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## Why Not Ephemera? The Emergence of Ephemera in Libraries

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THERE ARE MULTIPLE WAYS of approaching the topic of ephemera in libraries. I want to begin with some personal comments that reflect on my experience with ephemera, demonstrate the potential scholarly interest in ephemera by citing several recent publications that make excellent use of such collections, and share the results of some informal conversations with curators in other institutions. I will close by considering our experiences at the American Antiquarian Society (AAS), where I have been aware of ephemera as a classification of material for over thirty years.

As director of the AAS's new Center for Historic American Visual Culture—which seeks to promote the use of printed imagery in academic settings through workshops, conferences, improved access to our collections, fellowships, and exhibitions—I am particularly concerned with the use of pictorial materials in general. The Center is trying to find strategies to improve the use of our collections and those of our sister institutions by academic scholars. I also serve as president of the Ephemera Society of America. This organization works to cultivate and encourage interest in ephemeral material; to further the understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of ephemera by people of all backgrounds and levels of interest; to contribute to cultural understanding; and to promote the personal and institutional collection, preservation, exhibition, and research of ephemeral materials. The Ephemera Society of America now has funding for a research fellowship and sponsors two fine publications: the *Newsletter* and the *Journal*.

I think that one of the challenges before the special collections community is to justify to library administrators the cost of acquiring, preserving, and making accessible ephemera for which there is no demand from a specific academic field. It is difficult to substantiate large expenses for collections that have no readily definable audience. However, there are several recent scholarly books that could be used to defend our collecting efforts. The first is *Pets in America: A History*, by Katherine C. Grier, professor of material culture studies, Winterthur Program in Early

American Culture at the Winterthur Museum and the University of Delaware.<sup>1</sup> Grier has always loved pets. Over the years she collected photocopies of articles, photographs, and original printed items about pets and stored them away until she had reached a “critical mass.” Her book is filled with advertising ephemera about pets and their equipage, food, toys, cages, and the like. It is difficult to imagine that her text would have been as successful without such a generous amount of printed ephemera. And, in many ways, the material that Grier collected determined the direction of the book. There was no predetermined thesis. Likewise, Mary Kelley’s *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* contains copious footnotes to nineteenth-century institutional publications of girls’ schools and academies found at AAS and other libraries. They incorporate the plans of study, identify teachers, and provide names of the students. Many of the broadsides and slender pamphlets are unique. Kelley learned through these documents that the curricula of female academies were equivalent to those of boys’ schools, and her work took, in her words, “one of its most decisive turns” when she first encountered documents that provided this evidence.<sup>2</sup> Does one need a better justification for making such rare items available?

We can also turn to other publications to see how ephemera are becoming respected and promoted by research and university libraries in recent years. Some libraries have chosen to highlight ephemera collections in printed guides to collections. Dale Roylance’s *Graphic Americana* is the catalog of a 1992 exhibition at Princeton University.<sup>3</sup> With its succinct text and copious illustrations that provide definitions and examples of forty-four types of ephemera found in Princeton’s collection, this catalog can be used as a model for similar publications.

Helena Zinkham’s *Guide to Print, Photograph, Architecture, & Ephemera Collections at the New-York Historical Society* was issued in 1998.<sup>4</sup> The collection she describes dwarfs the holdings in my institution and raises the question many other institutions face: how to deal with collections numbering in the hundreds of thousands of items? At some point, the possibility of providing item level records collapses and even the production of a simple inventory remains a goal that is out of reach. Zinkham’s book can serve as an excellent model for exceptionally large collections. It contains information on arrangement and access, provenance, references in

1. Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

2. Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006), viii.

3. *Graphic Americana: The Art and Technique of Printed Ephemera from Abecedaires to Zoetropes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Library, 1992).

4. *A Guide to Print, Photograph, Architecture & Ephemera Collections at the New-York Historical Society* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1998).

publications, related collections at the Historical Society, and related collections in other institutions. Zinkham addresses many different types of collections: book-plates; certificates, including membership certificates, temperance pledges, diplomas, and rewards of merit; scrapbooks of pictorial newspaper clippings; pictorial newspaper illustrations; miscellaneous examples of graphic arts, including clipper ship cards, Civil War envelopes, letter sheets, frakturs, games and playing cards, reproductions of paintings, bank note specimen sheets, and other American prints; picture postcards; printed posters and, specifically, posters printed by the Strobridge Lithography Company.

Another splendid library guide is E. Richard McKinstry's *Guide to the Winterthur Library: The Joseph Downs Collection and the Winterthur Archives* (2003). The Downs Collection contains both manuscripts and printed ephemera, much of it relating to American decorative art. McKinstry has published other bibliographies, including one on travel narratives, one about the Edward Deming Andrews Shaker Collection at Winterthur and one identifying trade catalogs that served as the basis for a major microform project. Winterthur also chose to highlight its library collections, including some ephemera, by mounting a fine exhibition at the Grolier Club, accompanied by a sumptuous catalog that contains a wide variety of visual materials that have been gathered over several generations to document the history of the decorative arts and material culture in the United States. The essays in the catalog demonstrate how valuable ephemeral materials can be in a scholarly inquiry.<sup>5</sup>

Another recent publication in which the word "ephemera" figures prominently in the title is William Helfand's *Quack, Quack, Quack: The Sellers of Nostrums in Prints, Posters, Ephemera & Books*, the catalog of an exhibition at the Grolier Club in 2002.<sup>6</sup> As many readers of *RBM* know, Helfand uses his collection of ephemera to document the history of pharmacology. The broadsides, trade cards, popular prints, and advertising materials that he has gathered are remarkable. Because it rivals that of any research institution, he can use the collection to provide scholarly documentation on a number of topics.

Diana Korzenik, in her foreword to *Objects of American Art Education*, a catalog of an exhibition at the Huntington Library in 2004, noted that "What I most prize in my discovery of ephemeral sources is that such artifacts and documents—from school art publications to alumni lists of art schools—may assist researchers in identifying individuals and institutions, heretofore unknown, who played a role in

5. Neville Thompson, Bert Denker et al. *The Winterthur Library Revealed: Five Centuries of Design and Inspiration*. (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press for the Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library, 2003).

6. William H. Helfand, *Quack, Quack, Quack: The Sellers of Nostrums in Prints, Posters, Ephemera & Books* (New York: The Grolier Club, 2002).

art making in America.”<sup>7</sup> Her collection, along with those from other institutions, can be used in creative and meaningful ways, if we make information about them readily available. This, however, can be a huge challenge.

A final scholarly publication based on ephemera is Glenn A. Jones’s significant study in the Fall 2006 issue of *Ephemera News* that uses antique menus to track seafood cost and availability during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jones was trained as a paleoceanographer studying changes in the earth’s climate and teaches at Texas A & M University at Galveston. He turned to menus while teaching a course on Coastal and Ocean Resources that required materials for active learning exercises for his students. When he encountered a few menus from the 1950s, these set his research on a new path: using menu collections at the New York Public Library, the New-York Public Library, and the Johnson and Wales Culinary Archives.<sup>8</sup> Jones was able to shed new light on seafood population trends.

These publications provide some excellent examples of how ephemera can be made available to scholars and used in the scholarly world. However, I believe that these publications are the exceptions, and that scholars generally ignore the evidence that ephemera in the great research collections can provide. So, the question remains, how can ephemera be used? I have posed this dilemma to several librarians. How do we bring scholars, largely wedded to textual sources, to ephemeral materials? One way to do so is to make information about these collections available through online catalogs and inventories on Web sites.

Wendy Woloson at the Library Company of Philadelphia finds that ephemera are now on the “radar screen” of scholars. This could well be a result of her own advocacy of the materials and her efforts to make collection level records available in the library’s catalog. Like AAS, the Library Company provides item level cataloging of pamphlets and broadsides that facilitates access to them. One example, the McCallister Civil War Ephemera Collection, is now under bibliographic control, thanks to funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Among the additions Woloson makes to the Library Company collection are dance tickets, as well as programs for employees of specific companies that provide a social dimension to economic history. She reports that ephemera appear frequently in exhibitions at the Library Company, which is yet another way to make the collections known to scholars using the library.

In September 2005, the Library Company and Winterthur held a conference, “*Ephemera Across the Atlantic*,” that coincided with exhibitions of ephemera at the

7. Diana Korzenik and Cathy Cherbosque, *Objects of American Art Education: Highlights from the Diana Korzenik Collection* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library Press, 2004), 45.

8. Glenn A. Jones, “Vintage Menus Help Scientists Trade Seafood Cost and Usage,” *Ephemera News*, 25:1 (Fall 2006): 1, 10–19.

Library Company, and manuscript and printed *frakturs* at Winterthur. In addition, the conference celebrated the long-anticipated publication of Don Yoder's *The Pennsylvania German Broadside: A History and Guide*.<sup>9</sup> The Library Company will publish the papers presented at the conference, and this publication will add significantly to the literature on the subject. Other libraries feature similar ephemera on Web sites, including Pennsylvania State University's *Pennsylvania German Broad sides and Frakturs* mounted by the Special Collections Library.<sup>10</sup>

Randall Burkett, curator of African American Collections at Emory University, is actively collecting ephemera "created by and for, and often published within the African American Community." He notes that these examples shed important light on a print culture that is far richer than previously supposed. Scholars have largely described "orality" as the principal mode of African American cultural expression and production in the nineteenth century, but ephemeral documents in the Emory collection now challenge that view. Moreover, the collection—which includes broadsides, pamphlets, rare periodicals, bookplates, bookmarks, fans, calling cards, funeral programs, printed ribbons and pins, sheet music, calendars, programs, newsletters, and tickets—covers the recent as well as the more distant past. Burkett predicts that scholars will be able "to re-examine notions about African American cultural production of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries," and he is aggressively bringing together materials to serve the future needs of scholars.<sup>11</sup> Crafting a collection of ephemera to enable scholars to further the research agenda of an institution is a fine strategy and one that can be used as well for fund-raising purposes. Emory received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to catalog more than 3,000 pamphlets; that work is now completed and highlighted on the Emory Library Web site.

The Huntington Library in San Marino, California, has long included ephemera in its collection. A search of their online catalog for the term "ephemera" identifies 280 records, ranging from recently published books on ephemera to collections of ephemera, some simply listing the date of acquisition and number of items in each. Although not terribly informative, such minimal records are better for providing access than having nothing at all. However, there are other records that reveal a great deal of information: for example, the online record for the Diana Korzenik Collection of Art Education Ephemera, which numbers about 1,200 items dating from 1850 to 1940. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humani-

9. The Pennsylvania State University Press issued this volume for the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania German Society. It is volume 39 in the Publications of the Pennsylvania German Society.

10. [www.libraries.psu.edu/speccolls/rbm/fraktur/](http://www.libraries.psu.edu/speccolls/rbm/fraktur/).

11. Randall K. Burkett, "Black Print Culture at Emory University," *Manuscript Archives & Rare Book Library of Emory University*, 1:2 (Fall 2007): 6.

ties, the curator of the collection, Cathy Cherbosque, organized it, provided an online finding aid, created an exhibition in the library with the donor's assistance, and published a brochure.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the online collection description, there is a detailed finding aid available onsite. Cherbosque notes that the subject of ephemera has received more attention at the Huntington in recent years, particularly in recognition of the importance of improving finding aids to collections. The Web page devoted to ephemera lists forty-four different collections—enough work for a team of catalogers. Too often in the past, specific information resided only in the mind of the curator. Providing descriptive information on collections remedies that dependence on a staff member's memory.

It is interesting to see how the special collections and archival communities are reacting to the challenge of providing access to unprocessed collections. I have a list dated 1998 of "Miscellaneous Printed Collections" issued by Rutgers Special Collections & University Archives. It represents approximately 30,000 items, organized by format, including admission cards, airline timetables, broadsides, calendars, campaign miscellany, funeral cards, ration books, sheet music, song sheets, trade cards, valentines, and wrappers. At the top of the list is the following statement: "They are ephemeral in nature and do not warrant cataloging, due to their format and content." Happily, the library at Rutgers has decided to start providing better access to these collections, and information about some of them is available on their Web site, including chronological listings of broadsides, methods to access to the newspaper and map collections, and lists of song sheets and sheet music related to New Jersey. The Sinclair New Jerseyana Collection is described in some detail. Certainly, important progress has been made in providing online access to collections previously accessible only through onsite conversations with library staff and curators, which is an important and welcome development.

What is the situation at the American Antiquarian Society? AAS began cataloging its broadsides with a succession of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities beginning in the early 1980s and concluding just a couple of years ago, when we finished up a project to describe single-sheet poems and songs published between 1850 and 1877. Over the past twenty years or so, thousands of these single-sheet items have been thoroughly analyzed and described, and I believe that AAS was the first library to catalog broadsides according to AACR2 standards. Other institutions followed, often using AAS records as the basis for their own. In the summer of 2005, AAS and the Readex Division of NewsBank collaborated in reproducing digitally all of the AAS broadsides published between 1820 and 1876 (about 15,000 items) and scanning an additional 15,000 pieces of ephemera: programs for popular entertainments, advertisements, lottery broadsides, menus,

12. Korzenik and Cherbosque, *Objects of American Art Education*.

bill heads, trade cards, Civil War envelopes, rewards of merit, invitations, clipper ship cards, and stock certificates. College students created brief records for these ephemeral materials.

Although these brief catalog records are not up to the AACR2 standards that catalogers in other libraries might expect of AAS, we ultimately had to realize that it is impossible to record information on large collections in infinite detail. As a curator, I find that having a brief record is better than having no record at all, particularly as we acquire additional items. Since users of libraries today expect everything to be online, I am beginning to believe that collections without electronic access might as well not exist at all.

How did AAS accomplish so much cataloging so quickly? To facilitate the work of summer college students, one of our senior catalogers developed templates for each type of material so that certain fields would always be filled in. We assigned two catalogers to proofreading duty, and one student served as the expeditor, getting the materials to the scanning and filming crew after the cataloging work was completed. A full-time AAS staff member worked in the same space as the students in order to respond to questions as they came up. Yet despite such procedural safeguards, several of my colleagues and I were in the background, fretting all the while and hoping that progress was being made. And in the end, the progress the students made was remarkable. One of the great by-products was that, as soon as records were in the online catalog, readers asked to see the originals. Long-buried collections became available, even before Readex launched *American Broadsides and Ephemera*.

But cataloging ephemera, in spite of the templates, presented many challenges. I have a document titled "What we learned from the first ephemera project" that identifies some of the problems. For example, not all of the ephemera categories fit into AACR2 rules that were developed for cataloging books, so inconsistencies in coding surfaced. Items that were largely visual in nature necessitated creating a description of the imagery in order to make the subject headings comprehensible, which often required knowledge beyond that acquired by our bright college students. Indeed, although they all had some training in United States history, it was often not enough (which underscored that we had previously tended to take the expertise and knowledge of our senior catalogers, some of whom have graduate degrees in history, for granted). Finally, the descriptive vocabulary used by the students varied wildly from one to the other. So, the records are imperfect, but they provide access nonetheless. If other libraries would begin to catalog individual pieces of ephemera using such simple formats, the scholarly community would benefit handsomely.

AAS has also created a Collections page on its Web site to provide information about other items of ephemera, leading users to collections that are not yet individually cataloged but can be viewed in the library. AAS also features ephemera in online exhibitions, such as *A Woman's Work Is Never Done* and *An Invitation to Dance: A History of Social Dance in America*.

But two significant questions remain: how to get scholars to use materials that are different from the texts that normally form the basis for scholarly research and how to get the materials to the scholars. In the reading room at AAS, the curators work directly with readers. We consider that we have done our jobs well if we can direct a reader to evidence that is entirely new to him or her. This, of course, includes the ephemera collections. Some scholars need no encouragement. Historians of the book rely on advertisements and prospectuses in their research, not to mention manuscript receipts and bills. The scholar and bibliographer, Donald Farren, for example, notes the importance of ephemera for the study of subscription publishing of the eighteenth century, and his research has benefited from thorough cataloging of broadsides at AAS and access to collections at the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University and the Massachusetts Historical Society. But Farren also notes that there are undoubtedly additional printed items lurking in manuscript collections for which there is no ready access.<sup>13</sup> For the study of nineteenth-century American publishing, printed proposals, prospectuses, and advertisements are critical, and AAS continues to acquire these materials.

Now that the importance of providing access to collections of ephemera has been brought to the attention of administrators of special collections, what strategies can be used to further the development of ephemera collections and promote their use? Clearly, additional instruction about the management of ephemera collections is needed. An excellent example of one such program is Henry Raine's week-long institute at Long Island University's Palmer School of Library and Information Science: "The Joy of Ephemera—Collecting, Cataloging and Managing Ephemera Collection," held in 2006. One of my conversations in preparation for this article was with a faculty member at Simmons College, Martha Mahard. She and I will probably collaborate on a workshop in 2007 at Simmons College, which could provide up-to-date information to a variety of audiences, including staff at local historical societies and at college libraries in the region, many of whom have special collections. And perhaps Terry Belanger's Rare Book School at the University of Virginia will again offer a course on Ephemera.

An accepted minimal standard for cataloging individual pieces of ephemera clearly would be useful, one perhaps like the art library community has developed to ad-

13. Correspondence from Donald Farren, May 24, 2007.

dress this issue.<sup>14</sup> Another possibility is for an enterprising curator or librarian to create a definitive bibliography on ephemera, similar to the one that I completed on American prints of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup> The Ephemera Society of America is in the process of indexing its serial publications, another positive step in making information about ephemera available to librarians and scholars.

To conclude, it is clear from examining libraries' holdings and Web sites that collections of ephemera have emerged from the shadows of oftentimes more costly and better-cataloged books, but much remains to be accomplished. We need to remember these "minor collections," as Clarence Brigham, a major force for more than fifty years at the AAS, called them, and propel them into the hands of students and faculty, for these transitory documents shed a great deal of light on history and culture.

14. See *Art Museum Libraries and Librarianship*, ed. Joan M. Benedetti (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2007). Chapter 9 is "The Invisible Made Visible: Collecting Ephemera in the Art Museum Library."

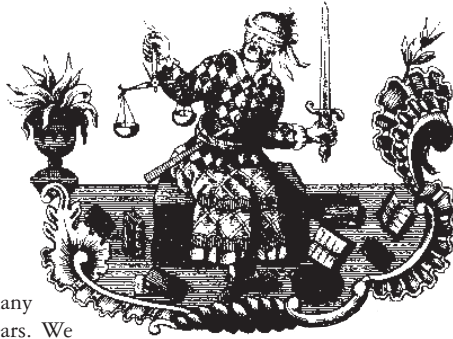
15. Georgia B. Barnhill, *Bibliography on American Prints of the Seventeenth through the Nineteenth Centuries* (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press for the American Historical Print Collectors Society, 2006).

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