Increasing the Visibility of Slavic Medieval Manuscripts

Author Note

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Introduction

Discovery. It means different things to different people. It rarely happens quickly. More often, it involves peeling away layers of meaning to discover a hidden essence. Even with a revelation, discovery resembles sculpting; refining the revelation to reveal its essence. Slavic medieval manuscripts, appearing at first glance to be poor orphans, have revealed themselves to be giants of human dignity. They represent the survival through unimaginable sufferings of marginalized people during truly evil times.

Access to these Slavic manuscripts, however, presents unique problems to the scholar. Western institutions tend to marginalize Slavic manuscripts. I believe this marginalization comes from the poor condition of many manuscripts and because of misconceptions about their intellectual value. Only recently has inter-disciplinary interest expanded manuscript research beyond previous boundaries through the technologies of information science and the viewpoints of literary criticism, historiography, and hypertext theory.

I describe here my discovery of the cultural heritage of Slavic manuscripts and my application of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to them. I also describe efforts to preserve and provide access to these artifacts through conventional conservation techniques and through electronic publishing.

Discovery of the Hidden Treasures

My quest started innocently enough as a class assignment; yet that assignment transformed my life into a treasure hunt. Christopher de Hamel's *A History of Medieval Manuscripts* (2001) provided the treasure map. The interplay of color and gold on the images illuminated my soul. Seeking further, I searched the Internet.
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First, the Internet led to Hilandar Research Center, the heart of Slavic manuscript studies in the Americas and the largest microfilm collection of Slavic manuscripts in the world. Hilandar revolutionized Slavic studies through universal access to treasures formerly remote and forbidden to women.

Next, the Internet revealed the Summer School for Digital Preservation of Slavic Medieval Manuscripts. We studied theories and methods of physical and digital preservation and visited the Historical and Archival Church Institute (HACI) in Sofia, Bulgaria. HACI contained treasures that reflected incredible dedication by scribes long gone. The manuscripts contained profound wisdom and artistic expression, and their format displayed a resemblance to post-modern electronic hypertexts. Yet, the appalling poverty of those poor, orphan manuscripts (see Figures 1 and 2) devastated me. I swore to preserve them; to make available those artistic and intellectual treasures, and to bridge the gap between the East and the West in time and space. You see, Western civilization did not begin with the Renaissance! Behind the book of today, both the printed book of the Renaissance and the electronic text of the Internet, lies a millennium of Orthodox manuscripts, a foundation now forgotten. I resolved to re-draw the treasure map, to polish the gems and make them accessible to popular and scholarly audiences.
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Figures 1,2: Broken spines and covers, torn pages, insect damage, wax, moisture, and neglect…

The Treasure Hunt

Sts. Cyril and Methodius nurtured Slavic literacy in the 9th century, transmitting Byzantine and classical Greek traditions throughout Eastern Europe. Slavic manuscripts then suffered terribly, with an estimated 90 to 95 percent disappearing to Rus, Byzantine, Roman, and Ottoman invaders (Matejic). Some of the earliest extant manuscripts remain locked in foreign libraries in the Vatican, Moscow, Vienna, and London.
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The hunt for Slavic manuscripts began early in the 20th century as scholars searched for Slavic heritage in historical documents and religious manuscripts. The pioneers Evtim Sprostranov and Ivan Gošev visited monasteries and churches in urban and remote mountainous regions to collect the records of the past. Sprostranov (1900) described the first 137 manuscripts and 20 fragments. Gošev (1926-1937) described others. They found some remarkable examples, as depicted in Figures 3 and 4.

Figures 3,4: Gold metalsmithed Gospel Book cover, HACI, #18, Pshinski monastery, and Gospel #250, made by Ioan Kratovski, 15-16th century.

From 1944 to 1990, Soviet governments restricted study of manuscripts in an effort to re-write history. After the Soviet collapse in 1990, international collaboration arose. Annisava Miltenova, of the Bulgarian Academy of Science, and David Birnbaum, of the University of Pittsburgh, built, tested, and analyzed machine-readable corpora of medieval Slavic manuscripts.
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in their project "Repertory of Medieval Bulgarian Literature and Letters" (Miltenova, 2002, 6). Since 1994, the Miltenova-Birnbaum team has described over 300 manuscripts.

Of the 8,480 extant Slavic manuscripts in Bulgarian collections 5,466 reside in the National Library (Gergova and Dipčikova, 1997, 14). The HACI contains 1,500 more. Smaller repositories include the Bulgarian Academy of Science and the University of Sofia Research Center "Ivan Dujčev." Each had its own catalog, and the first union catalog appeared in 1982 (Hristova, Karadžova, and Ikonomova, 1982). Getov cataloged the Greek manuscripts of the HACI in 1997. The National Archeographic Commission finished the first volume of the HACI catalog in 2009 (Hristova, Mussakova, Uzunova, 2009). In other words, scholars steadily but slowly are cataloging Slavic manuscripts.

Cleaning the Dust of Time

We often assume that medieval manuscripts occupy magnificent institutions and are treated like royalty. This Western dream, however, does not extend to Eastern Europe, where thousands of medieval manuscripts remain hidden away.

Words cannot express the tragedy of those disintegrating treasures The manuscripts appeared to me like little orphans, covered with dust, pierced by insects, dismembered and stripped of their precious covers. My preservation assessment of HACI in 2001 (Nikolova-Houston, 2001) determined that almost 60% of them required urgent care due to damage and aging. Seventy three percent of the manuscripts required special care.

I created a database containing descriptive and preservation data for each manuscript. Then, I digitized a few and created the Website "Slavic medieval treasures from Bulgaria." The Website and published reports spurred funding from the Order of Saint Ignatius (an Eastern Orthodox Charity Organization) and a large private donation from Julia Bolton Holloway of...
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Biblioteca e Bottega Fioretta Mazzei in Florence, Italy. These $10,000 allowed us to renovate the HACI facilities and to re-house more than half of the manuscripts. Fighting sickness from the decades of dust (see Figures 5-7) and in spite of contractor delays, we preserved the manuscripts and increased access for the scholarly community.

Figure 5: Performing preservation needs assessment of the collection and measuring each manuscript for archival box storage.
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Figure 6: Before the remodeling: manuscripts wrapped in suspicious black paper, stored in old dusty wooden shelves, subject to insects…All covered with black dust

Figure 7: After the remodeling of HACI: new metal shelves, manuscripts stored in archival boxes, and walls and floors repaired…

Building the Virtual Scriptorium

In 2000, the Internet contained no Websites with images of Slavic manuscripts (Nikolova-Houston, 2001), but only a handful of "Webliographies" of links to other sites and institutions, online catalogs, academic programs, and personal Web pages (e.g., Zubrinic, 1995). Slavic scholars grieved about this lack of resources on the Web and yet largely dismissed the Internet as a research tool or repository of images (Dobreva, 2003). Some complained about lack of consensus about standards of electronic cataloging, transliteration, and digitization (Dobreva, 2003). Others complained about obsolete data formats, linguistic difficulties, and lack of financial support for digitizing manuscripts and resolving copyright issues. Some blamed the wide variety of computer hardware and software (Miletanova, 2002). In addition to the
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complaining, Western libraries lacked primary and secondary sources dedicated to Slavic artifacts.

After renovating the HACI, I surveyed the need for digitization. I surveyed scholars, analyzed the HACI user log, and consulted with the director. All scholars previously and currently working with the collection agreed that some manuscripts, including the parchment manuscripts, the Greek collection, the most endangered, and the most used, should receive priority for digitization. Seven of twelve scholars interviewed would work with an electronic copy, and five would accept a digital copy on paper (Hazen, Horrell, and Merill-Oldham, 1998, 7). I decided to digitize.

My "virtual scriptorium" started with seven CDs of digital manuscript images (e.g., Figures 8 and 9) that helped me to create the Website "Slavic Medieval Treasures from Bulgaria" (Nikolova-Houston, 2002a). That site featured the HACI collection and the devastated condition of its manuscripts against a historical background of manuscript development. During subsequent visits to HACI, I digitized complete manuscripts and selections from others (Nikolova-Houston, 2002b & 2004). Unfortunately, my school erased all three websites upon my graduation in 2008.
The lesson here is that librarians should know the information needs of the academic community, and scholars should inform librarians about the current state of scholarship and provide ideas about increasing access to sources (Nikolova-Houston, 2005). This communication does not always happen. As librarian and scholar, I felt that I could bridge the gap. To invest scholars, I used Participatory Design (PD), which originated in Scandinavia in the 1970s to empower workers by involving them in the design of tools and artifacts. PD draws on the "tacit knowledge" of workers, that is, the implicit or unarticulated knowledge learned and transmitted through experience and apprenticeship. PD resembles user-centered design, but PD is design by users, while user-centered design is design for users (Iivari, 2004, 287). Participatory design does take time, but it is worth the effort. If you wish to try it, keep in mind the value of time for the participants, especially the faculty. Prepare yourself and your project ahead of time through homework and research. Recruit extra participants, because some will drop out. Remember the
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three commandments: Know thy users! Know their needs! Know their sources! Keep in mind the
criteria of Web creation: content, design and navigation. Remember always that intellectual
content must drive the design.

Mining the Marginalia

Historians traditionally focus on great battles and grand personalities. We should not
blame them. Such documents are easy to find. The "grass roots" history hides in obscure
locations, such as the margins of books and manuscripts, as in Figure 10. Even historians who
study marginalia have neglected evidence from the Slavic East due to the multiple barriers of
historical, religious, linguistic and cultural differences.

Figure 10: National Library, Gospel #433, f.66, 1544. [Translation] Oh, Oh, Oh, pity on me,
brothers. I wrote in most difficult times, in one hidden spot, and a premonition came to me, that
they were collecting Janissaries but my children were yet too young for Janissaries Those wicked
betrayers told the wicked

Hagarians, so they came to take
my children. They came with a
friend of mine. I was deeply
troubled and don't know what I
write. Betrayers don't know
themselves neither their children.

Amen.

I studied marginalia from the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans
deprived the non-Islamic portion of this population of some rights, such as equitable taxation, the
right to raise first-born male children, the right to worship openly, and the right to an education.
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The Ottomans also banned the printing press for centuries and created prohibitive prices for paper and writing implements. As a result, extremely few books and manuscripts circulated in the Balkans. The Orthodox Church played a formative role in countering such strictures. This was a story of words not uttered in public, of the yearning for knowledge not available, of words written and hidden in silence, a story of desperation. As related in Načev & Fermandžiev (1984, 67):

“In the year of 1598, there was such sadness and despair…and the Turks arose… Oh! My goodness! What sadness the earth has suffered through! They burned down villages and towns, many churches left desolated, stole holy icons and many people were dragged naked on the ground, some killed by sword, others shot. And no place was left where dead people did not lie - hills, valleys, mountain tops, meadows, everything was covered with dead bodies. And it was a great desolation in this land.”

Another example appears in Figure 11:
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Figure 11: HACI, Menayon #92, f.2, 1794. [Translation]: In the year of 1794. Let it be known that during the tenure of priest Grigorii, the kurdzhalii came to Etropole for the first time and did much destruction, robbing everything they found. They did not come to the church of Holy Trinity. When they left, they took ducats from the agas, because the Turks locked themselves in the tower. And the Christians ran away in the woods. So, when the Christians came back, the Turks locked them in because of the money, that they (Turks) had to give to the kurdzalii, and took them by force from the Christians, 30 bags of ducats and spread those money on all houses so the priest Grigorii had to pay for the metoch 250 groshs. And a great misery happened to the Christians that no human language could describe, and during this time reined the sinful sultan Selim…and the bishop of Lovech was Antim and dedo (grandfather) Peno was a (mager) guard from the village of Zhelyava, of Sveta Troica.

I wrote *Margins and Marginality: Marginalia and Colophons in Slavic manuscripts during the Ottoman Period* as the first comprehensive study of South Slavic marginalia and...
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colophons ever published in the West, documenting the first sustainable evidence of the life of
the common people of the Balkans under Ottoman rule (Nikolova-Houston, 2008). Marginalia
revealed the hidden voices and submerged stories of the people oppressed by foreign rulers for
five centuries (1393-1878).

For this study, I analyzed 146 manuscripts in the HACI that contained marginalia and
colophons. Content analysis yielded 20 categories that clustered into the six thematic groups of
Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLUSTERS</th>
<th>CATEGORIES OF INTELLECTUAL CONTENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The world of the book: the book and its history</td>
<td>Colophons, Book sponsorship, Binding, Scribal notes, Book history, Book plates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The world within: the book and its users</td>
<td>Doodles and illustrations, Epigrams, Inscriptions, Trying the quills, Personal notes, Education-related notes, Readers’ notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The world between: community and the Church</td>
<td>Pilgrimage notes, Commemoration lists, Donations of goods to churches, Church repair documentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The world outside: political &amp; social history</td>
<td>Historical marginalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The world around: nature and the cosmos</td>
<td>Natural, Meteorological, and Astronomical phenomena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The world above: God and the supernatural</td>
<td>Prayers and hymns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Content analysis, the first level of analysis of the corpus of marginalia and colophons.

When taken as a whole, the study corpus presented both the worldview of the authors and
a list of the functions of books in society. General System Theory (Bertalanffy 1968) provided an
interpretive framework for the corpus. Before the Ottoman invasion in 1396, marginalia and
colophons represented a closed system of introspective notes written by and for members of the
Church. After the invasion, the corpus of marginalia and colophons became an open system of
interactions between the central text and writers of the six thematic clusters of Table 1.
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The six thematic clusters related to each other and to the central text through a recursive, seven-layered, nested system. Each cluster's title describes the relationship of the author to a specific segment of the universe. The prepositions (within, between, outside, around, above) indicate an expansion of interest from the central text to the political and social aspects of life, to nature, and eventually back to God. Starting from the central text at the first level, the second level of interactions exists within THE WORLD OF THE BOOK, through book-related marginalia. The third level appears as THE WORLD WITHIN, represented by interactions between the book and its users. The fourth level of interactions describes THE WORLD BETWEEN, through Church-community related marginalia. The fifth level of interactions expands beyond the community and describes THE WORLD OUTSIDE, through historical marginalia. The sixth level focuses on THE WORLD AROUND, through marginalia about natural phenomena and the cosmos. Finally, the seventh level of interactions describes THE WORLD ABOVE, represented by references to God and the supernatural, most commonly, devotional or liturgical passages, returning the system to the word of God. These seven layers of information nest, one inside the other, as shown in Figure 12.
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Sixth cluster, THE WORLD ABOVE: God and the supernatural.


Fourth cluster, THE WORLD OUTSIDE: Political and social history.

Third cluster, THE WORLD BETWEEN:
Community and Church.


First cluster, THE WORLD OF THE BOOK:
The book and its history.

THE WORD OF GOD: The central text
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Figure 12: The seven-layered system representing the worldview of authors of marginalia.

Why did people write in the margins? The manuscript space possibly constituted a haven for marginalia at a time when even stone monuments and buildings were being destroyed. Surviving manuscripts usually were kept in hiding. In addition to the physical security of the manuscript, people possibly believed that by inscribing their names in margins they would receive eternal salvation. Pilgrims inscribed their names to commemoration lists inserted into manuscripts and read during services at the monasteries visited. Other people donated money for manuscript production. Manuscript colophons, bookplates, and book sponsorship marginalia reflect the value placed on books, through series of blessings and curses against stealing. As late as the 19th century, people still believed that books possessed a saving grace to lead Bulgaria from ignorance and servitude. The epigram inscribed by Todor Manastirski (1862) reveals a continuing belief in the saving grace of "you, most beautiful manuscript" for the fight of the Bulgarian nation for independence from the Ottoman empire and for the fight of the Bulgarian Church for independence from the Byzantine Orthodox Church (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: #28 Four Gospels, HACI, Boboševo monastery: [Translation] Ah, you holy ancient times! How do you endure to live in such indescribable ignorance? And you, most beautiful manuscript! Lead our nation, Its salvation depends on you! Oh, you our ancient past! You learned about the Goddess of Wisdom by the Greek hatred! Todor Nenov Manastirski from Elena, 1862, March 1.
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Becoming a Scribe

Since first touching the crumbling Slavic manuscripts, I have felt attached to them. I wished to preserve them, to show them to the world, even to become a scribe, myself. Slavic manuscripts may appear less illuminated than Byzantine or Latin manuscripts, but remember the struggles to create and preserve Slavic manuscripts during the Ottoman rule of the Balkans: lack of materials and the constant fear of imprisonment, torture, and death if discovered.

The decorations of Slavic manuscripts indicate that, during Ottoman rule, Slavic scribes broke from Byzantine tradition and borrowed freely, for example, from Celtic and Latin sources, Persian carpets, and Islamic arts. They also incorporated motifs and elements from folk embroidery, metalwork, and woodcarving. Some decorations resembled labyrinths. Traditionally, walking toward the center of a labyrinth helped the medieval monk to pray and meditate. In manuscripts, those illuminations lead the eye to a focal center, the Holy of Holies, where supposedly resides the sacred Name of God. While looking at those illuminated labyrinths, the reader can pray, walking visually to the center, to the heart of all things.

Scribes created manuscripts as a sacramental act of building the House of the Word of God. Until the middle of the 19th century, Slavic monks copied manuscripts to satisfy the liturgical or devotional needs of a church and as an ascetic practice to test their faith. They worked late into the night, in the freezing cold of winter or the heat of summer, isolated from the world. Marginal notes from the 12th century testify to the challenges:

“Petur Ivanov, a smith, brought this parchment. I froze while I was writing, because I hurried before they take the Triodion [manuscript] away from me” Bitolski Triodion, 12th century, BAS #38 (Hristova, Karadzhova, Uzunova, 2003, 28).
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“I am writing at night, without candlelight, trying to find, forgive me” Miscellany of three manuscripts, 12-13th century, Sankt Petersburg City Public Library, Gr.70, (Hristova, Karadzhova, Uzunova, 2003, 11).

“Woe to me! I cannot continue, because I feel sick. Woe to me! The wind feels so cold and strong” Four Gospels, second half of 13th century, Athens National Library Cod.1796, (Hrisotva, Karadzhova, Uzunova, 2003, 33).

Other examples appears in Figures 14-15:

Figure 14: National Library, #498, f.2b, scribal note: [Translation]: "Oh! I am so hungry! I write in the darkness…"

Figure 15: National Library, Vrachansko Gospel #19, f. 147b, scribal note: [Translation] May God forgive the nun because she used to bring me soft bread and eggs so I can nourish myself

For whatever reason, medieval Slavic scribes rushed to complete their manuscripts. They focused on the text, the Word of God, rather than on the illustrations. Decoration came last, when the text was completed. When illustration became possible, the selection of colors depended on
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availability of materials. Gold came with luxury that only royalty and nobility could afford, and few Christian royalty and nobility survived under Ottoman rule. As a result, Slavic manuscripts produced during the Ottoman rule appear rough, naive, and less illuminated than Western manuscripts of the time. Some decorations remained blank, waiting for gold or pigments. When I copied these, I felt that I should fulfill the scribal intent by adding the gold and pigments.

Following the medieval scribes, I attempt to recreate their artistry through contemporary thought and materials. Medieval scribes illuminated manuscripts with gold leaf, probably because they had few other media: traditional practice required a certain spectrum of tempera pigments, distilled water, and egg yolk. Artists today have available a diversity of materials and media: pigments and paints such as tempera, oil, acrylic, and gouache. I consciously observe traditional patterns but use the colors and materials that I believe the scribes would have used, had those colors and materials been available as they were in Figures 16 and 17.

Figures 16,17: My labyrinths, inspired by the Slepchevo Gospel, 16th century, and a 12th century Byzantine Gospel.
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I learned much as the scribes learned, by recreating the patterns of manuscript illuminations rather than by reading books about the history and art of illuminations. As with the scribes, my hands and eyes have grown heavy and weak during winter cold, summer heat, and late night hours. Errors in situating words, creating margins, and spacing lines have begun to teach me page design.

Illuminating the Public

I believe that contemporary audiences at all levels of education and on both sides of the digital and socio-economic divides can benefit from the medieval treasures. Barriers, however, exist. How can we increase the visibility and usability of these resources? How can we make them relevant to the widest possible audience worldwide? These questions occupied me for over a decade. I tried to resolve them through artifact preservation, Website creation, scholarly publications, and conference presentations. Yet, I failed to reach most people. Thus, I began to recreate the manuscript illuminations and to use them to frame inspirational texts. Starting in March 2009, the exhibitions of these works began to capture the public imagination. Showings became an informal way of teaching about "history from below," about the experience of medieval scribes, and about the need to preserve the originals. To date, I have encountered tens of thousands of patrons through 28 exhibits and 25 festivals or fairs. Direct contact and informal conversations have inspired people more than any other means of communication. Wherever the illuminations appear, people learn about the history of the manuscripts, the art of the ancient scribes, and the challenges imposed by foreign oppressors and the nature elements. By becoming aware, these people appreciate the illustrations. Two examples appear in Figures 18 and 19.
Figure 18: Four Gospel cover with the four evangelists, Sts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, combining different illumination patterns, and enhanced by jewels.

Figure 19: Manuscript illuminations decorating the scriptural passage Gal. 5:22-23.

**A Postscript . . .**

“For when I open a medieval manuscript, this is entirely different from the experience of opening of a printed book, for I am conscious not only of the manuscript but also of how in reception the parchment has been penetrated, of grease stains, thumb marks, erasures, drops of sweat, places where images have been kissed away by devout lips…Every book is a relic of bodily pain, desire, and death” (Camille, 1997, 259)

Slavic manuscripts and early printed books give us an important part of the history of Christianity. When I first encountered Bulgarian medieval manuscripts at the HACI, they reminded me of orphans. Poor and torn clothes concealed human dignity, creativity, and responsibility before God and future generations. Now, I perceive these orphans to be giants of the human spirit. They represent the sufferings of marginalized people during a truly unfortunate
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time. We owe so much to the scribes who wrote those manuscripts and marginalia, and we owe to our children the legacy of their ancestors who wrote each line in blood and tears.

Manuscript arts of calligraphy and illumination truly are relevant to contemporary audiences. Soaked in popular culture, stuffed with junk food, and burdened by kitsch, people have lost that important link to the past that nurtures the soul. People need beauty, meaning, and spiritual value in their lives, provided by objects that represent sacrifice. With drops of blood, sweat, tears, and wax on their pages, the manuscripts speak volumes about history and suffering. We MUST spread that tradition to this generation and pass it on to the next by preserving and providing access to artifacts, but we also must encourage others to reinterpret the artifacts artistically and make them relevant to our times and needs.

During the last twelve years, layer by layer, discoveries revealed to me the essence of Slavic manuscripts. As a librarian, I learned to preserve these treasures from the dust and damage of time and to provide access via the Web. As a scholar, I learned to appreciate their literary and historical dimensions. Now, as an artist and a scribe, I struggle to follow the ancient practices and translate them for contemporary audiences. My discoveries might appear quite modest to you. They changed my life, however, and I hope they will illuminate yours.
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Biographical Sketch

Tatiana Nikolova-Houston, Ph.D., works as a Librarian, Institute for Classical Archaeology, at the University of Texas at Austin, and as Preservation Administrator for the non-profit organization "Society of Folk Dance Historians". Her Master's studies focused on the Preservation and Access for medieval manuscripts, and grew from her assisting Bulgarian manuscript collections by conducting preservation assessments, cataloguing, web publishing, fundraising, archival rehousing, and renovating storage facilities. Her dissertation work studied comprehensively the marginalia and colophons in South Slavic manuscripts produced during the Ottoman rule on the Balkans. Nikolova-Houston holds also a Master's in Biblical Studies. She does research in preservation and access and theoretical application of manuscript marginalia and colophons. Since 2008, she has dedicated her work to popularize Slavic manuscript heritage by artistically recreating their illuminations, exhibiting them to the public, and conducting informal lectures and workshops.