

Rare Books Collection Development Policy

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. This document constitutes a statement of the Rare Books Collection development policy of the SOAS Library Special Collections and aims to provide information and guidance to library staff, academic staff, students, library users, members of SOAS, and the wider scholarly and professional communities as to the principles governing the development and management of its Rare Books collection within the SOAS Library Special Collections.
- 1.2. The Rare Books Collection's statement of purpose and mission is integral and subaltern to that of the SOAS Library Collections, whose purpose is "to support the mission SOAS University of London (otherwise known as the School of Oriental and African Studies).

The mission of the School is to be a leading centre of excellence in research and teaching relating to Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

To achieve this mission and statement of purpose, SOAS is committed to *preserving, maintaining and enhancing* its collections in order to make the best possible use of them not only for scholarly research and teaching, but also as a source of knowledge exchange between SOAS and the wider community at local, national and international levels."

- 1.3. SOAS Library Special Collections staff is charged to enable physical and intellectual access to this collection of Rare Books collections while at the same time ensuring its long-term preservation.

1.4. At SOAS University of London, the Rare Books Collection serves multiple purposes:

- It supports the information, instruction, and research needs of SOAS University of London students, faculty and staff, as well as the local, national and international research community and general public, in line with the status of SOAS Library as the National Research Library for Africa, Asia and the Middle East:
 - As a teaching collection that preserves physical evidence of the way printed artefacts have evolved over the centuries, from a hand-crafted artefact to a mass-produced consumable;
 - As a research collection for targeted concentrations of printed text supporting scholarly investigation;
 - As a research repository for noteworthy examples of the art and craft of the book: typography, bindings, paper making, illustration, etc;
 - As an historical repository for outstanding examples of human accomplishment as preserved in printed formats.
- It functions as a secure storehouse for works that - because of their age, uniqueness or scarcity, fragility, ephemeral nature, provenance or association, high financial value and/or other special bibliographic significance, either on their own or as part of a discrete and irreplicable collection of items - are not appropriate for the general circulating collection.
- As a powerful outreach tool through its use in exhibitions, the use of images for university products and social media presence, and displays for fundraising and publicity events, the Rare Books Collection plays a vital and growing role in spreading the vision and reputation of the SOAS Library, and so of SOAS University of London generally.

1.5. The Rare Books Collection seeks to enable researchers to interact with the physical artefact as much as its condition allows it. As such, and although the collection does contain many precious items, it is not designed to be a “treasure house” only to be admired. Instead, the goal in acquiring and preserving rare books is to encourage their use and to introduce today’s digital natives to a better appreciation of the importance and relevance of the printed word as an information system.

1.6. This Collection Development Policy should be read in conjunction with the *SOAS Library Vision and Strategy statement*, the *SOAS Collections Management Policy* and the general *SOAS Library Collection Development Policy*.

2. Collection's definition, scope and strengths

Definition

- 2.1. The collection of Rare Books at SOAS Library includes books, journals and other media material that are regarded as rare because of their age, uniqueness, scarcity, fragility, provenance, association, financial value and/or other special bibliographic significance, either on their own or as part of a discrete and irreplicable collection of items. They are distinguished from the general stock of the Library and are housed, managed, catalogued, preserved and consulted in a manner appropriate to their status as rare books. By their nature they also form part of the local, national, and international documentary heritage.

The material in the Rare Books Collection should be afforded, where possible, both secure and temperature-controlled storage and monitored circulation, with a view to indefinite retention.

- 2.2. Parallel and distinct to the Rare Books collection is the printed material kept in closed-access within the Special Collections, which is neither old nor fragile, but simply requires to be kept off the open shelves and accessed under supervision, due to their relative scarcity, price and/or controversial content, putting them at higher risk of being stolen or mutilated. This collection will be designated as the Closed-Access Collection.

As a general rule, this collection only requires secure storage (which need not be environmentally controlled) and supervised access to avoid theft or damage. Acquisition and retention of these items are not subject to this Rare Books Collection Development Policy, but to the SOAS Main Library Collection Development Policy.

Scope

- 2.3. The Library was established in 1917 around the oriental section of the London Institution Library (founded in 1805) by exchanging collections mostly by deposit on indefinite loan; the non-oriental collections were traded for the oriental collections from other University of London libraries such as the King's College and the University College of London. Donations were also received from the British Library, the India Office Library, the Courtauld Institute of Art and a number of private benefactors.

Over the passing decades, SOAS Library has also been fortunate to receive large amounts of individual donations and bequests of rare printed and manuscript material and archives. Such gifts are immensely valuable in assisting SOAS Library to support the teaching and research mission of the University and to enhance the national and international research value of its collections.

The Rare Books collection contains today about 70,000 (*TBC*) printed books, pamphlets and broadsides covering a wide range of subjects. Spanning from the 10th century to the present, they range from exquisite and ancient woodblock prints, to ephemeral and cheap periodicals.

The core focus of the Rare Books collection is the study of the languages and civilisations of Africa, Asia and the Middle East over the past millennium, encompassing the experience and interactions of Europe and Britain with those regions.

The linguistic range is as extensive as the regional scope of the collection. The Rare Books collection includes works in English, Latin, French, Dutch, German, Italian, Spanish and other European languages, as well as works in hundreds of languages from Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus, South Asia, East Asia, South East Asia and Oceania.

Strengths

- 2.4. SOAS Library is committed to enhancing and expanding all its collections in continued support of its teaching, learning and academic research community. SOAS Special collections and the Rare Books Collection holdings in particular underpin all academic activities of the University. Furthermore, SOAS Special Collections have a renowned national and international reputation to uphold with regard to certain collections, notably its Missionary Societies libraries (including the Robert Morrison Collection of Chinese Rare Books, and the deposited libraries of the Methodist Missionary Society and the Council for World Missions), the Sir Reginald Johnston Collection, the Sir David Percival Foundation Library (deposited), the Tibetan, Japanese, Chinese and Mongolian collections of woodblock prints, The Stencil Collection, the Graham Furniss Collection of Hausa Popular Literature, the Hardyman Madagascar Collection, the Auboyneau Collection and the Dr Cyrus Alai Collection of specialist maps of Persia. These are characterised by the richness, breadth, comprehensiveness and/or depth of coverage relating to a topic or subject area.

Specific subject area strengths in the Rare Books Collection are, in alphabetical order:

- **African languages, literatures, cultures, religions and history**, especially of Ethiopia, Libya, Madagascar & Nigeria
- **Archaeology**, especially Middle Eastern (Levantine) & Eastern Asian (Chinese and Japanese)
- **Arts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East**, especially Chinese and Japanese fine arts
- **British history**, especially 16th to 20th century international relations, colonial and missionary history as well as travel & exploration accounts from Jesuits, missionaries, British travellers to the region and colonial administrators
- **Buddhist religion, culture and history**, across all of Asia
- **Central Asian and Caucasian history** especially 16th to 20th century travel & exploration, and international relations history
- **Chinese and Mongolian languages, literatures, culture, politics, religion and history, from 10th to 20th century.**
- **Christian religion, culture and history**, especially from 16th to 20th century missionary Christianity

- **European history**, especially 16th to 20th century international relations, colonial and missionary history as well as travel & exploration accounts from Jesuits, missionaries, European travellers to the region and colonial administrators
- **Folklore studies of Africa, Asia and the Middle East**
- **Hindu religion, culture and history**
- **Islamic religion, culture and history**, especially Islamic law, across all the Islamicate world (from Africa to South East Asia)
- **Japanese and Korean languages, literatures, cultures, religions and history**
- **Jewish studies**, especially Yiddish language and literature
- **History of science and medicine in Africa, Asia and the Middle East**, in the languages of the regions
- **Middle East languages, literatures, cultures, religions and history**, especially of Iran/Persia, (Ottoman) Turkey and the Levant
- **Ottoman Empire history**, especially travel and exploration, international relations from 15th to 19th century but also history of book printing
- **Pacific Islands languages, literatures, cultures, religions and history**
- **South Asian languages, literatures, cultures, religions and history**, especially of Mughal and British India, and in Sanskrit, Sinhalese and Tibetan languages.
- **South-eastern Asian languages, literatures, cultures, religions and history**, especially of Malaysia, Thailand and Burma.
- **World geography**, especially travel and exploration from 16th to 20th century.
- **World history**, especially international relations, colonial & missionary history from 16th to 20th century.

For a more detailed overview of our rare book collections, see our [Rare Books Collection Strengths](#) document.

3. Collection development and acquisition policy

Review of criteria determining inclusion in the SOAS Rare Books collection

- 3.1. The Rare Books Collection in SOAS Special Collections has been acquired and built up by gift, bequest, loan and purchase, as well as through internal transfer, over the last 100 years or so, reflecting the variety of both academic and non-academic activities throughout SOAS's history. They are considered to be permanent collections and as such provide continual strong support for present and future programmes of study and research activity as well as remaining available to all researchers regardless of background or affiliation.

3.2. An item or collection of items is normally designated as, added to or acquired by Special Collections to the Rare Books Collection if it fulfils the first and one or more of the following criteria:

- it is a rare printed work or contains rare printed works
- it complements, enriches or builds on the subject strengths of existing Rare Books collection (see paragraph 3 below)
- it has been identified as supporting SOAS teaching and research needs
- it is of intrinsic local (SOAS), national or international heritage significance
- it enhances the reputation of or is of special local or historical significance to SOAS University of London
- its physical format, fragility, vulnerability or other characteristic requires special storage, access, handling and management conditions.

Notes to 3.2

Rare is here defined as falling into one or more of the following categories:

- they are of significant provenance
- they are of special bibliographic significance (e.g. examples of early regional printing, first edition, limited or special edition, variant issue, privately published or small press items)
- they are of significant cultural or historical significance (e.g. unique bindings or illustrations, association items, inscribed items, items of known scarcity value)
- they form part of an irreplicable collection of material (e.g. an individual's research published collections either on their own or accompanying an archival collection; a publisher's publications archive)

3.3. Items to be included in the Rare Books Collection should also align with the scope and strengths of the current Rare Books collection in terms of imprint date range, geographical areas (Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Britain and Europe), subject and languages.

New collecting concentrations may be added by the Rare Books curatorial staff after assessment of their relevance to the mission of the SOAS Library Special Collections.

3.4. Items excluded from integration in the Rare Books Collection are:

- i. Wet, mouldy and/or actively infested items that pose a risk to the collection.
- ii. Badly mutilated copies that have lost their integrity as artefacts.
- iii. Art works, unless those closely aligned with the graphic arts of relief and intaglio, xylography, lithography, collotype, off-set, xerography and related printing technologies.

Rare Books Collection Acquisition policy

3.5. Potential acquisitions and gifts are identified and added to the collections by the Head of Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts Curator, or an appropriately trained librarian designated for that purpose. The collection grows in the following ways:

- i. By donations, gifts and bequests;
- ii. By occasional purchases by the Head of Special Collections and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Curator;
- iii. By transfers from the circulating collections.

3.5.1 Donations, Gifts And Bequests

Special Collections welcomes donations that meet established collecting criteria and serve the needs of the School.

Donations, gifts and bequests are regulated by the Special Collections Acquisition Procedure. All gifts are governed by the Special Collections Due Diligence Procedure.

Donations of Rare Books are reviewed and must be approved by the Special Collections staff. Special Collections cannot accept gifts that pose preservation hazards (e.g., mould, insect infestation, dampness); entail special conditions and constraints that the library cannot honour; or require extensive processing or conservation treatments. Wherever possible, Special Collections will endeavour to direct donors toward a more suitable institution for materials that do not meet these criteria.

Donation forms are signed by the Special Collections staff and the donor. Donors are invited to meet with Special Collections librarians and archivists, and other library personnel, to ensure that the rights and responsibilities of each party are clearly understood and agreeable. No collection will be physically accepted without a donation form signed by the Special Collections staff and the donor.

For all gifts of a significant size potential donors are asked to consult with the Special Collections Staff in advance, so that the receipt, storage, cataloguing and conservation implications of the donation can be discussed in detail. Gifts of significant size may be defined as those gifts whose review, cataloguing, processing, storage and conservation cannot be covered by existing Special Collections resources.

Financial donations to support the purchase, storage, cataloguing or conservation of the collections are also warmly welcomed.

3.5.2 Purchases

Due to the high monetary value of many rare books, the curatorial staff of the Rare Books Collection will approach prudently the spending of funds for purchases.

Establishing good working relationships with qualified members of the antiquarian book trade is important to ensure that the Library's funds are used effectively and economically. Purchases from private individuals might be considered, following the same guidelines for prudent expenditure and due diligence procedures.

Purchase of rare books from professional book dealers, auction houses, or, in the case of artists' books, independent artists selling their own work are preferred.

Rare book purchases are selected by or in consultation with the Head of Special Collections and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Curator.

3.5.3 Transfer

CRITERIA FOR TRANSFER:

There are six criteria for transfer of materials from SOAS Main Library Collections to SOAS Special Collections. Books may be candidates for transfer to Special Collections should they meet one or more of them:

- **DATE:** "early printing" may vary according to geographical location: for example, Chinese block and movable type prints may date as far back as 10th century, whereas early printed material from Korea or the Middle East may track back to as late as the 19th century, as lithography or manuscript tradition persisted far longer.
- **RARITY AND SCARCITY:** Books whose demand exceeds their supply: these include books with fewer than ten copies held in the United Kingdom; books not held by another London library; books issued by private presses, generally in fewer than 500 copies; books with a short print run from countries of Africa, Asia and the Middle East.
- **MARKET VALUE:** Books with significant replacement costs;
- **BIBLIOGRAPHIC AND RESEARCH VALUE:** Books that can significantly contribute to our knowledge and/or ability to teach the history of the book, or possessing texts with enduring research value; these include: first appearance in book form of collected literary authors and the first appearance in book form of collected seminal theoretical or critical studies; books relating directly to the history and material culture of Africa, Asia and the Middle East; books from the libraries of notable persons or institutions (significant or understudied writers, artists, printers, publishers, collectors, scholars or notable historical figures) bearing annotations or unique genealogical information.
- **PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** Because our rare book collections document the history of the printed book, we consider for transfer books in unusual formats. Artefactual details that help foreground book history for research or teaching purposes are similarly valued and preserved: for example,

books that have distinctive bindings, plates, original art or photographs, unusual typography, unusual printed surfaces, or display collecting practices of a particular period.

- **CONDITION:** Items meeting the foregoing criteria are not automatically added to the rare book collections. Damp, mouldy or insect infested books that pose a risk to the collection, and badly mutilated volumes that have lost their integrity as artefacts will be rejected.

TRANSFER POLICY PROCEDURES:

Rare books identified for possible transfer to Special Collections will be evaluated by the Librarians in consultation with the Rare Books Curator. Candidates for transfer may be identified and flagged up by any SOAS Librarian, or Library user. Once the decision to transfer has been made, the librarian will review the cataloguing and make necessary changes to the record, in consultation with the Rare Books curator. The book will then be relabelled and delivered to Special Collections for conservation treatment, if required, and shelving.

When gifts of books that may qualify as rare according to the criteria cited above are offered to SOAS Library, it is recommended that Special Collections staff are informed whenever appropriate, so that relevant advice and assistance may be given.

It is also recommended that Special Collections staff are consulted, when appropriate, when stock weeding exercises are conducted in the libraries, as some items no longer deemed relevant to current teaching or research may have historical significance and may therefore be appropriate acquisitions for Special Collections.

Additional collection development information

- 3.6. **Duplication.** In the hand-press era, duplication is a meaningless concept: no two copies of a printed text from the same edition are exact duplicates. Even after the advent industrial book production, subtle and more obvious differences (such as binding variants) are significant evidence of the status of books as cultural objects. Therefore, the Rare Books curatorial staff will consider adding items that appear to be bibliographical duplicates, if they have significant copy specific attributes that are deemed worthy of preserving in multiple copies.
- 3.7. **Cataloguing.** Rare books as cultural artefacts have both physical and textual elements. Therefore, bibliographical descriptions of rare books often include unique, physical characteristics rather than attempting to create a universal, generic description. The Rare Books curatorial staff will work with staff in Metadata Services to describe its holdings at an appropriate level in line with accepted national and international standards.

- 3.8. **Completeness.** The Rare Book Collection endeavours to preserve the entire book; therefore, integral elements (for example dust jackets, slip cases, inserts) will be retained and protected.
- 3.9. **Preservation and conservation.** The curatorial staff will work in tandem with staff from the Collection Care and Digitisation team to ensure an ongoing program of review of condition and selection of appropriate housing or treatment for items in the Rare Books Collection.
- 3.10. **Digital preservation.** The curatorial staff will work in tandem with staff from the Collections Care and Digitisation Team to ensure an ongoing program of review of conditions and selection of appropriate digitisation and digital storage of the Rare Books Collection.
- 3.11. **Deaccession.** Inclusion in the Rare Books collection is made with a view of perpetual retention.
However, rare books can de-accessioned when they do not fall within the collecting scope of Special Collections, or their physical condition has significantly deteriorated, or if they are the subject of a repatriation or restitution claim.

Upon an ongoing appraisal of the collection, opportunities to upgrade the collection with a superior exemplar may lead to the decision to withdraw a superseded copy. Out-of-scope copies may also be deselected. In such cases, the curatorial staff will endeavour to find an appropriate home for the withdrawn materials, often in collaboration with a trusted member of the antiquarian book trade.

De-accession of a rare print in view of a repatriation or restitution claim will be conducted in line with the Library's ownership dispute policy.