Dumbarton Oaks, III. The library

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III. THE LIBRARY

Merlin W. Packard

The beginnings of the Research Library are inextricably connected with the development of the Byzantine Collection. When Mr. and Mrs. Bliss settled at Dumbarton Oaks in 1933, their personal library already contained many important works dealing with Byzantine art and allied fields and they already had in view the goal of, in the words of Mr. Bliss, "a research collection to illustrate the books—a library to interpret the objects."

By 1936 a professional staff had been assembled to embark upon the systematic development of a research library, and our present accession records begin in early December of that year. On 31 December 1937, the two-thousandth volume was recorded. By the end of December 1940, four years after the formal beginnings of the Library and a month after its transfer to the University, the holdings numbered 10,200 volumes.

During this same period, 1936-1940, there was assembled a considerable body of research material other than books. The foundations of the present photographic collection were prepared and some five thousand photographs, chiefly dealing with Byzantine sculpture and minor arts, were on hand at the end of 1940. Moreover, the Dumbarton Oaks Census of Early Christian and Byzantine Art in America was well advanced and its files constituted a valuable research tool. The Dumbarton Oaks copy of the Princeton Index of Christian Art had been made in 1939 and was nearly all filed by the end of 1940.

It will be seen that the focus of acquisition in this formative period was art history and archaeology. The holdings included complete runs of the principal European and American journals dealing with classical and mediaeval art and archaeology. However, even then, the Library possessed the most important encyclopedic works in the fields of classical and Islamic studies, church history, theology, and canon law, as well as runs of a number of periodicals in these fields. Although the number of Greek texts, both classical and post-classical, was not yet large, the Library did possess the Greek Patrology and the Bonn Corpus. Thus, the first steps had been taken to expand the scope of
the Library to cover all aspects of Byzantine civilization as well as the antecedent cultures upon which Byzantium developed and the contemporary cultures with which there was mutual interaction and influence.

It was in this formative period, as well, that the nucleus of our not inconsiderable holdings of material in the Russian language was formed. The Library was able to purchase complete or nearly complete runs of pre-1917 periodicals and series as well as much monograph material. All of the publications of the Seminariurn Kondakovianum of Prague were acquired. Although the volume of Soviet publication in our fields of interest was not great in the 1930's, what there was was well represented at Dumbarton Oaks.

At the time of the transfer to the University, the books were housed on the second floor of the new wing which had been constructed on Thirty-second Street to provide display space for the Byzantine collection. The Princeton Index, Census, and photographic collection were in three rooms in the basement of the main building. The stacks room in the new wing and the basement rooms were already crowded, and there was little space for readers. Accordingly, in the summer of 1941, the present Main Reading Room was constructed on the second floor in the central section of the house where there had previously been two large bedrooms. Three other bedrooms, on the east end of the second floor, were converted to catalogue and reference rooms, and to house the Princeton Index, photographic collection, and Census.

During World War II, the research activities at Dumbarton Oaks were, of necessity, greatly curtailed and large areas of the buildings were occupied by agencies of the Federal Government. Nevertheless, the Princeton Index was maintained, work continued on the Census and the photographic collection, and the Library itself continued to grow, although at a considerably slower rate than in its first four years. At the end of 1945, the Library had just under 16,000 volumes, and was again very crowded. In 1946, the west end of the second floor of the main building was remodelled to make a stack room. A few years later, the entire third floor was remodelled to provide shelf space, giving the Library approximately its present work, reading, and storage areas.

In the past quarter-century, the Library and related research materials have not ceased to increase. The photographic collection, which consists of some 38,000 photographs and about 7,500 slides,
and the Census now occupy two large rooms in the basement of the Pre-Columbian wing. The Princeton Index is housed in a room in the basement of the main building, and an adjoining room is devoted to microfilm and microfiches. We have microfilms of all of the manuscripts owned by the Library of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul and films of other manuscripts, mainly Greek, which have been acquired in connection with the research projects of individual scholars. These total about 850 codices. In the past year we have begun to acquire pre-1917 Russian publications on microfiche. At present there are more than 6,000 microfiches, which represent about 400 bibliographical volumes.

The holdings of books and periodicals have now increased to some 75,000 bound volumes, and nearly 700 periodicals, annuals, and irregular series are received at the present time. As a result of numerous exchange agreements made in the years just after World War II, there is an unusually rich collection of publications from the countries of eastern Europe. We are particularly fortunate in our holdings of the publications of the academies, learned societies, and museums of Yugoslavia. There is also a substantial body of Turkish publications both recent and prior to World War I.

The increased size and importance of the collection brings, quite justifiably, ever growing demands upon the Library by graduate students and scholars both within and outside of Dumbarton Oaks. Recent years have brought increased interest and instruction in our fields on the part of the universities in the District of Columbia. The presence of a library such as ours in close proximity to these institutions, some of which already have a tradition in one or another of the segments of our composite field, can provide a vital stimulus to further growth of Byzantine studies within the Washington academic community, and can help to assure “that the community of scholarship in the Byzantine and medieval humanities may remain unbroken.”

(To be concluded)
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