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Online Auction Services Orders: An Order Librarian's Reflections on OLAS

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Beginning in October 2000, the UNC-Chapel Hill Academic Affairs Library began acquiring material sold through eBay.com auctions. Although the Library had acquired material through auctions in the past (through auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's), obtaining material from eBay.com established a precedent for the Library, engendering a new workflow that was eventually named Online Auction Services (OLAS). As the Academic Affairs Library's Order Librarian, I registered with eBay.com, often placed the bids (under guidance from the selectors) and coordinated the creation of the firm order record, payment to the seller and receipt of the selected item. OLAS has proven a challenging, rewarding, fascinating and sometimes frustrating experience for me and other staff members. This article will provide a narrative of our experience with OLAS, as well as a description of the guidelines we developed to ensure bibliographic accuracy.

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
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graphic and fiscal controls of this new
process.

My first encounter with the extremely
fluid e-world of OLAS occurred in July 2000,
when the North Carolina Collection ex-
pressed interest in acquiring a Thomas Wolfe
book signed by Ernest Hemingway. In
preparation for this new experience, I regis-
tered with eBay.com and worked with the
Curator of the North Carolina Collection to
place a bid. In spite of our efforts, we were
outbid three times—even after bidding as
high as $2511. A few months later, however,
the Library did successfully bid, order and
receive its first OLAS order. On behalf of
the Photographic Archivist, I placed a bid on
eBay for a photograph of African-Americans
taken in 1903. Because the seller was not set
up to accept a credit card payment, I could
not use my state-issued Visa Purchasing Card
(which would have been the quickest, easiest
and most convenient method of payment).
I explored the option of indirectly paying the
seller through PayPal.com, but—after con-
sulting with the Director of Financial Plan-
ing and Administrative Services—we deci-
ded (due to some snags) that I would not
use PayPal to prepay the seller at that point
in time. Consequently, the order was handled
as a “classical prepayment”—a term I coined
for prepaying vendors with checks (as op-
posed to using a credit card). This method of
prepayment is a rather cumbersome and time-
consuming process due to the Library’s re-
strictive prepayment policy and the many
steps—not to mention handling by various
departments—it involves. The item was re-
ceived approximately a month after the order
record was created and released in Innopac.

The next several eBay bids (for various
items, including a 1694 New England coin,
a North Carolina obsoleto coin and pho-
ographs of African-Americans dating back to
the 19th century)—placed on behalf of (or by)
the Photographic Archivist or the Keeper of
the North Carolina Collection Gallery—
proved successful and the firm order trans-
actions were performed in a similar manner.
The sellers (who almost always required pre-
payment) were prepaid with checks. The
items were usually received a few weeks af-
ster the order records were created and re-
leased. Purchase orders were attached to the
“invoicing” (comprised of emails from the
sellers indicating the total price and the item)
and delivered to Accounting staff, who would
forward the paperwork to the University Ac-
counts Payable Department (which would
actually cut the check). In spite of some snags
and the complications of relying on a clas-
sic prepayment method (ill-suited for the
OLAS process, since sellers expected pay-
ment in a timely manner, in addition to the
fact the buyer is obligated to buy the item
when the bid is successful and has only three
days to make arrangements with the seller),
the new workflow became somewhat routine,
though extraneous to the larger firm order
operation.

A breakthrough in the process occurred
in December 2000, when I indirectly prepaid
a seller through PayPal.com. Many eBay
sellers are, in fact, set up to accept payments
through PayPal.com or BidPay.com—the
former’s Website announces that it’s “The way
to receive and send money online” and the
latter’s Website states its more specific focus
in allowing its users to “pay for your auction
by money order” and “receive approval from
the Director of Financial Planning and
Administrative Services, I registered with
PayPal.com and completed an online form
which resulted in paying the seller. While
I’m not completely clear how this works,
PayPal (according to its Website) only re-
quires that the buyer enter the seller’s email
address and the amount—“The recipient gets
an email that says ‘You’ve Got Cash’!...[they]
can then collect their money by clicking a link in the email. Relieved that I
could finally transcend the classical prepay-
ment process, I was hopeful that I could now
expedite and simplify the OLAS workflow.
Alas, my sense of triumph was deflated dur-
ing a subsequent OLAS transaction (result-
ing in the acquisition of a medal from the
1939 New York World’s Fair) when I dis-
covered that the seller could not accept a pay-
ment through PayPal. Once again, I was
forced to revert to the classical prepayment
process—and the seller was eventually pre-
paid with a check. In the next two eBay or-
ders/transactions, the sellers did accept
PayPal payments, so my hopes of using
PayPal to pay most sellers were renewed. But
I was disappointed when I hit a new snag—
one that required almost Herculean efforts
to overcome. In the course of trying to pay for
a photo of ‘‘Chang & Eng Siamese Twins P.T.
Barnum,’’ PayPal informed me that I reached
a $250 limit. This surprised me in spite of
the fact that the fine print of the User Agree-
ment stated, “Unverified users are limited to
$250 of spending until the confirm an email
address and bank account”—a minor detail
that I glossed over in my zealous haste to set
up an account with PayPal. In order to raise
this “spending limit,” I was instructed to “add
bank account information”—i.e., bank name,
account type, bank routing number, check-
ings/savings account, etc. Baffled by this new
and annoying obstacle, I used BidPay to pay
the seller (in spite of the $10 fee) and then
consulted with the Director of Financial Plan-
ing and Administrative Services. She in turn
referred me to the Purchasing Card Ad-
ministrator. I contacted her, inquiring if the
bank who issued the card could possibly relay
this bank account information (so I could thereby
fulfill the verification requirement and raise
the spending limit). I voiced my skepticism
that this could be done because it would be
information regarding a specific individual
account—but I hoped that I would receive a
response that would allow me to raise the limit
and unseat my hands. The reply I received
was both unexpected and disconcerting. She
reported that, according to the Director of
Internal Audit, “PayPal is a service/organization
and we cannot use this vendor.” Moreover,“...we cannot pay for services on
the purchasing [state-issued Visa] card.” I
was stunned by this because I did not regard
PayPal as a service (in the sense of an agency
that provides a non-physical product), but as
a vendor (albeit, a virtual one) we paid to
purchase material for the collection (in much
the same manner that we would pay other
vendors to purchase the requested material
directly from the publisher, distributor or pro-
ducer and supply it to the Library). The pro-
hibition, of course, also extended to
BidPay.com and essentially resulted in a
monorail on OLAS orders until it could be
resolved.

Months later, the Director of Financial
Planning and Administrative Services ob-
tained approval from the Director of Internal
Audit for using the state-issued Visa to pre-
pay these third-party “services” after issuing
a justification for the utilization of these
Websites. This development signified a piv-
total point in the OLAS process. The
Director of Financial Planning and Administra-
tive Services issued a policy statement and pro-
cedures for OLAS transactions. The new
policy shifted the responsibility of the actual
bidding to the selectors and made the excel-
ent point that “Since the nature of such pur-
chases fall outside the main business stream
employed by Acquisitions for obtaining li-
brary materials, the standard procedures used
to purchase most materials are not appropri-
ate for on-line auction purchases and create
inefficiencies.” The objective of the new
procedures was to “accomplish two goals,”
as signing “the various tasks/responsibilities
required to participate in and complete such
purchases assigned to the Acquisitions depart-
ment and “Maintaining internal controls at a
level that will satisfy audit standards.” Se-
lectors were “given the authority to initiate
such purchases and to handle the bidding pro-
cess [in accordance with the procedures]...In
order to provide as much flexibility in using
this process as possible...” In other
words, the selectors were now the design-
ated bidders.

I supplemented these procedures with in-
ternal guidelines designed to clarify details
of the workflow. It seemed that this internal
documentation was important because the
Searching Specialist was assigned to serve
as my backup (in the event that I was not av-
ailable to coordinate the firm order placement
after the auction closed). Also, the selectors
might benefit from clarification of their roles
and the steps in the process. In a nutshell,
the internal documentation summarized the
following sequence: the selector identifies the
item in OLAS, decides on the maximum bid,
notifies the Order Librarian and Searching
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Specialist (who then works out the payment, order replacement and shipping logistics).

At that point, it appeared that the OLAS gods were smiling on us—a long overdue smile. PayPal's "Initial Spending Limit" for voluntarily and mysteriously vanished—or, to be more accurate, was raised—when I logged into my account in August 2001 (I concluded from this that the limit is apparently cyclical, though I was initially given the impression that it was permanent). And, in one transaction (to my pleasant surprise) the selector persuaded the seller to ship us the item prior to receiving payment, so I could bypass both PayPal and BidPay (the latter has a smaller limit of $500 per item) as well as the classical prepaid payment process. The OLAS gods did not smile on us, however, when I attempted (on behalf of the Music Library) to place a bid for a manuscript autographed by Robert Schumann that was being auctioned on Sothebys.com. After completing the basic registration process, I discovered that I needed to complete a "signature lot registration application" (apparently, a separate and special registration process) and furnish a letter of reference from a financial institution. We considered the option of having an agent place the bid for us, but then decided not to proceed with the bid after learning that we did not have enough money in the selected fund to purchase the manuscript. Incidentally, Sotheby's Website has since apparently merged with eBay (the new URL is http://sothebys.ebay.com/). This online partnership is described as a "joint online destination."

Many of the frustrations we experienced with OLAS have resulted from imposing the standard firm order placement, receipt and payment procedures (established, in many respects, to satisfy stringent auditing requirements) on the dynamic, 24/7 realm of online auctions where buyers and sellers have three days (after the auction closes) to work out the payment/shipping logistics, and sellers almost always expect to be promptly paid in advance. Fortunately—and thanks to the efforts of our Director of Financial Planning and Administrative Services—we were finally granted permission to use third-party online organizations such as PayPal (which was recently acquired by eBay) to pay the sellers under certain circumstances. The OLAS policy and procedures evolved in a trial-and-error process, as a result of consulting with various departments and trying to conform to university procedures.

While much attention has justifiably been focused on electronic resources, there appears to be a dearth of literature and discussion on the challenges faced by a library trying to purchase material won on an online auction such as eBay. Given the great variety of rare material offered in online auctions and the needs of special collections to acquire these esoteric items, I think more focus on OLAS is called for and hope this article might be useful to other acquisitions professionals and paraprofessionals preparing to take the plunge into OLAS.

Other acquisitions librarians and paraprofessionals planning to take this plunge would be well-advised to work out the procedures in advance, and clearly define the roles of all relevant parties. Based on our experience (which may or may not be applicable in other institutions), I can outline the following basic steps:

- Selector identifies item for the collection and places bid (or requests that acquisitions staff place the bid) and notifies acquisitions staff member responsible for coordinating OLAS orders
- Selector forwards any email notification from Online Auction Service regarding status of bid—especially, after auction's close—and indicates fund to use
- Acquisitions staff member contacts OLAS seller and negotiates payment logistics (stating preference to receive the item with an invoice, but not expecting seller's agreement to supply in this manner)
- Acquisitions staff member creates an order record in the automated acquisitions (or integrated) system to encumber funds and to provide bibliographic control
- If prepayment is necessary, Acquisitions staff member opts to prepay with a library-issued credit card if seller is willing and able to accept a direct credit card payment
- If the seller is not willing and able to accept a direct credit card payment, Acquisitions will use PayPal or BidPay to indirectly pay seller (if this is an acceptable option for all concerned), or prepay seller with a check
- Acquisitions staff member conveys purchase order number and ship-to address to the seller and requests receipt and/or packing slip indicating order number with the material
- Finally, I urge you to determine if using PayPal or BidPay to indirectly pay sellers are acceptable options for your institution prior to your first transaction. These Websites are valuable and reliable resources—if you are permitted to utilize them. Good luck with OLAS! 🎉

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Digital Reference: A New Library Paradigm or the Emperor's New Clothes

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Every so often the library profession loses its head over some peripheral issue and goes bonkers, often suggesting that current collection development practices have to be revamped, overhauled or possibly scrapped. It is like that now, if you have been following some of the profession's fascination with digital reference service. The term "digital reference service" isn't easy to define, but it can best be understood as reference in "which people submit their questions and have them answered by a library staff member through some electronic means (email, chat, Web forms, etc.), not in person or over the phone."

The champions of this new form of virtual reference aren't shy about their new-fangled alternative, nor are they about to downplay the magnitude of the changes that they fancy are upon us. The more rhetorical among them argue that reference, as we know it, is about to change forever. They insist that the user culture has altered drastically. Fiber optics, the Internet, and patron expectations have overturned everything. In fact, the new way of approaching things is so fundamentally different from the old that reference librarians will have to transform their role radically. The new revolution will mean altered codes of conduct and altered modes of operating...

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