

Library Facsimile Collections: Researching, Preserving, and Appreciating Manuscript Heritage in the Age of Photography

Facsimiles are accurate reproductions of manuscripts: drawn, engraved, photographed copies of papyrus, parchment, and paper in the form of scrolls, codices, or sheets with graphemes, musical symbols, miniatures, and illuminations. With the establishment of scientific methods and disciplines dedicated to or based on the study of manuscripts such as paleography, papyrology, musicology, medieval history, and art history, facsimiles played a crucial role as essential research aids. They were also recognised as means of communication and exchange within research circles, and as collectible items in their own right. Furthermore, well before the formalisation of conservation practices, the preservation value of facsimiles was acknowledged. Finally, they were outcomes of sophisticated technological experiments and innovations aimed at producing increasingly precise and available reproductions.

The aim of this project is to investigate rich multidisciplinary facsimile collections developed within the main libraries in Europe and America – such as the National Library of France, the British Museum, the Pierpont Morgan Library, and the Vatican Apostolic Library – from the latter half of the nineteenth century until the onset of the Second World War, an era characterised by the professionalisation of research, institutionalisation of public collections, the rise of internationalism, and by technical innovation. The collections in the focus of this project will be considered as universal science archives of manuscript research and preservation forming significant reflections of the emerging concepts of international responsibility and global governance regarding cultural heritage and research. Hence these libraries will be viewed not merely as repositories but as dynamic centres for manuscript research, preservation, appreciation, and reproduction, attracting scholars from a diverse array of disciplines, as well as antiquarians, publishers, enthusiasts, collectors, artists, and photographers from around the world. This project will also seek to identify and highlight often-overlooked members of this community, in particular librarians, as well as forgotten or unrealised visionary initiatives.

An important objective of the project is to connect the historical facsimile collections with their contemporary counterparts, which are produced using increasingly advanced digital technologies and tools. It will be argued that the remarkable outcomes of high-profile initiatives—such as the *Vesuvius Challenge* and the *Greek Texts*, which focus on deciphering the carbonised papyri of Herculaneum—should be viewed not only as products of the Fourth Industrial Revolution but, more importantly, as the next phase in a continuous tradition of manuscript research, preservation, and valorisation in which reproductions have played a key role.

Today the collections that are the focus of this project are often marginalised within current research and within the library space. Often they have been relocated from manuscript reading rooms to distant storerooms, transferred to other departments, or even forgotten altogether. A significant aim of this project will be to not only to study these collections but also to reflect on their contemporary relevance, and the methods for preserving and promoting them.

The outcomes of the project – presented in a comprehensive monograph – will thus uncover forgotten facsimile library collections, contribute with the first research study on this phenomenon of such wide scope, uncover the current research and heritage value and potential of manuscript facsimiles and their collections. In addition, a general declaration regarding the value of manuscript facsimile collections aimed at establishing general guidelines for their preservation will be elaborated.