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University of South Carolina, CONTENTdm, and the Ege Leaves

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It all started in the early 1920s when Otto F. Ege, Dean of the Cleveland Institute of Art and Lecturer on the History of the Book at the School of Library Science at Western Reserve University, "liberated" selected leaves from medieval manuscripts, annotated them, and sold forty sets to different universities in Europe, the United States, and Canada. Taken as a whole, the leaves, from varied periods and national origin, provide a remarkable history and illustrate the art of the manuscript during the period of its greatest development and influence. Set #27 is housed today in the University of South Carolina's Rare Books and Special Collections and is of special interest not only to historians, but to scholars working to "reassemble the texts that Otto F. Ege dispersed."

Obviously, documents from the 12th to 16th centuries are at great risk of damage from the environment and from handling, and their availability to artists and scholars has been necessarily restricted. Digitization and digital collection management software now make it possible to unlock the rich lessons of these manuscripts.

When the University of South Carolina Libraries created a department charged with digitizing the university's valuable collections, the first order of business was determining from others' experiences what kind of investment in technology would best serve this task. According to USC's Kate Foster Boyd, Digital Collections Librarian at the university and coordinator of the new digitization project, the technology that stood out among others was CONTENTdm. This turnkey system had been heavily used on the west coast for a number of years and was beginning to make inroads in the east and in the southeastern region in particular. CONTENTdm's popularity is due, in large part says Boyd, because it is easy to use and is well supported, a particular boon for institutions that do not have their own programming resources. It is also considered more sophisticated than the competition.

CONTENTdm is a powerful and flexible digital collection management package produced and supported by DiMeMa Inc. It offers scalability to meet a wide range of needs, and it is marketed to libraries, museums, and nonprofit archive associations through OCLC Online Computer Center. Hosting is available to institutions that do not have their own server; that option is also available during the 60-day free trial. The University of South Carolina Libraries selected CONTENTdm, and onsite installation and training took place in the fall of 2004. The first collection selected for digitization was the Otto F. Ege manuscripts.

Kate Boyd "drove the show," according to Heather Dray, Educational Services Supervisor at SOLINET. Boyd's task at this point was to bring together diverse staff resources to set up and operate the several components of the project to make it function organically. But it had to do more than that. Preserving the documents for posterity was part of the job; ensuring that they were universally accessible and searchable required the skills of a cataloger and the expertise of a subject specialist. Elizabeth Sudduth of Rare Books and Special Collections and Dr. Scott Gwara of the English Department assisted in developing the metadata. SOLINET's Dray coached the Digital Activities Team on the use of Dublin Core standards. That phase of training took place in December 2004. Four months later, in April 2005, the digitized Otto F. Ege Manuscript Collection was launched.

The Ege leaves are finally broadly accessible. Furthermore, as soon as the collection was made available on the web, Rare Books and Special Collections was contacted about a conference being held in June 2005 at the University of Saskatchewan concerning the Otto F. Ege Manuscript collections. This Symposium, called "Remaking the Book," focused on the creation of a digital database of all the leaves that were dispersed.

The speedy conclusion of this first project and its evident quality is testimony to the capabilities of the system and the expert direction of project manager Boyd and her enthusiastic staff. According to Boyd, the 50-leaf collection was a good, manageable size from which to learn. She also credits CONTENTdm for its ability to capture the front and back of each leaf, display it as one, and link the records for cataloging. In addition, the JPEG2000 file format enables researchers to zoom into the images and focus on the scripts and designs.

In all, the University of South Carolina has made a fine contribution to literature and history. CONTENTdm has proven its merit for projects

such as this, and Otto F. Ege's dispersed leaves are once again available to the public. One day the manuscripts might very well be back together, virtually speaking. Kate Foster Boyd can take understandable pride when she announces, as she did in April, that "the University Libraries' Digital Activities Department of the University of South Carolina Rare Books and Special Collections is excited to announce that it has officially launched its first CONTENTdm collection: Otto F. Ege Collection of Fifty Original Manuscript Leaves. We welcome your visits (<http://www.sc.edu/library/digital/collections/ege.html>) and commentary."