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Marianne Hansen

Bryn Mawr College, mhansen@brynmawr.edu

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Real Objects, Real Spaces, Real Expertise: An Undergraduate Seminar Curates an Exhibition on the Medieval Book of Hours

Marianne Hansen

In Fall 2007, the author (curator of rare books and manuscripts at Bryn Mawr College) collaborated with an art history faculty member to lead a semester-long undergraduate seminar on the medieval book of hours. During the class the students created the Library's Spring 2008 exhibition. The exhibition was accompanied by a keepsake flier, a website, and two events: a panel discussion with student curators and a lecture by a manuscripts scholar. The class and exhibition were supported by the Friends of the Bryn Mawr College Library. This essay emphasizes student work on the exhibition, which I supervised, rather than the academic study of medieval manuscripts, supervised by the faculty member and essentially similar to classes which do not include an exhibition component.

We hoped to have about fifteen students; twenty-six attended the first day. We explained the class was going to be a lot of work, requiring a paper as well as full participation in the exhibition. We warned the students that they were going to have to criticize and be criticized by their classmates. Neither of these reduced the prospective class size appreciably, so we handed out a questionnaire that covered interests in, and previous experience with, art history, history of religion, and the Middle Ages, and finally chose the students for the class based on their responses.

In the first month, the class focused on books of hours and other medieval manuscripts. The required texts included Wieck's *Painted Prayers*,

Brown's *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts*, and de Hamel's *The British Library Guide to Manuscripts*, with readings in *Time Sanctified*, *Image on the Edge*, and other standard works. The faculty member led the historical and theoretical discussions, while I talked about manuscript production methods and introduced the students to our books.

At the end of September, we added the exhibition component to the class. I had difficulty identifying useful readings which could serve to rapidly introduce the students to issues in creating an exhibition, but settled on the following:

- Lindauer, Margaret. "The Critical Museum Visitor." in Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice*, 2005.
- Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. Alta Mira Press: Ca, 1996
- Clarkson, Christopher. "The Safe Handling and Display of Medieval Manuscripts and Early Printed Books." *The New Bookbinder: Journal of Designer Bookbinders*. v. 19, 1999.

We designed an exercise to get the students thinking about exhibition design—they visited our current show on the history of the College's archaeology department, then discussed how their readings helped them understand the show's design and audience, and its overall strengths and weaknesses. They also started to consider how our space could be used in their own exhibition, including the layout of the show, paths a visitor might take through the exhibit, and visual aspects of the dis-

play. Throughout the class we found it productive to work in ways that made the physicality of the books and the space an integral part of the students' experience; they tended to let theory surmount other concerns if they were away from the objects and the exhibit hall. This exercise revealed for the first time an issue that affected our work flow and decision-making throughout—fifteen students were too many to truly agree on anything.

An essential part of this class was extensive and repeated contact with the books themselves. The first assignment was to thoroughly study one book and report on the contents, illustrations, decoration, and any other topic addressed in the class or readings. At the next class meeting we elicited a list of topics that interested the students, and began discussing the show's focus. The possible themes covered a wide gamut, but as the students prepared their next assignment—a written proposal for the show—topics of general interest emerged. Because we met only once a week, we used course management software (Blackboard) for out-of-class discussions and to present reports and suggestions. (As the semester progressed, we also use it to build a preliminary website for the exhibition, using its wiki so all the students could load text into the site structure.) Using the shared workspace provided by Blackboard, the students then commented publicly on one another's proposals and began negotiating what we should do. A second issue surfaced at this time: although the College's collection is extraordinary for a small institution, we have no books of hours of the quality ordinarily shown in art history classes, and we could not support an entire display on many of the topics that interested the students. For example, although like many scholars they were excited about the role of women in the production of hours—and fascinated by ownership by women—neither could be illustrated with our holdings.

Similarly, the hall has fourteen wall cases and a long built-in case, as well as several movable vitrines, but we have only eleven books of hours, half

of which are fully illuminated. We required the students to use only works in our collection, so some points had to be illustrated by reproductions from books on display in other cases. We were, fortunately, able to provide additional books and objects and the final exhibition included two breviaries, a psalter, a *Mariale*, three printed hours, a pair of sixteenth-century sculptures, and a plaster cast (a "fictile ivory") of a thirteenth-century sculpture. There was also a facsimile book of hours, with a medieval-style chained binding as an interactive display. But the problem of making a coherent statement with the artifacts at hand was difficult for some students. We did emerge from the discussion of the proposals with an overall theme—the use of books of hours in acts of personal devotion. A popular suggestion was made early, even before the topics solidified: that the cases be arranged in the ordinary order for a book of hours, and this turned out to fit the chosen theme and formed the basis for our display.

Although this theme was far from groundbreaking, I was impressed with how many of the students understood from their own experience points I have known older curators to ignore. They said:

"I don't think that many individuals outside of our class or other medieval studies courses know what a Book of Hours is"

and

"I want the exhibition to have a structure that is clear enough that anyone who is completely new to the subject can grasp the exhibition."

and

"Too much text and too little mental and/or physical engagement in the exhibit is definitely a concern. Having to stop at a station for long periods of time to read a display card (rather than moving around visually and mentally

stimulating cases at a quicker pace) can really bog down an exhibition.”

The next assignment was to examine the books more closely. Each student was assigned a section of the book of hours (the calendar, matins, prayers for the dead, etc.) and required to look at that section in every available book, exploring how the sections might illustrate our chosen topics. Those topics included the cult of the Virgin, marginalia, production techniques, reader response, and other issues commonly addressed in the literature. Based on their findings and suggestions, I matched the topics with relevant sections of the books, and assigned each combination to a student. So, one student would curate the part of the show covering the Office of the Dead, and also address death, and reader response. As soon as the topics were assigned, the students began research and writing.

From the beginning of November through the end of the semester, successive drafts of the label text were due every week, as were responses to classmates' texts. We hoped the students would experience what it was like to be a curator of a small collection, the excitement as well as the exhaustion, but some were more troubled by normal difficulties than their professional counterparts would be. As the show developed we had to drop sections and change assignments. For example, students were interested in the use of hours to teach literacy in the medieval home, but we could not illustrate this with our collection. Early enthusiasm for exploring parallels between pictorial storytelling in books of hours and in comic books was set aside when the topic failed to fit into the overall theme we settled on. A professional who is juggling ideas and artifacts expects to have to reject topics and shift focus, but students who had done preliminary work on issues that were deleted were disconcerted. Many also struggled with balancing their recently acquired knowledge with the brevity imposed by a label. I finally had to advise them: “A guideline I use

is to write what I would tell a friend who is pleased to see the item, but not interested in hearing more than two minutes worth of info about it.”

We printed out draft labels and taped them on the exhibition cases, then went around reading, commenting, and rearranging. This physical approach to the exhibition highlighted the experience of the viewer and helped identify weaker sections. Students were able to hear and evaluate criticism of their work, and they made necessary changes promptly. This layout technique was indispensable the day we matched the books (represented by printed images) and topics with the cases they would occupy.

The students were also responsible for other tasks. Based on a survey of interests, I assigned students to teams: graphics (visual identity, label design, and advertising), publicity and programming, displays (fixtures and also interactive displays), publications (website and keepsake), and editing. Most students had little experience in these areas and staff instructed and coached them or, in a few cases, took over a task that was too complex. For example, I taught the display team to make book supports, but when they envisioned creating a replica book of hours for visitors to page through, I did the binding.

Choosing the title was the most difficult negotiation the group engaged in. It is a task that experienced teams have trouble with and the varying sensibilities of the students made it harder. We tried open discussion, brainstorming by writing titles on slips of paper presented anonymously, communicating on a discussion board. We never did reach unanimity—when we finally voted on the top dozen contenders, each student listed their three top choices and also one title they truly disliked. One title (*Like the Virgin*) received seven favorable votes and four utter rejections. We finally chose *Intimate Devotion: The Book of Hours in Medieval Religious Practice*, a title one student had criticized on the grounds that it made her think of underwear.

The end of the semester saw a flurry of activity: labels, comments on other students' drafts, revisions. The editing team had the worst of it, because they could not start until everyone else was nearly finished—and the curators were slow to respond to their suggestions. But by the end of the semester the books were chosen; supports made; reproduction images identified; label text written and revised; posters, postcards, and keepsake designed; opening event with a panel of student curators planned; speaker invited; and website started. The instructor had dropped the paper requirement when it became clear how complex and time-consuming the exhibition was.

Because Bryn Mawr's semester ends in December and the show opened in January—and because there was an exhibition in the gallery through the fall semester, the class finished before we were able to install the exhibit. Throughout early January, while the students were on break, the instructor, other staff members, and I worked to make the exhibition reality. We corrected final errors in the text. We laid out the labels according to the students' design, and had them printed and mounted. We sent the poster design to our graphics shop, and the postcard design to the printers.

When the students returned, we installed the show; about half the students assisted. We taught them to hang signs and bind books into supports, and let them deal with the esthetics of placement of books in cases and reproduced images on walls. The opening event was a panel discussion, and five of the students reflected on their experiences. We were pleased to hear that several were more interested in working in museums or libraries than they had been—and resigned when one said frankly that it had helped rule out these careers. An unusually large number of students attended, most drawn by invitations from class members. The panel was followed by a reception and supper for the students. A second event mid-semester brought Kathryn Smith, a prominent art historian from NYU, chosen by the

students from a list of eminent scholars, who spoke on royal female patronage of a book of hours.

Three major problems attended the class: First, some students did not meet deadlines nor fulfill the requirements of the class and exhibition. This is common, of course, but in this case every failure inconvenienced fifteen people. We met once a week, and if I did a class like this again, I would argue strongly for twice: many of the students worked best in class, and would have benefited from more contact time. We also met on Mondays; many routinely left things until the last moment and since Special Collections is closed weekends, they did not have access to books or advice when they wanted to work.

We also had trouble with the course management software. Blackboard supports e-mail communication, a bulletin board, and a wiki. The students disliked the bulletin board, and nearly all struggled with the wiki, which I personally spent too much time trying to manage. A shared workspace is essential for this sort of project, but we had the wrong one.

Finally, the group was too large to hold a fully participatory discussion, too large to work as a single team, and too large to easily come to agreement on different issues. A smaller group of more expert students (a graduate seminar for example) might avoid this problem. Or an undergraduate class where the instructor took more control could build an exhibition quicker. But you would lose the autonomy of the students in shaping the show, and their involvement in other parts of the planning and decision-making.

Overall, though, the seminar was extremely successful. The participants were apprentices and students, but they were also, in a real sense, curators. They had as much authority and autonomy as we could give them (or as much as they would take). They determined the theme of the show and its layout, wrote the label text, did the work of support staff, and dealt with a complex communication project. They handled books of hours and wrote about them

so frequently that most became genuinely fluent in the terminology and adept in the basic issues to an extent I have never seen in ordinary classes. The panel discussion gratified the college administration, since the seminar represented the remarkable student experience that Bryn Mawr, uniquely among institutions of its type, can support with our collections of rare books, manuscripts, and art objects.

An important part of the success of this experience depended on the people involved. My col-

leagues, Eric Pumroy and Barbara Ward Grubb, were indispensable, both in moving the project along and as models for the students of timely, friendly, expert cooperation. And the entire project would never have existed without the professor, Martha Easton, whose cheerful willingness to experiment, to let others take the lead at times in her classroom, and to tolerate ambiguity underlay everything we accomplished.

The web version of the exhibition is at <http://www.brynmawr.edu/library/exhibits/hours/>.