Conservation et reproduction ... Colloque International

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One rejoices in the event which occasioned this book. Taking as a birth date the appointment in 1475 of Bartolomeo Platina as librarian, the Vatican Library had the opportunity in 1975 to celebrate the beginning of its sixth century of active service. It chose to do so by inviting leading administrators of twenty-one European research libraries (the United States was represented by two members of the staff of the Library of Congress, John C. Finzi, Assistant Director for Library Resources, Reference Department, and Charles G. LaHood, Jr., Chief, Photoduplication Service) to a colloquium, the proceedings of which are reviewed here.

The colloquium was organized with evident thoroughness to achieve the greatest possible expression of consensus during the four days of the conference itself. Several lengthy questionnaires were circulated as much as twenty months in advance and helped to define areas of disagreement and to refine the list of participating libraries and the topics to which the principal speakers were asked to address themselves. In light of this conscientious advance work it is not surprising that the colloquium was able to reach agreement on a set of 10 statements -- presented here, after the text of the papers read and transcripts of the ensuing discussions, in French, Italian, English, and German versions.

The colloquium secretariat paid a high price in liveliness for this agreement. The 7 major reports are workmanlike presentations of institutional, regional, and national attitudes and practices; the discussions are polite and thoughtfully responsible; but there is little that is memorable in these 368 carefully crafted, letterpress printed pages. Indeed, the statements, proudly headed "Recommendations of the International Colloquium on the Conservation and Reproduction of Manuscripts and Antiquarian Printed Books," may seem a trifle obvious to any librarian who has had to reconcile his responsibility to preserve the book undamaged for the use of the future readers with the understandable desire of a present reader for a facsimile and the instinct of a good photographer to obtain the best image technically possible.

Stemming from a fundamental concern for the conservation of unique or rare scholarly sources, the recommendations include placing the library photographic laboratory under the supervision of the academic staff; staffing it with sufficient generosity that it is able to respond with considered deliberateness to requests; retaining master negatives whenever possible for security and to meet future requests; participating in responsible academic and commercial photographic reproduction projects; supervising interinstitutional loans by competent staff; codifying loan procedures by one of the international library organizations; continuing the exchange of information and collaboration toward common practices; and including conservation training in the curricula of library schools.

The painstaking organization of the colloquium suggests that it will have a continuing influence, and much future collaboration on these and other issues may eventually be seen to derive from it. This book seems destined to play a small role in that future. However sympathetic to the idea one is, it is hard to imagine whose pulse will rise to, for example, the final statement on the training of librarians: "The members of the Colloquium express the wish that, wherever the professional training of librarians is placed under the control or influence of the higher authority on which the libraries of the country depend, the attention of teachers and students be drawn insistently to the gravity of the ethical, technical, financial, and legal problems posed by the conservation, reproduction, and loan of all valuable and fragile documents, for which future librarians will one day be responsible" (p. 363).
One hopes that those attending the colloquium learned much from the formal sessions and took full pleasure in the splendid hospitality which doubtless surrounded them. One wonders, however, if the cost of producing and distributing this substantial record of the conference would not have been better devoted to a briefer but more compelling document of interest to those not attending. Solid argument and articulate conclusions seem more likely to achieve lasting consensus than muddled expressions of common concern.

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