

The Curator's Toolkit

Artifact Lab

Session 1: Crash Course in Artifact Study

Learning Objective

Apply Montgomery's Points of Connoisseurship and Rosenbach's concept of rarity to books from The Rosenbach collection. Gain experience in close looking and formulating research questions.

Artifact Selection

Dickens, Charles. *The Works of Chas. Dickens Originally Issued in Thirty-four Volumes and Now Extended to Seventy-nine Volumes. Extra Illustrated...* London: Chapman & Hall, 1903. Various volumes. Call No. EL3 .D548 903.

Featured volumes: 1 (*The Pickwick Papers*), 5 (*Oliver Twist*), 19 (*The Old Curiosity Shop*), 27 (*David Copperfield*), 31 (*Bleak House*), 35 (Christmas Books), 37 (*Little Dorritt*), 43 (*Great Expectations*), 55 (*American Notes and Pictures from Italy*), 59 (*A Child's History of England*), 69 (*The Life of Charles Dickens*), and 79 (account book).

Directions

Using the Principles of Connoisseurship as outlined by Charles Montgomery and the concept of rarity as articulated by Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach in *Books & Bidders*, look closely at the volume from *The Works of Chas. Dickens* you have been given. Write down your observations and any questions that come to mind when studying the book. Do not worry about having "correct" information, or even answers to your questions—this is simply an exercise in close looking and formulating questions! Be sure to launch your study at the most basic, elementary level, and then move on to the bigger questions of rarity and historical significance. No observation is too small to note on your worksheet. No question is too simple—or to grand—to ask.

After spending 20 minutes with your book, discuss your findings with your small group. Tell them about your book, and what questions you have. The last 20 minutes of the lab session will be spent sharing out with the entire class what you've discussed as a group. The rarity diagram and list of principles of connoisseurship are reproduced below, along with some questions to guide your thinking.

Charles Montgomery's Points of Connoisseurship

I. General Appearance

Describe the exterior of the book in simple terms, so that someone who has not seen it could picture it just by your words.

II. Form

How big is the object? (Record its measurements here.) How does it compare in size to other volumes in The Rosenbach's collection that you have seen?

III. Ornament & Aesthetics

What kinds of decorations and ornaments do you encounter throughout the volume? List them here:

How would you describe the visual aesthetic of the book, both the actual designs and patterns and the image the design tries to communicate?

IV. Color

What colors appear on the book's binding?

Is there a standard color theme for decoration within the book?

Do you see evidence of the object's color(s) having changed over time? Where?

V. Materials

List all the kinds of physical materials that you encounter in the book (leather, paper, etc.):

VI. Craft Techniques

What kinds of craftspeople and artists might have been involved in making this book?

Look at the various component parts of the volume (binding, illustrations, etc.). How would you describe the quality of the handicrafts involved in its production?

VII. Trade Practices & Marketplace

Who published the book? Where and when?

For whom (that is, for what kind of person) do you think this object was made?

Based on your initial review, do you think this object is an upscale product, an economy volume, or somewhere in between? Why?

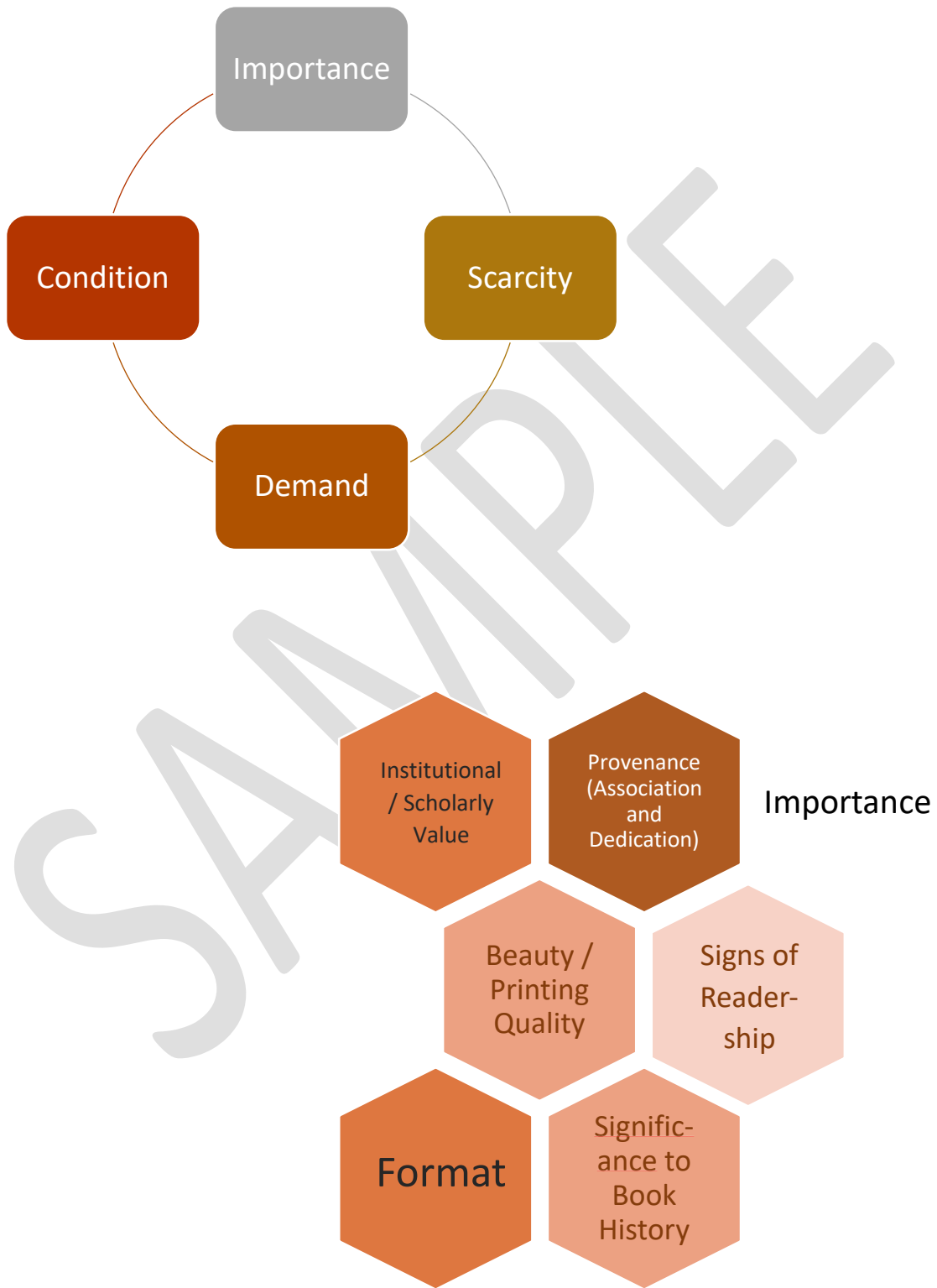
VIII. Function & Historic Context

What is the condition of the book? (Consider both the binding and the interior contents.)

Does the volume show any signs of use by past readers? If so, what are they?

SAMPLE

Dr. Rosenbach's Concept of Rarity



Applying Dr. Rosenbach's Concept of Rarity

“Why age alone should be thought to give value to most collectible objects, including furniture, pictures, and musical instruments, I don't know. However, it is a great and popular fallacy. The daily prayer of all true collectors should begin with the words, ‘beauty, rarity, condition,’ and last of all, ‘antiquity.’ But books differ from other antiques in that their ultimate value depends upon the intrinsic merit of the writer's work. A first edition of Shakespeare, for instance, will always command an ever-increasing price. The same is true of first editions of Dante, Cervantes, or Goethe. These writers gave something to the world and to life—something of which one always can be sure.”

– Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach, *Books and Bidders: The Adventures of a Bibliophile*, 1927

Condition

How would you describe the condition of the book? (Excellent, good, fair, or poor?) Give detail below. Be sure to study both the binding and the interior contents.

Scarcity

Based on your study of the book, how scarce would you *guess* this volume actually is? How would you go about confirming or modifying your initial assessment?

Demand

What kinds of collectors do you think might be interested in a book like this on the rare book market today? Do you think this kind of book has a high demand or a low demand?

Importance

Review the characteristics of importance as described on the chart on the previous page. Do you think this volume, and the set of which it is a part, has importance?

What makes it important? What makes it less important? *(Bear in mind that, when the class reconvenes, we will consider all of these books as a set, not just the individual volumes.)*

What are the most significant questions you would want to follow up on in terms of better understanding this volume, and the series of which it is a part? Where would you begin to launch further research?