Enhancing the Description of Rare Books

a component of a panel
by James P. Ascher, presented May 19, 2008
2.1.2.1 All: Adopt as a guiding principle that some level of access must be provided to all materials as a first step to comprehensive access, as appropriate. Allow for different cataloging levels depending on the types of documents, their nature, and richness.

Degressive Description

The idea [of Degressive Description] is that different periods of printing and different classes of books should meet with correspondingly varying treatment.

Levels of Description
Two major changes

• Information is digital and fungible

• Scholarly paradigms shift frequently
The English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) lists over 460,000 items

- published between 1473 and 1800
- mainly, but not exclusively, in English
- published mainly in the British Isles and North America
- from the collections of the British Library and over 2,000 other libraries

Search the ESTC  Go direct to ESTC Search

Using ESTC Items at the British Library  How to register as a reader and use ESTC items at the British Library

Bank holiday closure: Please note the Reading Rooms will be closed on Monday 26 May and Monday 25 August. The other public areas in the Library will be open on these days.

Other British Library catalogues
- British Library Integrated Catalogue
  Main catalogue, all dates
- Manuscripts Catalogue
  Western language manuscripts private papers and archives
- Other Catalogues
  Including specialist finding tools

Links
- About the British Library's early printed collections
- About the ESTC project
- ESTC news and mailing list
- How to use the British Library reading rooms
Recueil des histoires de Troie. English

h'Fre begynmeth the volume intituled and named the recuyell of the histories of Troye, composed and drawn out of dyuercue bookes of latyn in to frenshe by the ryght venerable persone and worshipfull man. Raoul le ffeure, preyest and chapelayn vnto the ryght noble gloruous and myghty prynce in his tyme Philip duc of Bourgoyne of Braband [et]c in the yere of the incarnacion of our lord god a thousand foure hundred sixty and foure, and translated and drawn out of frenshe in to englishe by Wylliam Caxton mercer of ye cyte of London, at the comau[n]ide[n]t of the right hye myghty and vertuous pryncesse hys redoubtyd lady. Margaretye by the grace of god. Duchess of Bourgoyne of Lotry of Braband [et]c, whiche sayd translacion and werke was ... fynysshid in the holy cyte of Colen the, xix. day of septembre the yere of our sayd lord god a thousand foure hundred sixty and enleuen [sic] [et]c. ...

Variant title
- Recueil des histoires de Troye
- and zeland and thus whan alle thyse thynge cam

Publisher/year
- [Bruges : Printed by William Caxton and, probably, Colard Mansion, 1473 or 1474]

Physical descr.
ESTC errors in general

- Correct: 83%
- Errors: 17%
ESTC errors in the oldest

- Correct: 52%
- Errors: 48%
Fungible data can be revised
Scholarly paradigms shift
An Exhibit Catalog for Industrialized Bookmaking
University of South Florida, Tampa Campus, Special Collections Department Reading Room.
October 12 – November 30, 2007

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One of the earliest uses of woven paper in America is by Isaiah Thomas in 1795. This copy of *Sermons on various subjects* (1806) by Joseph Lathrop was printed by Isaiah Thomas on both handmade woven and laid paper. The page on the left is handmade laid paper, while the one on the right is handmade wove paper.
Digital information can be intertwined
Sources for book history

• In house knowledge
• Exhibition catalogs
• Local and visiting scholars
• Courses on bibliography
• Scholarly publications