

Conservation within the Polonsky England and France Project: Actions carried out at the BnF

Francesco Siri, Bibliothèque nationale de France

In 2016, thanks to the patronage of The Polonsky Foundation, the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the British Library started an unedited partnership aiming at cataloguing, digitising and showcasing a corpus of 800 illuminated manuscripts, produced in France or England between the 8th and 12th century.

The two libraries are working together to give access to the corpus, digitising 400 MSS from each collection, cataloguing them and carrying out necessary restoration and conservation works. The Bibliothèque nationale de France will create a new bilingual website in order to make available on-line all selected MSS, and to allow digital comparison among them. The British Library will create a bilingual website intended for a general audience that will feature highlights from the most important of these manuscripts and articles commissioned by leading experts in the field.

The aim of this paper is to present the context of MSS restoration realised by the BnF in 2017, focusing on some highlights. Conservation checks have been possible only after the transfer of all special collections in the new stacks, opened in December 2016 on the BnF Richelieu site in Paris. The very narrow time given to conservation, due to parallel digitisation process, led BnF to choose some external ateliers, after a public competition that took place between January and March 2017. From April to September 2017, the four ateliers worked on 79 mostly illuminated MSS, dating from 9th to 12th century, providing a new and challenging experience for both librarians and restorers. This has been possible thanks to the exceptional support of The Polonsky Foundation, and an important contribution of the Department of Special Collections of the BnF.

The MSS were grouped in two main lots. Works on the first lot focussed on the restoration of old bindings, their consolidation, and included some interventions on selected leaves or quires. Works on the second lot concerned the restoration of book blocks and the making of new bindings. The first lot was then divided in groups, according to the binding features: medieval wood bindings, different Morocco bindings from Jean-Baptiste Colbert's, Royal and other collections, parchment bindings, a group of MSS once own by the Cluny abbey, and some modern bindings. The second lot was divided in three groups, according to the format of the MSS. An overview of these interventions will be presented in this paper.

Bindings of three additional MSS with metalworks and ivories were also included in the restoration project. Two specialists of these materials worked to bring new life to these bindings, consolidate some of their elements, and study old binding techniques. Two of them will be displayed in the Louvre Museum from October 2017.