

Getting Inked? A Survey of Current Institutional Marking Practices in Rare Books and Special Collections

A survey was conducted to ascertain whether applying institutional ownership markings such as ink stamps, handwritten accession numbers, or bookplates to rare books and special collections items is widespread, as well as whether the practice, and thinking around the practice, changed over time. This article presents a detailed account of literature on practice and institutional guidelines, and how they have changed over the last seventy-five years. The authors present the background for and findings of their survey, following a literature review, the latter two of which show a lack of consensus around the adoption, value, and purpose of marking items—with considerable hesitation due to a perceived damage to an item caused by marking. The survey also revealed a lack of local policies and procedures on the practice of applying ownership markings. The authors conclude with recommendations for future implementation and additional surveys.

Introduction

Recent high-profile thefts in the cultural and heritage sectors bring back to the fore the importance of theft prevention and recovery measures.¹ This article presents a survey on one such measure: institutional marking practices, such as the application of ink or blind stamps, handwritten accession numbers, bookplates, as well as technological solutions, such as chemical or synthetic DNA markers, in rare books and special collections.² The survey results are presented alongside a summary of relevant

1. Travis McDade, “The Inside Story of the \$8 Million Heist from the Carnegie Library,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/theft-carnegie-library-books-maps-artworks-180975506/>; Lisa O’Carroll and Philip Oltermann, “Georgians Arrested Over Cross-Europe Thefts of Rare Library Books,” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/apr/25/rare-library-book-thefts-europe-libraries>; The British Museum, “Announcement Regarding Missing, Stolen and Damaged Items,” August 16, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Announcement_regarding_missing_stolen_and_damaged_items.pdf

2. Faculty of Chemistry, Brno University of Technology, “Invisible Identification Mark Protects Rare Archival Materials and Art Prints,” August 14, 2024, <https://www.zvut.cz/en/ideas-discoveries/ideas-and-discoveries-f38103/invisible-identification-mark-protects-rare-archival-materials-and-art-prints-d262620>; Michael Stillman, “Raptis Rare Books Adopts Invisible Marking System to Protect Books from Theft,” *Rare Book Hub*, November 2018, <https://www.rarebookhub.com/articles/2505>.

professional literature and guidelines, which acknowledges the drawbacks of marking rare and special collections material but that, overall, supports marking as a pivotal theft prevention measure. However, the survey results reveal that, in practice, there is hesitation and inconsistency when implementing this recommendation.

Literature Review

While library security is dealt with frequently in professional scholarship, the literature on marking rare and special collections material is more limited. The paucity of professional literature on physical processing of books was raised as early as 1956 by then assistant director of libraries at Ohio State University, Rolland E. Stevens, who noted that the practice then, as now, was open to much debate.³ Literature on library security shows that concern about the security of rare materials emerged seriously in the mid-1960s.⁴ By the late 1970s and early 1980s, libraries in the United States were taking action through forming working groups and developing guidelines.⁵

Library director Susan M. Allen attributed growing concern around security of special collections to some high-profile thefts reported in the media, bemoaning the lack of seriousness with which these crimes were treated,⁶ while research assistant Kristin M. Janus also linked library theft to media coverage, citing better public awareness of material value through television programs such as *Antiques Roadshow*.⁷ Library director Mary Wyly attributed price rises and scarcity of materials on the antiquarian book market to greater consumption of private collections by institutional buyers. She linked this, in turn, to changes in educational practices that encouraged students to focus on primary source materials in their studies. Wyly also notes that, in North America, property theft dramatically increased between the 1950s and 1980s.⁸ The American Library Association (ALA) observed that outreach activities—that promote use of rare books and special collections—may compromise security by drawing the attention of thieves to high-value items.⁹ Growing concern around theft of rare materials in the mid- to late-twentieth century led to the transformation of an ad-hoc security committee of the American College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Rare

3. Rolland E. Stevens, "Loss of Books and Library Ownership Marks," *College & Research Libraries* 17, no. 6 (1956): 493.

4. Kristin M. Janus, "Securing Our History," *Library & Archival Security* 17, no. 1, (2001): 5, https://doi.org/10.1300/J114v17n01_02; J. J. Rossman, *Access to Special Collections and Archives: Bridging Theory and Practice*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 115.

5. S. M. Allen "Preventing Theft in Academic Libraries and Special Collections," *Library & Archival Security* 14, no. 1 (1997): 38; Rossman, *Access to Special Collections*, 115–120.

6. Allen, "Preventing Theft", 37–38.

7. Janus, "Securing Our History," 4.

8. M. Wyly "Special Collections Security: Problems, Trends, and Consciousness," *Library Trends* 36, no. 1, (1987): 242–246.

9. American Library Association, "ACRL Standards and Guidelines: Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections: A draft," *College & Research Libraries News* 60, no. 4 (1999): 304, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.60.4.304>.

Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) into a regular committee with a mission to develop guidelines that would inform policies at a local level.¹⁰ The first guidelines on marking rare books and special collections material were published in 1979.

As shown by existing published guidelines and professional literature, marking is usually considered as one of a range of measures to improve library security. However, as this survey shows, there is professional confusion and hesitation around this issue, suggesting that marking practices deserve to be explored independently. This article provides recent data on marking practices within the rare book and special collections sector.

Published Guidelines

There are several published guidelines from American and European organizations that deal with marking rare books and special collections material. The most comprehensive and established of these is the *Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections*, published by ACRL/RBMS in 1982, 1990, 1999,¹¹ and 2009, with revisions in 2019 and 2023.¹² The original 1979 marking recommendations were included as an appendix to successive versions of the *Guidelines*. Marking rare materials is endorsed by all versions of the *Guidelines*, with some minor variations in approach. Apart from the first iteration in 1979, marking is proposed as one of several security measures.

While seemingly the most pervasive source of advice on marking rare and special collections, the ACRL/RBMS *Guidelines* are not the only relevant policy documentation available. In 2012, the former Chair (2002–2006) of the ACRL RBMS security committee, Everett C. Wilkie, Jr., compiled and edited *Guide to Security Considerations and Practices for Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collection Libraries*, which contains a chapter dedicated to marking rare book and manuscript materials that vehemently supports the marking of *all* rare book and manuscript materials, which the author calls “planned mutilation for a good cause.”¹³ The *Collections Theft Response Procedures* published by the Getty Conservation Institute and Huntington Library in 2001 also endorses marking, referencing the ACRL/RBMS *Guidelines* for this recommendation.¹⁴

10. Allen, “Preventing Theft,” 38.

11. American Library Association, “ACRL Standards and Guidelines,” 1999, 304.

12. “ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding the Security of Special Collections Materials” American Library Association, revised June 2023, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/security_theft

13. Everett C. Wilkie, Jr., *Guide to Security Considerations and Practices for Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collection Libraries* (ACRL, 2012), 159–76.

14. Wilbur Faulk and Laurie Sowd, *Collections Theft Response Procedures*. (Getty Conservation Institute; Huntington Library, 2001), http://hdl.handle.net/10020/gci_pubs/collections_theft_response

The Rare Books and Special Collections Group of the United Kingdom's library and information association, (Chartered Institute for Library and Information professionals (CILIP)), published *Guidelines for the Cataloguing of Rare Books*. This guidance does not cover markings, except in the case of recording historical markings that relate to provenance.¹⁵ However, CILIP's *Theft of Books and Manuscripts from Libraries: an Advisory Code of Conduct for Booksellers and Librarians*, jointly developed with the Antiquarian Booksellers Association (ABA), states that "Libraries have a responsibility to make unique and (if possible) indelible marks of ownership."¹⁶ The Consortium of European Research Libraries' (CERL) Collection Security Working Group developed a Quick Audit Tool to help institutions protect themselves against theft that includes tacit endorsement of marking practices.¹⁷ Despite the lack of universal acceptance for it, there is considerable support from recognized authorities in these high-level guidelines, for libraries who wish to implement a marking regime.

The ACRL/RBMS marking guidelines themselves are reasonably consistent, always advising use of visible markings with secondary application of invisible markings, that is, any marking not visible by the human eye such as use of invisible ink, microtaggants, microdots, or micro-embossers.¹⁸ The rationale for a combination of the two methods is that highly visible markings are more likely to be removed or erased by thieves, as demonstrated in the case of the Lambeth Palace,¹⁹ Texas State Library and Archives, and Harry Ransom Center thefts.²⁰ There has been acknowledgement throughout the various iterations of guidelines that the approach irrevocably changes an item, and that the final decision rests with the individual institution.

Current ACRL/RBMS marking guidelines unequivocally state "the failure to mark collections compromises security and increases the likelihood that materials will not be returned if stolen," emphasizing that this is especially important for printed books, which are difficult to tell apart, remarking that "some marking is better than none."²¹

15. "CILIP Guidelines for the Cataloguing of Rare Books", UK Bibliographic Standards Committee, CILIP Rare Books and Special Collections Group, 2007, revised 2007 https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/group/6b7ad90b-bf8b-4d07-8406-0d28376b41f1/guidelines_for_the_cataloguin.pdf

16. "Theft of Books and Manuscripts from Libraries: An Advisory Code of Conduct for Booksellers and Librarians," Antiquarian Booksellers Association (ABA) and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), 2015, revised January 2015 https://www.cilip.org.uk/members/group_content_view.asp?group=201312&id=690475

17. *The Quick Audit Tool: A Self-Assessment Tool in the Fight Against Theft, Mutilation, Vandalism and Loss, offered to you by the CERL Security Working Group*, 5th ed. (Consortium of European Research Libraries, 2024) https://www.cerl.org/_media/collaboration/security/quick_audit_tool_booklet_prpage_v5_def.pdf

18. Wilkie, "Security Considerations," 165; Joshua Finnell, "Invisible Markings and Conservation Treatment: An Exploratory Study," *Library & Archival Security* 24, no. 1 (2011): 19–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01960075.2010.494594>.

19. Alison Flood, "Lambeth Palace Retrieves Stolen Collection of Extraordinary Rare Books", *The Guardian*, April 30, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/29/lambeth-palace-stolen-books-retrieved>.

20. For a robust discussion of different methods of marking see Wilkie, "Security Considerations," 160–1, 159–76.

21. American Library Association, "ACRL/RBMS Guidelines."

Permanent, visible stamping in conservation-grade ink is recommended to deter theft. The mark itself should clearly identify the institution and appear in a prominent place that would be difficult to obscure or remove without raising suspicion. Invisible marks are proposed to prove ownership in the case of theft. These should be applied discreetly, their use recorded in internal documentation, with the information restricted to prevent their targeted removal. ACRL/RBMS also recommends documenting past procedures, markings and deaccessioning activities.

Best Practices: Recommendations from Professional Literature and Discussion

Literature and professional discussions, such as conference presentations, tend to consider the issue of marking in the wider context of collection security. The literature emphasizes the importance of policies and procedures, with Trinkaus-Randall noting the need to develop a security policy, and with both Allen and Janus recommending the inclusion of theft in collection emergency plans.²² Trinkaus-Randall suggests developing a shared sense of responsibility for managing cultural property and seeking buy-in from staff by including them in policy development.²³

The need to implement supporting collection management strategies is also evident in the literature, with recommendations to improve item-level description of significant materials to include copy-specific information.²⁴ Lieberman stresses the need to add detailed bibliographical information to catalogue records to help distinguish between editions, issues and states, and to mark materials immediately upon acquisition.²⁵ Digitizing or documenting items through reference photography can also provide proof of ownership in the case of theft.²⁶

The main goal of marking rare books and special collections is to make items less vulnerable to theft and prove ownership in the case of theft. As noted by Kovarsky, despite recent advances in technology, “one of the simplest measures, the direct marking of materials, can and should be more widely employed.”²⁷ The recommendation to mark is made with the understanding that this action permanently changes an item: as Lieberman states, institutional stamps become part of a book’s provenance.²⁸

22. G. Trinkaus-Randall, “Preserving Special Collections Through Internal Security,” *College & Research Libraries* 50, no. 4 (1989), 452–3; Allen, “Preventing Theft,” 30; Janus, “Securing Our History,” 14.

23. Christian M. Cupp, *Security Considerations for Archives: Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections*. Air Force Institute of Technology, Wright-Patterson AFB: 2.

24. Greg Seppi and D. Skeem, “Picking Up the Pieces,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 21, no. 2 (2020).

25. Ronald Lieberman “Are Rubber Stamps Better than Chains?” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 6, no. 1 (1999): 79, https://doi.org/10.1300/J106v06n01_08

26. Cupp, *Security Considerations*, 4.

27. Joel Kovarsky “Keeping it Safe, Keeping it Available—Theft Prevention in Special Collections,” *Library Student Journal* 2, no. 4 (2007): 10.

28. Lieberman “Are Rubber Stamps Better,” 79.

Objections to marking raised in the literature include cost, labor, time, damage to the item, and the potential for damage to be inflicted through attempts to remove markings.²⁹ The notion of perceived damage surfaces regularly, and, in more extreme cases is described as “mutilation.” Although very dated, the 1937 article “Librarians as Enemies of Books” arguably still resonates as an example of the cultural stereotype of a “destructive” stamp-wielding librarian more concerned with administration of an item than its cultural significance.³⁰

Trinka and Randall emphasize that, in addition to the aesthetic impact of marking, the practice has drawbacks, due to the time and expense required to implement marking programs; they cite a 1966 estimate by the Archivist of the United States that it would take 5,000 years and 20 million dollars to mark the holdings of the National Archives.³¹ Cupp seems to agree that there are limits to what can be achieved through marking regimes, stating that, “Marking offers one of the best means of protecting individual items from theft,” but that it is not practical to mark everything.³² Wyly notes that retrospective marking raises labor issues, and points to the fact that the practice still is not fully accepted by the profession.³³ Seppi and Skeen point out that improving description of rare materials can provide a “shopping list” to prospective thieves.³⁴

Current Outlook on Marking Practices

In her recent Churchill Fellowship report, Phillipa Stevens affirms that marking remains contentious but similarly points to the strong support from professional bodies and the literature. She concludes: “The method of marking should be decided in the context of previous practices, tightly controlled as to where, and simple enough to be administered in sections other than the conservation team.”³⁵ While the advice on marking from ACRL has been relatively stable for decades, there is less information available on whether these guidelines were widely adopted; an issue that this paper seeks to address. A minority of institutions have publicly accessible information available online that outlines marking practices. For instance, the Rare Book Policy of the University of Hong Kong Libraries shows that institution stamps rare materials and provides instructions on how to do so.³⁶ In contrast, the Rare Book Collections Policy of Western Libraries, states: “No labels, stamps or embosses are affixed to

29. Haworth Continuing Features Submission, “Marking of Materials,” 50.

30. R. G. Adams, “Librarians as Enemies of Books,” *Library Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1937): 317.

31. Trinka-Randall, “Preserving Special Collections,” 452–3.

32. Cupp, *Security Considerations*, 4.

33. Wyly, “Special Collections Security,” 252.

34. Seppi and Skeem “Picking Up the Pieces.”

35. Phillipa Stevens, *To Benchmark the Balance of Access, Security and Preservation for Significant Library Collections*, Winston Churchill Trust, 2024, <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/philippa-stevens-nsw-2019/>

36. “Rare Book Policy,” University of Hong Kong Libraries, 2020, <https://lib.hku.hk/sites/all/files/files/general/Rare%20Book%20Policy.pdf>

rare books,” and recommends the use of acid-free bookmarks to record information instead.³⁷ A paper presented at the 2010 Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) Book, Paper and Photographic Materials Symposium indicated that, at the time, the National Library of Australia used ink stamps and embossing on some materials to prevent theft, placing these at the top edge of a page without text.³⁸ A 2023 presentation by Gardham indicated that, at the time of presentation, University of Glasgow were applying water-soluble bookplates and handwriting the shelf marks in pencil, but were considering re-introducing stamping.³⁹ The lack of accessible institutional policies on stamping may not be so surprising, given that the ACRL/RBMS Guidelines recommend that these should remain confidential to protect against systematic removal of marks, in the case of theft.

This literature review identified two pre-existing surveys on marking practices. In 1956, Stevens reported on a survey of marking practices from nineteen large American college libraries to understand the implementation of ownership marks to reduce theft. The survey was not focused on rare materials; however, it investigated marking practices across different formats (e.g., bound, unbound, microfilm, microcards, and microprint). The survey found that two (10%) used a rubber stamp, six (31%) used a perforating or embossing stamp, and 17 (89%) used a bookplate.⁴⁰ In 1987, Wyly reported that a more targeted survey on security by RBMS found that 31% of 89 respondents were marking materials.⁴¹

Background

In 2021, both authors of this paper then worked at Museums Victoria Library. Museums Victoria is based on the unceded lands of the peoples of the Kulin Nation in Naarm/Melbourne and is Australia’s largest public museum organization. At that time, the institutional library began documenting processes around cataloguing and end-processing of library materials, including rare books and special collections, which led to questions as to exactly why the practice of applying ownership markings to special collections materials ceased. This article’s central survey, consequently, sought to gather recent data on marking practices in rare and special collections.

37. Debbie Meert-Williston, “Rare Books Collection Policy,” Western Libraries, 2021, <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/files/policies/collections/rarebooks.pdf>

38. Jennifer Lloyd, “A Sticky Issue—Labelling Library Collections” in Contributions to the 6th AICCM Book, Paper & Photographic Materials Symposium (AICCM, 2011): 40, https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/AICCM_BP2010_Lloyd_p40-42.pdf

39. Julie Gardham, “Marking Our Collections: To Stamp or Not to Stamp?” (paper presented at the CERL Collection Security Summer School: Security Policy in Practice: Staff & Partners. Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid, Spain, 6–8 September 2023). https://www.cerl.org/_media/collaboration/security/cerl_2023swgsummerschooljg.pdf

40. Stevens, “Loss of Books,” 493.

41. Wyly, “Special Collections Security,” 250.

At Museums Victoria Library, ownership markings were commonplace, from the establishment of the collection in 1854. At various points through the library's history, markings included handwritten accession numbers or a date of acquisition, either in ink or pencil. Ink institutional stamps and library stamps are also regularly seen on library collections (see Figure 1).

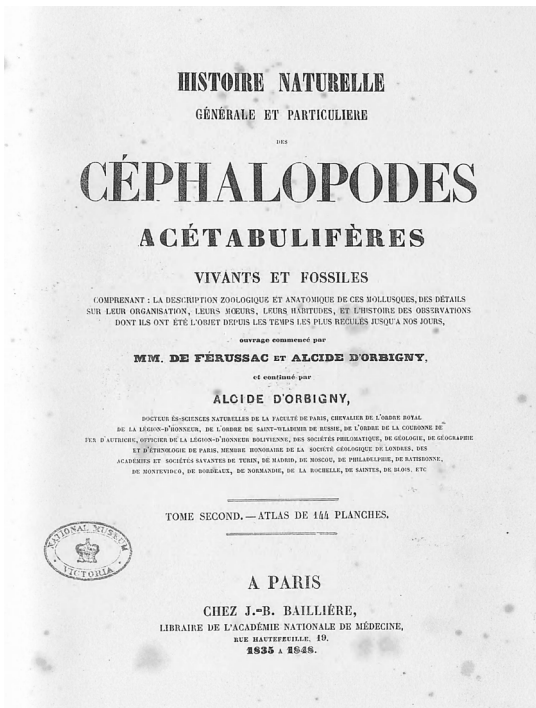


FIGURE 1

Title page of Museums Victoria's copy of Histoire naturelle: generale et particuliere des cephalopodes acetabuliferes vivants et fossiles by Ferussac and d'Orbigny (1835) with National Museum Victoria stamp. Source: Museums Victoria via the Biodiversity Heritage Library <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/263034#page/9/mode/1up>.

Ink stamps were used into the 1970s, and an embossed stamp was used for items entered into the Rare Book Collection from the 1970s until the 1980s, when the practice ceased. The placement of stamps varies a little but tends to appear on the title page and the verso of plates⁴² (see Figure 2).

A conversation with Museums Victoria's paper conservator revealed an openness to resuming the practice, given more information as to whether this was still common elsewhere. To gauge whether the practice of institutions applying ownership markings directly to special collections materials is still widespread, a ten-question survey about the application of library ownership stamps on materials was circulated through rare book and special collections-related listserv groups, including SHARPL, LIS-RAREBOOKS, and ALIARare (see Appendix A for survey questions).

42. Hayley Webster, "Provenance and Library Stamps at Museums Victoria and on BHL," *Biodiversity Heritage Library Blog*, October 3, 2019, <https://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2019/10/provenance-and-library-stamps.html>

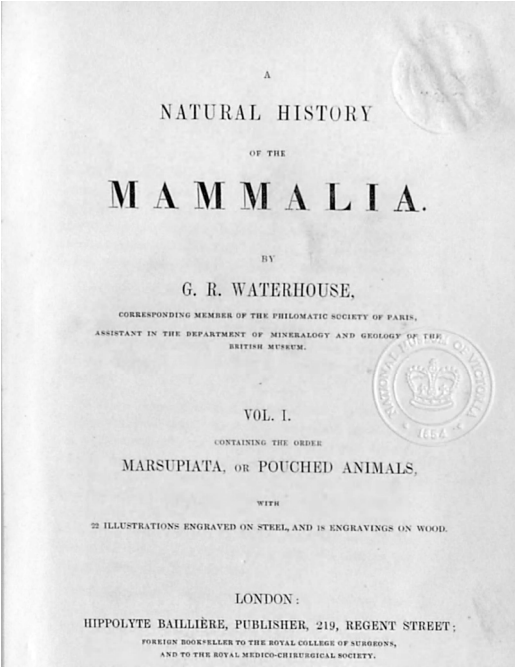


FIGURE 2
Title page of Museum’s Victoria’s copy of A natural history of the mammalia by G. R. Waterhouse (1846–48) with embossed National Museum of Victoria stamp. Source: Museums Victoria via the Biodiversity Heritage Library <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/272451#page/7/mode/1up>.

Survey Methodology

The survey was hosted on Microsoft Forms, was open from December 17, 2021, until February 1, 2022, and attracted 94 respondents, one of which was screened out due to evasive responses which suggested the respondent may not have been truthful due to privacy concerns. The survey was anonymized due to the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, and any identifying information given in free-text answers was removed before publication. Respondents were not asked to provide information on geographic location or type of institution.

Survey Results

When asked: “Does your organization apply ownership stamps to special collections materials?” 57% answered that they did not (see Figure 3).

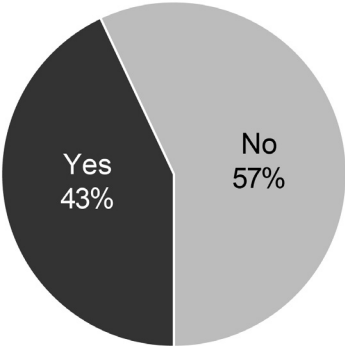


FIGURE 3
A visualization of responses to survey question 1: “Does your organization apply ownership stamps to special collections materials?”

Discussion

Throughout the free-text answers, several pros and cons were presented by respondents. As referenced above, a major reason against applying ownership markings to special collections materials given was the perceived damage to collection items by these practices. Indeed, any mark is a permanent alteration of an item and thus becomes part of its material history. One of the main reasons given for applying ownership markings was the perceived value of these to researchers, with respondents suggesting that any markings become “part of the history of the object” and served to contextualize and maintain an item’s histories. Several respondents commented they were conscious of adhering to standards of conservation and preservation, while some respondents said that they worked alongside conservators to sensitively and responsibly apply ownership marks to items through use of conservation inks.

The placement of any marking was also raised as being important, with respondents suggesting that any marks should be “sensitive to aesthetics and functionality,” should have no impact on the usability of the item by obscuring text or images and, therefore, should be decided on a case-by-case basis. Some respondents objected to the aesthetic of the marking itself, commenting that markings are “visually unappealing” and “look unprofessional especially when a researcher wishes to view the item or when the image is required for publication.” Others stated that “stamps do not detract from the research or exhibition value of . . . material,” and “do not impact its research value when properly applied,” with one respondent pointing out that markings on digital copies can be easily removed with Photoshop if needed. One respondent also suggested that not all institutional collections are guaranteed to stand the test of time, and that

not marking materials displays a bit of cockiness or short-sightedness about what may happen to these collections in future, and we want to be sure that future stewards and researchers can trace the history of the materials accurately, whatever may come.

The effect on the monetary value of the items was mentioned by a few respondents, with one stating that adding any markings would detract from any future sale price. Alternatively, another respondent offered that “reduction of financial value is no bad thing if it deters theft or thoughts by unscrupulous institutional leaders of selling material in the collections.”

Unsurprisingly, the perceived benefit of ownership markings as a deterrent to theft and to assist with proof of ownership was a focus for many respondents. It was striking that the three respondents who reported their institution had been the target of a theft in the past in a free-text answer supported applying ownership markings to

special collections. One called it “an essential safeguarding measure” noting that the onus of proof is on the institution to provide distinguishing copy-specific information, and that even “suspicious rubbing or the non-existence of paper in the places where a stamp is can be a major element in such proof.” Another noted that permanent markings were felt to be necessary by the institution, because not all items had copy-specific information contained in the catalogue record. The third of these respondents stated that ownership stamps assisted in their successful identification and return of stolen items.

As noted earlier, the use of non-permanent markings, such as pencils or affixing bookplates using conservation adhesives, were mentioned by many; however, by their nature, these could be removed with little to no sign. Several respondents also mentioned recording annotations and barcodes on acid-free bookmarks, containers, or in Mylar sleeves, which others noted came at a risk of disassociation.

A small number of respondents stated that ownership markings on items were not necessary because their collections are closed access and non-circulating. In opposition to this, one respondent noted that items can be loaned to external institutions for research or display, while another suggested that many thefts are conducted by internal staff. On cases of institutional theft, that respondent also contemplated that knowledge of the method and location in which ownership marks are applied should be limited as this could be used to disguise internal theft.

Recommendations

Together, the survey and literature review show lack of agreement around marking rare books and special collections. While the recommendation to apply ownership marks has considerable support from numerous professional bodies, and is backed up by professional literature, the survey results show both that this recommendation has been adopted in piecemeal fashion by the profession, and that there is considerable hesitation due to the perceived damage that marking causes to an item. Familiarity with existing guidelines from ACRL/RBMS, CILIP & ABA, and Getty Conservation Institute and Huntington Library publications may prove a useful first step for those initiating conversations about marking in their institution. The development of policies or guidelines by national libraries or library associations in other regions may also help individual libraries navigate this issue.

The survey revealed a lack of local policies and procedures, which institutions would be wise to address. Even if institutions decide against marking, having a documented position would reduce professional confusion over this issue and improve knowledge transfer within organizations. Additionally, the work done to establish a policy would ensure that the issue is properly considered, rather than acting upon assumptions

around “damage.” If possible, work with conservators to establish local marking guidelines to reduce the impact on the item.

If implementing a marking program, an institution should follow the recommendations from ACRL/RBMS to apply a unique, visible mark that is readily identifiable, in an obvious but unobtrusive position that does not obscure any content. Preferably—if practical—a secondary, invisible mark should also be applied somewhere unexpected. This should be clearly documented, with these details restricted to only the necessary staff. While the specifics may be confidential, the lack of consensus around marking suggests that broader knowledge-sharing among the profession and exchange of high-level policy decisions would be useful.

Another factor that emerges strongly in literature is the need to consider marking practices in the broader context of collection security. Recommendations abound in the existing literature, and the CERL Quick Audit tool offers an accessible way to measure compliance. Marking regimes should be implemented in conjunction with collection management strategies such as reducing cataloguing backlogs and improving copy-specific description.

Conclusion

This paper highlights a wide gulf between published guidelines and best practices and the practical implementation (or lack thereof) of these guidelines. As an industry we have been warned for decades that failure to mark valuable materials can result in heavy losses and yet the marking of collection items appears to have declined.⁴³ There is much to explore in future studies on this disparity, not least the question of why permanent ownership markings are not being applied, despite the substantial amount of professional guidance to do so. This inconsistency is not a new observation: indeed, librarian and library security expert William A. Moffett, who is known for assisting in the capture of prolific library thieves James Richard Shinn and Stephen Blumberg, noted in 1983, “the rarer they are, the less likely they are to mark them.”⁴⁴

As librarians, the authors of this paper often see the reverence that people hold for physical books, the disgust that is often shown for folding pages or contemporary marginalia, and the guilt associated with sometimes necessary activities such as re-binding, opening uncut leaves or deaccessioning. It seems that books are still considered such sacred objects that any alteration or destruction of their form is considered sacrilegious. The authors hope this paper will encourage more transparency and com-

43. Wilkie, “Security Considerations,” 159. Alice Harrison Bahr, *Book Theft and Library Security Systems, 1978–79* (Knowledge Industry Publications, 1978), 107.

44. William A. Moffett, “College Libraries Struggle with Theft,” *Walla Walla Union Bulletin*, October 4, 1983, 5, NewspaperArchive.

munication between institutions on marking rare material. A follow-up survey in five or ten years to further gauge progress or change in this area would be pertinent. In building this survey, the authors erred on the side of caution by fully anonymizing the responses. However, if possible, the next version of this survey should ask for selective demographic data points, such as the type and size of library represented, and collect broad geographical location data, to help determine whether there are trends among libraries of certain types or sizes, or within specific regions.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. Does your organisation apply ownership stamps to special collections materials?

[Yes / No]

If yes, go to Q5. If no, go to Q2.

2. Has your organisation applied ownership stamps to special collections materials in the past?

[Yes / No]

If yes, go to Q3. If no, go to Q4.

3. Was there a conscious decision to stop? Please explain:

[Free text]

Go to Q4.

4. Would you like to add anything?

[Free text]

Survey branch ends at Q4.

5. Does your organisation have a policy around applying ownership stamps to special collections materials?

[Yes / No]

If yes, go to Q6. If no, go to Q7.

6. Can you share a link to this policy, or else copy the relevant passage/s into the text box?

[Free text]

Go to Q7.

7. Has your organisation considered ceasing the practice of applying ownership stamps to special collections materials?

[Yes / No]

If yes, go to Q8. If no, go to Q9.

8. Please explain why your organisation considered ceasing this practice, and why your organisation decided not to cease applying ownership stamps:

[Free text]

Go to Q9.

9. Please explain why you and/or your organisation places value in applying ownership stamps:

[Free text]

Go to Q10.

10. Would you like to add anything?

[Free text]

Survey branch ends at Q10.