

ILAB Provenance Research Checklist for Antiquarian Booksellers

© ILAB 2025 — Published December 2025

This document will be updated periodically.

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Disclaimer

This document is a working document and will be updated regularly in response to ongoing input from the book trade and from the institutions with which ILAB collaborates. It has been prepared by the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB) in consultation with its national member associations and with IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, Rare Books and Special Collections Section.

This guide is intended as a practical resource to support ILAB members in navigating provenance research and in responding to expectations commonly set by institutional buyers. It is published for informational and guidance purposes only. It does not constitute legal advice, nor should it be relied upon as a substitute for independent legal counsel. Legal obligations vary by jurisdiction, and booksellers are responsible for ensuring that their

business practices comply with all applicable local, national, and international laws and regulations.

1. Introduction: Provenance and the Book Trade

By David Pearson

A definition: provenance in books encompasses all the evidence we have of the ways in which books have been owned, used and interacted with through successive generations, from their first point of making and sale or gift. It is concerned with observing, recognising and interpreting the many forms that evidence takes.

Interest in the provenance of historic and collectable books has grown hugely in recent decades. There are multiple reasons for this:

Users and owners of books – collectors, academic researchers, students of book history – have become more interested in the way books were read (if they were), and the influence they had on previous generations. Historical bibliography – making lists of what was published – has matured into book history, the desire to understand the social impact of books. Provenance evidence, the interface between books and their users, is the key to understanding this. Books come to life not so much when they are printed, but when they are owned.

Libraries now put a lot more effort into recording provenance evidence in their catalogue records and making it discoverable. Exhibitions rely heavily on provenance features to tell the stories of books. As mass digitisation proceeds the cultural value of books, as physical objects, resides more and more in those unique copy-specific aspects than in the texts which can be read electronically.

Dealers and auctioneers recognise that provenance helps to sell books and enhance their commercial value, more so than in the past. We have moved beyond Association Copies - books owned or inscribed by famous people - to take interest in annotations, marginalia and ownership evidence of all kinds; today, a written-in historic book will often sell for more than a clean copy.

As we have become more concerned about cultural objects of all kinds (including books), which may have been taken from earlier owners in illegal or unethical ways, the importance of provenance research to establish such movement has grown.

Consequently, to be satisfied on this point, dealers and sellers of books face increasing pressure from institutions and legislators to demonstrate complete chains of provenance for their books.

Recording provenance is also an important protection for all kinds of custodians of books, in case they are lost or stolen. Printed books are, by their nature, not unique; every copy of the same edition should be textually the same. It is the copy-specific features (provenance, binding, all kinds of post-production evidence) that allow for confident identification should this become necessary.

It is important to know that provenance evidence takes many forms, beyond the primary sort of the many kinds of markings left in books (including inscriptions, annotations, marginalia, shelfmarks, price codes, bookplates/labels, ink stamps, stencils, drawings, bindings, censorship, mutilation). Sale catalogues, diaries, letters, probate documents and even paintings can provide evidence to link particular books with previous owners.

It is equally important to stress that there are many reasons why all the answers we seek will never be found. Most historic books have passed through many hands over time and it is unusual to find one where every link in that provenance chain can be identified (unless we know with confidence it has spent all its life in one institutional or family library). Many people, through history, have chosen not to mark their books, while ownership marks have often been deliberately removed or damaged by later owners. The repair and rebinding of books has also lost us vast quantities of provenance evidence. Many marks in books are observable, but not identifiable because they are coded or cryptic. These are particularly important points in the context of that growing desire for complete provenance audit trails to satisfy buyers: it will sometimes be necessary to explain the impossibility of that request.

David Pearson is a leading expert on provenance and historic books. He retired in 2017 from a career in libraries and now writes and teaches on book history.

2. What do Libraries expect from the Trade? Summarizing an ILAB survey to libraries worldwide (including national and legal deposit libraries)

Feedback following a survey by ILAB, involving leading international libraries, including major national and legal deposit institutions, confirms that relationships between the antiquarian book trade and libraries are, on the whole, very positive and cooperative. Librarians consistently emphasised that most booksellers are willing to engage openly and responsibly on provenance matters. At the same time, institutions noted recurring challenges. Provenance information supplied by the trade is sometimes incomplete, and there have been instances of problematic provenance emerging through auctions, which has reinforced the need for greater diligence. For both ethical and legal reasons, libraries will not acquire material with questionable or insufficient provenance, and they strongly encourage booksellers to provide descriptions that are as detailed as possible, ideally supported by images of bookplates, inscriptions, stamps, annotations, or other ownership marks. While some institutions, such as those in the Netherlands, report that sales are rarely lost due to missing provenance, international expectations are clearly tightening. Following high-profile cases, most notably the Louvre Abu Dhabi investigation, institutions in the Middle East now routinely require purchase invoices, will contact previous owners, and carry out multi-stage verification of ownership history.

In Australia, librarians report increasing institutional sensitivity to provenance issues, even where the legal framework for books is limited. In New Zealand, the Protected Objects Act adds a further layer of responsibility, as documentary heritage objects over 50 years old that are rare or unique may not be exported without government permission, even though they can still be traded domestically.

Libraries also highlighted that copyright issues may intervene even where physical ownership is clear, particularly with photographic or archival material, and that written documentation from original creators or estates can be crucial for future research access. Provenance by descent is frequently confirmed only verbally, which relies heavily on trust between dealer and institution, even though verification may ultimately be impossible.

Libraries advised that provenance assessment is usually conducted on a case-by-case basis rather than through rigid universal criteria, with particular attention paid to any material that may have circulated between 1933 and 1945.

While probing institutional questions can sometimes be perceived by the trade as signs of suspicion, librarians emphasised that such enquiries are primarily intended to allow institutions to understand and manage acquisition risks responsibly. Their core message to the book trade is consistent: clear, careful, and detailed provenance descriptions strengthen confidence, protect both parties, and increasingly determine whether an acquisition can proceed at all.

3. Key Considerations for Booksellers & Practical Checklist for Provenance Research

Is the book marked with ownership evidence (bookplates, inscriptions, stamps, etc.)?

→ Photograph all marks and research names or symbols

Are there any indications of removal from public or religious institutions (library stamps, inventory marks)?

→ Contact the institution (library, archive, religious order) to verify deaccession status.

Are there physical signs of alteration, damage, or suspicious removal (e.g., excised bookplates, erasures, signs of removed ownership)?

→ Document all traces, compare with known examples, and request clarification from the seller.

Does the book come from a high-risk region or era (e.g., WWII looting, conflict zones)? / Is the book a potential object of Nazi-era or WWII spoliation (1933–1945)?

→ Consult Holocaust-era provenance resources and relevant national databases; seek expert advice if warranted.

Is the book listed in stolen property databases (INTERPOL, ILAB Missing Books Register, Art Loss Register)?

→ Search all relevant databases and keep screenshots or confirmation notes in your provenance file.

Can the seller provide provenance documentation (auction records, invoices, catalogues)?

→ Request copies of all available documents and verify them independently whenever possible.

Does the seller offer vague provenance explanations (“family collection”, “inherited”) without documentation?

→ Ask for additional details, dates, previous owners, or supporting paperwork; record the seller’s statement in writing.

Does the item require an export/import licence (e.g., due to national regulations)?

→ Consult national export laws; if required, apply for permits before shipment or advise the buyer accordingly.

Does the item require special export/import documentation (e.g., for bindings with ivory)?

→ Check national and international regulations; obtain certificates before sale or export.

Does the book contain elements protected by CITES (e.g., ivory in bindings)? Is documentation available?

→ Verify CITES status and request or issue the required certificates before transferring ownership.

Where and by whom is the item sold? Prioritize reputable and official dealers.

→ Research the seller’s professional affiliation (i.e. ILAB or national association or other booksellers’ association membership) and check online reputation.

Is the seller’s identity verified? Obtain name, address, and ID copy for private sellers.

→ Record ID details securely and retain them with the transaction file for future reference.

Does the transaction include a clear, written purchase agreement? Retain copies of all documentation.

→ Prepare a signed invoice/contract outlining terms, provenance statements, and guarantees.

If in doubt, try to consult with legal authorities, provenance experts or with your ILAB national associations board before finalizing the acquisition.

4. Provenance Research Resources for Antiquarian Books

4.1 Stolen and Illicit Goods Databases

- ILAB Missing Books Register: <https://missingbooksregister.org/>
The ILAB Missing Books Register is a free, international database created by the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB) for reporting and tracking stolen or missing rare books and manuscripts. It allows booksellers, collectors, institutions, and law enforcement to list and search for items, supporting the recovery of lost or missing antiquarian books or material.
- INTERPOL Stolen Art Database: <https://www.interpol.int/Crimes/Cultural-heritage-crime>
A global police database of cultural objects reported as stolen by member countries. It supports the identification and recovery of stolen items, accessible to law enforcement, collectors, and dealers.
- FBI National Stolen Art File: <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/violent-crime/art-theft>
A database of art and cultural property reported stolen in the United States and internationally. Maintained by the FBI's Art Crime Team, it's a key reference for verifying provenance.
- Art Loss Register (commercial): <https://www.artloss.com/>
The world's largest commercial database of stolen art, antiques, and collectibles. It offers due diligence services and assists in the recovery of lost and looted items.
- Art Recovery Group: <https://www.artrecovery.com/>
An organization specializing in the investigation and recovery of stolen and looted cultural property. They maintain a private database and offer bespoke recovery solutions.

4.2 Holocaust-Era and WWII Cultural Goods

- Lost Art Database (Germany): <https://www.lostart.de>
Managed by the German Lost Art Foundation, this database documents cultural objects displaced due to Nazi persecution and the Second World War.
- Provenance Database: <https://www.proveana.de/en>
An online platform presenting provenance research funded by the German Lost Art

Foundation, including the Gurlitt trove and related case studies.

- Central Registry of Looted Cultural Property 1933–1945:
<https://www.lootedart.com>
An international resource on Nazi-era looted art, including databases, case studies, and claims guidance. It is widely used by museums and legal professionals.
- ERR Project Database: <https://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/>
Documents artworks looted by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg during WWII, with searchable records from the Jeu de Paume in Paris and other sources.
- DHM Munich Collecting Point:
https://www.dhm.de/datenbank/ccp/dhm_ccp.php?lang=en
A digital archive of ownership records and images for artworks processed at the Allied Central Collecting Point in Munich after WWII.
- Database on the 'Collection Hermann Göring':
https://www.dhm.de/datenbank/goering/dhm_goering.php
Provides documentation of artworks collected by Hermann Göring during the Nazi era, with detailed descriptions and provenance histories.

4.3 Book-specific resources and databases

1. Rare Book Hub: <https://www.rarebookhub.com/>

Rare Book Hub is a comprehensive online research platform focused on rare, antiquarian, and collectible books, as well as related printed and manuscript materials such as maps, letters, broadsides, photographs, and prints. It serves collectors, booksellers, librarians, and researchers by aggregating data from across the global rare book market and making it accessible through a unified interface.

While some features are freely accessible (e.g. auction listings), the transaction history and analysis tools are available to subscribers. Overall, Rare Book Hub is one of the most powerful and data-rich platforms available to antiquarian booksellers for conducting market and provenance research.

Key Features:

- Auction Records Database: Rare Book Hub offers access to over 10 million auction and dealer catalogue records, some dating back to the 19th century. These entries often include details like ownership inscriptions, bookplates, condition notes, and sale history, all crucial for provenance research.

- **Bibliographic and Dealer Resources:** The site also includes bibliographic data, dealer directories, and tools for organizing personal collections, which can be cross-referenced with provenance notes.

For antiquarian booksellers, Rare Book Hub is invaluable for tracing when and where a specific book has appeared at auction or in dealer catalogues, helping to confirm ownership claims, link books to notable collections, and identify gaps or patterns in provenance history.

2. CERL Provenance Information:

<https://www.cerl.org/resources/provenance/geographical>

The above-mentioned portal is an exceptional tool developed by the [Consortium of European Research Libraries \(CERL\)](#), specifically to support the study of book ownership and provenance across Europe and beyond.

This resource brings together a wide array of international & national databases, catalogues, and digital projects that document copy-specific features in early printed books, such as inscriptions, bookplates, shelf-marks, and bindings. It is organized geographically, allowing users to explore provenance-related initiatives by country or region. This is particularly useful for antiquarian booksellers because it helps trace the origin and ownership history of books, identify historical collectors or libraries, and authenticate potentially significant copy-specific evidence.

3. WorldCat

<https://search.worldcat.org/>

WorldCat is the world's largest online library catalogue, containing records for hundreds of millions of books and other materials held by tens of thousands of libraries worldwide. It is managed by OCLC (Online Computer Library Center), a global library cooperative. At its core, WorldCat aims to inform which libraries in the world hold which books, and in which editions.

4. The British Library:

<https://bl.libguides.com/guides>

Research guides are provided by the British Library, that can be used for research to help using the vast British Library catalogue, request collection items to consult and explore freely available electronic resources.

5. English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC)

<https://datb.cerl.org/estc>

The English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) is the most comprehensive resource available for the output of the printing press in the English-speaking world before 1801.

ESTC is a bibliography that aims to record every distinct letterpress item produced during the hand-press era in these regions. It is also a union catalogue that lists copies of those

items held by libraries and other owners around the world as well as links to digital reproductions where available. Begun in the late 1970s and with its roots in Pollard and Redgrave's Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, & Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad 1475-1640 (STC), ESTC currently contains about 500,000 records and more than 3 million holdings. It is co-managed by the British Library and ESTC North America (ESTC/NA). *Currently hosted by CERL following the 2023 cyber-attack on the BL.*

6. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography - DNB:

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/>

The ODNB contains over 63,000 biographies, 75 million words and 12,000 portraits of significant, influential or notorious figures who shaped British history. *Behind a paywall, but free to holders of most UK public library cards.*

7. Australian Dictionary of Biography - ADB:

<https://adb.anu.edu.au/>

The Australian Dictionary of Biography is Australia's pre-eminent dictionary of national biography. In it you will find concise, informative and fascinating descriptions of the lives of significant and representative persons in Australian history.

5. Paid Academic Research

For complex material, especially manuscripts and early printed works, many experienced booksellers also rely on paid academic consultants as part of their provenance research. These specialists can provide expert assistance with paleography, language identification, historical context, and attribution, often clarifying details that are not accessible through standard reference works or databases. Members of ANZAAB, for example, report using paid consultants for research on medieval manuscripts in Romance languages, early Eastern-language manuscripts, British colonial manuscripts, Spanish colonial material, and Japanese manuscripts and printed works. While this kind of expertise involves additional cost, it can be invaluable when dealing with rare, high-risk, or high-value material, helping to establish authenticity, refine dating, identify ownership marks, and resolve uncertainties that would otherwise remain unanswered.

6. Major international reference libraries

Alongside their own reference collections, many booksellers make regular use of major international reference libraries to support provenance research (see catalogues listed under 4.3). These institutions offer unparalleled access to specialist catalogues, archival resources, and expert staff. Frequently consulted examples include the

British Library in London,
the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London,

The Grolier Club in New York,
the Frick Art Reference Library (also New York), or
the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

When in-house resources reach their limits, booksellers frequently turn to librarians at major institutions for assistance in identifying ownership marks, tracing historical collections, and resolving difficult attribution questions. Where possible, bookplates, inscriptions, stamps, and previous ownership names are systematically checked against these sources, often yielding critical information for establishing provenance.

7. Guides & Further Reading

1. Provenance Terminology

RBMS Controlled Vocabularies: Provenance Evidence Terms:
https://rbms.info/vocabularies/provenance/tr_idx65.htm

This portal is part of the RBMS Controlled Vocabularies for Use in Rare Book and Special Collections Cataloguing, maintained by the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the American Library Association.

The page listing “Provenance Evidence Vocabulary”, provides standardized terms to describe various forms of ownership and copy-specific marks in books, such as bookplates, autographs, annotations, and stamps. This controlled vocabulary helps cataloguers and booksellers describe provenance evidence clearly and consistently in records and sales descriptions.

2. Books & Guides on Book Provenance Research

1. **David Pearson – Provenance Research in Book History: A Handbook** (Second Edition, 2019)
The most comprehensive and practical guide to identifying and interpreting ownership evidence in books. Covers everything from inscriptions and bookplates to bindings and auction records.
2. **David Pearson – Books as History: The Importance of Books Beyond Their Texts** (2008, revised 2021)
Explores the broader cultural significance of books as physical objects, including how provenance contributes to their historical value.

3. Courses, Workshops & Online Learning

1. **Rare Book School (RBS) – University of Virginia**

- Courses: Provenance: Tracing Owners & Collections (taught by David Pearson) and Introduction to Descriptive Bibliography:
<https://rarebookschool.org>

2. London Rare Books School (LRBS) – University of London

- Courses on book history, descriptive bibliography, and provenance studies:
<https://www.ies.sas.ac.uk/study-training/study-weeks/london-rare-books-school>

3. CERL (Consortium of European Research Libraries) Webinars and Training Materials

- Regular online seminars and recorded training on provenance:
<https://www.cerl.org/services/seminars>

4. RBMS Webinars and Guides

- RBMS (Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of ALA, the American Library Association) offers vocabularies, guidelines, and occasional workshops: <https://rbms.info>

5. ILAB Symposia about Provenance & other related topics

- Online resources:
<https://www.youtube.com/@ilabbooksellers2253/videos> & the ILAB website : <https://ilab.org>

8. Recommended Record-Keeping and Due Diligence

Effective record-keeping and due diligence are central to responsible bookselling and form an important safeguard for both dealers and buyers. In jurisdictions where it is required, such as Australia, Japan, and Switzerland, booksellers must verify the identity of the seller and maintain accurate records of each transaction; in Switzerland, for example, documentation relating to cultural property must be retained for up to thirty years. Dealers should also familiarize themselves with national export and import regulations, particularly in countries where cultural heritage laws impose restrictions on the movement of printed or manuscript material. Beyond legal compliance, the use of stolen book registers, including the ILAB Missing Books Register, as well as commercial resources such as the Art Loss Register, provides an additional layer of protection and helps to ensure that material offered for sale has not been reported missing or unlawfully removed. Maintaining thorough records, checking available databases, and understanding relevant legislation collectively strengthen due diligence practices and support the integrity of the trade.