

Robert Dalton Harris, Diane DeBlois, David Margolis, and Jean Moss

## The Contribution of Ephemera Dealers

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*Robert Dalton Harris and Diane DeBlois of aGatherin', and David Margolis and Jean Moss of Margolis and Moss, explore the relationship between dealers and the libraries and museums that purchase ephemera from them. The two couples who, for over three decades, have specialized in handling ephemera within the rare book world, are from different backgrounds and have divergent strengths, yet agree philosophically on both the importance of ephemera and the complementary role dealers can have with librarians and curators in building collections. In describing their passions, they hope to connect with the collector inside the library and archives profession, as well as to illuminate what it is they actually do as ephemerists, capitalizing upon the quotidian.*

### **Why would an antiquarian choose to specialize in ephemera?**

*Robert Dalton Harris, as a Garbage Hound:*

My life as a collector began in the hospital—not the one in Salt Lake City where I was born, but five years later in Oregon when I got polio. My neighbor in the children's ward was totally absorbed in his stamp collection—so I asked my mother about stamps, and we immediately found half a dozen different ones on envelopes from her correspondence. These we purloined, soaked, and counted. Many years later, my grandparents returned to me a letter I wrote them that Christmas, in which I painstakingly accounted for the thirteen stamps I had by then amassed. I was off and running. My mother invited me to take any duplicates I could find from her own collection—I remember that there were two—and subsequently we collected together, but in separate albums: gathering from the incoming mail, from gifts, from the post office, from approval selections, and “big bag missionary” mixtures—until my collection exceeded hers and, it was agreed, I became the proud possessor of both.

Humble as these beginnings were, they already had entailed a host of features that have infused all my collecting—and dealing—since: (1) the presence of sympathetic

mentors; (2) a fascination for the exotic; (3) a sensitivity to fine distinctions; and (4) a propensity to accumulate and enumerate.

When our family moved to student housing at Montana State, I discovered I could earn two cents on each coke bottle that the undergrads chucked from the windows of the nearby dormitory. To monopolize this trade among the droves of kids who were competing for the bounty, I would make my rounds well before dawn each day all year long—not only scavenging bottles, but cruising the garbage cans for the mail discarded by foreign students and for anything else that seemed useful to me: an old game of Monopoly or some marbles. In short, I became a garbage hound.

These proclivities survived adolescence, Air Force ROTC, and my marriage while an undergrad at Stanford. When I moved east to graduate school at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., the quality of the trash improved exponentially. It was difficult to believe the riches discarded. I had to keep my eye open for every salvage opportunity. One building under demolition harbored only the sad corpse of an unwary workman. But, for instance, I rescued literally from the blade of a bulldozer several cardboard rolls of bird's eye views of nineteenth-century towns produced by the Burleigh Lithograph Company. When I sold a collection of over fifty different views to the New York State Library, the garbage hound became an ephemera dealer.

I had already been a part-time postal history dealer—financing my maturing collections and the purchase of reference material. When I became disillusioned with the domination of physics by the military-industrial complex, I exchanged my profession for my hobby in order to earn a living, registering aGatherin' as a fulltime business in 1973—the garbage hound with a “touch of class.” My first printed catalog, issued in 1975, was entitled “ephemeRa.”

Some of my most important “finds” continue to come from a sensitivity to salvage. A dealer in perfume bought a New York building that still housed the foreign correspondence of a manufacturer of Florida Water, 1848–1866. The perfumer took the envelopes for their stamps—and sold me the jumbled contents of some 65,000 transactions. Over a great many years and 4,000 hours, this became the Lanman and Kemp Archive of the Drug Trade, now at the Hagley Museum and Library.

Diane and I give lectures and workshops at Mohonk Mountain House, a Hudson valley resort that has been owned by the same family since 1869. We have consulted with them about their considerable archives. But quite by chance we were on hand to rescue from the trash their correspondence files with prospective guests, dated 1895–1920—thrown out because they were covered with grime and rodent droppings from having been housed in a barn.

Rescuing trash—on whatever level—entails taking responsibility for it and guiding it to an appropriate home.

*Diane DeBlois as Teacher of the Narrative:*

I met my partner, Rob, in my thirties when my car broke down in a blizzard. Had we crossed paths as teenagers, it might have been in an abandoned farmhouse. Both of us loved to snoop into spaces where other lives had been lived—trying to recreate a narrative from the old newspapers behind flowered wallpapers, the shopping lists forgotten on upper shelves, the love letters between the floor boards.

When I applied for a visa to enter the United States as Rob's assistant, I underplayed the decade I had spent as teacher of English literature and drama. Instead, I emphasized a job I had at the Osler Library of the History of Medicine that supported my undergraduate degree at McGill. Yet in my new career as an ephemerist, searching out and teaching the narrative became my specialty. I like nothing better than to buy (from another dealer or from a beleaguered executor of an estate) a box of scrambled memorabilia and letters—and then sift through, organize, and comprehend the shape of the ordinary life or lives to see if this small archive can shed a more general light on a universal experience pinned to time or space.

I like to read other people's mail—particularly those letters that end "please destroy this immediately." I like to read diaries—even the most prosaic. I once read twenty years' worth of annual pocket journals—just a small space for recording notes on the weather, crops planted, and so on—kept in the late nineteenth century by a farmer in upstate New York. They contained details so minimal that a life seemed hardly to have left a dent. Yet patterns did emerge: how often the Jewish peddlers came by and what was bought from them; what crops became staples of diet and which items of trade or barter; how much labor was spent on the home place and how much cooperatively on another's farm or on projects for the larger society, such as roads; the amount of time required to take grain to the mill, lumber at another mill; and how often my scribe visited Martha on Sundays before he married her. After absorbing this life of daily labor until my own muscles ached, I wrote the narrative, sketched the maps that put it in perspective, drew attention to the published records, and sold the diaries to the New York State Historical Association for their Farmers' Museum.

Much of my time in our business is spent writing—compiling narratives for descriptions of what we sell or what we appraise, but also meeting deadlines for a variety of publications that regularly include my pieces on ephemera. I write for the collectors of rare books, the collectors of stamps and postal history, the collectors of manuscripts and, naturally, the collectors of ephemera—including the Society

of Commercial Archeology, whose members collect the disappearing evidence of roadside attractions. Essentially, I am saying over and over: look at this particular piece of ephemera and appreciate what it can tell you.

I am a constant proselytizer for ephemera. I try to convert rare book dealers who, when I began in this business, treated most ephemera as a chaotic scourge threatening their organizational sanity. I have given speeches to my colleagues in the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America, to the Denver Rare Book School, and to rare book and manuscripts librarians in the Albany and Philadelphia areas. I have prepared exhibits to show the general public and collectors how ephemera works.

Though I am not a collector myself, I sometimes say I collect the stories of why other people collect. It intrigues me that a particular special collection has a new interpretation mandate; that a client is writing a book; that nostalgia is underpinning a customer's choice of items. I love hatching ideas to extend or corral collections. Last year, I responded to a client who had been attracted to the ephemera of dentistry because both her late father and her brother were dentists. She bemoaned: "Oh, why do I keep buying this stuff—all I do is put it in a drawer." I made for her a scrapbook of the items she owned—mounting them archivally with good protection and providing captions—for her brother to use in his waiting room.

As with all teachers, I am hungry to learn from my clients: I look forward to their telling me more than my research has revealed. They get to take home the ephemera I have prepared. But I get to tap their learning and keep their stories.

### *David Margolis as Artist:*

I am an artist, but do not make art. Seven years in art school—a BFA from Pratt Institute and an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania—turned me into a young painter, printmaker, and photographer. But making art was too painful, and when I landed a job at the rare book auction house, Swann Gallery, in 1975, I found to my amazement that when someone actually paid me to look at and handle beautiful objects, the angst dissolved and the necessity to make art ceased. I was passionate about "the stuff," and became Swann's cataloguer of mostly nonbook items: maps, prints, photographs, and the bits-and-pieces we now call ephemera, including post-card collections, scrapbooks, huge posters, and tiny trade cards, as well as stacks of advertisements, bills, invoices, letters, and promotional materials.

In 1976 I started Swann's photography department as that market was just beginning to develop. Thanks to the huge amount of de-accessioned items from various libraries, Swann Galleries became a place for collectors and dealers to locate masses of fresh material. In those days there were few reference works on historic photo-

graphs and little past market histories—I just looked at this stuff, described it, and sat back to watch it sell. I had found my calling.

As an example of those heady days, George Lowry, president of Swann, and I were called into the University Club in New York City to look at part of its library that they planned to de-accession. After viewing a beautiful Ptolemy Atlas, we were asked if we might be interested in some large photography albums. We said we would like to see them, so they lifted the tablecloth right below us and, under the table, we spotted two mammoth photo albums. Both were massively bound in full black morocco with a large round of a redwood tree in the center, and each contained fifty large photographs of California and Oregon by Carlton Watkins. I catalogued the albums and estimated each at \$20,000 to \$30,000, an extraordinary evaluation at the time. The albums individually sold for about \$100,000. This year, a single photograph from these one hundred large photographs sold at auction for almost half a million dollars.

After five years, Jean and I left New York and moved back to Santa Fe, where we had met. We opened Margolis and Moss, a general antiquarian shop selling old books, prints, maps, photographs, and lots of ephemera. We joined the Ephemera Society while it was still based in London and were involved in the American branch when it started here. We joined the ABAA in 1984 and began doing book fairs on both coasts. Along with Rob and Diane of aGatherin', we brought large quantities of ephemera to these fairs, introducing an area unfamiliar to most book-sellers and starting an awareness that has spread throughout the trade.

Over the past twenty-seven years various large collections of ephemera have come our way. We organized, catalogued, and placed the Peter Gross collection of technical aviation material: two tons of pamphlets on wing flaps, engines, and ailerons. It is now in the Smithsonian Institution. We appraised a massive collection of nineteenth-century photographs donated to the Clements Library. There was also the David Anderson collection of turn-of-the-century decorative American bindings, many with the poster that advertised the book. It now resides in Colorado.

We now do more appraisals and collection building, and presently issue catalogs on the exotic world of mainly nineteenth-century books illustrated with original photographs. But the most fun is still the treasure hunt of shops and houses for something we have never seen before and can learn about.

### *Jean Moss as Follower of Aesthetics:*

As the oldest child in a large, peripatetic (thirteen schools before college), collecting, military family, I think I came about my love of “stuff” honestly. My first col-

lection (age seven) that was not started for me by my parents (i.e., dolls) was made up of porcelain shards—Meissen, Dresden, Rosenthal—that I dug up from ruins in post-war Germany—not exactly paper ephemera, but they were things no one else wanted: they were evidence of a life that was gone, and they were pretty. It was “pretty” that initially attracted me to ephemera: the aesthetics of cigar labels with that gorgeous gold embossed ink; the valentines with cutouts and hand coloring; the varnished, chromolithographed scraps and trade cards; the pochoir Art Deco promotionals; the hand-set type of early theater snakes; and the nineteenth-century trade catalogs with wood-engraved illustrations.

As a child I kept pieces of ephemera that came my way—the pretty greeting card; the wonderful wrapping paper; the liquor label that lurked in the old book with marbled boards that I bought at a library sale—and as a college student of English and theater, and continuing as a young adult, I haunted the used bookstores. But it was in the years immediately before and just after David and I began our business, when we started seeking out paper in antique and book stores, that ephemera took on, for me, meaning beyond aesthetics. We bought a group of English theatre broadsides from the 1820s through the 1850s, replete with names like Kean, McCready, and Kemble, including one for *The Winter's Tale* starring the great Charles Kean. Almost hidden among the names of the players was that of Ellen Terry. It was her first role—when she was nine years old. I declared that I was uninterested in autographs. They really were not very pretty! We bought a first edition of *Leaves of Grass* with a piece of manuscript poem in Whitman's hand laid in. I held the poem, which was physically composed of scraps of paper with stanzas that had been glued together in a way I knew was characteristic of the way Whitman worked. I began to feel a tingling at the back of my neck and I got goose bumps on my arms. Before I knew what had happened, my throat was tight and I was sobbing. Passion was born.

## **How do ephemera dealers add value to the items they sell?**

### *David, on the “Food Chain”:*

How does a piece of ephemera, discarded from a home or an institution, find its way to a special collections librarian, to fill that gap in one of your collections? I call it “climbing the food chain.” In the relatively new market for ephemera, items are often found at the bottom of the chain by pickers and move directly to the top, through sophisticated dealers, to you the special collections librarian. A smart and creative librarian can acquire this item anywhere along the line, and, as you might guess, it gets more expensive as it heads to the top. But the dealers at the top have located, catalogued, preserved and protected, and presented the item to you. They have earned their dollars.

At the bottom of this chain is the picker, someone who is passionate about “the stuff.” Usually he (I have never met a female picker in the book or ephemera trade) has no education in old and rare material. He comes with a good eye, a fine memory, and a love of the freedom that scouting offers. Endlessly on the lookout for old paper, he regularly visits sales in houses, estates, libraries, and churches. There are flea markets, thrift shops, and junk stores to rummage through. He might visit the town dump regularly or even “dumpster dip” at government buildings. He then heads up the chain by trying to sell his new treasures at a paper show or to a local dealer—possibly a book or antique dealer who sells old paper.

Next in the chain is the more sophisticated dealer in ephemera. He, she, or they (there are many husband and wife teams, such as the four of us) have usually been in the business long enough to have handled a vast amount of material, possess a large reference library for doing research, and are able to write descriptions putting ephemera in its historic or artistic context. Dealers use pickers as a source, but also themselves travel widely to paper and book fairs; visit antique and book shops; and often see private dealers to inspect and purchase from their stock. They display at the better shows, meeting librarians and private collectors to discuss their interests and to suggest material that best fits within their collections.

This system of picker-to-dealer-to-library is today being challenged by the new dynamic of the Internet. Starting about ten years ago, eBay and similar auction sites entered the American psyche. Now anyone can become a dealer. Pickers often find it more lucrative to put items for sale online than to do a show or offer them to a dealer. Students and budding collectors consider it fun to sell directly online. A dealer in small-town America no longer just prices a piece of ephemera and waits for it to sell: he puts it on eBay and lets that market establish the price (often to his chagrin, and sometimes to his delight). The paper and book trade have changed. Things become confused: what was once rare often becomes common, and esoteric knowledge has lost much of its power—one just checks what others have said about an item, or “Google” the title and suddenly: instant knowledge. Forget the large reference library and the pile of auction and dealers’ catalogs: the new young dealers just need their laptops, and off they go.

Ephemera sales online are in their infancy. The intimacy of handling an item, the serendipity of finding something you were not looking for, and the connection of dealing with a person, in person, are being replaced by the online search, the anonymity of filling out an order, and the lack of continued purchases from the same source. It is a new day on the wild electronic frontier.

*Jean, on Dealer-Built Collections:*

You, as special collections librarians, obviously have as one of your focuses the building of collections through acquisition by donation or purchase. Often you add to collections a single item at a time, and I assume that for many of you this is one of the joys of the job. But, given the time and budget constraints of most libraries today, one of the ways the ephemera dealer contributes to the library world is by selling collections. Sometimes these collections are brokered between a private collector and a library; sometimes the collections have been built by the dealer. Most often, these collections have been organized and cataloged to such an extent that they can save the library many man-hours.

I put out a call on the ABAA chat group asking colleagues what collections of ephemera have they built and then sold. Here are a few examples: Sarah Baldwin of E. Wharton and Co. sold to the University of Delaware a collection she had formed on woman's suffrage, which included posters, flyers, postcards, a window hanger, anti-suffrage pledge forms, buttons, pennants, and even a paper cup from the 1915 woman's suffrage referendum in New York. Ron Lieberman of The Family Album built and sold to Winterthur a large collection of ephemera from the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Mike Slicker of Lighthouse Books, who established and sold to the University of Florida a collection of about 30,000 pieces of ephemera relating to Florida, wrote to me:

Here in Florida, where the history of most cities and towns began as a flicker in the eye of some promoter, ephemeral items are the first tangible evidence of these developments. In fact, the history of Florida is tightly bound with the history and development of "promotion" itself. Even today, theme parks and real estate developments across the state carry on in the rich tradition of their forebears, and are providing carloads of material for tomorrow's collector.

Since 1980, aGatherin' has been building a collection on the history of the atomic bomb. They began with an exhibition of ephemera relating to the decade of the 1940s, and the discovery of a remarkable void of interest in the atomic age. For Robert (and I quote) "this seemed to deny the fundamental significance of nuclear physics, pointing to a corresponding need to document its cultural ramifications." Piecemeal, they started buying anything that pertained to the subject—books, pamphlets, photographs, advertising images. They searched broadly. From English booksellers in Hay-on-Wye, to antique dealers in the "yellow cake" country of Arizona and Utah, they found themselves following the material—extending their inventory into the history of strategic bombing, and the origins of Chicken Little ("the sky is falling, the sky is falling"). As with most collections, the purchase of

major items crystallized their sense of purpose. They bought the archives of the first head of security for the Atomic Energy Commission and of two of the past presidents of the American Nuclear Society. In terms of volume, the thousands of books predominate. But in terms of importance, they feel it is the ephemera that relates most intimately to our lives as survivors of the Cold War.

Margolis and Moss is presently building a large collection relating to tourism and the social and economic relationship between Mexico and the United States. This had been an interest of ours for a long time and we bought and sold many pieces to David Farmer at the DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University. After David's ultimate, pre-retirement exhibition and catalog entitled "Destination Mexico," we decided to take the plunge. Instead of selling this material piece by piece, we would form a collection ourselves. In the past five years we have spent close to \$100,000 on this collection of ephemera. There is little published on the history of tourism in Mexico, yet it is the third largest economic engine in that country (after oil and remittance from Mexicans abroad). In fact, in the wake of Mexico's dwindling oil reserves, the current president of Mexico, Felipe Calderon, has declared it his mission to do everything possible to promote and encourage tourism.

Starting with the introduction of the railroad in Mexico during the early 1880s, through the development of auto travel, and then air travel, tourism has grown to dominate many areas of Mexican life. Our collection includes railroad and airline timetables; menus and promotionals for restaurants and hotels; catalogs of curio shops and the development of the "folk art" market; land speculation and immigration pamphlets; industry prospectuses; city and regional guides; posters promoting travel and pleasure in Mexico; postcards depicting the beauty and historic nature of the region; entertainment programs for sports, dance, art, concerts, and literary readings. Add to this: scrapbooks, journals, photograph albums, and personal narratives, and one starts to build a picture of the development of the foreign interest in Mexico and its economic impact.

An interesting adjunct to this collection is the part that focuses on stereotypical iconography of Mexico from both sides of the border. This shows us not only an aspect of the way we in the U.S. viewed and view Mexico, but also one way Mexicans viewed and view themselves: the fruit crate labels; the menus; the greeting cards and valentines; the calendars; the bridge tallies; the kitchen decals; and the embroidery designs for tea towels and tablecloths featuring the smiling señorita, the colorful sombrero, the Aztec princess, and of course, the sleeping Mexican with his cactus.

This part of the collection owes its inspiration to the great American Indian iconography collection built by Alfred Bush for the Western Americana Collection

at Princeton University and to the wonderful collection built by a former client of ours, a man who was the director of a home for the aged in Dallas who sat on President Carter's Committee on Aging. He collected the iconography of aging: Ladders of Life; Seven Ages of Man; old people actively portrayed in expected or unexpected roles; old people in interaction with young people, and so on. Unfortunately, I do not know what became of that collection. I would like to think that it is a special collection in a library somewhere.

Sometimes collections become so large, so diffuse, or so expensive that the possibility of selling them intact becomes remote. This may be the case with a Gatherin's A-Bomb collection and it may be the case with the Mexican collection David and I are building now. But both these collections are organized and focused in such a way that they can be divided into distinct parts, each of which comprises a complete collection that could be sold individually.

### *Robert, on Taxonomy and Value:*

Ronald Lauder, who recently paid 135 million dollars for the Gustav Klimt painting, *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, painted in 1907, explained four levels of distinction, between the merely very good and the great: "Oh," "Oh, My," "Oh, My God," and "Oh My God, I thought it was in a public collection."<sup>1</sup> While these categories are certainly subjective, they nonetheless reveal a sense of hierarchy that connoisseurship shares with taxonomy and that translates into a scale of monetary value. Similarly, the dealer, when approaching the task of pricing a batch of ephemeral trade cards or illustrated billheads or travel brochures, and without the advantage of, or recourse to, a comprehensive catalog, is likely to make a similar number of distinctions—from the pedestrian to the exemplary—and price accordingly.

In 1972, I purchased the estate of an antiquarian bookseller, consisting not only of books but also of all the ancillary paper material that then accompanied books in the antiquarian trade. To learn about classification and value in this new field, I sold the books to other dealers for their offers, provided that they would disclose to me their basis for determining value. For the ephemera, I had to form my own ideas about points of merit and value, there being no established culture of dealing and no expert advice.

If, however, the material is not particularly visual in nature (if it does not easily fall by inspection into ranking piles), then, as our philosopher-printer used to say: "You have to make a careful study." From scratch! Admit ignorance; look for variation; compare and contrast; look for the second variation; discern patterns.

1. Rebecca Mead, "An Acquiring Eye," *New Yorker* (January 15, 2007): 59.

In discovering postal history, for instance—a term that dignified the collection of stamps used on their original envelopes—I had been particularly attracted to a folded letter sent before postage stamps had been invented, postmarked from Troy, N.Y. It is hand stamped Roman numeral “V,” and “Paid.” I guessed that this meant prepayment of five cents in postage. Intrigued, I collected stampless period mail from Troy and soon published in the *American Philatelist* a classification of Troy’s pre-stamp postal markings according to the different handstamps, their period of use, function, color of ink, and state of wear. Seeking to correlate these distinctions with other factors, I also tabulated the succession of Troy postmasters, the evolution of postal regulations, and details of local history. In school, I was studying physics. My hobby was biology—an evolutionary taxonomy of my collections.

In our professional lives as dealers in ephemera, aGatherin’ specializes in the ephemera of transportation and communications systems, the post office, and the telegraph. We have published a classification of telegraph delivery envelopes to chart a chronological and geographic framework for the incorporation of the telegraphic system of the United States. And we have collected postal archives to produce a dramatic narrative of United States postal history.

In the case of the telegraph, our taxonomy was physical: space and time (geography and chronology), as contrasted with the Post Office, where our taxonomy was biological—of an evolving culture. Generally we use both, and this means that our current work in the telegraph is tending more to the evolutionary taxonomy; in the post office, to the physical.

As dealers, we are often in the position to buy large holdings and to make careful studies. Librarians can draw upon this experience for their own classification of what had been inchoate in ephemeral material—beyond Dewey and LC.

### *Diane, on Appraisals:*

Both Margolis and Moss and aGatherin’ perform several appraisals a year. We have reputations, earned by much field work, for courteous dealings with clients and for good, literate, and thorough reports. We are on the lists of appraisers recommended by the institutions geographically close to us and by those further afield. Most of these assignments occur when the owner of a collection or an archive approaches an institution to make a donation. Once the donation is deemed appropriate for access, the owner will hire us to appraise it for a tax deduction. As professional appraisers, we must charge an hourly fee (never a percentage of the value of the collection) and determine a “fair market value.” With ephemera, we are somewhat hampered from finding a truly comparable sale, for each collection is unique. We participate in creating a hierarchy of values. In general, this can be expressed as: how important is this

collection (or single item) to interpreting an aspect of cultural history; how complete is this collection (and a concomitant: how difficult would it be to replicate); and how well matched is the donation to the institution accepting it.

But our work as appraisers encompasses more. We are paid to help individuals deal with their own family's letters and ephemera. We recommend ways to house and share the items, or we perform the work ourselves. For instance, one woman who hired us was bogged down in the task of transcribing the letters her late husband had sent his parents while serving in the South Pacific in World War II. She wanted their grandchildren to know about this aspect of their grandfather's life. I photocopied the letters and wrote a narrative using the most vivid descriptive passages, placed in the context of what was happening with the American and other troops; and I then recommended that the woman donate the original letters to the New York State Library. This could perhaps be called an "appraisal-plus."

In the world of ephemera appraisal, aGatherin' has become known for tackling very large and unwieldy collections. The largest, in terms of volume, and the longest, in terms of years, was our appraisal for Arrow Shirt. Back in the junk-bonding days of the early 1980s, Arrow was taken over by Westpoint Pepperell and, as a result, prepared to move to Georgia from Troy, where it had been making shirt collars since the 1860s. The company had a very lovely and well-organized museum and archive—and the local special collections librarians were desolate that such riches might go south. We agreed, pro bono, to draw up a preliminary appraisal report to show the new owners the advantages of donation. But they only got it half right, if that. They agreed to donate what they considered the ephemera most germane to local history, while keeping what still might inform their continuing business. They also trashed the organization of the collection, so that we performed the final appraisal in an abandoned building with everything piled higgledy piggledy in factory bins. Still, this donated collection is pure gold for the Rensselaer County Historical Society.

Ten years passed, and Arrow called us again. Several owners later, the boxes of ephemera, now swelled by other records, were taking up too much space in their Atlanta warehouse and the new CEO threatened to throw it away. A self-designated angel at the New York City head office convinced him to hire us to appraise the holdings. Our report included the caveat about wretched organization detracting from market value, but also recommendations of more than one institution that would welcome the donation. Arrow at least decided to keep the ephemera.

Ten more years passed, and we received another call from the Arrow angel. Yet another owner had sold off all real estate, the very name of Arrow had been

purchased for use in this country by Van Heusen, and the ephemera archive was on the brink of the garbage dump again. Our appraisal proposal pointed out that if all Arrow consisted of now was a head office and the global rights to various trademark names, then their archive of historic patterns, trade name swatches, and so on was even more valuable to them. In the end, we rented a storefront in our village and Arrow sent up two tractor-trailer loads—forty tons, 1,600 boxes. Twenty very intense working days later, we had pruned it by over half, organized it in three sizes of uniform storage boxes with a finding guide, and donated many duplicates (and large items like sewing machines) to local institutions. Because our work is strange in so many ways, Rob even ended up driving the whole archive to a document storage warehouse in Queens. Our appraisal report again proposed that a final placement in a research library would be appropriate. I just checked, and Philips Van Heusen Corporation now owns the archive, along with all the trademarks. They are in the process of setting up a research archive of both fabric swatches and documents. Ironically, their only tool for knowing what came from Arrow is the finding guide we prepared.

Here is a gratifying example of the completion of the collector-dealer-institution circle. Twenty years ago, at our booth at a New York City philatelic show, a collector of Philippine stamps admitted that he was finding his collection limited. In conversation, I discovered that he was interested in architecture and showed him a binder of nineteenth-century illustrated letterheads we had for sale, many of which included vignettes of buildings. He bought one of a boiler maker that pictured not just the factory building, but also the nearly bestial monster boilers being assembled in the yard. I encouraged him to join the Ephemera Society of America, which he did—and each year he would come to the annual fair and buy more letterheads from us and from other dealers. He became interested in analyzing the design elements. We encouraged him to give a talk, and a paper on his ideas was published in one of the Society journals. As he neared retirement and the collection reached a certain maturity, he asked our advice on what institution to donate it to. We recommended the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University, because a former head librarian, Herbert Mitchell, had been such a bird-dog for buying ephemera from every fair within reach of Manhattan public transportation. In December, the collector hired us to appraise the collection, now residing at the Avery: it truly was a celebration to see how thoroughly welcome both the collector and the collection were. He will continue to add to it. And already it is being used—a restoration architect was able to recreate the design of towers removed from a New York City building by examining the lithograph on a letterhead.

In our role as appraisers, we promote responsible collecting—especially the preservation of original organization and of archival integrity. We guide collectors

toward donating rather than splitting up collections for sale in the open market. And we help match collections to appropriate institutions. In the short term, this sometimes works against our roles of buying and selling. But for ephemera, we are committed to the larger picture.

## **How do ephemera dealers support special collections?**

*David, “We are Facilitators, not the Enemy”:*

I have met collectors who are annoyed when we offer them an item. They see us as being in the way of them getting “the stuff.” They resent that we “found” this item, marked it up, and are offering it to them at what they feel is now an inflated price. They do not understand the “value added” by dealers prior to a sale. To better understand what this means for the buyer, let us start with the simple fact that we purchase what we sell. Think about it: we put our money where our mouth is. We have to believe in this material. This is a great incentive to price fairly and sell quickly to keep our cash flowing. We travel extensively to buy and sell (once again, using our own money) and spend many hours scouring other inventories and bins to find the items we enter into our stock. Just think about what this would mean if you had to do it to find the material for your special collections!

After building an inventory, we structure it. First it must be protected. Does it need conservation or cleaning? How to best protect it? Should items go into paper or plastic sleeves? Will they fit in an album or be placed in a box? What do we do with items made of silk, leather, wood-bark, glass, tin, or porcelain (printed ephemera come on many different surfaces)? Next we must try to place the items in their historic context: dating them, identifying their printing methods, noting important personages or styles with which they might be associated, and explaining why these items are worth the value we have placed on them.

An example of a value-added collection is a group of 9,000 postcards of New Mexico we sold to the DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University. For more than ten years we purchased these cards. Our purchases were culled from tens of thousands of cards we saw at shows, antique shops, or received on approval from other dealers. What we offered the library were not mixed shoeboxes of postcards but, rather, nineteen archival boxes of cards, with each card in a protective plastic sleeve. The boxes were divided by city, town, or village (in alphabetical order). Most of these were further divided into overviews, street scenes, public buildings, private buildings, and any special features of the area, including parks, monuments, railroads, or ranches. There were sections for indigenous peoples, as well as general tourist-type promotions. All of the cards were counted, listed, and analyzed in the accompanying description. Included was a history of the postcard

in New Mexico, a discussion of its uses and choice of subjects, and a description of the importance of this “popular communication” in today’s understanding of New Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century. When the collection was sold, the director of the library felt that the collection was well worth its price of \$30,000, since he received not only the cards but also saved money by not having to sort, display, catalog, and analyze this material himself. Any graduate student working on twentieth-century New Mexico could instantly plunge into this material and use it in any number of unimagined ways.

### *Jean, on Passion, Presentation, and Promotion:*

How do we present and promote this material? What is the “added value” we keep mentioning: this poster, rolled in a tight tube, on which we spent \$350 and for which we would like to double our money when we sell it; this wonderful broadside we rescued from a junk shop, where it was lying on a crankshaft, unprotected by even so much as a sandwich bag, and where, despite their lack of care, the owners wanted real money for it; this group of letters written by a Union soldier to his dear wife, which we found in the bottom of a large box of dirty paper; the accumulation of all the advertising promotions sent to a small general store/post office in November 1911, which Rob and Diane found insulating walls; the trade catalogs bought in flea markets in Spain and lugged home in carry-on luggage. These all contain “added value”: time, energy, and money, which are the three “hidden” expenses of each item you purchase.

The more we know about your individual collections, the easier it is for us to direct material to them. The best possible way for us to get the material to the right collection is to have a personal relationship with the librarian or curator. By the way, it is also the best possible way for the collection to acquire the material. For a number of years, David and I had very close relationships with four major western history special collections curators. One had strength in railroads, one in Native Americans, one on Texas, and one on California. Yet each wanted all of it. We had to decide to whom we would first offer the really desirable material. Since we had not only professional but personal relationships with the curators, our decisions were generally based on our perception of which library was the best fit for a particular piece or, very often, if we knew they would all want the piece, on a sort of “round robin, take-turn” basis.

Promoting this material is part of our job. We must research and present it to you, be it via letter, e-mail, or catalogue. We try to understand the nature of your collections and explain how this material fits in. If it needs conservation, it must be conserved. If possible, a provenance should be supplied. In the case of manuscript material, authenticity must be established. If there are library markings, clear

title must be established (de-accessioning is a sloppy, old habit that is often hard to prove). We, as dealers, have the same responsibility of stewardship and care for the material while it is in our hands as do you, the final custodians.

*Robert, on Cultural Capital:*

Cultural capital arises from the currency and markets generated by the artifacts and the people who make and receive them. Individual sensibilities may be fickle, but the galleries and academies and institutions provide mass and momentum to the cultural community. They provide the market for symbolic expression, in conjunction with the artifact, which is the currency of cultural capital.

Cultural capital certainly also entails both the universal and the quotidian. The fine arts may be said to exemplify a quest for universal principles underlying individual expression. And ephemera may be recognized as evidence of the transient features of daily existence. We live in circumstances where globalization challenges the canonical assumptions underpinning diverse cultures, and where technological change seems to be driving individual lives.

A cultural quantum of status and change also calls for both. Books and photographs are more often exalted as fine art, but they can be used to document the quotidian. The collection of books produced from television dramas, formed by rare book dealer Bill Ewald and sold to the Cecil H. Green Library at Stanford University, tracks popular taste and the growth of television. On the other hand, of course, postage stamps and soap wrappers, which are typically regarded as ephemera, might be used to illustrate canonical principles of human expression. The distinction of ephemera, therefore, inheres not so much in the specific artifact as it does in the intellectual activity associated with the fascination by which it engages our attention, top down or bottom up.

Pieces of fine art are not particularly utilitarian (nor are they usually made of intrinsically valuable components), yet they may accrue great value. On the other hand, the ephemera of fine arts are “garbage.” From the Roman Bronze Works archive, the original Remington plasters were going to be tossed along with the registration book of the bronzes. At the moment, we have three and a half tons of discards from the National Gallery of Art—which, as the ephemera of the fine arts in the United States, do not tell us much more than a postage stamp would about, say, the Klimt painting—but reveal much about the capitalizing culture of the fine arts in this country.

The fine arts do provide us ephemerists with a model for the building of cultural capital. The process is accomplished by teachers and schools; by opportunities for

exhibition in public spaces; by evaluations from sale in galleries and at auctions; and by certification through the attention of academies and the study of scholars.

But while the fine arts may readily be esteemed for their contribution to cultural capital, ephemera have only recently been regarded in this way. In looking for ways to interpret social change, libraries and museums are increasingly turning to ephemera. Yet, we must admit to a paucity, or a relative immaturity, in the institutional support system. We ephemerists are still operating in that space between “worthless” and “priceless.” Ephemera needs to be more taught, more exhibited in public places, more evaluated by gallery and auction sales, more certified.

### *Diane, on Networks:*

It must be obvious by now that the four of us are good friends. We met at the very first annual conference and fair of the Ephemera Society of America, recognized our compatibility, and consolidated our relationship over the course of other such fairs on the East Coast. After we helped sponsor Margolis and Moss in the ABAA, we met each year at West Coast fairs. As with so much else, networks among ephemera dealers are crucial. I should point out that in our businesses, a key network is the binary one between partners. The never-ending conversation over what to buy, how to price, and when to commit to projects such as this symposium—that is our fuel.

When we stay at Jeanie and David’s Santa Fe guest house, we sleep surrounded by their research library, and I am always impressed at how rich it is in areas that ours is not. We turn to them for advice on all things photographic and on the whole topic of westward expansion. They metaphorically raid our reference library for communication and transportation subjects by telephoning us with questions. Knowledge is power, and all good dealers have good libraries. Cooperative knowledge is even better.

We need our network of fellow dealers. We need our professional associations. We need the information from the journals of specialist collecting groups. We need the information gleaned from browsing ephemera fairs and book fairs, where ephemera are increasingly being displayed. And I must put in a plug for the Ephemera Society of America, because this is a group that serves us all: dealer and collector, both private and institutional.

In 1975, the Ephemera Society began in England. From its start, the English group fostered close relationships between private and institutional collections—and, because of a central locus in London, its meetings could be a more sophisticated form of “show and tell.” Both aGatherin’ and Margolis and Moss joined the group in its

second year, looking to make contact with others who had designated ephemera as their field. And out of the concerted efforts of the English Society, organized and amplified by Michael Twyman, an exemplary reference book was published in 2000: *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to American contributors, it covers much of the ephemera indigenous to our country—though a more Americanized edition is in the works. If you deal with ephemera at all, you need this book.

The Ephemera Society of America, established in 1980, was spearheaded by ephemera dealers, along with keen collectors with a background in printing. From the beginning, the focus was multidimensional: an annual event would include a fair so that ephemera could be bought and sold, conference presentations that could lead to published articles, and an exhibit of ephemera collections. The Society provides a membership directory—and the most important page for relations between dealers and special collections is one that lists institutional members. A quarterly newsletter, *Ephemera News*, is a forum for information on shows and for short articles. Of more value to research libraries is the annual *Ephemera Journal* that publishes more scholarly articles. This is the only organization that advocates for good communication between private collectors and public institutions.

I am on the Board of Directors of the Society, and all of us take seriously the stated goals: “to cultivate and encourage interest in ephemera and the history identified with it; to further the understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of ephemera by people of all ages, backgrounds, and levels of interest; to promote the personal and institutional collection, preservation, exhibition, and research of ephemeral materials; to serve as a link among collectors, dealers, institutions, and scholars; and to contribute to the cultural life of those who have an interest in our heritage as a nation or a people, both nationally and internationally.”

2. Maurice Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian*, edited and completed by Michael Twyman, with the assistance of Sally De Beaumont and Amoret Tanner (New York: Routledge, 2000).