

A Pavane for these Distracted Times

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I'm grateful to Eric Holzenberg and the Grolier Club for asking me to be a part of this examination of a serious subject: libraries in hard times. I've taken the title of my remarks from another period of hard times: the English Civil War, when Thomas Tomkins and William Lawes, court musicians to Charles I, wrote, respectively, a "Pavane for these Distracted Times" and a "Pavane for these Troubled Times." I won't be able to deliver on the literal promise of my title, unless our moderator, Mark Dimunation, can push a button to cue the viols, but I do want to talk about certain themes that emerge from the situation that libraries currently find themselves in.

We know the dismal facts. Libraries have lost endowment, many of them as much as a third. Some of the country's largest and most well-endowed institutions have suffered the most in this regard. Libraries have lost staff through lay-offs, termination, and early retirement. Some have instituted furloughs in order to keep as much of the staff in place as possible. Because I've heard of some libraries losing large numbers of staff, I reacted with no particular surprise recently when a university special collections librarian mentioned to me that his unit at the library was losing one staff member. But then he proceeded to list all the activities and projects that would have to be stopped or curtailed just because of the loss of one person. In recent years, libraries haven't had the luxury of generous staffing, so any loss now is likely to be severe.

Given my duties at the National Endowment for the Humanities, as director of its Division of Preservation and Access, I fear that a result of the recession might be a decline in preservation work in the nation's libraries. It's all too easy for even well-intentioned administrators to regard preservation as postponable. However, the useful life of a book or artifact is limited, especially if it's in need of stabilization or treatment or held in the wrong storage environment. The internal clock for that object is ticking, but it ticks softly, and a library's audience for access, particularly online access, is larger and louder. I want to affirm, however, that preservation and access are a marriage, and as in all true marriages, one side doesn't get to grab all the covers.

Another fear I have is the possibility of interruptions in the important work libraries do that can be accomplished only slowly over the course of years: creating a conservation laboratory, hiring new staff trained in digital technology, planning for preservation of the library's digital collections, dealing with the backlog of unprocessed collections. In difficult economic times, administrators often curtail spending for programs that can't deliver instant outcomes.

At NEH, we think we're seeing signs of the recession in the number of applications we're receiving. I say "we think," because, of course, there's no way for us to be certain why an institution did or did not apply in any given year, but there have been increases, some quite dramatic, across the agency. Last year, in

the Division of Preservation and Access we received 257 applications for Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions, and this year we've received 353. So far this year, we've received more applications than last year in all the division's programs. Fortunately, the agency's budget has not declined. Our agency's appropriation was \$145 million for Fiscal Year 2008 and \$155 million for FY 2009. President Obama has submitted a request to Congress of \$171 million for FY 2010, which includes \$10 million for a grants program serving arts, historical, and cultural organizations in the District of Columbia. I might mention another probable sign of the economic times, which is that NEH has seen a significant increase in applications to its recent job announcements. Lately, there has been a slow but steady stream of vacancy announcements due to retirements, and that will probably continue for some time, since the agency did not reach a considerable size in staff until the late 1970s, and many of those people are now retiring.

The Division of Preservation and Access is continuing to offer grants to catalog book collections, arrange and describe archival collections, and digitize collections for online access. These activities account for many of the awards we make. Often, several project activities will be combined to form a compelling project. For instance, NEH made an award last year to The New York Public Library to catalog, digitize, and perform conservation treatment on three collections of Chinese rare books and pamphlets, including finely illustrated painting manuals of the Ming Dynasty, bound in silk, which are beautiful examples of Chinese book arts.

I'd like to mention two new NEH grant opportunities offered by my division, both of which can benefit libraries. The first is Research and Development, a grant program for projects that address major methodological challenges in preserving or providing access to humanities collections and resources. In our guidelines for the current cycle of this program, we especially encouraged applications for R&D projects dealing with preventive conservation, digital preservation, and preservation and access for recorded sound and moving image collections. You will also find on the NEH website the guidelines for our other new program: Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections. This program in preventive conservation will help collecting institutions plan or implement sustainable strategies to prolong the useful life of collections. For both the planning grants of up to \$40,000 and implementation grants of up to \$400,000, NEH encourages collaborative and interdisciplinary planning that considers the nature of materials in a collection; the performance of the building, its envelope, and its systems in moderating internal environmental conditions; the cost-effectiveness and energy efficiency of various approaches to preventive conservation; and the project's impact on the environment. In May of this year we held a conference at NEH in partnership with Italy's Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche that brought together American and Italian researchers on the subject of "Sustainable Cultural Heritage." There were over 150 people in attendance, so we think there's an eager audience for our new grant program on this subject.

Those are a few things that NEH is hoping libraries can benefit from, but the larger problems still remain. What can libraries do on their own to help prevent the loss of staff and funding? Libraries must continue to assert their central role in a well-functioning economy and to remind the public why libraries are even more important in hard times. Libraries have created job centers, providing the relevant resources to help people find employment; libraries offer the free use of computers, a lifeline to the unemployed. Their reading rooms offer the only free higher education available. These are aspects of library involvement in society that the public is able to observe and understand. The aspect of library work that is harder to see and articulate but is strongly felt is the authority libraries command, authority that they've earned over time by being the advocates and guardians of free speech and of privacy and of public service and of free access to information and knowledge. And now, as we are able to have access to almost inconceivable amounts of digitized content, the authority of libraries in managing that content, preserving it, and retrieving it for our use, can only take on greater and greater value to society. As the world merrily digitizes, it is librarians who deal with the issues of standards and best practices that will determine the authenticity and longevity of these materials.

Years ago, staff of The New York Public Library told me that on 9/11, people came streaming into the Fifth Avenue building. When I thought about it, it made perfect sense. At a time when the city's "official" authorities were downtown where they had to be, the library represented not only a safe haven but also another kind of civic authority. The need for *auctoritas* is a primal one, and libraries must take every opportunity to use their professional and authoritative voice. In these troubled times, when the discussion is always about dollars and cents, we shouldn't be distracted from the important question, which is: What is too valuable to lose? Especially in hard times, it's necessary to return the discussion to the real issue: the mission of libraries, their central role in civilized society, and the authoritative voice they bring to the exchange of knowledge in a democracy.