

Cultural artefacts - a Swedish perspective

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Why did the National Library of Sweden earlier this year spend SEK 13 700 (2 300 Australian dollars) on a short letter of minor interest, written by August Strindberg? And for that matter on a letter known for years and published in the 20 volume edition of his collected letters.

Yet we did. With money from a limited budget of only SEK 200 000 per year (approximately 35 000 Australian dollars) for the purchase of manuscripts.

The division I work in within the National Library of Sweden is responsible for manuscripts, maps and prints. It was formed only this year in connection with the reorganisation of the whole library. As I have very little knowledge of the map and print collections, I will limit my paper today to manuscripts and private archives which earlier formed a separate division.

At the moment a new collection development plan is under way for the division and I quote from this provisional document:

“The mission of the Division for Manuscripts, Maps and Prints within the National Library of Sweden is to collect, preserve and provide access to manuscripts, maps and prints by Swedes, in Swedish or about the cultural history of Sweden. This purpose is fulfilled through systematic acquisitions of manuscripts and archives primarily by Swedish authors, scholars, artists and others of interest, and of manuscripts of particular value to research on Swedish history and on the collections.

The division has the same focus as the rest of the National Library, i.e. basically history and the arts.”

As part of the National Library, we obviously have a special responsibility to collect Swedish material and to enrich the library’s printed collections. However, we are not the only institution in the country concerned with Sweden’s cultural heritage, but part of a network of libraries, archives and museums working together to guarantee as coordinated a national acquisitions policy as possible. Regional and historical aspects are taken into consideration, as well as the principle of provenance when new material is acquired.

From the National Library’s point of view it is important that the archives are preserved for posterity, not primarily in which institution they are kept. This means that if part of a private collection is already represented in another institution, we generally refrain from acquiring documents belonging to it.

Likewise, there is a general rule that the archives of scholars belong in the university with which they were affiliated, the papers of politicians and public officials in the National Archives, while those of authors and artists belong in the National Library.

But there is no rule without exceptions, and, in the end, it is up to the owner (and/or donor) of the collection to decide where it will be kept. For instance, you will find the private archives of Dag Hammarskjöld, the former Secretary General to the United Nations, in our division. Judging from what I just said, these should really have ended up in the National Archives.

The scope of the manuscript collection is not limited *only* to Swedish material or material primarily of Swedish historical interest. This is true especially for our medieval manuscripts.

Among the treasures best known internationally is the 13th century *Codex Gigas*, a manuscript containing the Bible and a number of non-religious texts in Latin. It is sometimes called the Devil’s Bible as it has a striking, full page picture of the devil. The codex was taken as war booty by the Swedes in Prague in the seventeenth century.

Codex Gigas really lives up to its name. It is 90 centimetres high, 50 centimetres wide and weighs 75 kilograms. This makes it the largest Western manuscript. The codex was written in a monastery in Bohemia around 1230. Since 1648 it has been part of the National Library of

Sweden. Right now, for the first time in more than 350 years, it is back in Prague and exhibited in the Czech National Library.

To prepare for this event it has been digitised, a work that took more than a year to complete. A website has been created with depictions of the codex itself in the best technique available and supplemented by scholarly commentaries in Swedish, Czech and English (www.kb.se/codex-gigas). Until now, very few scholars have been able to study the *Codex Gigas*. But through the new website everyone has access to this world famous manuscript.

Other notable manuscripts in the division are, for example, *Codex Aureus* with the four gospels, written in Latin around 750 in England; a 5.4 metres long scroll containing a textbook on surgery and medicine, written and illustrated in the 15th century, also from England; *Äldre Västgötalagen*, an old Swedish law book from around 1280 which is the oldest preserved Swedish “book”; and the revelations of St Bridget’s of Sweden from 1361, one of two remaining documents in her own handwriting.

These are just a few examples of the treasures. Some of them, such as the *Codex Aureas*, are available in excellent facsimile editions, or in critical editions with commentaries (the revelations), others are for the time being only available in their original form on site in Stockholm. A three year development plan for the whole library will target digitising rare and fragile material, including manuscripts.

Individual manuscripts form only a small part of the holdings of the division. Altogether the collections fill some 4 000 shelf metres. Private archives take up most of the space.

I have already mentioned our approach to the collecting of private archives. Most frequently they are the private papers of authors. Only Swedish authors, or authors who at some point have been active in Sweden, are represented. This means for example that we have archives originating from the German dramatist Berthold Brecht, but *only* from the time he was living in Sweden during the Second World War.

Nelly Sachs, Jewish-German poet and Nobel Laureate, came to Sweden in 1940 and settled down in Stockholm. She continued to write in German. The National Library not only has her papers but also a reconstruction of the small one- room flat she lived in until her death in 1970. The entire interior is authentic with furniture, paintings, books and memorabilia. Seen together with her notes, drafts of her poems on scraps of paper, her manuscripts, letters and photos, it conveys an impression of a life characterised by contradiction and tragedy which resulted in great poetry.

Another example, this time from the literary field in which I personally am most at home, children’s books:

Ann-Madeleine Gelotte started out as an illustrator, but later also came to write her own texts. In three books she documented the childhood of her grandmother, her mother and herself in detail. She spent years on research which resulted in books that just as well could be regarded as ethnological documentaries as children’s picture books. To be able to make the illustrations as correct and as detailed as she wished, Gelotte built three-dimensional models of the three homes with all the furniture, and even the main characters, cut out in paper. Two of these models remain and were, after her death, left to the National Library together with her manuscripts, original drawings, photos, notes and other documents. The material gives a very clear picture of how this author-illustrator worked.

As I mentioned in the beginning there is a very limited budget for acquisitions of manuscripts. The sum is not likely to grow in the future. On very special occasions, special funds of the library can be used and in other instances we have managed to get external funding.

Gifts and donations form the base for additions to our collections and today chiefly contemporary private archives are acquired. Contact with possible donors is one important task for the head of the division and requires time as well as a fine balance of tact and persistence. Most of the time it is well worth while.

When single documents are acquired, it is usually to fill gaps in already existing archives. This was the case with the Strindberg letter I mentioned in the beginning. His papers form one of the most important and most used collections, and when on rare occasions something is on the market, the division tries to acquire it. Strindberg's archives are part of the cultural heritage which the National Library has a special duty to preserve.

Modern archives can present problems just as difficult as those related to historical materials. Two of our private archives contain hard discs from computers ten, fifteen years old. How are these best stored and will anyone be able to read them in the future? These questions and other like them are new to a division more used to handling parchment and vellum, but they have to be dealt with soon, before all the information is lost.

The original artefact always contains information difficult to convey in another medium. A facsimile might many times be a good substitute but can never replace the original.

When it comes to bearers of information over centuries, there is no match to parchment. A good quality paper comes next. No one knows how digital files, cd:s, dvd:s and other new media stand the test of time. And the problem of migration remains to be solved.

Besides preserving material, the library also has a duty to provide access to it. This can be done in many different ways. The Codex Gigas project has shown what digitisation can do, but there will always be scholars who for different reasons need access to the original artefact or document.

Not as spectacular as the Codex Gigas project, but just as important, is the current work to develop a national data base for private archives. The project is administered by the National Library and its Division for manuscripts. A provisional version is already available. On the Internet, researchers can find out where different archives are located and what kind of material they contain. This new data base is called Ediffah, which is short for "A digital infrastructure for the archives and manuscript collections in research libraries in Sweden". It can be reached at www.ediffah.org. So far there is only a Swedish version.

Traditionally libraries have collected books and possibly manuscripts, archives documents, and museums other kinds of artefacts.

But over the years a deeper understanding of what these institutions have in common has developed. New horizons, new demands and the need to exhibit fiscal restraint have further underlined the importance of co-operation.

In 2004 a co-ordinating office for eight archives, libraries and museums was set up in Sweden. Co-ordination, accessibility and collaboration is being emphasised, both in regard to collecting new information, as well as in sharing institutional experiences. Digitisation is of course one of the central issues.

This year the heads of the National Library, the National Archives and the Swedish National Archives for Recorded Sound and Moving Images have initiated discussions on how their institutions can co-operate more closely. Eventually these discussions might lead to a new governmental agency incorporating the three separate ones. As both the National Archives and the National Library have a history going back several hundred years, this will indeed be a break with tradition

From a Swedish point of view one thing is obvious: co-ordination and co-operation are the keywords for the future.

Thank you!