

What Future For Rare Books ?

By Alain Marchiset, antiquarian bookseller

The speech which follows was given at the SLAM headquarters where a press conference was convened at the end of November 2002, and which was attended by journalists specializing in the Art World, as well as French public officers from the Ministry of Culture, the "Direction du Livre", the Archives and Public Libraries. The theme chosen was "What future for rare books", and the main object was to make the guests aware of the difficulties arising from the complex European regulations concerning cultural property.

As we move forward into the twenty first century with its electronic digital and virtual revolution, hypertext read through hyperlinks, and lastly the e-book, we may legitimately pose a question regarding the future of the traditional book, and particularly that of old books.

Nonetheless, the anticipated death of the book is not a new phenomena. We recall that the book published in 1967 by the Canadian Marshall MacLuhan under the title "The Gutenberg Galaxy" dealt with this matter. Over the years we have seen that the electronic revolution has not really had the effect it had been predicted to have. We may also recall the cover of a magazine which appeared in the '90s and which referred to the answer of Gutenberg to MacLuhan in the form of an arm gesture of extreme vulgarity. Desktop Publishing did not finally kill the published book. It simply vulgarised the publishing proces. For us who are interested in the book as such, we feel that the aesthetics of the book may have suffered but not its productions in terms of quantity.

Undoubtedly the book as an expression of the written language has gone through several mutations, such as, for example:

- the transformation of the "volumen" into "Codex"
- the transformation of the written manuscript into the printed form
- xylography to mobile characters
- artisanal fabrication into industrial production

Today however, the anticipated revolution is perhaps more radical.

The question however is not as anecdotal as we might imagine because we know that the book played a major role in the diffusion of thought especially in the western world. It is not within the realm of this paper to consider the ties which unite Humanism, Reform and the publication and distribution of the book, for this would take us too far.

Regarding the question of distribution of publications and of culture in general, we underline that the recent official report by Cordier¹ refers to the specific nature of the business of bookselling and to the valuable services rendered by the traditional bookshops in the diffusion of culture.

¹ *It is therefore essential to underline the additional merit of traditional bookshops. The specific nature of the business of bookselling is less in the presentation and management of a large stock of books, and more in its ability to assist and direct in a permanent manner the public in the selection of books to acquire. It is this ability which characterises the good bookseller. This is what we describe as the role of the bookseller in the diffusion of culture. It is a matter for local bodies to ensure the continued activity of bookshops, which in itself is a French specialisation in the distribution of books (extract from the Report on the Digital Book of May 1999, written by the Commission headed by M. Cordier for the Ministry of Culture)

From a more international viewpoint, the recent publication of Andre Schiffrin describes the catastrophic evolution in book publishing in the United States, which the title of the book best describes as "Books without editors", the strategy adopted by large communication groups to propagate publications without editors, books without authors, which are on sale in bookshops without shops.

In France, the distribution of the book is practically in the hands of 2 big financial groups. As to independent booksellers, more than half have disappeared in less than 20 years. When it comes to the diffusion of culture, the balance sheet of big distribution, coupled with globalisation, does not give rise to any great jubilation.

In view of this modern trend, the curators of libraries and antiquarian booksellers could turn into dinosaurs.

Regarding librarians Cordier's report notes that "the essence of the profession of the librarian was to catalogue and to conserve, and he is becoming a middleman." Paradoxically, however, with the computerisation of relevant data, referred to by specialists as the "de-materialisation of culture", the role of the librarian has but in fact enhanced from that of a depository of culture to that of a diffuser of this new virtual culture. Nonetheless there is always the risk that ancient documents will end up hidden in dark storage areas to serve only as a reference basis to computerisation. On the other hand we are aware that the big projects for digital computerisation appear to be on the decline.

Regarding booksellers, I tend to believe that as the gap widens between books for consumer purposes and rare books, there will be greater distinction between them, and that such books will acquire greater value for collection purposes. From this point of view, there will always remain a margin for small scale bookselling business, which will address itself to cultured amateurs. This tendency has already been observed, that booksellers of rare books have and will continue to play a leading role in upholding a high quality, even if marginal, production. Thanks to their cultural knowledge regarding the history of the book, the antiquarian booksellers often have a more refined approach to contemporary books and are often interested in original and refined forms of publications.

The difficulty, of course, is to maintain this marginal profession, and to be able to transmit the professional experience to future generations and more particularly, to ensure their financial subsistence. Fortunately the old book has not aroused the interest of large financial groups, even though in recent times, some doubtful statements have been made regarding the speculative nature of rare books which may have unfortunately aroused the interest of specialised speculators.

In point of fact the great danger for the profession is the proliferation of European regulations that have been enacted over the past few years. These regulations and their restrictive nature have dealt a severe blow to the interest of collectors and merchants, who represent the platform for the enrichment of our cultural heritage. To base the development of cultural wealth on administrative action and methods is certainly not the best way to enrich this country. The example provided by the administrative policy followed in the Eastern communist countries of Europe has shown that such methods do not work. Today the art market is above all international in character. We can no longer argue in a vacuum. For

example we have seen that in the field of immigration, administrative restrictions have not eliminated violations.

The High Authority which regulates French Public Auctions, and generally the professionals of the art market know that VAT on imported goods constitutes severe setbacks to the enrichment of our national heritage. There are, however, other restrictions. Thus the notion itself of "zero level" for certain cultural assets would appear today to be obsolete. This administrative restriction which goes back to 1993 has not in fact served to protect our national treasures, which had been the primary object of the regulation. Official statistics speak for themselves. Where the restriction is European in origin, it has not been applied in a uniform manner by the member nations of the European Union. This has of course penalised French booksellers in relation to their European colleagues, because France applies those restrictions in a stringent manner. The Germans, on the other hand, have adopted a more liberal interpretation of the European restrictive regulations. Obviously it has generated perverse effects and complicated the life of customs officials, such that everything of a cultural nature has become suspect. Even UNESCO has recently put its finger in the pie. On the pretext of putting an end to the felonious market in archaeological objects, it has included old books as falling within the vague definition of cultural property, despite the fact that the functions of that organisation is to defend the free circulation of books as expressed in a 1978 Convention.

It would be a great pity in the interest of conserving our national heritage to do nothing to protect our profession. Auctioneers and sales experts do not educate or guide amateurs. Those who do are professional experts and dealers, often one and the same. The booksellers of rare books and the dealers in autographs and etchings are competent to give advice, and do so in fact, to collectors, and it is this relationship between the bookseller and the amateur that has, over the years, given rise to the great collections that have enriched our national heritage. We know that great collections have been gathered by passionate collectors with the help and advice of professionals in the field of any one profession. Also, we often forget that the bookseller as well as the restorer play a principal role in the conservation of our heritage. And it is the bookseller who takes upon himself the burden of restoring old documents in order to trade in them. It is not by chance that members of our profession choose to ply this trade. It is rather a question of passionate addiction to the profession over a long period of time, which allows members of the profession to acquire and put to use their specialised knowledge.

Finally we should perhaps give credit to the French association of booksellers "SLAM" created in 1914 and which has made it its business to ensure the application of the code of ethics and rules of our profession, and which provides an incentive for holding annually the most important fair for old books in Paris to which all important booksellers are invited. Equally, this same association, propagates and advertises the cultural and social role of our profession. And while we belong to the large antiquarian family, our trade is not old-fashioned in its ways. Our Association was among the first in Europe to create, more than five years ago, an internet web site, and we have since developed a search engine for rare books within the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers which represents 28 countries throughout the world. Equally SLAM launched the concept of a virtual bookfair on internet four years ago. It is for this paradoxical reason that the digital and virtual world is less of a stranger to us as it might seem.

I thank you all for your patience in listening to this dissertation.

Alain Marchiset
President of SLAM

This speech was followed by a debate between SLAM committee members and their guests; the three following topics were mainly discussed: the rare book market, the export licenses and VAT on cultural goods.