Preserving Culture Through Library Collections: The Example of Paul et Virginie

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Abstract

Kristin Hoffmann, librarian of the French collections at the Weldon Library (The University of Western Ontario) discusses the goals and tasks involved by the preparation of a library display contributing to a 18th Century literature course about Paul et Virginie.

KEYWORDS: library studies, archives, pedagogy, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre
Preserving culture through library collections: The example of *Paul et Virginie*

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One day in the summer of 2016, I got an email from Servanne Woodward asking to talk about how I could contribute to her course on 18th century French literature. Servanne and I met, and she talked about the context of the course and what she wanted her students to learn. Her goal in bringing me into the class as the librarian for French Studies was for her students to learn about libraries as cultural institutions, institutions that provide expressions of culture reflecting the present time, that preserve culture for future generations, and that facilitate the creation of culture and new cultural expressions. She proposed that I prepare a display that would highlight these aspects and tie in to a particular work of French literature that the class would be studying, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie*.

As I thought about what to include in the display, I realized that the materials in our library’s collection related to *Paul et Virginie* in four distinct ways. These became the four components of the display:

- original eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century editions of *Paul et Virginie*;
- reprinted editions, from the mid-nineteenth century through to 2014;
- works of scholarship and criticism on the novel and the writer; and
- related works and images, showing both how the popular culture of the time is reflected in the novel and the novel’s influence on popular culture.

I titled the display, “Preserving culture through library collections: The example of *Paul et Virginie*.” Along with books and images, I included explanatory notes in the display for each of these components, which also incorporated some contributions from Servanne. The following sections reproduce those notes in a slightly revised form and describe the materials included in the display.

**Original editions**
Librarians acquire original editions and texts because of their scholarly value, and because libraries can preserve these rare works and make them available to all researchers, not just to wealthy private collectors. Most of these items came from The James Alexander and Ellen Rea Benson Special Collections, Western Archives and are housed in our climate-controlled special collections facility.

In the display, the original editions included:

- Three English translations dating from 1797, 1807, and 1808. The 1797 translation published in London by Machell Stace, the earliest English translation, is generally considered to be the best.
- An Italian translation, *Paolo e Virginia*, from 1795. The bookplate in this volume shows that it came from John Davis Barnett, who donated his personal collection of 40,000 items to Western. That collection became the core of the Western Libraries collection.
Reprinted and new editions

Literature that occupies an important place in a cultural tradition is relevant long after it is published; scholars may continue to study and learn from it for centuries. Numerous editions may be published, particularly when the original work is old enough to be in the public domain and is no longer covered by copyright. Librarians collect these new editions and new translations in order to facilitate continued research and learning. In the example of *Paul et Virginie*, our library has several reprinted and newer editions, including translations, annotated editions, and illustrated editions. I included as many as could fit comfortably and attractively in the display case.
Scholarly and critical works

Scholars around the world study these works of literature and create new knowledge and understanding of them and their place in our culture. Librarians ensure that the output of this scholarship is acquired so that the scholarly conversation can continue. One of the distinguishing features of research libraries is their focus on collecting these scholarly and critical works and making them available to faculty, students, and other researchers.

In the display case, I included monographs of scholarly criticism about the novel, biographies and criticism about the author and some sample journal issues. Today, most journals are published online as well as, or even in place of, print publications, so I included printouts of articles (including an electronic device would have been impractical). In the photo below, the print volume of *The Modern Language Review*, with an article about the illustrations in *Paul et Virginie*, shows one of the novel’s most well-known images.
Related works

Large research libraries such as Western’s have collections that cover a wide range of topics. Because of the breadth of our collections, there are many materials that scholars can draw on in order to help understand or illustrate themes in literature.

The labyrinth motif was an aspect of eighteenth-century culture that features prominently in *Paul et Virginie*. In the display I included books that Servanne had found which show the labyrinth from the cathedral at Chartres, the labyrinth in the gardens at Versailles, and general designs for garden labyrinths.

Elements of fashion and style from the novel also made their way into French culture. Notably, Marie-Antoinette had her painter, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, do a portrait of her wearing a simple, white “creole” or “countryside” dress, reminiscent of the style of dress that Virginie wears as Paul carries her over the river in the remote island forest. The portrait created a scandal, because it seemed that women were going out in public in their undershirt. To address the scandal, Vigée Le Brun painted a second portrait, with Marie Antoinette posed identically but now in full regalia. Printed copies of both portraits were included in the display.
Presenting the display
The display was in The D.B. Weldon Library, Western’s library for the humanities and social sciences, from mid-September through the end of October. It was on the main floor of the library and could be viewed by anyone who came into the library. In early October, Servanne brought her students into the library so that I could talk with them about the display and the academic library’s role in preserving and highlighting culture. Some colleagues from French Studies also attended the talk, as well as a writer from the campus newspaper *Western News*.

My key messages for students were that librarians want to provide access to materials for as many people as possible, and that as we work to support teaching and research at our universities, we support the preservation of culture and the development of new scholarship.

The students were attentive and engaged, and were especially interested in the original editions. A news article, “Novel look into the role of academic libraries,” appeared in *Western News* in mid-October. I was pleased and gratified with the results of this display, both in terms of helping students understand the role that librarians play in preserving culture and making cultural materials accessible, and in terms of highlighting some of the beautiful and important materials in our collection.