DIGITIZATION PROJECT PUTS HISTORY CLOSE AT HAND

Imagine holding a book from 1492, a map from 1673, or a catalog listing the first Davidson courses. These are real experiences for Davidson students who conduct research in the Davidson College Archives and Special Collections. Having first-hand contact with another century is a special event, but one that often has to be limited to protect the originals. While going digital cannot reproduce the wonder of holding a 400-year-old document, online versions can reach a wider audience and even forge new relationships.

The Davidson College Library Archives and Special Collections staff has engaged in a number of conservation and digitization projects over the last two years. Creative solutions to satisfy digitization needs within budget limitations have included identifying cross-institution collaborations, using commercial conservation services, and educating staff on techniques to manage digitization work in-house.

Collaborative projects often offer cost-effective means to accomplish digitization, and result in Davidson’s materials being integrated into larger regional and national digital projects. In collaboration with staff from the North Carolina’s Digital Heritage Center in Chapel Hill, the Davidson Archives and Special Collections has not only preserved important college history, but remains an active participant in a state-wide effort to preserve North Carolina history. Davidson contributed historical photographs and copies of the early college catalogs (1841–1869), scanned in-house, to the statewide online collection. Additional catalogs (1860–2012) were scanned through Digital Heritage’s services and are accessible to the general public both through the Archives and Special Collections Digital Collections Web site and the DigitalNC site.

Yet another collaboration produced (see Digitization on page 2)


digitization efforts result in the realization that artifacts require conservation. When preparing the Cumming Map Collection for digitization, we found four maps that needed conservation to restore faded colors, to remove matting, or to repair tears. To this end, the maps were deployed to the experts at Etherington for restoration.

Not all of the digitization at Davidson is accomplished using established cooperatives or commercial services. The Arabic-language Bible of Omar Ibn Sayyid is one of the most in-demand and unique items in Davidson’s Special Collections. Omar Ibn Sayyid was a Muslim African slave who lived in the southern states in the early 1800s. He was likely the most educated slave in North Carolina, as well as the author of the only known slave autobiography written in a native language. The Bible is an 1811 Newcastle-upon-Tyne translation into Arabic. This particular volume has Arabic notations written by Omar, and was last subject to professional conservation in 1994, when digitization was not yet a common practice. In 2010, an opportunity arose to help the Medical University of South Carolina launch a pilot program in which they shared their new digital book cameras. College Archivist, Jan Blodgett, was able to use their digital photography technology to capture each page of the 818-page Bible, as well as two emblem books (dating from 1544 and 1621) from the Rare Book Room. These photographs were then edited and converted in-house into an e-book format that is accessible on the library’s Web site. Now these works can be read by anyone anywhere on the globe—including students from other countries.

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digitization (cont’d from page 1)
Two major works of art are now displayed in and near the library. Sean Scully’s 2011 painting *Wall of Light Red Shade* hangs on the center east wall of the main floor, and Magdalena Abakanowicz’s sculpture *The Group of Ten* stands on the lawn near the northwest corner of the library.

From 1998 to 2011, Scully, an American painter of Irish birth, created a series of *Wall of Light* paintings. Known for his “use of stripes, bands and blocks of paint to explore the emotional potential of colour,” according to Ben Luke in *Apollo* magazine, Scully told Robert Enright of *Border Crossings*, “I have spent my life making the melancholic into something irresistible. Because, as the world has changed around me and become more regretful, my paintings have become more true.”

Cort Savage, Art Department chair, is excited to have this work on public display. “One cannot help but be immediately struck by the presence of Scully’s painting upon entering the library. It’s quite unusual to encounter a Scully painting of this scale outside a museum space. As an abstract work, it draws us toward questions without easy answers, toward ambiguity, and sets the stage for one’s mind to become more open to possibilities. It’s a wonderful visual statement that awakens and encourages curiosity while at the same time adding great beauty to the space.”

The Abakanowicz sculpture adds another outstanding piece to the college’s sculpture garden. Savage said at the dedication: “As a sculptor, I could go on about the significance of Abakanowicz’s work; about how major works by this artist reside in museums, public and private collections around the world; about how this artist altered the landscape of contemporary sculpture; about how this artist holds seven honorary degrees from institutions in the U.S., England and her native Poland; about how this artist has won the highest artistic achievement awards in Poland, Austria, France, Italy, Brazil, Mexico and in the U.S.; or about how exciting it is to add a work by such an accomplished female sculptor to our collection of campus sculpture.” He went on to describe the physicality of the work: “Unique in art media, sculpture parallels most accurately our human experience. Like us, sculpture is a media governed by the physics of mass and material, weight and gravity. Sculpture shares our physical condition. Like us, sculpture is a media of stuff. And yet, like us, everything sculpture aspires to reaches beyond its physical limitations toward meaning and purpose that transcends its meager physical existence. To experience and understand a sculpture fully is to unflinchingly engage with our own plight.”

Both works are made possible by the generosity of George and Linda Kelly, parents of Win ’02 and Madeline ’08. The Scully painting is on loan from their collection, and the family joined Kat Belk-Cook, Ginny Newell ’78, and Pat and B.D. Rodgers in donating the Abakanowicz. The library adds its thanks for enriching our space with this tremendous art!
Digitization (cont’d from page 2)

institutions, as faculty have begun to incorporate the online Bible in their coursework.

There is more to come. Archives staff are evaluating collections and materials for future projects. Digital collections make the unique and interesting materials housed in Archives and Special Collections available to a wider audience. These collections also encourage patrons to make use of the resources of Archives and Special Collections, while limiting handling of the originals and preserving rare and important artifacts for future generations of researchers. Digital collections provide staff with opportunities to collaborate on state, regional, and even national levels, where Davidson’s singular treasures add richness and depth to aggregated digital collections. For more information, please visit the Archives website at http://sites.davidson.edu/archives/digital-collections.

Send us your e-mail address and stay updated!
lismith@davidson.edu