for the continuation of what I call “the canon of handwritten culture” inherited to date in books that passed on the trace of physical human presence or, indeed, its absence: ink strokes, amended errors in rubrications, columns, and marginal notes. Hence, I consider the *incunabula* to be perhaps one of the last unconscious and sustained tributes to centuries of handwriting practice.

“The age of the printed word”

The sixteenth century became “the age of the printed word”. However, the physical form of the book inspired by the historical codex form, has remained largely intact thanks to its functionality until today.

Post-incunable transformations of the book form were mainly manifested in diverse typographical applications to improve legibility, as well as in the page layout and subsequent changes in technology.³ David J. Shaw notes how there was an increased specialization visible though book making and book page content hierarchy and markup, although printing starting from the incunable period remained essentially unchanged. With regards to the page, text layout was clearly improved by the introduction

² From the Latin *Incunabula*, meaning related to the “cradle” or “birthplace”. In the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, *incunabula* are defined as “any book printed with movable metal type prior to January 1, 1501. This definition includes only the first 50 years of typographic printing. Block books or xylographic books of the same time period are normally not considered to be *incunabula* as they would not have been printed typographically—that is to say with movable meta type.” See Allen Kent, Harold Lancour and Jay E. Daily, Eds. 1974. *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*. New York, Basel: Marcel Dekker Inc. 265.

³ New technologies were all employed to the benefit of content layout. If we focus on the nineteenth century, for example, several new options emerged for printing images: lithography, wood engraving and photography.

of the book title, a title page, the name and location of its producer, page numbers introduced in the early sixteenth century, and the development of indexes (Shaw, 2011, 222). Moreover, when examining technological and industrial advances, punch-cutting, type-founding, bookbinding, and papermaking were broadened and developed into separated activities.

Several factors contributed to the reaffirmation of the age of the printed word. When referring to the period of Gutenberg’s printing revolution, Lotte Hellinga observes a change in the readership of books by the middle of the fifteenth century, when both the readership and the ownership of books were no longer solely for the privileged few (Hellinga, 2011, 207). This was partly due to some more technological aspects of printing discussed extensively by Adriaan van der Weel in his book *Changing our textual minds: the increased speed of copying* which allowed information to be disseminated faster than with manuscript production; the consequent *increase in copies* so that readership could be multiplied, to which I would like to add the resulting lower cost of the book due to ease of reproduction; and lastly, *legibility*, thanks to the printing press facilities which made identical reproductions of typographic applications possible, allowing texts to be read more easily than those that were handwritten (van der Weel, 2011, 82)⁴. Other socio-historical conditions that contributed to the significant expansion of the printed book include, on the one hand, the progressive increase in literacy rates in Europe and the growing interest shown by the academia in published books for scholarship and, on the other, the industrialization process developed throughout the Enlightenment, which intensified the specialization and division of the printing sector and expanded the systems for the commercialization and distribution of books.

New book formats emerged as a result of changing reading habits. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century books were mainly being read in libraries. However, taking advantage of Gutenberg’s invention, the humanist Aldus Manutius (c. 1451–1515) became one of the first publishers renowned for his high quality printed work that established a printing house in Venice. Although small-sized books had been produced before, Manutius published a series of pocket-sized books that even today are considered beautifully edited and published. They were also very well received in his time, creating a hallmark that was soon imitated throughout Europe in editions such as those produced by Elzevir in Leiden. This was also an indication that the mass production of books was slowly taking into account the interests of a different reader: one who was more interested in owning a book that could be carried beyond enclosed walls and taken to different places. Manguel reminds us at this point that of “all of the shapes that books have acquired through the ages, the most popular have been

⁴ The importance of typeface development or *homo typographicus* as van der Weel likes to put it, definitively increased the legibility of books. In the nineteenth century, an example was the invention of the bold typeface that added to the rest of the Roman and the Italic cuts a variety of textual emphasis or tones or voices within a text (van der Weel, 2011, 95).

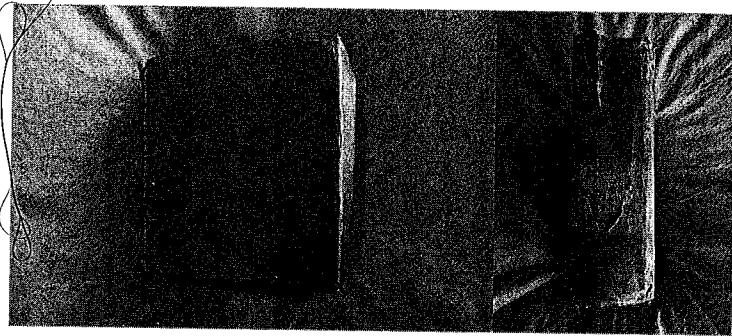
those that allowed the book to be held comfortably in the reader's hand.⁵

As previously observed, "canonical" book forms have evolved from the codex to the incunable. During this process, the same physical characteristics prevailed: the book had numerous leaves or pages and was bound with a cover. However, there are relevant examples of books that appear to be early departures from this standardized book form.

Reviewing the Special Collection at the University of Leiden, I came across the *Vossiani Latini in Octavo*, a rather atypical book and an exceptional discovery in the Dutch manuscript collection. The third part of this book, which dates from the eleventh century, is made of scraps of animal skin (possibly from a cow) prepared as parchment, which have been recycled and bound together. This is why book historian Erik Kwakkel speaks about the object as an example of "Medieval garbage."⁶ Kwakkel presupposes that in order to make book production less costly, the leftovers of some parchments were cut out and used to finish this book. The result of using these irregularly sized parchments is an asymmetrical pagination that affects the *join or gutter*, as well as the *edges of text block*, and the complexity of the book's *text block* in general.

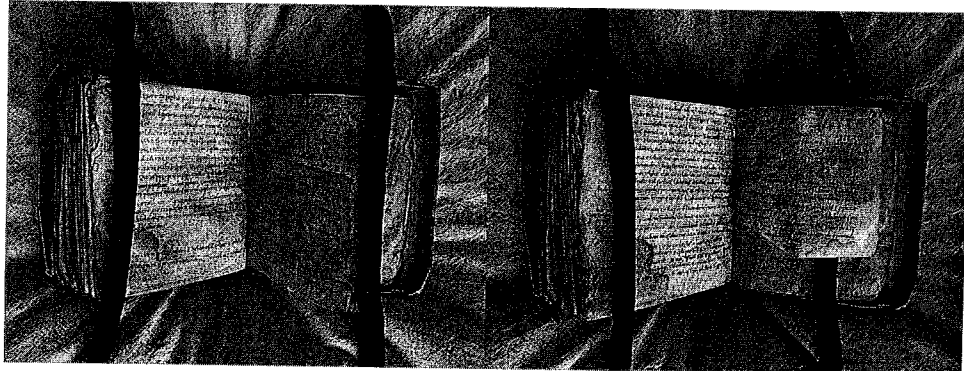
Figures 1-2

Vossiani Latini in Octavo.
Manuscript VLO 92, Part 3,
11th century
Leiden University Libraries,
Special Collection.
Photo: D. Ojeda



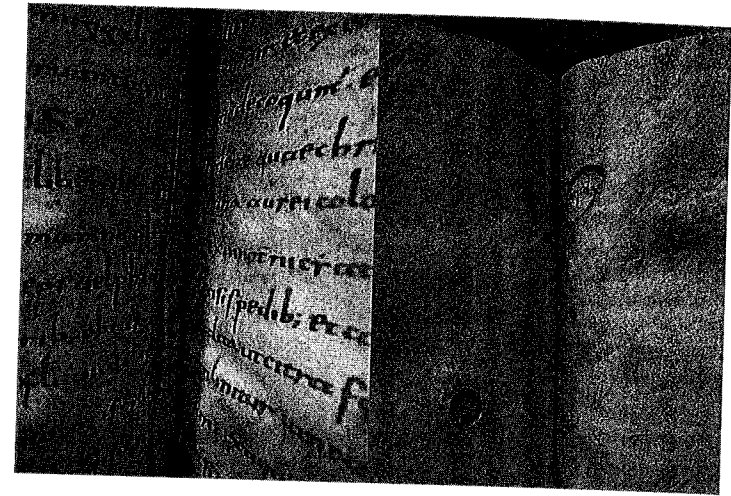
Figures 3-4

Vossiani Latini in Octavo
Manuscript VLO 92, Part 3
(Fragments)
11th century, Leiden
University Libraries, Special
Collection.
Photo: D. Ojeda



figures 5 - 6

Vossiani Latini in Octavo
Manuscript VLO 92, Part 3
(Fragments)
11th century, Leiden
University Libraries,
Special Collection.
Photos: D. Ojeda



Half pages in the book (Figures 3 and 4) are the result of the "whatever found" material strategy used to assemble the text block. As a note in the margin that expresses an interesting parallel experience, book designers nowadays tend to use half pages as a design approach to highlight different kinds of information within a given book's content for the reader.

Other relevant examples of variances in book forms are the anatomical flap books developed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, primarily for medical students. Layers of the human anatomy could be seen through a series of meticulously superimposed illustrations (later becoming printed images) on their pages — also known as *fugitive sheets* — in times when the study of the human body with cadavers was prohibited. Anatomical flap books were complex in terms of production: parts of the human anatomy were assembled by means of layers of paper that opened to reveal the interior of the human body's structure. The books performed a simulated autopsy that the reader followed by opening finely illustrated or printed pieces of papers corresponding to the human body. Fugitive sheets can also be considered early examples of pop-up books, and their "animated images" appealed to a great number of readers beyond the medical personnel for which they were initially intended.

To make a book is to "curate" information—
A conversation between Danné
Ojeda and Mathieu Lommen

Following Danné's interest in the book as object and how these artifacts characterize humankind's knowledge and behavior, she approached Mathieu Lommen — current curator of graphic design at the Special Collec-

5 See Manguel, A. 1996. *A History of Reading*. New York: Penguin Books, 128.

6 Libraries, L. U. 2012. Medieval garbage in Leiden University Library.

tion Library, University of Amsterdam (UvA) — to speak about book history scholarship and the creation and transmission of knowledge, as well as his current criteria for safeguarding books in the digital era. Lommen studied Dutch Literature (Nederlandse letterkunde) at the University of Amsterdam. He has curated exhibitions based on treasures found in the Special Collection such as “Book seeks reader: advertising from the book world since the 17th century” (Special Collections, 2008). He was Managing Editor at *Quaerendo* (1997–2011) and member of the editorial board of *Codex: the journal of letterforms*. He also edited *The Book of Books. 500 Years of Graphic Innovation* (2012), published by UvA, Amsterdam, and Thames and Hudson Publishers, London.

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Q:
Mathieu, when did you start working in the Special Collection and how do you describe your current role?

A:
I officially became the curator in 2001. Before that, I catalogued type specimen collections and prints for the university library. As a curator I collect, describe, and present collections.

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Q:
Are there specific requirements you might need to comply with as a curator of the Special Collections, for instance, curating one exhibition per year?

A:
Exhibitions on graphic design are usually presented every two years. Although they may be presented more often, there is at least one exhibition on graphic design every two years.

.....

Q:
What sort of guidelines have you developed or have you followed to organize the Special Collections? For example, what kind of classification do you use, and what could be the special “features” you and your team of specialists look for when selecting a book for the Special Collections? I recently read in *The Book of Books: 500 Years of Graphic Innovation*⁷, a book which you just published, that since its foundation in 1578, the Amsterdam University Library has collected books primarily “for their content”. However, it also began to select books based on “their production method or design”. Could you speak about the general criteria applied currently for selecting books for the Special Collections?

A:
Libraries like this one collect books because of their rarity or use of a special method of production. Books by Bodoni or William Morris were not collected for their content because the content had already been published

several times before. Libraries always loved exquisite luxurious books. For hundreds of years, the Amsterdam University Library has collected *edition deluxe*, luxuriously-produced intellectual books.

If you look at books by Baskerville and at the list of inscribers for his books (which is attached to our copy), you will see the names of several libraries that acquired them. These copies were archived because of the quality of Baskerville’s book design and production. Other collectors’ items include books that are rare or valuable and first editions of famous authors’ publications. There are also books by designers which are not valuable but which we acquire. For example, a Penguin designed by Jan Tschichold is rather cheap, but nevertheless it is something special we like to keep in a good condition.

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Q:
Is there any difference between the books you collect from the Netherlands and those that you select from abroad?

A:
We do not acquire that many books which we call “primary works”. We collect secondary literature — books about books — and books designed by designers. What we prefer to do is find collectors, and we acquire their collection. For example, we recently acquired a collection of Dutch photo books by famous Dutch photographers from the 1940s to today.

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Q:
Hence, in terms of classification, the Special Collection focuses on classics book forms, exquisite, luxurious books, or rare books, among other exceptional objects. It is also a collection that focuses on research, which is why you collect secondary rather than primary sources. Is that an accurate description?

A:
Yes, indeed. Our library is different from a museum. For example, we do archive works by important figures, such as Irma Boom. We cherish them but also have a broader view. We do not only collect beautiful things. Since we are a scientific institution, we want to depict the broader field of the graphics trade, not only attractive ‘big’ names. We also collect artefacts on the process of design, mainly for research purposes.

Regarding exhibitions, we have to invest in relevant topics. For example, you cannot make an exhibition about the design of dictionaries because it will attract only very few people.

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Q:
In collecting historical items, what difficulties do you face?

A:
One of the difficulties I faced at the Special Collection was breaking the tradition of collecting *traditional bibliophile* editions, letterpress printed

⁷ Lommen, M., ed. (2012). *The Book of Books. 500 Years of Graphic Innovation*. London, Thames & Hudson Publishers.

books in small editions. I think that nowadays those editions do not have the same importance they had in the 1890s or 1900s. These bibliophile editions do not add to the history of the book, so I think that it is not money well spent. Something new I suggested was that we should collect Irma Boom's books, for example. She was in her 40s when we acquired her archive. I think that it might be difficult for institutions like this one to understand that internationally-acknowledged books by individuals such as Irma Boom that can presently be acquired for 30 or 40 euros, are, from the perspective of the history of design, more important than some luxurious editions that might cost hundreds of euros.

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Q:
I believe that when you acquire books for the Special Collections, you have to justify why you select them. Could you briefly describe this process?

A:
The process has changed over time. When I started acquiring living archives, the organization was different. I could acquire books and archives and put them in stacks. But nowadays, the organization is stricter, and I am not allowed to do this on my own. We first discuss this in an acquisition team. We have to discuss how much space an acquisition will require and how much it will cost to catalogue these books. As a rule, we do not pay for archives. So at present, we do not take complete archives or complete productions like we did with Irma Boom. I usually will talk to the designers if they are still alive and will make a selection of their books and archive. It is not only about beautiful things but also about how these objects contribute to research.

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Q:
Why have you acquired Irma Boom's archive? What elements set her books apart and make them interesting for research purposes?

A:
When I acquired her archive, she was already known as an important book designer both among her Dutch colleagues and internationally. I was quite sure that she was a good asset to our collection. I thought that if we waited, maybe some other institution would ask her for her archive.

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Q:
You recently collaborated with Irma Boom on two of her exhibitions: *Biography in Books* (2010, University of Amsterdam Library, The Netherlands), and *The Architecture of the Book* (2013, Institut Neerlandais, Paris, France). Through this experience, you gained an insight into how she works and how she thinks in terms of book production, among other issues. Is there something you would like to share on how she engages in the production of the books she designs?

A:
I think Irma Boom has the advantage of the Internet. The Internet makes it

clear that making a book has to be a meaningful endeavor. The book form as a documentation of something you have researched and the book as a sequence of images is not — in most cases — the best way to think of book production. In the Internet era, one needs a strong justification to make a book. Why do you choose to publish your content as a physical book and not as a website or a PDF? The printed form has its share of advantages and disadvantages. In Irma Boom's case, she profits from the Internet as the existence of Internet fuels the recognition that Irma's work is justified because of the personal choices she makes. And, I think this is the only way you can justify the existence of a book. One should not misuse the medium of a book any longer for things that a book is not good at. If one uses the medium of a book, it is important to know why a particular type of paper is chosen, why the pictures are arranged in a particular way, and why the book has been bound in this way. A book should be justified: Why is it a book and not something else?

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Q:
Hence, you think that nowadays, the book as a medium has gained specificity because it differentiates itself from the Internet, and because the book — amidst the digital era — is somehow a 'space' to propose alternatives to the digital environment.

A:
Yes. At present, the choice of a book as a medium should be a justified one. Please, do not misuse the medium of books because my house is full of books, and I do not have space for more.

.....

Q:
Through your words, I perceive the worldview of a researcher. Your main approach to books is to study their content, in particular the manner in which books have been designed and produced. You further seek to evaluate and select books to be preserved for future generations. A priority for you seems to be that there shall be a need for the book to exist or for the book to perform a purpose.

...But coming back to your earlier statement, from the point of view of a book designer and speaking from my own point of view, this is basically what designers do: they justify why a book should exist.

A:
This is especially so since the Internet came into existence. Before, you did not have to justify why you made a book, because wanting to publish information seemed to be reason enough. But now, you can publish information in many different ways.

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Q:
In that sense, one could say that your definition of a book is that of a specific physical object that can justify its existence outside of (as opposed to) the digital medium.

.....
A:
Yes. It should be that way. There are many advantages and disadvantages when one compares a book to the Internet. The Internet includes everything: if you publish all artworks from a museum, what would we look at? Thousands of pictures and so much information would be available. In comparison, a book should be something that is more of a selection, maybe a performance.

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Q:
A book then allows you to select very specific information, to curate information.

.....
A:
Yes, to curate information. That is a nice way of formulating it. To make a book is to curate information. And this is what Irma Boom is good at: curating information. She rightfully takes that role.

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Q:
..... Going back to the Special Collections, why are they entitled "special"?

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A:
That is the international convention. All libraries like this one have "Special Collections".

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Q:
..... So is it a generic term for this sort of collection?

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A:
Yes. You have lending libraries, and you have the more special collections, those that host either very expensive or not very expensive but fragile or very rare books. For example, we have a large collection that is not expensive at all consisting of printed ephemera of the book trade. They are very rare and important for research.

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Q:
Where does the "rarity" of the book reside? Is it in the way the book is made, or is it rare as a result of a transformation to the canon of the traditional book form?

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A:
The less valuable a book is when it is published, the greater the chance that it becomes rare. There are forty or more Gutenberg bibles. That it is not a rare book. The Baskerville books are not rare either. Those books were expensive then, and they continue to be expensive now, so everyone who owns them will keep them safely. But if you were to look for well preserved children's books from the 50s, they would be very difficult to find. Similarly, it would be hard to find a book by Heartfield from the 20s with a photomontage.

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Q:
You mentioned some keywords that describe the Special Collections. How do you classify the collection?

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A:
Rare or expensive. These are the first criteria. Because the collection comprises of books that are worth thousands of euros, medieval manuscripts which are of course both unique and expensive, and original letters, these objects cannot be borrowed. There are also ephemeras that are interesting for research purposes. It may be because of their content, or their form, or because they have been specially printed. We are also interested in printing techniques, such as examples of very early offset printing, or early photographic techniques. So, keywords that define the collection could be expensive, rare, and vulnerable.

.....
Q:
Examples of the early printing techniques will offer a look into the history of books as a technology. This highlights an interesting area for me, which is how the canon of what a book is in terms of its format has been developed and how this canon has been challenged during the history of book design. This leads me to ask if there is any original or foundational book that you have in the collection that, when you look at it, you say, "This is the very first book that was printed without a cover," or "This is the very first book with its spine exposed?"

.....
A:
We have the first Dutch book to have its illustrations printed in colour, early lithographed books, and a nice collection of the bindings of early 19th century publishers. Earlier books were not bound by the publisher but individually instead. If you were a wealthy person who loved books, you could have your books bound in expensive leather and stamped with gold lettering. But the difficulty with the history of the book is that, in my opinion, it is very much an Anglo-Saxon history. And one of my objectives as a curator of the collection is to try expanding the Anglo-Saxon view of the book's history by including, for example, modern books from France and Germany.

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Q:
..... Could you name some authors whose books you think are foundational? I am thinking of books that challenged the traditional form of a book.

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A:
I would think one could name Baskerville as a foundational author because in the 18th century, he was the one who thought to look at a book as a whole: at the paper, at the printing, and of course at the design of the typeface.

While I cannot recall precise examples, what I do know is that the industrialization of the book in the 19th century uniformed its production, often making it less interesting. The book became a cheaply produced object with a nice cover that had to be sold.

.....

Q:

If you had to select one of the most valuable or the most beautiful books you have in the collection, or if you had to select the most interesting one because it is most ephemeral or fragile, or because it is the most luxurious or expensive, which book would that be? Perhaps to name just one might be difficult, but just as an example, what book would you select?

.....

A:

I could not select one book... If there was a fire and I could only take one book, I would probably save a book by Arrighi. He was the most famous 16th-century Italian calligrapher and perhaps the most famous calligrapher of all times. The book was made on commission of the poet Vittoria Colonna and completed in 1517. It is a thick book entirely written by Arrighi himself. Yes, I will definitely go for this book. I love writing, so I will probably take that one because it is unique and so beautiful.

Q:

..... What is the content of this book?

A:

I always forget what the book is about because I am not interested at all in the content of it. People always ask about that, but I will have to look it up. I only look at the writing. There are also very nice illustrations.

.....

Q:

During a conversation I had with Irma Boom, she mentioned that she had selected a book by Aldus Manutius to be shown as part of her retrospective exhibition organized together with the Special Collection. She added that her selection was motivated by the fact that Manutius's book was considered one of the most important and beautiful books of your collection. Is there a book by Aldus Manutius that deserves to be safeguarded from a fire?

.....

A:

The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili? I am not sure if this was the one she used for the exhibition. It is an iconic book because of the content and the illustrations. But several libraries internationally possess copies.

.....

Q:

Is Manutius's book a foundational book? Is it a book that might have started a tradition, for example in terms of printing techniques, or does it have any other pioneering feature?

.....

A:

Not in printing techniques. But other books published by Manutius started the tradition of printed pocket books. These met the people's desire for portable books. One of these pocketbooks⁸ is reproduced in *The Book of Books: 500 Years of Graphic Innovation*.

⁸ Mathieu Lommen refers to the book *Johannes Aurelius Augurellus, [Poemata]* (Venice: Aldus Manutius).

.....

Q:

And within the Special Collection, do you also archive unfinished books? I am thinking, for example, of scale models or dummies. For instance, Irma Boom creates dummies to produce her final books. Do you have unfinished books such as dummies or scale models created by Irma Boom?

.....

A:

We have some dummies from her archive. Yes.

.....

Q:

..... And do you collect unfinished books, dummies, or unfinished letters from centuries past?

A:

Not especially. They are rare. If we have them, we will not discard them of course.

Q:

..... Is there a way for the public to access these rare, unfinished books?

A:

You could maybe find them in some of our modern archives. Because they are unfinished, they might not be catalogued on an item level, but they might instead be listed as part of the archive. And because they would not be published books, they would not be described in our catalogue on an item level. Generally, books are catalogued on an item level, but there is also an archival description of the whole collection. One can go to the online catalogue, and objects not archived on an item level would be described in an inventory.

.....

Q:

..... There is a special place for miniature books in the history of books in general. How do you treat them?

A:

Miniature books have of course always been very collectable. They are in closed stacks because they can be easily stolen.

.....

Q:

..... And in principle, the public has access to everything?

A:

Yes.

.....

Q:

..... Even to non-catalogued items?

A:

Yes. Only a very few books are not easily available to the public because they are very vulnerable. For example, although we have the book *Dlia golosa*

by El Lissitzky in paperback, offering the original to the public will destroy it. In this case, we offer facsimiles. And if someone wants to see the original book, a curator needs to approve the request. But although some books are restricted, the public has access to 99.9% of the materials in our collection.

.....

Q:

Talking about book designers, Cees W. de Jong referred to a comment you once made: "Books made by designers often seem to be the resort of emptying a bookcase: too personal and lacking in explanation."⁹ What did you mean by this statement?

.....

A:

I meant that designers are not researchers. Not all designers are this way, but generally speaking, they are not capable of looking for materials in the way a researcher will. It is a skill you learn in university: how to find articles, or reliable information about a subject in libraries or archives. It is very time consuming. And this limits the way you can progress. Designers often also have difficulties with writing. Conversely, they can articulate a visual essay, and that is why they invented it.

In the future, there will be — I think — a sort of competition between authors and designers. If the designer wants to be an author, why couldn't the author be a designer too? The same is true of book publishers. I am sure many publishers have many good ideas and concepts for publishing books, and that designers often work from their concepts, but it is never mentioned. I think the author of the future should have more knowledge about book making if he chooses to publish in the printed form. If you want to make a documentary, you have to know something about filming and how to use the camera. If you choose the medium of a book, you should know something about designing books.

.....

Q:

That is thought provoking. Your words defend your position as an author.

.....

A:

Yes. As an author, I do not want just to provide the text and pictures for someone else to make a book. It should be a cooperation from the beginning.

.....

Q:

As a design historian, you know your subject, and you want to control as many elements as possible of the book's production. You mentioned earlier that in the future, there could be a competition of skills and authorship. How much are you able to allow a designer to contribute to your book? In other words, how much do you allow a designer to be a co-author?

.....

A:

As much as he or she allows me to be a co-designer. If designers would really be co-authors, they would design less books. Many designers note each

hour they have worked on a project. But as an author, you hardly ever get paid for all your hours. So, if a designer wants to be co-author, no problem, come with me to the archives, do the selection and the writing together with me. I use to write one book every two or three years, while designers make ten or more books each year. You cannot live from writing books. I work to write books. So, I don't think that there will be much competition in that area.

.....

Q:

On this point, it is good to go back to Irma Boom's books, since you have worked with her and we both agree that she is a designer-author. She edits content, does visual research, develops visual ideas, and creates concepts. She is both also because she is able to "translate" these elements into the physicality or the materiality of the book. Therefore, when one sees her books, one is able to grasp the content of it by the way the object is produced. She is experienced in speaking content through form. Right? From that point of view, a designer might not necessarily have to go with you to the archives, but he or she can interpret this research material using form to create content, as Irma Boom does. What are your thoughts on that?

.....

A:

Yes, alright. Irma Boom is a league of her own. But then in general, a designer is called an author after the researcher/author has made the content selection. Designers work on many subjects, so to me it seems difficult for them to judge the quality of research done by someone else.

.....

Q:

Talking about your current occupations, what book or curatorial research project are you involved with at this moment?

.....

A:

I am working on Letters from the beginning of the 15th century until now.

.....

Q:

Are you creating a sort of historical *continuum*?

.....

A:

Yes. It will be an exhibition and a book about Letters. There has not been much historical research in this field. One can make real discoveries among Letters that have never been noticed in the last few decades and in this way contribute to the existing literature. And this is very exciting.

.....

Q:

When I look at those handwritten Letters or books, I always experience some sort of nostalgia for what has been lost with the advances of technology. There are certainly many advantages, but they come at the expense of something that could have been essential in that époque, like the development of calligraphy once was essential to its era. Do you think that with the current

..... technological developments, we are witnessing the end of the era of books?

A:

No. There is just a change. I do not think books have the impact they used to have. The printed book as a mainstream object of communication is disappearing. I offered a book to my daughter a few weeks ago. I had not finished my sentence when she said, "You know I am not interested in books." When she was young, she had a whole room filled with books. We bought meters of children books, but now she is not interested in books. Her generation is not interested in books. That is why I think that the book as a mainstream object is finished. Although I regret this, I think the book will become an elite medium.

.....

Q:

'The book as an elite medium'... that is how books first developed. First, books were an elite object, although for completely different reasons. Only wealthy people could acquire and customize them. Late however, they became a mass medium object. Do you think that in the future the book will go back to its roots and once again be just an elite object?

.....

A:

Certainly more special. There will be no paperbacks anymore. I am no longer a curator of books as a mass medium. I love books because they used to be just that. But that is going to end. For quite some time, it made me sad. But I know it will be that way. I cannot change it.



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Mathieu Lommen works since 1991 as a curator of graphic design and typography at the Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam (UvA), where he has also taught graphic design history. He has published multiple works on book and type design from the nineteenth century onwards and has curated several exhibitions on these subjects. His publications include: Limited Edition: Archive of the Foundation De Roos 1945–2005 (2006), the brochure 50 years Helvetica (2007), Het cahier Kees Nieuwenhuijzen (2009), Irma Boom: Biography in Books (2010); The Book of Books. 500 Years of Graphic Innovation (2012, Thames & Hudson) and Irma Boom: The Architecture of the Book (2013).