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# Theft in libraries or archives

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## *What to do during the aftermath of a theft.*

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**A** theft of books, manuscripts, or archival material from a library or archive may sneak upon you quietly and without notice—much like an earthquake or a fire. The resulting disaster from theft may be as devastating as any natural disaster for an institution's collections. Just as water-soaked materials are certain to be lost forever if timely action is not taken to treat them, so stolen materials will be lost forever if timely action is not taken to attempt to recover them. It would be well to ask questions about theft and to incorporate theft in a disaster plan as one to rank with those disasters of a more natural origin, such as fire and water.

Usually a disaster plan is written in two parts: the "before" section that enumerates preparedness issues and activities, and the "after" that outlines recovery efforts, procedures, and resources. If theft were included in a plan, preparedness factors such as thorough bibliographic control, high standards for timely inventory, approved marking practices, issues involving retention and quality of user records, knowledge of insurance coverage, and the need for constant vigilance might be prescribed in the first section. The second section could include a plan for recovery which would address such problems as how theft is discovered, what the proper aims of any recovery plan ought to be, what the actions are that must be included in the recovery plan, and finally, what the impact of a theft and

the recovery effort may be on staff and the actual work of a department or an archive. The remainder of this paper addresses these problems and offers some concrete solutions which are vital to any theft recovery effort.

### **How is theft discovered?**

The March 1990 arrest of Stephen Blumberg at his home in Iowa for transporting across state lines more than 28,000 stolen books and manuscripts valued at \$20 million and the revelations surrounding this case indicate that the libraries he victimized discovered their losses by quite a variety of circumstances. It is not uncommon for a library or archive to be unaware that materials have actually left their premises until a telephone call from an alert book dealer or law enforcement agent arouses suspicion. Recovery of materials stolen then often becomes the signal that all is not right. On the other hand, evidence of forced intrusion or apprehension of a person in the act may rather abruptly signal a theft. More subtle indicators such as altered bibliographic records or substitutions may be the alert that a patron or staff member has stolen valuable materials. It is also possible that regular inventories may reveal a systematic pattern of loss without providing any explanation. The most difficult discovery to grapple with is what insurance adjustors call "mysterious disappearance."

An important and valuable item that is seldom used may one day turn up missing without any sign of intrusion or other irregularity. This may be the hardest type of theft to confront because feelings of denial must be overcome before one is emotionally able to take positive action. (It behooves any administrator of special collections or archives to have a thorough knowledge of insurance coverage prior to any kind of disaster and knowledge of "mysterious disappearance" coverage should be among the information sought.)

### **The aims and actions of a recovery plan**

As soon as evidence has been collected that indicates the occurrence of a major theft, "[one's] practice and pursuit" (as Aristotle said in his *Ethics*) must be aimed toward an important good. In this case the "good" is recovery and apprehension—recovery of property and/or insurance reimbursements and apprehension of the criminal or criminals who perpetrated the crime. Aiming toward this "good" must become the highest priority of the institution. But what is the best "practice and pursuit" to accomplish recovery and apprehension? "ACRL guidelines for the security of rare book, manuscript, and other special collections," prepared by ACRL's Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Security Committee, is available as an excellent guide.<sup>1</sup> By way of summary, one should remember that in virtually any case three types of action must be undertaken. Action must be undertaken to notify. Action must be undertaken to inventory. And action must be undertaken to chronicle. And all of this must be undertaken at the same time, often by the same individual. The following explanation illuminates what is meant by this trio.

### **The notification process**

Historically libraries and archives have tried to "hush up" thefts, or they would simply ignore them for fear of being shunned by donors if the thefts came to light. It is safe to say that this argument no longer holds credibility, nor is it seen as ethical in the professional library and archival world. There is virtually no institution big or small, prestigious or not that has not experienced problems of theft. The question is no longer a question of whether to notify. Rather it has shifted to a question of who should do the notifying and who should be notified.

Who does the notifying will vary from institution to institution. Size, staff, lines of responsibility, the

existence of a security officer (highly recommended by the RBMS Guidelines), management style, and organization structure may all have an impact on decisions regarding the appropriate person to contact each constituency. What does remain constant are the constituent groups that must be notified by someone.

Of course the administrators, trustees, and staff of the institution must be informed, as well as the institution's insurers. Staff, especially, will be inclined to spread rumors if they are not informed honestly. This may demand a delicate balance as sometimes a lack of information may be perceived as a withholding of information.

Law enforcement personnel should be notified; since they tend to work along hierarchical lines, the most local agency should be contacted first. For example, if an institution is part of a campus, then the campus police should be consulted first. These officers will contact city, county, state, and federal agents as they determine they are needed. If the institution is independent, city police should be contacted first. (Large cities sometimes have agents assigned to thefts and forgeries of art objects. Stolen rare books and documents of a significant value, i.e., if their theft constitutes a felony, fall into this category.) If there is good reason to believe that what has been stolen has been taken across state lines, or if the items are extremely valuable, then the local law enforcement agency is likely to contact the FBI. At some point it may be appropriate to contract for the services of a private investigator.

In cases where a thief has crossed national borders, or if it is suspected that stolen materials have been shipped out of the United States, the law enforcement agent contact may recommend that Interpol (the International Criminal Police Organization of which 142 countries are members) become involved.<sup>2</sup> The Interpol General Secretariat circulates almost two dozen notices monthly with "information about stolen property or about objects found in circumstances that suggest they may have been acquired illicitly. . . . Each notice may contain information about the theft of a single work of art or an entire collection."<sup>3</sup> Stolen rare books and manuscripts fall within the limits of the type of cultural property that Interpol tries to recover. Their notices connect with an international law enforcement network that may not be tapped any other way.

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<sup>2</sup>Contact: Interpol/USNCB, Angela Meadows, Art Analyst, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC 20530; (202) 272-8383.

<sup>3</sup>Jane Griffin Yeingst, "Interpol's Stolen Art Program," in *Journal of Field Archaeology* 14 (Summer 1987): 222.

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<sup>1</sup>RBMS Security Committee "ACRL Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections," *C&RL News* 51 (March 1990): 240-44.

A second group that should be notified immediately is rare book and manuscript dealers and auction houses. This can be done through individual contact, which is quite time consuming, or by connecting with dealers' networks. The Security Committee of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America has been working recently to organize a new one—"Bookwatch U.S.A."—to report stolen and missing books to dealers both by telephone and by the mails. Modeled after the system in place in Britain it should assist libraries and archives in the notification process nationwide. Its development should be applauded and encouraged. At the present time to activate "Bookwatch U.S.A." one must contact ABAA headquarters by telephone, fax, and/or letter to report missing or stolen books.<sup>4</sup> This one contact will set in motion a national telephone chain organized by region which connects and informs ABAA members across the United States. The hope is that ABAA members will also pass on any information regarding a theft to other local non-ABAA dealers as well. The initial telephone message alert is followed by a mailing called the "Pink Sheet" which actually gives bibliographic details of missing items. Five separate "Pink Sheet" mailings were distributed to ABAA members from their national headquarters in New York in the first six to seven months of the existence of "Bookwatch, U.S.A."

To reach British dealers one need only contact the ABA (Antiquarian Booksellers Association, Great Britain) to list stolen books in its monthly list—the original "Pink Sheet"—distributed to members, New Scotland Yard, and British libraries (by subscription) for the past fifteen years.<sup>5</sup> This is supplemented by a telephone chain.

Remember, however, that after initial notification by whatever means—telephone, letter, and/or through the ABAA or ABA "Bookwatch" programs—it still may be necessary to keep in contact with the dealers and auction houses—either locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally—that are most likely to have the missing material fall into their hands. Contacting dealers on the continent and in Asia is much more problematic as formal notification systems do not exist there. American dealers who normally handle material of the type that has been stolen can be excellent advisers regarding European auction houses and other foreign contacts. The International League

of Antiquarian Booksellers may yet provide assistance in this realm.

The ABAA's notification process was new in 1989 and is still developing. Another existing way to notify the international book world of loss is a newsletter which lists stolen cultural objects published by the International Federation of Art Research (IFAR).<sup>6</sup> The *IFAR Newsletter* has a fine reputation for disseminating information that has led to the resolution of cases. The *AB Bookman's Weekly* missing book advertisement column also continues to be an excellent way to broadcast a theft to those who can assist with recovery.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, to cover all bases with American and British bookdealers and to contribute to a permanent record of book theft in the late 20th century, two specialized databases should be notified by the submission of missing book inventory lists. BAMBAM (Bookline Alert Missing Books and Manuscripts), a database of missing items, is owned privately by Katharine and Daniel Leab, publishers of *American Book Prices Current*.<sup>8</sup> This database was established by the Leabs more than ten years ago to be a notification mechanism or service. In practice, it has proved difficult and cumbersome to access by booksellers wishing to check suspicious titles. At the beginning, hard copy was generated from the database. Over the years many thefts have been input so that the database has now grown to a healthy size. The BAMBAM database represents an incredible amount of valuable information on book theft in the last decade. If it can be made more readily accessible to librarians and booksellers, it may yet fill the need for which it was originally established. In 1987 the British Library established the National Library Security Office after discussions and a meeting with ABA and ABAA in hopes of establishing an online database of missing or stolen books. However, since the office lacked the resources, this job fell to the Provincial Booksellers and Fairs Association (PBFA) in cooperation with the ABA. "The 'Bookwatch Database,' as it is titled continues to grow," Paul Hutchinson of PBFA reported at an ABAA Security Committee meeting in Los Angeles, February 4, 1990.

One must not forget that other institutions should be notified, especially those in the area with similar collections, for they are likely to be "hit" as well. As disaster networks are formed across the country on the model of LAPNET and IELDRN in

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<sup>4</sup>Contact: Liane Wood-Thomas, Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America, 50 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10020; (212) 757-9395; fax, (212) 459-0307.

<sup>5</sup>Contact: Mrs. J. White, Secretary, Antiquarian Booksellers Association, Suite 2, 26 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H OD6, England.

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<sup>6</sup>Contact: Dr. Constance Lowenthal, International Foundation for Art Research, 46 E. 70th Street, New York, NY 10021; (212) 879-1780.

<sup>7</sup>Contact: *AB Bookman's Weekly*, Missing Books Section, P.O. Box AB, Clifton, NJ 07015; (201) 772-0020; fax, (201) 772-9281.

<sup>8</sup>Contact: Katharine and Daniel Leab, P.O. Box 1236, Washington, CT 06793; (212) 737-2715.

Southern California it would be particularly helpful if security concerns or theft were placed as a standing item on the regular meeting agendas of these networks. This would be an excellent way to communicate about this kind of disaster within a given region.

Contacting the media is much more problematic. The appropriateness of entering the media spotlight must be judged on a case by case basis. Doing so should certainly not jeopardize any investigation or recovery efforts. "Gag orders" may be imposed by judges during investigations that require warrants for search and seizure and/or arrest warrants. It may be legally necessary to hold a press release until after an arrest is made in order to insure that evidence will not be destroyed. The FBI is particularly shy of publicity as it investigates a case. In any event, the contact person should be an experienced press relations officer who can handle delicate information appropriately and carefully. To avoid confusion and to be assured that erroneous reports will not appear in the press, staff answering telephones should be instructed in how and to whom to refer curious reporters.

### **The inventory problem**

The second action, one that must begin as quickly as the notification process, is an inventory of what is missing. Depending on the circumstances of the theft, this may simply be noting the loss of a few items, or it may mean an extensive inventory of the entire collection which may take months. This goes hand in hand with the notification process, however. Each constituency notified will ask at least the same two questions: "What is missing or stolen?" and "What is its value?" This is when the quality of bibliographic records is put to the test. Administrators, insurers, law enforcement personnel, book dealers, the ABAA, the ABA, IFAR, Interpol, and BAMBAM will all want a missing book inventory list. Insurers may require an appraiser to place a value on missing items based on the information that can be given them from the bibliographic records available. The FBI may not be willing to enter a case unless the value of the missing material can be judged sufficiently substantial that felony charges can be anticipated in the event an arrest is made. Any book dealer will confirm that it is very difficult to place a monetary value on items that are not in hand. Unless condition is noted in the bibliographic record, there will be no way to know what it was at the time the item was carried off. As a safeguard, an institution may wish to seek an independent appraisal to judge the accuracy of any appraisal arranged by insurers. This will also have to be performed from a list. As a consequence, the information in the inventory list must be as accurate and complete as possible.

Any item-specific information that exists, including binding description, the presence or absence of a bookplate or bookplates, notation of missing pages, inscriptions, description of condition, whether institutional markings have been added on acquisition and if so their description(s) and location(s), etc.—should be included. If any photographs of missing items were made in the past, they should be appended to the missing book inventory list. It is better to err on the side of too much information than too little. If the existing bibliographic record is inadequate and lacking detailed item-specific information, one must make the best of a bad situation and piece together as much information as possible from donor files or dealers' catalogues from which books were purchased. In the event that a recovery is made, all of this information will prove invaluable in establishing rightful ownership. Unfortunately this inventory list containing item-specific information must be compiled as quickly as possible as it will be needed immediately for any investigations to proceed. The danger, of course, in having to compile this list quickly is that errors will creep into it. Therefore accuracy and speed must somehow be achieved simultaneously. The only thing worse than filing an insurance claim for ten stolen books is discovering later that twenty are actually gone.

### **The chronology of events**

Finally, the third action that must be undertaken immediately is the creation of a chronology. This is where archivists can really shine! One staff member must be directed to keep a record, by date, of everything that has happened and everything that has been done. Names, telephone numbers, and addresses should be included when appropriate. This will prove to be an invaluable record later as memory fades. It can be used to assure trustees and insurers that appropriate actions have been taken. And each new law enforcement officer or detective assigned to the case can be brought up to speed quickly by reading it. If the case drags on for a long period of time and institutional personnel changes, it may become the only accurate record of what occurred at the time the theft was detected and what action was taken at that time. Needless to say, details may be captured in the chronology that help to solve the case; information may be saved that becomes extremely helpful in a legal action or prosecution. A chronology can be created, saved, and updated quite easily with the help of most word processing software. Depending on the circumstances, it should be maintained at least initially as a confidential document and released only to appropriate individuals. Keeping up this chronology will be less time-consuming than the other priority actions of the recovery plan—notification and in-

ventory—but it will be no less important in the long term.

### Consequences

Now you may ask: “What is there left to do once everyone has been notified, all that is gone is accounted for in an inventory, and an historical record of the events has been set in motion?” Well, there will be a waiting period. Law enforcement personnel often seem slow to acknowledge the seriousness of book and document theft, and once they do they seem slow to act. There will be waiting for a break to occur; waiting for an investigation to culminate in an arrest; or perhaps waiting for a court date.

In the meantime, there may remain other work that must be done. For example, if stolen items have not turned up on the market, efforts to scan dealers’ catalogs and to remain abreast of auctions must be intensified. As a consequence, the level of administrative matters that must be handled—including correspondence and telephoning—may increase. A security evaluation may be mandated by superiors in order to prevent further such disasters. This may bring about reorganization, the installation of security equipment, and/or more time-consuming security procedures. If a marking program as recommended by the Security Committee of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section using permanent ink is mandated to protect what remains, implementation may become a long-term endeavor. Adding a mark to a book at the time of acquisition may be relatively simple. On the contrary, retrospectively marking a large collection will require staff, planning, time, and money to be implemented in an orderly way. And since the Library of Congress will soon no longer be able to supply libraries and archives with permanent ink, another manufacturer must be encouraged to produce an equivalent, satisfactory product. Happily, the RBMS Security Committee is presently at work on this problem.

The need for better bibliographic control of remaining collections, especially any uncataloged backlog, may also become paramount. Of course, these same measures implemented before disaster strikes and noted in the “preparedness” section of a disaster plan would serve to be a very prudent “ounce of prevention.” Once bibliographic control is established, a regular but random (in order to foil insider theft) inventory program will be possible, again at the expense of staff time for planning and implementation. Increased vigilance has its costs, but it pays off when a theft is prevented or discovered early.

These activities will all affect staff workload. Staff may need a great deal of encouragement to rise to the occasion. It may even be necessary to

redirect staff from other normal routines in an effort to secure the collections. All of this is likely to coincide with a time when staff is already feeling demoralized by the disaster that has occurred. Emotional problems may surface in workers including bereavement for what is lost, blame of self, blame of others, anger, resentment at the slow response or lack of thoroughness of administrators or law enforcement authorities, guilt, remorse, depression, or fault finding with the entire recovery effort. Rumors may be rampant, and the careers of innocent people may be in jeopardy if insider theft is suspected. These dreadful symptoms are likely to surface when any crisis or disaster happens and librarians and archivists are not immune. In fact, Dr. Joe Thigpen, a psychologist with Gelhausen, Ruda and Associates, Inc., Los Angeles, observed and chronicled these symptoms in employee behavior following the 1987 Los Angeles Public Library fires.<sup>9</sup> Were a psychologist to take a close look at employees of an institution following a major theft, similar behavior might be discovered and crisis intervention might be an appropriate response.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, anything that can be done to recognize and to deal with these consequences will be helpful.

What is done immediately in response to disaster, if it be in the direction of taking positive, helpful action, can set the recovery process in motion and encourage healing—slow though that process may be. Notifying all those who must know, taking stock of all that has been lost and making a record of the loss, and keeping a chronicle of the events and actions—that is, following a plan of action—may add to the burdens of an already overworked staff, but these activities will prove invaluable in the recovery effort. The additional workload that may result to secure the remaining collections will be hard at first. But if all this work can be seen as an important saving and securing effort, a preparedness effort, to guard collections, and if that work can be successful, a healthy environment can be restored. In addition, it will become clear that in the thoughtful “doing”—the acting toward recovery and apprehension of thieves and securing what remains the “taking”—is less likely to occur again. ■ ■

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<sup>9</sup>Joe Thigpen, “How to Cope with Library Disasters.” A paper presented at IELDRN, The Inland Empire Library Disaster Response Network, Disaster Primer Workshop, Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California, March 21, 1988.

<sup>10</sup>An informative discussion of the human response to disaster and the appropriate crisis intervention to that human response may be found in Raquel E. Cohen and F. L. Ahearn Jr., *Handbook for Mental Health Care of Disaster Victims* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

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## In praise of collectors

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who collect things, and those who don't. The New York Public Library is a treasure house for those of us in the former category, so much so that it has been referred to as the guardian of America's cultural heritage. Such foresighted donors as John Jacob Astor, William Augustus Spencer, Henry and Albert Berg, Arthur Schomburg, and Carl Pforzheimer helped foster this role by their extraordinary gifts.

The Library's exhibition, "In Praise of Collectors: Historic Gifts," which ran from September 28 through November 3, featured more than 140 drawings, prints, manuscripts, and objects donated or purchased with funds bequeathed by individuals. Organized around the themes of literature, political and cultural history, the art of the book, and the graphic arts, the exhibition showed how the discrete collections and interests of individuals came together to form cohesive and interrelated collections used by more than 1.3 million people each year. The objects on view range in time from a very rare fragment of a 10th-century Arabic manuscript of the *Koran* to a beautifully bound fine press *Koran* with painted cover dated 1989 by the contemporary artist Sam Francis.

The section on literature features some of the best-known gems of English and American literature with items drawn from the Berg, Pforzheimer, and Arents Collections. Among the highlights are a First Folio (1623) of William Shakespeare; a legendary rare first edition of Edgar Allen Poe's *Tamerm-lane* (1827); a first edition of *Daniel Deronda* (1876) by George Eliot; and the manuscript of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1925–1929).

The way in which holdings originally collected by diverse individuals came to complement one another in the Library is evident in the juxtaposition of various items; for example, a manuscript of *Tales of the Islanders* (1829–1830) (acquired in 1940 from W.T.H. Howe by the Berg Collection) written by the adolescent Charlotte Bronte adjoined with another piece of Bronte juvenalia, *The adventures of Ernest Alembert* (1830), from the Pforzheimer Collection, given to the Library in 1986; and the original manuscript for *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894) by Oscar Wilde, drawn from the Arents Collections, shown beside the manuscript of *The Decay of Lying* (1888) from the Berg Collection. A rare copy of The Declaration of Independence (1776) in Thomas Jefferson's own hand will be on view beside the first printed version of the Declaration, known as the Dunlap

Broadside. Materials drawn from the Library's performing arts collections include a Cecil Beaton watercolor drawing of a costume design for *Swan Lake* (ca. 1951); a manuscript of a poem composed by the famous 19th-century English tragedian Edmund Kean (1832); and a volume of sacred music *Patrocinium musices* (1589), from a monumental collection of the work of the celebrated Renaissance composer Orlando di Lasso. Items drawn from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture include a rare first edition of *Ad Catholicum*, a Latin epic poem by Juan Latino, an African-born professor of Latin and Greek at the University of Grenada (Spain). Other notable materials include a very rare manuscript (1799) of a military document issued by Toussaint L'Ouverture, the revolutionary Haitian leader of the late 1700s, and a pair of Edan Osugbo figures (early 20th century), dramatically sculpted brass castings used as regalia by certain members of the Yoruba people in Nigeria.

The role books have played throughout history was illuminated in the section "The Art of the Book," with materials ranging from the 9th century to the present day, drawn from the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division and from the Spencer Collection, which houses illustrated books, illuminated manuscripts, and books with fine bindings.

Works from the library's collection of 19th-century French prints, given to the library by Samuel P. Avery in 1990, comprised the majority of the visually beautiful materials on view in the graphic arts section. Among the works were rare etchings by Manet, including an impression of *Chat et fleurs* (1896) with pen and ink revisions by the artist; (1863), a drypoint by Whistler of one of his favorite models, Jo; *Tigre Royale* (1829), one of Delacroix's major lithographs; and *Hasta La Muerte*, Goya's scathing commentary on vanity from his *Los Caprichos* (1799), with its dramatic combinations of etching and aquatint. Of particular interest were prints shown in multiple states, so that the viewer could trace the artist's emerging intentions. Also on view was the only etching ever made by Van Gogh, *Dr. Gachet* (1895), drawn from the Arents Collection. ■ ■

