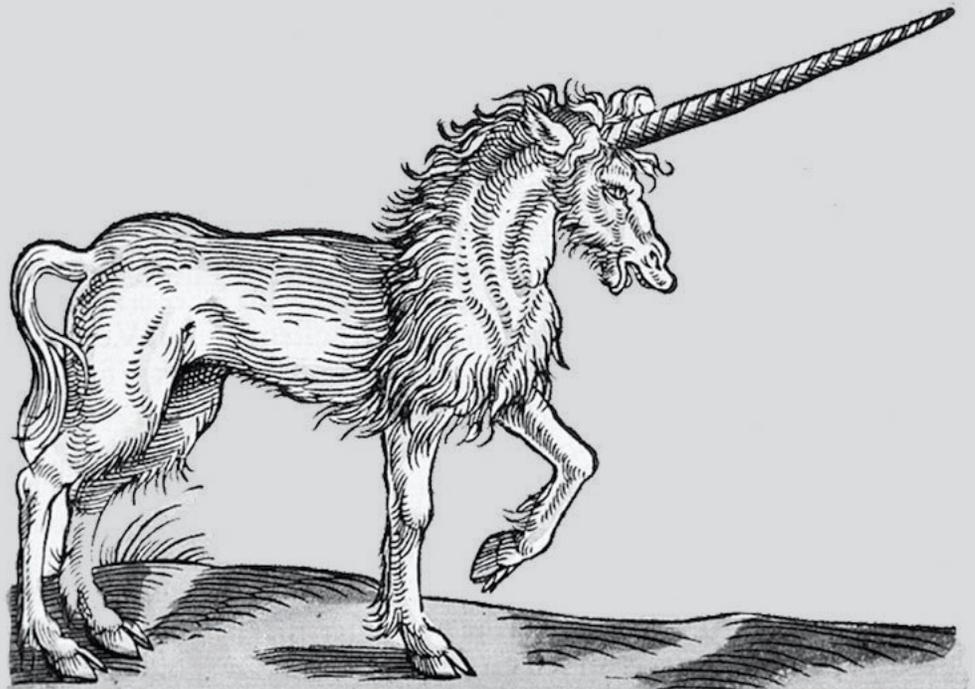


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# Pedagogical Strategies for Special Collections

Edward J.  
Valauskas  
USA



## Introduction

Rare books are powerful and important objects. They stimulate their users to investigate their significance, placing these works in a larger historical context. Too often, these books, because of their value and scarcity, are isolated, restricted in access to those with verifiable qualifications and status. For the public at large, rare books remain caged, stored in unique environments, put on view only in guarded and secure exhibits, tended by trained guardians.

There are alternatives to this approach. Why not take these books out of their prisons and make them more widely available? Why not invite the public to see, touch, and page through rare books? Give entirely new audiences opportunities to work with rare books and see how they regard these works as special.

This paper examines some activities at the Lenhardt Library of the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Illinois, USA, to make a unique collection more widely available in a variety of ways to very different kinds of audiences.

## Background

Overall, the Lenhardt Library includes about 100,000 volumes, focused on horticulture, botany, conservation, ecology, and related issues<sup>1</sup>. The rare book collection at the Lenhardt Library contains several thousand volumes, concentrating on botany, horticulture, landscape architecture, natural history, and exploration. The collection includes printed monographs, with the oldest work being the *editio princeps* of Theophrastus, completed on February 20, 1483. There are a large number of scientific serials in the collection as well, representing the emergence of the great scientific and collecting societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A portion of this collection was formerly part of the Library of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society (MHS). In 2002, the Chicago Botanic Garden acquired thousands of books and journals from the Society, many works that were isolated for years in Boston's Horticultural Hall<sup>2</sup>. This major acquisition inspired the staff of the Chicago Botanic

Garden to consider different ways in which to make the special collections in the Lenhardt Library more widely available to the public.

## Exhibits

Exhibitions are traditional vehicles for making rare books available to the public. The Lenhardt Library has long had a tradition of exhibiting treasures from its collections on a routine basis. For the past decade, there have been at least four exhibits in the Library per year on specific themes based on the strengths of the collection. In 2012, for example, the opening exhibit, *Renaissance Artists: Illustrations of Science and Art*, was coordinated with an exhibition at Northwestern University's Mary & Leigh Block Museum of Art. The Garden Library exhibit specifically focused on the relationship of artists and scientists with the great Antwerp publisher Christopher Plantin. The second exhibit, *Rare Seeds, Creative Harvest: Artist Books Inspired by the Rare Book Collection*, explained how an artist and a poet were both inspired to create new works based on specific antiquarian books in the Garden Library. *Botanical Art: Expressions of Natural Beauty*, the third 2012 exhibit, examined some of the most spectacular artistic works in the collection. The final exhibit, *The Garden Turns 40: Documenting Our Past, Planning for the Future*, pulled archival documentation representative of the last four decades of the Garden.

Literally in the course of developing an inventory of books and journals in Horticultural Hall in Boston in 2002, plans were being formulated on ways in which representative books from the Chicago Botanic Garden's new acquisition could be incorporated into a traveling exhibit on the history of horticulture and botany. Thanks to a grant from the U.S. Botanic Garden, the traveling exhibit *Plants in Print: The Age of Botanical Discovery*, was born<sup>3</sup>. *Plants in Print* included 13 secure and specially designed cases, five interpretative wall panels, supporting materials, including a catalogue, and a little over 20 rare books [Figure 1]. The exhibit opened at the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington, D.C. on April 1, 2004, returning to the Chicago Botanic Garden, where an all-day symposium brought together historians, scientists, and other scholars to discuss the history of plant exploration. *Plants in Print* has travelled to the Milton Hershey School Art Museum in Pennsylvania, Cherokee Garden Library at the Atlanta, Ga. History Center, and the Franklin Park Conservatory in Columbus, Ohio. Thousands of visitors have flocked to



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Fig. 1. A portion of the *Plants in Print* exhibition at its opening in Washington, D. C., at the U.S. Botanic Garden in 2004

*Plants in Print*, allowing diverse audiences to experience some of the most significant works in botany and horticulture from Theophrastus to Linnaeus to Robert John Thornton. Lectures and tours on the context of the show were provided at each venue.

### Classroom Use

The use of rare books in very special cases in the classroom has been discussed to some degree in the literature<sup>4</sup>; this approach was certainly one that the Chicago Botanic Garden adopted quite soon after the acquisition of the significant collection from Boston. In 2002, I was the Manager of the Library at the Garden and an adjunct faculty member at the School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University in

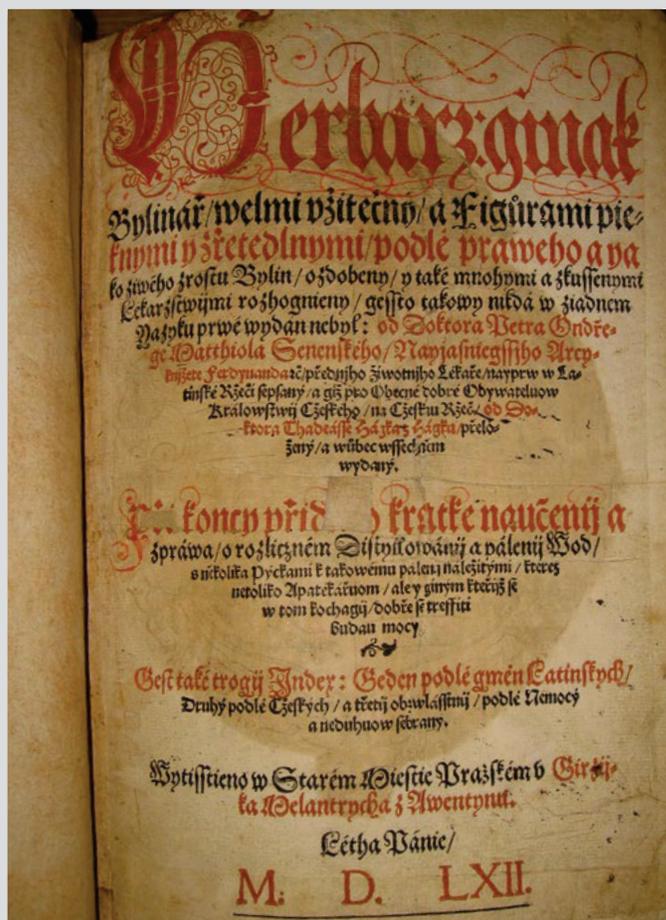


Fig. 2. Title page of Pietro Mattioli's *Herbarz* (1562), Chicago Botanic Garden copy.

River Forest, Ill. A number of courses related to rare books at the School were in need of revitalization, such as LIS 712: History of the Printed Book, LIS 711: Early Books and Manuscripts, and LIS 710: Descriptive Bibliography<sup>2</sup>. In discussion with the Dean at the time, Prudence Dalrymple, and the faculty of the School, it was decided to offer these courses, revitalized by integrating special collections at the Lenhardt Library into the routine work of the classes. For example, LIS 712: History of the Printed Book routinely took place in the autumn semester at the Library of the Garden, as a weekend intensive class. Students worked with specific rare books from the collection, preparing reports on the history of each work. From 2006–2012, 109 graduate students completed LIS 710: Descriptive Bibliography using books from the collection; 149 students (for the period 2005–2012) were enrolled in LIS 711: Early Books and Manuscripts, which uses some of the oldest works in the Garden's collection; and, 176 students, between 2003 and 2012, completed LIS 712: History of the Printed Book. Altogether, 434 students experienced monographs from incunabula to heavily illustrated printed books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



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In addition, classes for diverse and interested members of the public were offered in the School of the Chicago Botanic Garden. These classes started in 2003, and generally were two hours in length. Small groups of 5 to 10 adult participants were introduced to highlights of the collection, providing a vehicle for individuals to handle rare books and ask about the context and significance of specific works.

Classes from neighbouring educational institutions also took advantage of the collection, with visits to the collection including high school students, undergraduate, and graduate students. For example, in a seminar class at Northwestern University on art and science, 13 undergraduate and graduate students worked with six different books published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including several works published by Christopher Plantin in Antwerp and the oldest herbal printed in Prague, Pietro Mattioli's *Herbarz*, translated into Czech by the polymath Tadeas Hajek (Thaddaeus Hagecius) [Figure 2]. This Northwestern class was specifically tied into an exhibit at the Mary & Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern, entitled *Prints and the Pursuit of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe*<sup>6</sup>.

For the seminar students, it was a special treat to literally touch some of the works that were part of the ongoing exhibit. Some of the students in the Northwestern University class commented on their experiences with rare books from the Garden's collection<sup>7</sup>:

*Thank you for bringing a selection of early modern books to our seminar and for adding a hands-on, material dimension to our study of these objects. Thus far I had experienced such books only through reproductions of isolated pages, and I greatly appreciated the opportunity to see books in their entirety, to hold them and peruse their pages, and to learn about aspects of their production. Thank you again!*

*I was indeed inspired yesterday when I was turning the pages of the book from 16<sup>th</sup>-century Prague. The minute restorations on pages, the hand-written comments in red ink, and the intriguingly-complex design of illustrations are just part of the various interesting details that I got when I was reading the book. More importantly, this experience of handling the book gives us a sense of how all of these details that we came across in class readings—design, printing, publishing—come together in a book.*

*Knowing from past experiences of working with rare books within the sterile content of 'study rooms', I especially appreciate the hands-on approach of your presentation last week. Not only did your talk illuminate my understanding of book culture generally, but handling the books enabled me to better glimpse the complexities and specificities of the book making process, particularly where paper, typography, and binding methods are concerned. Thank you.*

These remarks certainly encapsulated commentary from other students and their experiences in working with selected rare books from the Garden's Library. Indeed, the books as physical objects allowed students to crystallize much of their indirect experience about the history of printing and the scientific and intellectual impact of books in Europe over the past five centuries.

### Harry Potter's Herbology

Thanks to the popularity of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, there was a great deal of interest in specific herbals and related books in the Lenhardt Library. I decided to experiment with an actual class that examined imaginary classes at Hogwarts (the fictional school of magic in Rowling's works) dealing with plants, such as the infamous mandrake. My first experimental class was offered in the School of the Chicago Botanic Garden. Donning my academic robe, I was greeted by a classroom of parents and their children, eager to see and handle some of the works that could have been part of Hogwarts' Library<sup>8</sup>. These classes were generally designed to be no more than an hour long, providing sufficient time to place Harry Potter's adventures in the context of medieval and Renaissance science [Figure 3]. These classes were repeatedly offered over a 24-month period at the height of interest in Harry Potter, stimulated by movie adaptations of the novels. One class in February 2012 featured three participants dressed, appropriately, as Hogwartsian students.

Since 2009, the National Library of Medicine (NLM) has had several versions of a travelling exhibit, entitled *Harry Potter's World: Renaissance Science, Magic, and Medicine*, circulating to public libraries in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> Thanks to some detective work on the part of librarians at host institutions, librarians in public libraries in Illinois and Michigan



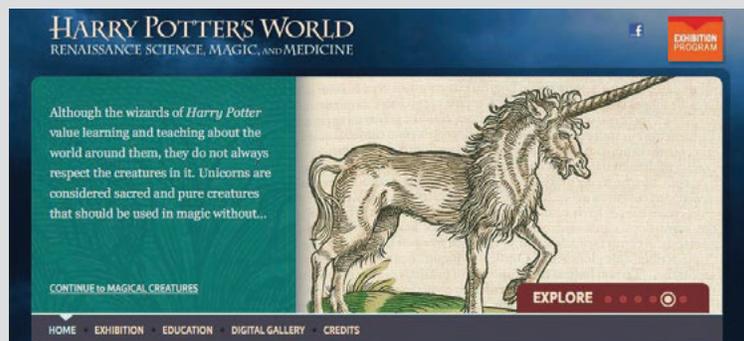
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Fig. 3. A young student at one of the Harry Potter classes

contacted me about supplementing the NLM exhibit (which lacks actual rare books) with lectures and rare books, such as herbals. I welcomed the opportunity to take a select number of botanical works on the road, to introduce them to different audiences beyond the classroom. As might be expected, the audiences were mixtures of both young and old, all with an enthusiasm for understanding some of the historical and scientific context of Rowling's imaginative series. These lectures were met with incredible enthusiasm, with fascinating discussions about the real and imagined ways to harvest mandrake, and the reasons why some plants in the family Solanaceae are dangerous, like nightshade, while others are quite enjoyable, like the tomato or potato.

Fig. 4. A portion of the Website for the National Library of Medicine's traveling exhibit *Harry Potter's World*



### Digital Rare Books

A growing number of rare books from the Library at the Chicago Botanic Garden have been digitized, to make these works more accessible and portable. These efforts were initially started in conjunction with Octavo Digital Imaging Services in Oakland, Calif.<sup>10</sup>. Selected rare books were transported to California for digital imaging, with the results available via the Library’s catalogue as well as on a Website, a digital rare book room at <http://www.rarebookroom.org>. On that site, digital copies of the following works from the Lenhardt Library can be found: Timothy Sheldrake, *Botanicum medicinale* (London, 1759); Jacob George Strutt, *Sylva Britannica* (London, 1826); Antonio Targioni-Tozzetti, *Raccolta di fiori fruiiti ed agrumi* (Florence, 1825); Theophrastus, *Historia plantarum* (Treviso, 1483); William Turner, *A new herball* (Cologne, 1568); and, Henriette Vincent, *Etudes de fleurs et de fruits* (Paris, 1820). These works were chosen for their rarity, illustrations, historical significance, and uniqueness.

In the course of this digitization effort, it was decided to digitize the oldest printed work in the Chicago Botanic Garden Library collection, Theophrastus’ *Historia plantarum* (Treviso, 1483) in order to compare it to another copy already digitized by Octavo from the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. This effort made

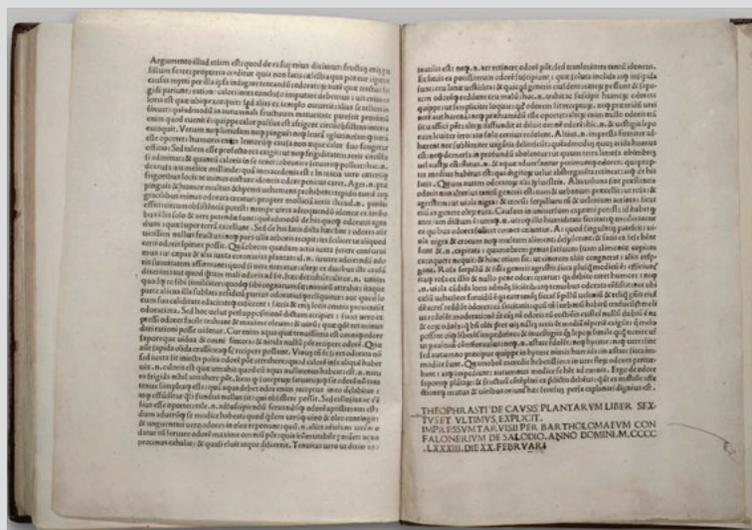


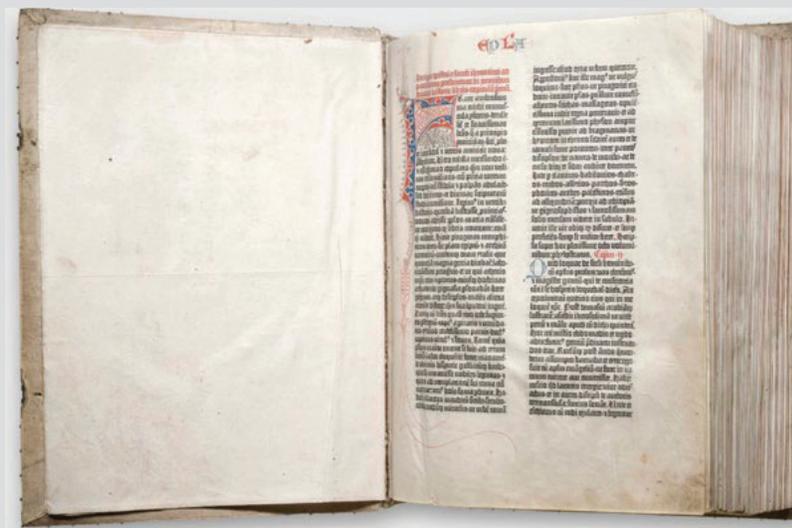
Fig. 5. Last two pages, including colophon, of Theophrastus’ *Historia plantarum* (1483), Chicago Botanic Garden copy



it possible for scholars and students to compare two rare copies of an incunabulum separated physically by thousands of kilometres on their desktops with Internet-connected computers.

The success of access to these digital works in the classroom led to a further expansion of their use with students, in conjunction with the continued use of actual printed rare works. In lectures on the earliest printed works, that is those published in the first half century of printing, in the fifteenth century, it was difficult for some students to grasp the many difficulties faced by early printers. Many of these issues become apparent from a close, intense examination of a specific work, but it is impossible to find an incunabulum available in multiple copies for student use. Digital copies, however, open up the possibilities of distributing a given work to students for study in class and at home. Thanks to Octavo's program of digitizing rare books from significant collections around the world, specific works were available in multiple copies on compact discs, accessible as very high-resolution PDF files. In classes on early printing history, students were provided with copies Octavo's digitized version of Gutenberg's *Bible*, one of three vellum copies in the United States, scanned from the collection of the Library of Congress. Digitization made it possible for students to literally take incunabula home for study, in preparation for discussion in earnest in class.

Fig. 6. Image from Octavo digital file of Gutenberg's *Bible* (1455), Library of Congress vellum copy



## Conclusion

Special collections contain many works that are unique, one of a kind. But special collections also include works that could easily be made more accessible to diverse audiences. A policy that limits access to all works in special collections defeats their important educational and even inspirational roles to all. A creative strategy that selectively approaches different groups, both in and outside the classroom, benefits not only libraries and special collections, but inspires future generations of scholars and collectors. These strategies include not only the use of actual physical copies of works, but their digital counterparts, in diverse and creative ways.

## References

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- 2 *Chicago Botanic Garden Acquires Premier Collection*, at <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/chicago-botanic-garden-acquires-premier-collection/> [accessed 2 January 2018].
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- 4 See, for example, Magia G. Krause, „*It Makes History Alive for them: The Role of Archivists and Special Collections Librarians in Instructing Undergraduates*,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 2010, vol. 36, no 5, pp. 401-411; and, Anne Bahde, *Taking the Show on the Road: Special Collections Instruction in the Campus Classroom*, *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, & Cultural Heritage*, 2011, vol. 12, no 2, pp. 75-88.
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- 6 *Prints and the Pursuit of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe* (September 6, 2011–December 10, 2011, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University; January 17, 2012–April 8, 2012, Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University), at <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/visit/exhibitions/3882/prints-and-the-pursuit-of-knowledge-in-early-modern-europe> [accessed 2 January 2018].
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