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Vilnius University Library

WORKING ON SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AT LITHUANIAN LIBRARIES

Abstract

Rare books and manuscripts in Lithuania are preserved in five different libraries: Vilnius University Library, Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania (Vilnius), the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences (Vilnius), Kaunas University of Technology Library and Kaunas County Public Library. Three libraries have Special Departments of Restoration and Digitization. They participate in the drafting of library policy aiming at acquisition, preservation and digitization of cultural heritage collections. The website ePaveldas (www.epaveldas.lt), comprising digitized Lithuanian prints and manuscripts from between the 16th and 20th century, increases possibilities of use and dissemination of unique heritage objects. The usage of digital copies helps to preserve the originals for posterity. The aim of this survey is to discuss work with print heritage at Vilnius University Library. It was established in 1570 and is the oldest and one of the largest academic libraries of Lithuania. The Rare Book Department actively participates in dissemination and presentation of print heritage by developing online catalogue, preparing exhibitions from the Library collections, publishing catalogues of exhibitions and collections, participating in research projects, reading reports at scientific conferences, preparing articles on research in book history and book culture. This survey focuses on publishing; the Rare Book Department at VU Library has published four exhibition catalogues, five book collection catalogues and two other kinds of books.

Keywords: Vilnius University Library, heritage, rare books, projects, printing, exhibition, collection

The rarest books and manuscripts in Lithuania are preserved in five different libraries: Vilnius University Library, Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania (Vilnius), the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences (Vilnius), Kaunas University of Technology Library and Kaunas County Public Library. Three libraries have Special Departments of Restoration and Digitization. They participate in the drafting of library policy aiming at acquisition, preservation and digitization of cultural heritage collections.

Some libraries, as well as various museums and the Office of the Chief Archivist of Lithuania take part in the project of digitalization of the documentary heritage. The result of this project is the website ePaveldas¹, comprising digitized prints and manuscripts in Lithuania from between the 16th and 20th century. Over 2,500,000 pages of top-valued old books, newspapers, pieces of art, manuscripts and church metrics have been digitized and loaded to the database. This constantly updated website increases possibilities of use and dissemination of unique Lithuanian cultural heritage objects. The usage of digital copies helps to preserve the originals for posterity.

The aim of this survey is to present the special collections at Vilnius University Library² (hereinafter – VU Library). It is the oldest and one of the largest academic libraries of Lithuania, which has state-owned library status. It was founded in 1570 by the Jesuits and, as such, is nine years older than Vilnius University³. Library holds more than 5.45 million copies, among which are particularly valuable manuscripts and publications (more than 300,000 manuscripts, about 160,000 rare books from between the 16th and 20th century, more than 2,000 atlases, 10,000 maps, and more than 93,000 artworks).

The focus of the text is mostly on rare books. The Rare Book Department at VU Library is the largest depository of old books in Lithuania; by its holdings and significance it rivals the most famous libraries of Eastern Europe. Rare publications are all documents published till 1800, Lithuanian publications published till 1917, cartography published till 1945, and bibliophilic editions, as well⁴.

The incunabula collection – first printed books, published until 31 December 1500 incl. – is one of the most important collections of this Department, and the largest among all Lithuanian libraries. It contains 328 incunabula – however, this number is not final, because new and different information tools allow easier identification of the defective books, which could also include incunabula. All incunabula preserved in Lithuania were registered and described by the bibliographer and book scientist Nojus Feigelmanas (1918–2002) in the catalogue *The Incunabula of Lithuania* (1975)⁵.

1 www.epaveldas.lt.

2 <https://biblioteka.vu.lt/en>

3 For more about Vilnius University Library history till 1832, see *Alma Mater Vilnensis: Vilniaus universiteto istorijos bruožai* (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2009), 172–201, 555–585.

4 See Vilnius University Library Document Protection Guidelines, I.4 (https://biblioteka.vu.lt/files/vilniaus_universiteto_bibliotekos_dokumentu_apsaugos_gaires.pdf).

5 Nojus Feigelmanas, *Lietuvos inkunabulai* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1975).

The collection of old Lithuanian books, published between 1547 and 1917 (about 10,000 items), is a piece of national pride. It is the largest complete collection of old Lithuanian books in the world. The collection includes one of the two known exemplars of the first Lithuanian book *Catechism* by Martynas Mažvydas (1510 or 1520–1563), printed in 1547 in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad, Russia). The other one is preserved at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Poland). This small, plain book is not distinguished by luxury decorative elements or numerous engravings, but it is valuable to Lithuanian culture, to its written word. It is important to mention that in 2017 a high-quality facsimile of the first Lithuanian book was published by Kamilė Kalibataitė⁶. According to Kalibataitė, “the creation and edition of the high-quality facsimile of the mentioned book was inspired by the already issued and quite precise copies of the first books, published in a number of other countries, thus ensuring the possibility to touch and feel their distinctive and peculiar authenticity, thus preserving particularly rare and vanishing books for the future generations. This high-quality facsimile ensures the possibility to feel a true copy of the original kept in the Library”⁷.

The other significant asset of the Rare Book Department is cartography collection – the 15th–20th century maps (about 10,000 items) and atlases (about 700 items released before 1900). The personal collection of VU professor and historian Joachim Lelewel (1786–1861) serves as the base of the collection; separate map collections were donated by the public figure Vaclovas Dargužas (from 1950–1951: Andreas Hofer; 1920–2009) and priest Vincas Mincevičius (1915–1992). All collections, preserved by the Rare Book Department, are listed and presented briefly on the web site of the VU Library⁸.

The historical collection *Bibliotheca Academia Vilnensis* (BAV) – one of the most valuable collections in the Library – is worth mentioning as well. It contains about 18,000 printed items. The collection was founded in the 16th century, back when the University was called Vilnius Jesuit Academy. After the closure of VU in 1832, the bulk of the collection has been taken out to Russia and returned only in the 1960s. Many personal libraries were part of this collection.

The Rare Book Department actively participates in dissemination and presentation of print heritage by restoring and digitizing the documents, developing online catalogue, preparing exhibitions from the Library collections, participating in research projects, reading reports at scientific conferences, preparing articles on research in the book history and book culture, publishing catalogues of exhibitions and collections.

6 Martynas Mažvydas, *Catechismosa prasty szade: makslas skaitima raschta yr giesmes del kriksczianistes bei del berneliu jaunu nauiey sagulditas*: [Facsimile of Martynus Mažvydus “Katekizmas”], [Facsimile of Martynus Mažvydus “Katekizmas”; project manager Kamilė Kalibataitė] ([Vilnius: Petro ofsetas, 2017]).

7 Kamilė Kalibataitė, “[Supplement]”, in: Martynas Mažvydas, *Catechismosa prasty szade*, [4].

8 See <https://biblioteka.vu.lt/en/cultural-heritage/rare-books>.

1. RESTORATION AND DIGITIZATION

The activities of these two departments are very important for the old heritage. The Restoration Department of VU Library is the oldest restoration department amongst its peers. It disinfects, conserves and restores documents from VU Library holdings (manuscripts, photographs, engravings, lithographs, various plans, prints, maps, albums, leather and parchment covers of old books and their fittings), and also runs a document protection programme. This Department restores the bindings of rare books, manufactures new bindings for valuable books, and prepares exhibitions on restoration subjects. It is important to mention that several restorers from VU Library shared their experience by preparing lectures about old binding and old decorative paper at the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Autumn 2017⁹. This information greatly helps librarians in cataloguing old books.

Striving to preserve cultural heritage documents of great significance for Lithuania and the world in general as well as aiming to ensure better access to original materials, VU Library has become the frontrunner among institutions of cultural memory and initiated many digitization projects. The Digitization Department has actively engaged in national and international cultural heritage preservation projects. A wide variety of cultural heritage documents that are kept in the Library can now be accessed through virtual library. The policy of the digitization at VU Library is described in the guidelines of digitization¹⁰.

Now thousands of digitized images of texts, maps and artworks from the collections of cultural and scientific heritage owned by VU Library are freely accessible on a website of Digital Collections¹¹. It provides an opportunity to browse and search for digital copies of documents from the rare book, manuscript, graphic art and museum collections needed for studies, research and cultural education. The website contains digital copies of the atlases that belonged to Lelewel, the cartography collection of Mincevičius from between the 16th and 20th century, and the most important Lithuanian books. This website also provides information on the national digitization initiatives and projects carried out by VU Library and gives links to digital collections of other cultural and heritage institutions¹².

2. CATALOGUING

The Rare Book Department also maintains an online catalogue. When cataloguing the old books, their records are made as detailed as possible. The greatest atten-

9 See <http://www.mab.lt/lt/naujienos/1897>.

10 See https://biblioteka.vu.lt/files/Dokumentai/vub_skaitmeninimo_gaires.pdf.

11 <http://www.atmintis.mb.vu.lt/en/collections>.

12 See <http://www.atmintis.mb.vu.lt/en/projects>.

tion is given to the provenances – inscriptions, stamps, ex libris, supralibros – and marginalia, because the bibliophilic value of an old book depends greatly on its provenances. The recording of different provenance signs is one of the most reliable ways to restore old libraries; however, this work requires a lot of knowledge, effort and time.

If possible, every bibliographic record is given a fingerprint – a book recognition code of 22 symbols facilitating the identification of a damaged book or its variant¹³. Fingerprints are especially helpful in cases where, due to numerous defects of the copy, there is no other possibility to correctly identify the year of publishing, edition, title and/or other data. For several decades the fingerprint was popular in many Western European libraries, while VU Library has been consistently using fingerprints since 2008. Beside the detailed descriptions, short descriptions are used to help the readers get the information faster.

3. PROJECTS

One of many important activities of the Rare Book Department is participation in different scientific projects. Between 2014 and 2015 VU Library accomplished a research project *Virtual reconstruction of the oldest academic library in Lithuania (VIRTUS)*, financed by the Research Council of Lithuania (Contract No. LIT-8-78). The aim of the Project was to investigate the oldest extant manuscript catalogue of VU Library – *Catalogus auctorum ordine alphabetico dispositus in Bibliotheca Collegii Academiae Vilnensi S. I. reperibilium*. During the course of the project the 18th-century catalogue was transcribed and the publications recorded in the catalogue were identified within our capacity. The digital copy of the catalogue and all data were compiled in the database VIRTUS¹⁴. The research revealed that 30 per cent of the books registered in the catalogue are protected in the above-mentioned historical collection BAV. This information gives an important boost to the study of provenances, has significance for the early history of VU Library, and shapes the basis for the preparation of publications on scientific book history and cultural¹⁵.

From the beginning of 2017, VU Library – together with other three libraries of Lithuania – began to take part in creating the database Material Evidence in Incunabula (MEI)¹⁶. It is a database specifically designed to record and search for

13 Vidas Račius, Sonda Rankelienė, “Kam reikalingas fingerprinas?” *Tarp knygy*, no. 7/8 (2008): 9–10.

14 <http://www.virtus.mb.vu.lt>

15 More information about the catalogue and the project VIRTUS can be found in the article of the project manager prof. Dr. Axel Ernst Walter: <http://www.virtus.mb.vu.lt/lt/apie/>; also shortly about VIRTUS: Marija Prokopčik, Aušra Rinkūnaitė, “Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekoje saugomo kultūros paveldo moksliniai tyrimai kaip Universiteto bendruomenės partnerio vizijos įgyvendinimo priemonė”, *Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekos metraštis* 2015, (2015): 145–150.

16 http://data.cerl.org/mei/_search

material evidence (or copy specific, post-production evidence and provenance information) of the 15th-century printed books: ownership, decoration, binding, manuscript annotations, stamps, prices, etc. MEI is linked to Incunabula Short Title Catalogue (ISTC)¹⁷, provided by the British Library, from which it derives the bibliographical records, and it allows the user at last to combine searches of bibliographical records (extracted from ISTC) with copy specific records. MEI database is a great tool for exploring the book's history, because it significantly expands the look to the first printed books and provides the possibility to reassess the incunabula in Lithuania. five hundred and two incunabula are kept in seven different libraries of Lithuania. Though this number, compared to the European libraries, is quite small, the participation in the project is very important for Lithuania, because in this way the heritage of Lithuania becomes visible to the world. Currently there are 142 records of Lithuanian libraries in MEI¹⁸.

MEI helps to discover new and important facts for the book history. Some minor discoveries – a token found in a book, Lithuanian words recognized in the margins, different prices of the incunabula identified and newly found incunabula copies, which are not registered in the libraries of Lithuania¹⁹ – are important for further research and also reveal the usefulness and importance of MEI.

4. PUBLISHING

The Rare Book Department belongs to the Heritage Collections and Research Centre, whose main aims are to publicize the old documents as widely as possible, to present the old collections as much as possible, to see that interesting and informative exhibitions would be accompanied by illustrated and annotated catalogues of the exhibitions²⁰. The publishing in the Rare Book Department intensified particularly in the beginning of the 21st century. All printed production of this Department can be sorted into exhibition catalogues, book collection catalogues and other kinds of books.

1) Exhibition catalogues

Usually the Rare Book Department prepares exhibitions from the Department's collections twice a year, and it also publishes catalogues of those exhibitions. The Department has published four exhibition catalogues in total. They are comprehensive, with numerous illustrations, introductory articles, usually written by a

17 http://data.cerl.org/istc/_search.

18 The data of 21 November 2017 is submitted.

19 Viktorija Vaitkevičiūtė, "Atradimai Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekos inkunabuluose", *Knygotyra*, vol. 69 (2017): 273–278.

20 The publishing production of the Rare Book Department from 2010 till 2014 is discussed by the head of this Department Virginija Galvanauskaitė. See Virginija Galvanauskaitė, "Biblioteka – leidyklų partnerė?", *Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekos metraštis* 2015, (2015): 173–185.

scientist who presents the historical or cultural situation in the relevant period. All catalogues are bilingual, which allows a wider range of readers to get acquainted with the topic.



Illustration 1: Exhibition catalogues (photo by Raimondas Malaiška)

In 2011, the Rare Book Department prepared the exhibition “Lithuania and Poland in the Commonwealth”, which was designed to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald. The exhibition catalogue²¹ describes Lithuania and Poland between the 15th and 18th century, presents their political, historical and cultural aspects, and may also give a better understanding of the complicated relationship between these two countries in the past centuries.

In 2012, the exhibition “Vetera reducta” (“The Past Regained”) and its respective catalogue²² were prepared to describe the activities of the former director of VU Library Levas Vladimirovas (1912–1999). He is not only known as a distinguished researcher and a famous man of culture, but also as a hero: “In the middle of the 20th century, as a result of continuous efforts made by Levas Vladimirovas, a great part of books from the old Vilnius University Library collection, which had been dispersed and carried off to foreign countries more than a hundred years ago, were brought back to Vilnius University”²³. The books from between the 15th

21 *Lietuva ir Lenkija bendroje valstybėje: parodos katalogas, 2010 12 13–2011 02 16*, compiled by Arvydas Maciulevičius, Evaldas Grigonis (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto biblioteka, 2011).

22 *Vetera reducta: parodos katalogas 2012 11 15–2013 06 15*, compiled by Ina Kažuro, Evaldas Grigonis (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto biblioteka, 2012).

23 Ina Kažuro, Evaldas Grigonis, “Levas Vladimirovas and the case of the old Vilnius University Library”, in: *Vetera reducta*, 33.

and 19th century are set up in the catalogue in several groups with respect to the towns they came from (Odessa, Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Kiev and Kharkiv). Amongst the returned books were some of the most valuable Lithuanian books and a unique Cyrillic collection.

The catalogue "The Sun Has Been Rising and Setting for Hundreds of Years"²⁴ was published after the 2014 exhibition commemorating the 300th anniversary of the birth of the founding father of Lithuanian literature Kristijonas Donelaitis (1714–1780). All materials are divided into themes, reflecting historic, cultural and religious environment of Prussia and a special region of Prussia called Lithuania Minor in the 18th–19th century.

In 2015, Lithuania celebrated the 250th anniversary of the birth of the eminent statesman and public figure, diplomat and composer Michał Kleofas Ogiński (1765–1833). This date was included into the list of UNESCO's celebration of anniversaries. On this occasion, VU Library – together with Lithuanian State Historical Archives and the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences – prepared the exhibition and the catalogue "There, where the Homeland's love and duty call"²⁵. Ogiński is known mostly as the composer of a polonaise "A Farewell to the Homeland", and his state, political, diplomatic and military activities as a dignitary of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were not known for a long time. Therefore, the catalogue was a great opportunity to present the different activities of Ogiński and also the political and cultural circumstances of that time in Lithuania.

2) Book collection catalogues

Till now the Rare Book Department has published five catalogues of the book collections. All catalogues have introductory articles written by scientists together with English translations, which not only give a detailed analysis of the collections, but also present the historical and cultural context of that time. The first one is the catalogue of post-incunabula²⁶ – the books published in the first half of the 16th century. The collection amounts to 1654 books – counting the duplicates and works made up of several volumes. They are considered to be of historical value all over the world. The department has a plan to publish a supplement of this catalogue, because during this time over a hundred of new post-incunabula were identified.

24 *Šimtus jau metus saulelė tekėjo ir leidos: parodos katalogas 2014–2015*, compiled by Viktorija Vaitkevičiūtė, Aušra Rinkūnaitė (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto biblioteka, 2014).

25 *Ten, kur kviečia tėvynės meilė ir pareiga: Mykolo Kleopo Oginskio 250-osios gimimo metinės: parodos katalogas*, compiled by Daiva Narbutienė, Ramunė Šmigelskytė-Stukienė, Nijolė Šulgienė, Alfonsas Tamulynas, Viktorija Vaitkevičiūtė (Vilnius: Petro ofsetas, 2015).

26 *Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekos paleotipai: katalogas*, compiled by Nojus Feigelmanas, Irena Daurgidaitė, Petras Račius (Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2003).

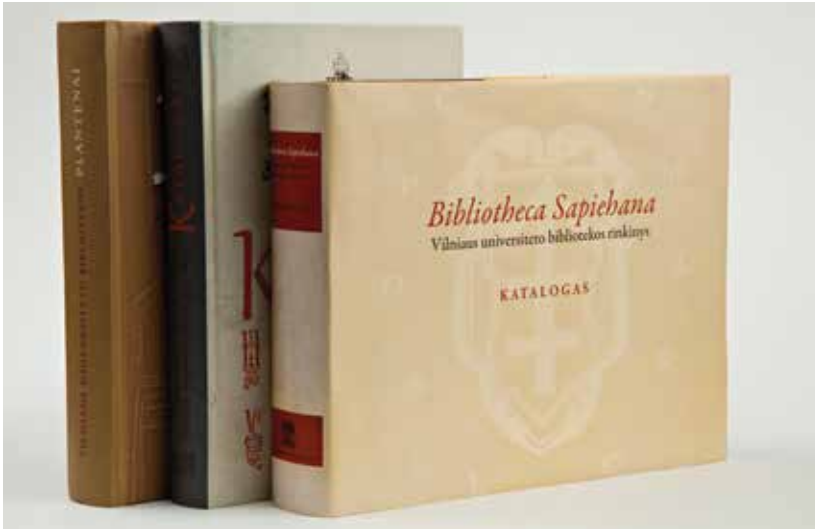


Illustration 2: Book collection catalogues (photo by Raimondas Malaiška)

In 2008, the Rare Book Department published the catalogue of Aldines²⁷, books printed by Italian humanist, scholar, printer and publisher Aldus Manutius the Elder (Aldo Manuzio il Vecchio, 1449 or 1452–1515) and his progeny. This separate collection is not very large – it consists of 38 volumes. The catalogue is informative, because for the first time each illustration is provided with a detailed description of the book.

The same principle was applied when the catalogue *Bibliotheca Sapiehana*²⁸ was printed in 2010. This representative, more album-like and exclusive catalogue consists of 249 books which belonged to the Sapiehas, a noble family. Private library of Sapieha was donated to Vilnius University in 1655. The abundance of illustrations in this catalogue really stands out: next to a bibliographic description of a particular book the illustrations of the covers, the title pages, the interesting engravings, and the provenances are given; these details give the opportunity to better understand the book. For the first time the fingerprint was used in the bibliographical description.

The catalogue of Cyrillic books²⁹ published in 2013 got a lot of interest from Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian librarians and scientists. Today the Cyrillic collection

27 *Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekos aldai: katalogas*, compiled by Petras Račius (Vilnius: E. Karpavičiaus leidykla, 2008).

28 *Bibliotheca Sapiehana: Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekos rinkinys: katalogas*, compiled by Aušra Rinkūnaitė (Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2010).

29 *Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekos kirilikos leidinių kolekcija 1525–1839: katalogas*, compiled by Ina Kažuro (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2013).

has 264 publications (371 copies), published up to 1839. Though this collection is quite well known among bibliographers and book researchers in Lithuania and abroad, it has not been properly researched till the catalogue was published. In this catalogue, the fingerprint code regarding Cyrillic books was used for the first time, so, in a way, the librarians of VU Library were innovators, because the popular opinion was that this fingerprint method is not applicable for books in Cyrillic³⁰.

The latest catalogue of the Rare Book Department contains Plantin books³¹. This collection consists of 454 titles and 737 copies. It is one of the largest and most significant collection of Plantin books in Lithuania. These books were printed between 1558 and 1746 in the famous Plantin-Moretus printing house and are notable for the carefully prepared text, high culture of polygraphy, artistic design of the book, and harmoniously combining illustrations, a variety of types and ingenious typesetting into an organic whole.

3) Other kinds of books

VU Library publishes a yearbook every five years; they reflect the most important aspects of library work, changes and relevant problems. The first yearbook was printed in 1957, and in 2015 the ninth book was published. It is dedicated to the story of the library between 2010 and 2014, and presents the different activities of VU Library, cultural heritage research and the articles prepared according to the reports, read at the international scientific conference “The Vilnius Cyrillic book printing in the European context: research and inventions” on January 22th, 2014.



Illustration 3: The book “Bibliotheca curiosa” (photo by Raimondas Malaiška)

30 To find out how the fingerprint was adapted for Cyrillic books, see Ina Kažuro, “The Cyrillic Collection at Vilnius University Library: History and Discoveries”, in *Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekos kirilikos leidinių kolekcija*, 95.

31 *Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekos plantenai: katalogas*, compiled by Vidas Račius (Vilnius: Petro ofsetas, 2015).

In 2016, the Rare Book Department received funding from the Research Council of Lithuania and published the book *Bibliotheca curiosa*³², which introduces another kind of dimension to the old book. The aim of this book is to give people a glance at the most attractive aspect of old books, to arouse admiration in old rarities. *Bibliotheca curiosa*, published separately in Lithuanian and English, presents 123 publications from between the 15th and 20th century and contains over 200 colour illustrations that reflect the intriguing world of old printed books; it includes books describing the scientific achievements of the 16th century in the fields of brain activity research and midwifery, a handbook on witch-hunting, a catalogue of in-born deformities, descriptions of pompous funerals and ship disasters from the 17th century, etiquette advice, translations of early Chinese military treatises from the 18th century, and other curiosities. A separate group of curiosa books consists of publications which were found to contain various items between their pages: notes, bookmarks, pictures, feathers, etc. Historical and threatening inscriptions, portraits and sketches made by readers or former owners found in books featuring old, ornate wrought-iron covers add great historical value to the collection.

The activities of the Rare Book Department at VU Library are similar to the special collections departments in another institutions. It is very important not only to preserve the existing old heritage, but also to disseminate it. In 2020, VU Library will celebrate the 450th anniversary; it is currently preparing for this important event. At the same time this is a great opportunity to introduce the society to the special collections in a wider scale.

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³² Sondra Rankelienė, Indrė Saudargienė, *Bibliotheca curiosa* (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto biblioteka, 2016).

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Vilnius University Library Document Protection Guidelines, I.4, https://biblioteka.vu.lt/files/vilniaus_universiteto_bibliotekos_dokumentu_apsaugos_gaires.pdf.

Summary

Working on Special Collections at Lithuanian Libraries

Rare books and manuscripts in Lithuania are preserved in five different libraries: Vilnius University Library, Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania (Vilnius), the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences (Vilnius), Kaunas University of Technology Library and Kaunas County Public Library. Three libraries have Special Departments of Restoration and Digitization. They participate in the drafting of library policy aiming at acquisition, preservation and digitization of cultural heritage collections. The website ePaveldas (www.epaveldas.lt), comprising digitized Lithuanian prints and manuscripts from between the 16th and 20th century, increases possibilities of use and dissemination of unique heritage objects. The usage of digital copies helps to preserve the originals for posterity.

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