

Handle This Book!

Curators put rare texts in 18-year-old hands.

By Roger Mummert

“WHO’S going to be the first to jump in here?” John Pollack asks, eliciting the reaction he usually gets when inviting freshmen to touch a 500-year-old book — “Are we allowed to, really?”

Mr. Pollack is a rare-books specialist at the University of Pennsylvania, and among his duties is presenting rare books and materials in undergraduate courses, including this new history department seminar on holy wars from the First Crusade to Sept. 11. On this morning in the stately Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 15 students crowd around a table covered with large, weathered texts, laid open in foam cradles that absorb the stress.

One student seizes the moment and steps up to a codex, a handwritten, bound manuscript made in Italy in 1471 entitled “Fasciculus temporum” (“Leaves of Time”). As he gingerly turns its stiff, brownish pages, light flickers through tiny holes where busy worms have consumed a few characters over the centuries. Still, the colored illustrations and large, ornate letters sprinkled through the text remain bright and clear.

Mr. Pollack reads the Latin passages, translating aloud as he goes. One student spots the names of medieval popes; another recognizes depictions of Romulus and Remus. Collectively, they decode a timeline running horizontally through the book and, with the help of bookmarks placed by Mr. Pollack, see references to the Crusades written just a few centuries after their conclusion.

“These objects are a link to the past, and they have a power that is undeniable,” Mr. Pollack says after class. “But these materials also are wonderful teaching tools that pose questions about how we know what we know.”

This represents a new way of thinking: rare books should be a hands-on experience.

“We’re not running a museum,” Mr. Pollack says.

Rare books and manuscripts, once restricted to scholars and graduate students in white gloves, are being incorporated into undergraduate courses at institutions like the University of Iowa, Smith College, the University of Washington and Harvard. Last academic year, almost 200 classes and student tours visited the rare-books collection of the University of Pennsylvania. That’s almost three times the number of visitors five years ago, according to Mr. Pollack.

Dusty bits may fall off cracked leather bindings, but medieval paper made from discarded clothing, and parchment or vellum from animal skins, are remarkably durable. Gloves, it has been decided, make a reader

paw at pages, with more potential to rip them (while diminishing the sensory experience). Now, dry, clean hands are the preferred tool, with no liquids or pens in sight.

Robert Darnton, director of the Harvard University Library, encourages students to hold, page through and sniff the Gutenberg Bible and Shakespeare’s First Folio, which he uses in his course “The Book From Gutenberg to the Internet.” “Books have a smell, especially rare books,” he says.

Mr. Darnton asks his students to “diagnose the symptoms” of a book — bits of petticoat in rag-based pages, symbols stamped in the binding, scribbles in the margins, called marginalia. By examining a book’s physical attributes, he says, “you can enter a world we have lost and understand it as it was.”

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SABINA LOUISE PIERCE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

TOUCHING HISTORY Students don’t need white gloves to peruse ancient texts at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, above and left, at the University of Pennsylvania. “We’re not running a museum,” says John Pollack, one of the library’s specialists.

What do the number of illustrations that have been hand colored reveal about the owner’s affluence, and who could afford knowledge? How was a 19th-century book mass-produced? What does that tell us about the democratization of ideas?

Courses on the history of the book itself have grown along with the ascendancy of electronic information. Students today often blindly grant authority to the online world. Curators want to reconnect them with original sources and teach them to question those sources.

For example, to illustrate that history is a series of competing narratives, Mr. Pollack directs the class to a chronicle of the Crusades published in 1611 with contrasting accounts. The students have been assigned to read the accounts in translation, but here they view the original Latin text on pages deeply stained by ink that has migrated across the pages.

Next, each student holds an indulgence letter, a broadside that was mass-produced in 1482, offering absolution from sins in return for donations to a crusade against the Turks. The historical implications are discussed: the selling of indulgences was a central issue in the rise of the Protestant Reformation and the schism in the Roman Catholic Church.

At that instant, holy wars are no longer an abstraction. The students hold physical evidence of momentous world events in their hands. ■