

RARE BOOKS AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY AT THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

We spoke with Geoffrey D. Smith, Head of the Rare Books and Manuscript Library at The Ohio State University. Mr. Smith has been with the OSU library system since 1983.

General Description

The Rare Books and Manuscript Library (RBMS) exists within the OSU library system under the umbrella of the Special Collections department. Founded as an administrative unit in 1962 (although parts of the collection were already in place before then), RBMS appointed its first curator two years later in Richard Ploch, a then newly-minted Lilly Fellow. Since that time, RBMS has grown into the most expansive of all the umbrella's individual collections, covering disciplines from literature to history, biography to philosophy and more. The collection contains twelfth century medieval manuscripts alongside twenty-first century literary manuscripts, totaling approximately 300,000 volumes of rare books and 2,500 linear feet of manuscripts.

Among the collection's many strengths, Mr. Smith lists the William Charvat Collection of American Fiction as particularly noteworthy, citing it as the strongest research book collection in the OSU system and "one of the outstanding fiction collections in the nation." The Charvat collection boasts approximately 75,000 books from the late eighteenth century to present day. These volumes are further augmented by a strong collection of contemporary American manuscripts from the likes of William S.

Burroughs, Raymond Carver, Frederic Tuten and William T. Vollmann. “[RBMS] is active in developing this portion of the Charvat collection,” Mr. Smith adds.

In other areas of traditional scholarship, RBMS was world class collections of Reformation History, Cervantes and Seventeenth-Century English drama. The acquisition of medieval and early modern manuscripts has grown greatly over the past four years under the guidance of Eric J. Johnson in the newly created position, Curator for Medieval and Early Modern Collections.

RBMS also houses a strong Irish collection, focusing on twentieth century authors such as James Joyce and William Butler Yeats and anchored by a healthy collection of Samuel Beckett manuscripts. “We build upon strength,” Mr. Smith says, “and Beckett is a strength.” Mr. Smith makes sure to add that while the Beckett collection is exceptionally strong, the Joyce collection is formidable as well.

Mr. Smith is especially proud of the Avant Writing Collection, a nascent collection he believes to be already ahead of the game and one he predicts will be a cornerstone of the genre in coming years. “It’s an art that has fallen between the cracks of most collections,” he explains. “Museums didn’t want [these pieces] because they thought of them as text-based, and libraries didn’t want them because they thought them art-based.” The Avant Writing Collection focuses on pieces that work outside of most standards, pieces most easily thought of as “avant garde,” combining both language and art. “Poetry is at the core of this,” Mr. Smith says.