

## The Library of the United Nations Office at Geneva - Custodian of League of Nations and United Nations Heritage

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### Abstract:

*The Library of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), previously the League of Nations Library, was founded in 1919 and became the UNOG Library when the League's assets were transferred to the United Nations in 1946. The Library continues to carry out its historic role "to serve as a centre of international research and an instrument of international understanding", thus keeping alive the visionary idea of John D. Rockefeller Jr., who, in 1927, contributed two million dollars to endow the League of Nations with a modern library suitable for the study of international relations.*

*With collections dating back to 1919 and totaling more than one million volumes, 9,000 serials, numerous official government documents, as well as over three million documents from the United Nations system publications collection, the UNOG Library is the largest in the United Nations system. It specializes in international law, international relations, economics, politics and the social sciences.*

*In addition to these library collections, the UNOG Library is the curator of the exceptional archival collection of both the League of Nations and the United Nations in Geneva. Inscribed in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2009, the three linear kilometers of archives of the League of Nations – the world's first intergovernmental organization for peace and cooperation – have exceptional heritage value and represent an outstanding resource for historical research on international relations. The most significant part of the archives of the United Nations in Geneva relate to the drafting of the Universal Declaration and the Covenants on Human Rights, and include other essential material produced from 1946 to present by the successive human rights institutions, by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and by other UN Secretariat entities in Geneva.*

*The UNOG Library is also the custodian of a collection of more than 2,000 artworks dating from the League of Nations period to the present, most of them donated by Member States. From a heritage perspective, the collection – a representation of artistic endeavor from all corners of the world – is a unique and precious part of the story of internationalism, which began in Geneva in 1919.*

*This paper will present these invaluable heritage collections and the role of the Library not only in terms of their preservation – including today's challenge of digital preservation – but also in making them available to an increasing audience worldwide. Standing by this commitment, the Library has developed an outreach programme and is implementing digitization projects in partnership with other*

*renowned libraries and academic institutions, as well as with United Nations member states governments.*

**Keywords : League of Nations, United Nations, Heritage, Preservation, Digitization**

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## **Introduction**

*“The instrument forged in Geneva which we transmit to the Organisation of tomorrow in the spirit in which it has hitherto been used will constitute a pledge for the future”.* Max Petitpierre, Delegate of Switzerland to the last League of Nations Assembly in April 1946.

The Library of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), previously the League of Nations Library, became the UNOG Library when the League’s assets were transferred to the United Nations in 1946. One of the few major library institutions that remained untouched after World War II in Europe, the UNOG Library houses unique and historically important collections and acts as a safe house for rare items that capture some of the key political and social developments of the 20th century.

Today the UNOG Library carries out a mandate spanning three key objectives:

1. To serve as a central Library for UNOG, the specialized agencies and other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations headquartered in Geneva, for the Permanent Missions in Geneva, and for qualified external researchers.
2. To act, through its Institutional Memory Section, as a repository for all records of the Organization that have enduring historical or administrative value, including the League of Nations Archives and paper related to pacifists movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
3. To manage and promote UNOG’s Cultural Activities Programme and Artworks collection.

Through these mandates, the UNOG Library aims to uphold the vision of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who, in 1927, made a significant donation to the League of Nations that enabled the construction of the library building “to serve as a centre of international research and an instrument of international understanding”.

## **1. The Library as “natural” custodian of heritage assets**

### **a. The League of Nations Library**

Founded in the wake of the First World War, the League of Nations was established in order to provide the world with relief from armed conflict. The Covenant of the League of Nations forms the first part of the Versailles peace treaty of 1919. It outlined the goals, organs, procedures and commitments of the League, whose headquarters was established in Geneva. As an essentially political organization, the League was entrusted with keeping peace through international law, arms control, conference diplomacy, and the idea of collective security. It also aspired to regulate international cooperation in a wide range of activities, from drug control to intellectual cooperation, from refugee protection to public health and transit and communications standardization.

On 10 January 1920 the League of Nations officially came into being with the entry in force of the peace treaty. The organization consisted of an Assembly and a Council, both assisted by a Permanent Secretariat, which was the technical organ of the League. Appointed and headed by the Secretary-General, the Secretariat was set up in Geneva, first in the Palais Wilson and later in the Palais des Nations. There were 42 founding member states in 1919. A further 21 countries joined between 1920 and 1937, but 7 left, withdrew or were expelled before 1946

The League of Nations Library, created along with the League's Secretariat to service the delegates to the Assembly and Council, as well as the Secretariat staff members, was conceived as a modern specialized Library of 90,000 volumes at the time of its creation.

In September 1927, shortly after the League had decided to construct its own building, the Palais des Nations, it was offered two million dollars by John D. Rockefeller Jr. to build and endow a library. It was Rockefeller's idea that this library would not only serve as an information center for the Secretariat of the League, but also as a world center for the study of international questions.

The Rockefeller grant helped crystallize the underlying principles of the library, which had a twofold objective. In the first place, it was to be a working library for the League and provide the information necessary for the decisions made by the League. Second, it was to be a library that would express the civilization and culture of the various countries so that the people of the world would come to understand each other and, through such understanding, to live together in peace.

The collections formed a Reference Library of international relations covering all of the activities of the League in political, social and economic questions, finance, health, international law and related subjects.

In addition to acquired monographs and periodicals on subjects of interest to the work of the League, its collections included the Organization's own publications— Official documentation, such as the *Official Journal* and minutes of various organs and committees, as well as Sales Publications. The League Library created a network of depository libraries, to which the official documentation was sent.

In return, government documents supplied free of charge by the Member States played a very important role in the library's collection of current information. They contained official data often not available from any other source. The library regularly received official documents and gazettes of the states, colonies territories, and other administrative units, official statistical publications and national law.

The collection in law and politics was the strongest one of its kind in Europe. A special effort was made to form a complete collection in international and national law and to make these works easily accessible, because a large part of the work of the League consisted of comparing national legislation.

It also acquired an exceptional collection of rare books concerning international relations, diplomacy, peace and disarmament, some of them dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The League Library also started developing archival collections on the history of international relations. In 1931, an essential archival "fonds" on the Peace Movement was acquired: the private papers of Alfred Fried and Bertha von Suttner, Austrian pacifists from the end of the nineteenth century, preserving records from an important phase of the peace movement prior to 1914.

## **b. The Library of the United Nations in Geneva**

In 1946, after its last Assembly took place, the assets of the League of Nations were transferred to the newly created United Nations.

On 19 April 1948, in a letter addressed to Julian Huxley, Director-General of UNESCO, Gunnar Myrdal, Executive Secretary of the newly established Economic Commission for Europe, explained the crucial role played in Europe by the Geneva Library: *“The war has created terrible havoc in Europe’s libraries; some of them have been completely or partly destroyed, others have been depleted or not kept up-to-date. The United States, on the other hand, and the East Coast and the New York area in particular, can boast of a great number of excellent libraries. It would be a great pity if the United Nations were to injure Europe’s library situation yet further by transferring such an important collection as the one in Geneva to the U.S.A. where it is not needed”*.

The Library and its collections remained in Geneva and became the United Nations Library at Geneva.

From its creation and the construction of a new building, the library had been intended to become the League’s institutional memory, with a Museum planned at the design stage of the building. The Museum became a reality in 1947, following the transfer of the League’s assets to the United Nations, to exhibit archival documents, portraits and the most significant artefacts of the history of the League of Nations.

The property of the League of Nations Secretariat archives was also turned over to the newly created United Nations. However, apart from the above-mentioned peace movements archival collections, the archival collections /fonds were not placed under the responsibility of the Library.

While some of the League's files were transferred to the Departments and Sections of the United Nations Secretariat in New York to serve as the foundations of their administrative or political activities, the bulk of the League's archives was kept in the vaults of the Palais des Nations.

In the late 1950s, at a time when historians started focusing their attention on the League of Nations archives, the files that had been transferred to New York gradually found their way back to Geneva, and were placed under the responsibility of the Library, which, having acquired the solid reputation of being a center for research and intellectual exchange, was considered the most natural place. Thanks to funds offered by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the League of Nations archives were classified, lists were established, and the archives were finally opened to the general public in 1969. The League of Nations Archives and Historical Collections became a Library Unit, and a special Reading Room was established within the Library's premises.

During the same period, the registry and records management functions of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) were placed under the authority of the Administration Division, and were not related to the Library.

In June 2000, having identified the need to ensure a stronger coordination between records management and the management of historical archives, the UNOG Director-General transferred all UNOG archive-related functions to the Library. The archives of the UN in Geneva include those concerning human rights institutions, as well as those of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

This was followed by a ten-year period of efforts to reform records management procedures and practices, to better preserve historical archives, and to make this heritage – of more than 6 linear kilometers of archival material – more accessible to a large public worldwide.

In 2009, the exceptional heritage value of the archives of the League of Nations, and their outstanding importance for historical research on most of the countries of the world – Member States or not – was recognized when they were included in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register.

The Cultural Activities Programme (CAP) was added to the UNOG Library’s set of responsibilities formally during the UN International Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations in 2001. Since then, the UNOG Library has consistently and coherently built on its mandates to become a center for intellectual, academic and cultural outreach to the global community and a hub for cultural diplomacy and academic exchange.

The responsibility for the management of the UNOG and League of Nations artwork collection was also added to the functions of the UNOG Library, which became the curator of a collection of more than 2,000 artworks, most of them donated by Member States.

## **2. Facilitating access to and preserving heritage assets: challenges and opportunities**

The legacy of the League of Nations is clearly evidenced in the structure and functions of the United Nations, whose specialized agencies are largely founded on the work initiated by the League of Nations. As such, the position of the organization as a ground-breaking attempt to create international peace and cooperation – in fields spanning from refugee protection to public health, from intellectual cooperation to minority rights or from transport and communications to global solutions to the economic crisis – cannot be disputed, and its contribution is recognized by the many researchers and scholars who consult the archives to this day.

From a heritage perspective, the artwork collection – a representation of artistic endeavor from all corners of the world – is a unique and precious part of the story of internationalism, which began in Geneva in 1919.

There has been indeed a huge increase of interest in the League’s heritage – including architecture, archives and artworks – in the past ten years, not only from academics, but also from Member States, civil society, and the general public.

In the early 2000s, the Library management faced the following situation: the heritage collections had been accumulated over the years, but not necessarily properly curated, due to a lack of resources to be dedicated to these areas. Recognizing the pressing need to take remedial actions, the UNOG Library progressively redeployed existing resources – human, financial and space – in order to provide wider access to and to preserve these invaluable archival and artwork collections.

A set of measures were taken over the years, culminating in a major restructuring exercise within the Library in 2013, which created the Institutional Memory Section, equal to the Library Services Section in number of staff. The Institutional Memory Section’s mission includes all aspects of the institutional memory life-cycle, from the management of records to the preservation of archives and their dissemination to the international community, while the mission of the Library Services Section is to support information and research needs of the United Nations system and all other authorized users. The UNOG Library structure is supplemented by a third pillar: the Strategic Planning, Programme Evaluation and Outreach

Section, which includes the management of Cultural Activities and of the artwork collection.

**a. Facilitating access to heritage assets worldwide**

A few months prior to the restructuring, in 2012, renovation projects in the Library Reading Rooms had included the consolidation of in-person reference services for the League of Nations and United Nations Archives at Geneva in what used to be the Periodicals Reading Room. Named after John D. Rockefeller Jr., to celebrate the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his donation to the League Library, this room now offers optimal research conditions and a “one-stop shop” for scholars working on international relations and diplomacy since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Research in the archives are facilitated by a set of tools and finding aids which have been developed over the last decade, and which include an [online catalogue](#)<sup>1</sup> and a [Research Guide](#) for the League of Nations<sup>2</sup>. The online catalogue offers an overview over the publicly accessible collections and allows for the viewing of digitized documents. The Guide contains information about the holdings and structure of the archive, catalogues and guides, digitized finding aids, useful databases and online resources, links to related collections and further resources.

The rising popularity of the archival material was reflected in the 103 percent increase in reference questions received in 2013, and the UNOG Library recognizes the need to implement large scale digitization in order to provide virtual access to many of the items in its rich collections. Digitization projects were indeed initiated as early as 2000, with the digitization of the [League of Nations photo collection](#) in partnership with the University of Indiana (U.S.). The papers of the last Secretary-General of the League of Nations, Sean Lester, the papers of the Austrian pacifist, Bertha von Suttner, the collection of UNOG human rights photos and original records related to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have been digitized and are available through the archives online catalogue. Key documents displayed in the League of Nations Museum have been made available to a large public through the [World Digital Library](#). In addition to these rather small scale projects carried out in-house, the Official Documents issued by the main organs of the League, the Assembly, the Council and the Secretariat are currently being digitized by an external company on the Library’s budget.

The resources required to digitize the vast collections on a large scale are lacking, however, and the Library is seeking partnerships which will help accelerate the process. More and more governments and heritage institutions express their interest in funding the digitization of portions of the archives of special interest to them, and projects have been recently launched with the Government of Georgia, the Government of Lithuania, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. A large part of the archives related to refugee protection, the “Nansen Fonds”, digitized by the National Archives of Norway will soon be made available online, and more projects are currently being discussed with several potential partners.

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<sup>1</sup> An archives management system, scopeArchiv, was acquired in 2003 and the description of the various fonds and collections is done – in general down to the file level – using ISAD-G, the international standard developed by the International Council on Archives. In view of the volume of files to be described, this is still a work in progress.

<sup>2</sup> Using Springshare’s Libguides

## **b. Preserving heritage assets**

League and UNOG paper archives are currently in satisfactory condition, but due to their acidity content, natural deterioration is to be expected. Preventive preservation measures – such as the rehousing of the files with acid-free material – are undertaken on a continual basis to reduce this effect. The UNOG Library employs a professional binder trained in conservation treatment, who executes most urgent repairs for individual pieces. Making the documents available online will also help to preserve them from any damage physical consultations may cause.

The UNOG Library faces significant storage and conservation challenges to its rich collections of historical and cultural material. While the collections continue to grow, the 75 year-old building and its associated maintenance problems pose increasing risks to their long-term preservation. A survey of storage conditions was done in 2004 by a preservation expert, following a flooding which affected UNOG archives. The recommended short-term measures, which were provided in order to protect documents and which could be executed by the Library, were implemented. Concerning recommendations for the long-term, which consist of providing new or dramatically improved storage facilities, the UNOG Library is actively looking for solutions within the framework of UNOG's Strategic Heritage Plan. This project, spear-headed by the Director-General, plans for the renovation of the Palais des Nations and upgrading and creating storage in line with international standards for its millions of books, journals, archives, artworks and official documentation, which are an integral part of it.

The Strategic Heritage Plan will in particular have to take into account the artworks collection. Many of the artworks were donated by Member States in the 1930s at the time of the construction of the Palais des Nations, and are an integral part of this outstanding “Art Deco” monument. The artwork collection continues to expand, with about ten items donated by United Nations Member States each year. It is physically scattered, on display, throughout this huge building, sometime compared – by size – to the “Château de Versailles”. Managing this collection is a challenging task for the Library, as there is currently no scope for increasing resources in this area beyond the redeployment of one post, done in 2013. This post has been assigned to the establishment of a management plan for and of a complete inventory of the collection. However, as the United Nations rules and regulations specify that donations should not entail any maintenance costs for the UN, some of the necessary conservation works can only rely on external donors.

## **c. Making cultural heritage visible through outreach activities**

The UNOG Library promotes its services within the framework of a communication strategy. Outreach activities raise the visibility of the Library as an institution, but also of the Organization's institutional memory and heritage assets. Targeted audiences include internal stakeholders, such as UN senior management, diplomats and governmental officials and external stakeholders, such as academics, education and cultural institutions, the civil society and finally, the general public.

The Library as a whole, and the Institutional Memory Section in particular, engage in discussion groups, conferences and professional associations in Geneva and on an international level. It also organizes conferences and symposia on different historical or cultural issues related to the work of the League of Nations and the United Nations. It actively participates in the coordination and activities of the [History of International Organizations Network](#) (HION) based in Geneva, which provides a platform for the “exchange of information between researchers, archivists and other people interested by the

work on the history of international organizations”. These activities allow for a better understanding of the academic environment and current research needs. The insights gained are used to determine special projects and partnerships.

Seminars on methodology for historical research are organized for groups of students of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, the University of Geneva, and International Schools of Switzerland, and tours of the League of Nations Museum are offered to high-school and university students from all over the world.

The best vehicle to make history come alive for external and internal visitors at all levels is the League of Nations Museum, created in 1947 in the Library premises.

In 2009, the registration of the League of Nations Archives to UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register underlined the importance of the archives as global heritage and the responsibilities of UNOG as its owner. The increased interest which resulted from the registration led to the renovation of the League of Nations Museum in 2010, with an updated permanent exhibition entitled “From the League of Nations to the United Nations”, a new multimedia space, and a temporary exhibition space.

The exhibition displays outstanding and unique archival documents and objects, as well as multimedia material, which tell not only the history of the League but also how it paved the way to the United Nations activities. Through collaboration with UNOG’s visitor service, visits have expanded dramatically in the past three years. The Museum, which participates in the Geneva Museums Association, is part of the international city’s cultural landscape.

As the 70th anniversary of the creation of the United Nations and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the League of Nations draw nearer, the necessity to further develop the Museum to highlight continuities between the two organizations led to the decision to rename it as the “United Nations Museum at Geneva” and to present thematic aspects of the United Nations history and current work.

Drawing on cultural heritage assets and developing further partnerships with cultural institutions, the Library will fit into a wider strategy currently implemented by the United Nations Office at Geneva, which aims to demonstrate how, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, international organizations in Geneva make a difference to people worldwide.