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Smithsonian Institution Libraries Receives World’s Largest Book

The world’s largest published book, according to Guinness World Records, recently was donated to the Smithsonian Institution Libraries by Mr. and Mrs. Theodore P. Janulis of New York. Measuring a full 5 feet by 7 feet when open and weighing 133 pounds, “Bhutan: A Visual Odyssey Across the Last Himalayan Kingdom,” by Michael Hawley, is a visually stunning photography book, capturing more than 100 images of the small Asian country’s rich landscape and culture. “It’s an exciting donation to our collection that we hope will draw people into a fascination with books and libraries,” said Mary Augusta Thomas, associate director of the Smithsonian Libraries.



Eliza Gilligan, Smithsonian Libraries’ conservator, inspects the binding of “Bhutan,” the world’s largest published book.

Bhutan’s rich and unique landscape and culture were ideal subjects for a project of this magnitude. Considered the last Shangri-la, Bhutan sits in the eastern Himalayas and is roughly the size of Switzerland. Its location provides a variety of ecosystems, including semi-tropical forests, savannah grasslands and bamboo jungles. The lush natural setting is coupled with a unique culture. Bhutan is one of the only remaining constitutional monarchies in the world. The majority of Bhutanese people live in rural villages and work on small family farms. Today, they continue to wear the traditional dress of robes and ankle-length dresses woven out of brightly colored fabrics.

“Bhutan” pushed current digital photography, printing and binding technologies to their limits. Each copy requires a gallon of ink, 24 hours of printing time and more paper than the length of a football field. Each digital image was two gigabytes in size, stretching the capabilities

of most computers and printers. The binding was done by the world's oldest book publisher, Acme Bookbinding, and utilizes an Asian fan-folded structure combined with European techniques.

“Bhutan” is the product of four expeditionary trips that Hawley, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology media lab, took with his students. The book's photographs were taken by Hawley and his team, as well as by Bhutanese people who joined the expeditions. A limited edition of 500 copies of the book is being published and sold exclusively through Amazon.com. Proceeds go to the educational nonprofit organization Friendly Planet and will benefit Bhutanese schools, scholars and educational programs. The Libraries hopes to make the book available to the public in future exhibitions, including the proposed Folklife Festival program on Bhutan.

“We look forward to deepening our relationship with the scholars and people of Bhutan through collaborative research programs and the country's possible exhibition in a Smithsonian Folklife Festival,” said Leonard Hirsch, senior policy advisor for the Smithsonian International Center.

“Bhutan” is currently being kept in the Joseph F. Cullman 3rd Library of Natural History, which houses the Smithsonian's collection of rare books in anthropology and natural history. One of the Smithsonian Libraries' 20 branches, its world-class collection contains approximately 10,000 volumes published before 1840 in the fields of anthropology, botany, zoology, paleontology and geology. The Cullman Library's holdings are particularly strong in 17th through 19th-century voyages of exploration, as well as the history of museums and scientific collecting.

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Editors: Downloadable photos of the world's largest published book are available at:

<ftp://sil-guest:9getfiles@ftp.si.edu/Press/Largest-Book>