

# Things That Do Not Last

SARAH SUTHERLAND muses on our reliance on digital memories and document storage.

I HAVE COME to spend much of my professional life thinking about the digital delivery of content, which allows me generally not to think too much about the physicality of things. This is, of course, a short-sighted thing to do—all things are decaying moment by moment, and we have the illusion that the digital doesn't degrade simply because we don't look as closely at the physical objects that comprise it.

With the fashion for cloud computing, it becomes even more difficult to conceptualize how reliable the physical containers of our information are, because we are saving our information on a computer in someone else's premises. With one's own computer, one can at least see the dust, discolouration and frayed wires that indicate physical obsolescence.

Compared to digital information, the integrity of data contained in books is generally more apparent because, in open shelving systems at least, one can see the books and assess their condition. This is not foolproof, as there is always a risk that hidden enemies of bibliophiles and agents of information loss are moving under the covers. It's always sad when our books meet an unexpected and untimely end because of damage from insects or mould.

Books degrade moment by moment, even in the best conditions, and I feel empathy for the medieval scribes who had to choose which books would be copied and what would be lost forever because they could only write so quickly. There were also material limitations: uterine vellum sounds like something that could never be supplied in quantities that could support a voluminous publishing industry. This meant that some scribes had to write on poorly prepared vellum with hair still on it, and have left us marginalia complaining about it.

Different media have different lifespans but, generally, the transitions over time have favoured media that degrade faster: vellum

manuscripts can last for over 1,000 years while paper books typically don't last more than 100, and magnetically recorded digital files are more likely to last less than 10. A notable exception is book publishers' transition to acid-free papers in recent years. With any luck, well-made books published now will generally last longer than those published from the 1850s through the 1990s.

Last spring, I attended the Vancouver Art Gallery's exhibition *Mashup: The Birth of Modern Culture* and observed the logical result of artists using found objects in their work. The paper used in early-20th-century collages was very discoloured. Perhaps proponents of the modern didn't care about having their work last for posterity, their found items and collages of newsprint glued to paper holding a moment in time for only as long as the moment lasted.

It was incongruous to see an art student carefully drawing Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. It is, after all, still a urinal. The case for creating or at least collecting art in traditional media is that it has a lifespan that makes it worth preserving—well-conserved canvases and frescoes can last centuries; pottery and stone can last longer still if they are sheltered from the elements.

Physical objects used to be much more valuable when human beings had to manually make every thing—in that environment a book represented months of labour. In contrast, things in the modern world have become so cheap and plentiful that it seems unlikely works of art will have to be reclaimed for their materials in the immediate future. Such practices are not unknown, of course, as recent thefts of memorial plaques in various cities across Canada prove, but they are by no means on a scale to rival the dismemberment of ancient landmarks for building materials to build cities as occurred in Rome in the medieval period. So it seems unlikely *Fountain* will be pulled into service as a bathroom fixture, though I read that the original was lost. Perhaps one day

it will be recovered from its reuse for its original purpose at the back of some New York bar. A superfluity of things creates a new risk for cultural objects: that we will simply throw them away.

Traditionally valuable things continue to have an aura of protection, and we are unlikely to throw them in the garbage. Collectors of fine printed editions can take additional comfort that their purchases are likely to last much longer than collections of pulp fiction or comic books. All works currently produced in print may in turn last longer than much of our digital information, unless it is regularly updated to new digital standards, often a manual, time-consuming task.

This challenge will likely confront the majority of people alive today, as they face the decay of family snapshots and even formal portraiture, which in most cases won't last their lifetimes. Our reliance on digital means to aid our memories may mean that we lose more recent images, while the faces of our Victorian ancestors still scowl out at us from the prints of their own era.

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~ Sarah Sutherland spends her days online managing content and partnerships for the Canadian Legal Information Institute. She is vice-chair of the Alcuin Society.

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BOOK REVIEWS

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*Typographical Ornata Et Cetera*

BY JOHN GRICE

(EVERGREEN PRESS, 2016, £300)

WHEN JAN AND I started printing at Barbarian Press in 1977, anything to do with type was a passion. Very soon after we started, we visited a letterpress shop owned by two octogenarian brothers who were selling their business (“To a woman!” we were told in ghastly tones). I spent a little time looking around the composing room, scanning scrapbooks of work the business had produced over the decades: announcements of stock auctions, estate sales, village fetes; some wedding invitations and birth announcements; and a vigorous polemic against the removal of a memorial fountain from one to another part of a churchyard. But no matter how joyous, impassioned or eager the material printed, the only sign of any ornament was the use of rules—occasionally. Once, in a moment of irrepressible exuberance, a double rule. But no ornaments, decorated rules or borders. I mentioned this to the old gentleman still stolidly setting type on the lip of his distaff volcano. (He was, I was fascinated to see, holding quads in his mouth, spitting them into his hand when he came to fill out the line: evidently the spit made them slip in more easily.) “Printer’s flowers?” he said,

enunciating with difficulty. “If we was supposed to have flowers, type would be made out o’ dirt.”

It was our luck that one of the books published in 1976 was John Ryder’s *Flowers & Flourishes*, and it became part of the foundation of my love for specimen books of type and ornaments. Type always took precedence, of course. In specimen books ornaments were always shuffled to the rear and shown in unrevealing single lines, or arranged higgledy-piggledy in “Economy Sets” or “Hand-I-Fonts.” In earlier examples, like the elephantine 1923 ATF *Specimen Book & Catalogue*, they were used throughout to border or illumine samples of job work. Occasionally I discovered treasures devoted to them: Harold Berliner’s *Garden of Printers’ Flowers*, Paul Hayden Duensing’s *Ornamenta*, Richard Hoffman’s *When a Printer Plays*, Mark Arman’s monographs on ornament, and the exquisite set of five Monotype broadsheets designed by Sarah Clutton in the 1950s. Now, in John Grice’s *Ornata*, we have a new masterpiece to add to that shelf.

Ornaments, *pace* my elderly quad-sucking acquaintance, are always a pleasure to look at, however much they may sometimes evade my