



Conference Review: SHARP 2022

## All things printed and more: SHARP 2022, Power of the Written Word

At the beginning of 2022, if someone told me that I will be in Amsterdam in July, talking about book history, presenting a paper, and exchanging ideas with the best minds of the field, I would not have believed them, especially since the pandemic, the digital fatigue of attending online conferences had already set in. I was looking forward to attending the conference in-person but as an early-career researcher, attending an academic conference outside my home country is a challenge in itself and the experience of obtaining the visa can only be described as a nightmare. I am most grateful to SHARP for their very generous travel grant which made all of this possible.

The SHARP 2022 conference, “Power of the Written Word”™, which took place from July 11 to July 15 offered both in-person attendance and hybrid-online participation. This was my first SHARP conference and I was amazed at the sheer number of panels, talks, and a wide range of topics, lightning talks and how the venues chosen for the conference had a strong impact on my experience.

After the registration, I went to the first workshop, “The Text in the Atlas Maior by Blaeu” at Allard Pierson, which houses the special collections of the University of Amsterdam Library. I must admit, as I entered the workshop hall, I was intimidated by the panoramic display of the *Atlas Maiors*. Produced by the publishing house of Joan Blaeu, these were one of the most beautiful maps I had ever seen. The archive at Allard Pierson have copies of *Atlas Maior* editions in five languages and through Reinder Storm’s wonderful presentation we learnt about the publishing history of the *Atlas Maiors*. We also got a glimpse into the exciting history about the provenance of the maps, how they were printed with copper plates and how they were used and stored. The objective of this workshop was to identify and analyse the texts written on the back of the maps and we were one of the first people to embark on this journey. After the workshop the participants had the opportunity to attend the guided tours to see the collections at the Allard Pierson where we saw the oldest manuscript from Amsterdam, books made in Delft, understand the significant difference between styles used in northern and southern Netherlands among the many other notable exhibits and especially, the exhibition showcasing the amazing work of Irma Boom. The conference was declared officially open with the welcome address by Dr. Lisa Kuitert, followed by the keynote lecture delivered by Dr. Kathryn Rudy on the late medieval prayer books. The talk focused on a single manuscript prayer book from 1445 and its use as a talisman to ward off the

bubonic plague. After the keynote lecture at the Aula, or the auditorium, a welcome reception sponsored by Brill Publishers was an excellent opportunity to meet many students and scholars of book history.

The next few days were spent at the magnificent halls of Royal Tropical Institute and the University of Amsterdam. After the second keynote lecture at the Queen Maxima Hall by Elizabeth Savage, I attended the panel, "Track and Trace. Material Traces within the Book Historic Field." This particular panel discussed the viable and tangible responses towards texts and books becoming a vehicle for autonomy and independence. The three papers discussed the historical significance of self-expression, women authors and readers, the history of exploitation and deprivation anchored in the system of governance, the important contribution of women writers in Sweden and one particularly interesting part was the enquiry into the Victorian provincial book club which looked at the data describing the kind of books the members were reading, who were buying certain titles and its social significance. The panel titled, "Women within the Book Industry"™ was particularly fascinating. Thoughts ranging from female book buyers in Gothenburg during 1880s, the very first translations of *Little Women* to the self-education movement by women in Warsaw around 1900 highlighted the dramatic differences and the strong influence of the printed word and women authors, translators and readers. It is important to note that during the breaks, exchanges over a cup of coffee, effortlessly transitioned towards academic discussions and outside the panels and paper presentations, there were many opportunities to learn, engage and network with scholars and experts. The next day I spent much of my time attending paper presentations on scientific reading rooms, the connection between reading and power, scientific publishing ecosystem, linguistic decision making in writing and editing, discussions on the marketplace of writers and readers, a wide view of the publishing ecosystem, which also addressed questions like, what are the driving factors behind creating a bestseller, how small independent publishers function and what specific kinds of impact they have on the industry.

My first time at the SHARP Conference cannot be described only as an academic activity, it had the fluidity and evocative power of scholarship which helped me to understand and experience the power of printed books, texts, manuscripts, processes and more. It would be impossible to list all the things I have learnt but the highlight of the conference for me personally was the support of organizing committee, the volunteers and how they created a warm, welcoming atmosphere. The excursions to the University Library of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Rijksmuseum research library, centered around the theme of the conference offered the participants the chance to observe the world of archiving, preserving and proper utilization of the resources. While it focused on the specific questions about the collection and the texts, the experts brought a deft playfulness to the subject, which would appeal to both students and scholars of book history as well as a general audience. Most of all, these activities supplemented my understanding not only in terms of academic queries but also helped in familiarising the participants with the beauty of a carefully curated research library, importance of the reading experience and of course, the fine production values of the book.

Amsterdam's™ background complemented the theme of the conference repeatedly, and history joined hands with the contemporary understanding of print culture. In my personal experience, the SHARP 2022 conference was a palimpsest of layers of research, history, and a wide range of enquiries; each layer separated by the keen interest and collaboration.

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Editor's Note: SHARP 2023 "Affordances and Interfaces: Textual Interaction Past, Present and Future" will take place fully online on June 26-29, 2023. The call for papers is available [here](#). Deadline is **30 December 2022**.

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