

(A note from the editor of Manuscripts: This issue of the journal nearly had to go without Bill's book reviews as his mother passed away during the week before the journal's content needed to be to the printer. It is during that particular week that Bill usually finishes the books he has been reading, and keeping notes on. He then writes his reviews. However, he returned from his mother's funeral and was still willing to finish at least one of his reviews. On behalf of myself and The Manuscript Society we send our deepest sympathies to Bill and his family, and we thank him for still being willing to finish at least one of his reviews for us).

Book Reviews: Accomplished Curator's Curio Cabinet

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WHITESELL, David R. *A Curator's Wunderkammer: A Decade of Collecting for the University of Virginia.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Library, 2021. 8vo. Softbound. 105pp. Numerous color illustrations. Limited to 500 copies. **\$25.00.**

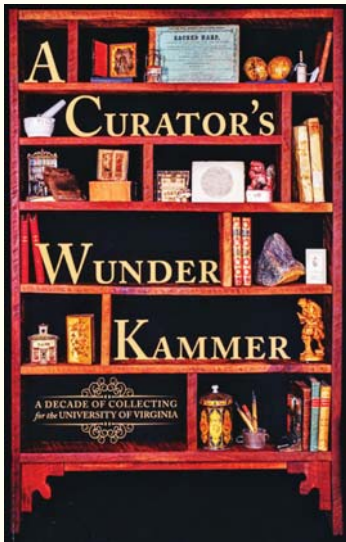
What percentage of 16,000,000 does 64 represent? I lack the math know-how to calculate it, but am told this represents 0.0004% (thank you, son Julian!).

I gape at curator David Whitesell's task in approaching the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, which he helped curate and from which he recently retired, to cull out this armful of treasures to highlight. But tackle it he did, and the result was an exhibition that ran from March through July 2022 at this fine institution at the University of Virginia.

Exhibition catalogues aplenty have been reviewed in this column over many years, and while *A Curator's Wunderkammer* may be among the smaller of them, it counts among the more unusual. The German "Wunderkammer" – literally, chamber

of wonders -- is less known than its quaint British counterpart “curio cabinet,” but *wonder* comes across clearly and better conveys the awe-inspiring nature of these objects more than does *curio*, which suggests trinkets and knickknacks.

Whitesell notes in his introduction, “In this exhibition I offer a small selection with comments intended to illuminate UVA’s current collecting policy, the ins and outs of the unpredictable and highly competitive acquisitions process, and how curators add value to the collection, one acquisition at a time.” In previous lives he curated at the American Antiquarian Society and at Harvard’s Houghton Library. Before that, crucially, he toiled in antiquarian bookselling for Richard C. Ramer in New York – a credential very few curators can boast, though Joel Silver at The Lilly Library (Indiana University, Bloomington) served a stint “in the trenches” before entering the world of library science. This background gave Whitesell an affinity for the trade that has served him well. He built a network of relations with many of the country’s leading antiquarian booksellers. When material germane to UVA’s many eclectic collecting interests became available, he was on speed dial and right of first refusal often came his way.



A Curator's Wunderkammer differs starkly from most exhibition catalogues. The eye-popping letters, documents, books and other paper that fill its pages are of course a delight – either single or two facing pages of text and image. But the images share equal billing with Whitesell’s tales of the acquisition of each item, including the seller’s identity and other details of which the public is rarely made privy. Many of my ABAA colleagues make appearances, sometimes

frequently. Whitesell naturally explains the special significance of every item, but it's not often that curators fill in the back story of the route by which each item made its way to UVA.

Artifact images in *A Curator's Wunderkammer* also differ greatly from most exhibition catalogues. Many strive for full-page images at actual size whenever possible on fine paper and in color so faithful it feels you can reach out and touch the actual artifact. The smaller size (8.5" X 5.5") of *A Curator's Wunderkammer* rules this out, plus the text sometimes lies partially *over* the image, thus images often consist of closeups of one portion of a letter, one part of a book's page, a fine leather spine and other partial images. It's a cozy feel appropriate to the book – far different from, for instance, Glen and Cathy Miranker's *Sherlock Holmes in 221 Objects*, a magnificent large exhibition catalogue reviewed in the Fall 2022 issue. The tightly-bound paperback format, alas, does not lend itself to lying open and flat on any page as might a hardbound edition.

But these are minor considerations in a work filled with--well, *wonders*. "I encourage you, then," suggests Whitesell in his introduction, "to explore this exhibition in your own way, engaging with those curiosities which attract your gaze and, I hope, some that do not.... If I have done the job well, these disparate objects will generate serendipitous connections, insights, and meanings for you...."

Taking this well-said advice, let me highlight a paltry half dozen items which attract my gaze:

Item #3 profiles an extraordinary find from UVA's outstanding Thomas Jefferson collection: It's doubtful Whitesell would have included this partial Jefferson document they acquired in 1988, "when the top half only appeared unexpectedly in a small upstate New York auction." But 25 years later, at the 2013 New York International Antiquarian Book Fair, the William Reese Company "carefully laid a trap for me" and produced the important lower half of the very same document! Pictured are the reunited documents – surprisingly, the lower half turned up at the very same New York auction house where 24 years before UVA had purchased the top half. As if that's not enough,

Whitesell remarks that “The manuscript is incomplete... I am convinced that one, possibly two more fragments remain in private hands and will surface someday...”

Item #14 draws yours truly to it as an Abraham Lincoln specialist: an 1839 three-page pamphlet as dull in appearance as it is in its title, *Public Lands in Illinois* – but it is rare as hen’s teeth and “takes pride of place as Lincoln’s first publication, number 1 in Jay Monaghan’s chronologically arranged *Lincoln Bibliography*.” More important, though, are Whitesell’s observations about its source:

Now it can be revealed that one of my secret acquisition weapons is the bookseller Peter Luke. His uncanny ability to flush out interesting and unusual material, which he quickly resells at attractive prices, has made him a bookselling legend. I learned early on to buy from Peter whenever possible. If I did not, dealers would and then offer the material to UVA at a substantial markup. Hence, I have acquired more from Peter – fully 1,000 items, primarily 19th-century Americana, literature, and trade catalogs – than from any other bookseller. But buying from Peter is a challenge: he has no Internet presence, issues no catalogs, sells primarily at small book fairs in the Northeast...

Item #19 concerns the manuscript archive of 54 letters from two brothers, both Confederate soldiers and UVA pupils, to their mother. “When I acquire manuscript collections, rarely is it clear whether the collection is intact or has been picked over, sometimes repeatedly,” Whitesell rightly observes. Dated 1861 through 1863, he also notes that “I was... disappointed by the November 1861-March 1862 gap.” Who doesn’t love a happy, if fortuitous and unexpected, ending: “A month after acquiring these letters, I was delighted to spot in a manuscript dealer’s catalog what was clearly the archive from which the letters had been separated. I immediately bought this portion... Three times the size, but one-third the price, of the original portion –

and yes, the missing letters from November 1861-March 1862 were present!”

Item #45 is not an autograph item, but tickles this dealer in both autographs and books because it confronts the most common misconception among non-collectors: That book dust jacket covers are a relatively recent, perhaps mid-20th century invention. Dealers enjoy showing such folk early 20th century and late 19th century dust jackets – rare survivors. The earliest dust jackets this dealer has owned were worn on both volumes of Elihu Washburne’s *Recollections of a Minister to France*, published in 1887. Much earlier examples exist, however, and Whitesell helped UVA acquire “one of four known examples (and one of two which remain sealed as issued) of the earliest recorded American imprint in its original dust jacket.” The pale blue beauty on this copy of *The poetical works of the late Richard S. Gedney*, 1857, is a thrill to behold.

Item #57 is also not an autograph item, but rather “one of three known copies of possibly the world’s first photographically illustrated book” – maybe, Whitesell stresses, for “There is yet no definitive answer.” The book is a gathering of six translations of ancient Greek texts by the British diplomat and translator John Hookham Frere, published between 1839 and 1842. His tale of dropping everything to scan a new digital catalogue (“then race through it, making quick but informed decisions as I go. Having done this a few thousand times, my efficiency and success rates are high.”) does not surprise. But he goes with his gut, orders immediately and beats out another order that arrived just after his order. Research continues, but it “seems likely [that] it precedes William Henry Fox Talbot’s photographically-illustrated *The pencil of nature* by a year or more.”

Item #64, the last item in the exhibition, Whitesell reserves for “the prize and, if I must choose, my favorite UVA acquisition”: the 2018 acquisition of eleven important manuscripts of Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges, of which his favorite is “The original manuscript of *La biblioteca total* (*The total Library*), the first page of which is depicted.

For the many of us who could not view this stunning exhibition in person, *A Curator's Wunderkammer* represents the next best thing. “Will my curious Wunderkammer, in its randomness and reflection of relentless collection building,” ponders Whitesell at the conclusion, “invoke for some the Borgesian terrors of a universal library? I trust not!” (For anyone not familiar with Borges’ noted 1941 short story “The Library of Babel,” it comes highly recommended.) Whitesell’s modest volume brings with it the intimate perspective of his personal anecdotes on the mysteries and intricacies of the University of Virginia’s acquisition process – an “inside scoop” seldom shared.