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Ephemera: The “Poor Step-Child” of the Archive – A Look at Current Descriptive Practice of Ephemera in Archives and Special Collections

The Oxford English Dictionary lists two definitions under “ephemera” (noun): 1) An insect that lives only for a day, 2) one who or something which has a transitory existence.¹ One might argue that, similar to insects, ephemera have no place in archives and special collections. Just as insects that live only for a day, ephemera – which range from ABC Primers to Bumper Stickers to Needle Packets to Zines² – are not supposed to withstand the test of time. They are to be used and then discarded. Ironically, for librarians and archivists,

¹ *OED Online*, s.v. “Ephemera, n.2,” accessed November 2010, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/63197>

² In fact, the *Encyclopedia of Ephemera* has 402 large pages crammed with ephemera from A-Z, and does not include three dimensional objects or memorabilia. Maurice Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian*, ed. Michael Twyman, Sally de Beaumont and Amoret Tanner (New York: Routledge, 2000). Also, the Ephemera Society (which caters mostly to collectors) has a great list of ephemera: <http://www.ephemerasyociety.org/whatisephemera.html>

ephemera hold an important place within the realm of cultural heritage. Ephemera tell stories about history that often are left untold.

So, what are the issues with ephemera for archives and special collections, especially if ephemera are not supposed to withstand the test of time? Printed ephemera (e.g., playbills, posters, flyers, scrapbooks) is often of terrible paper quality. While archivists and librarians have to deal with lower quality paper in traditional archival formats, the preservation issues for ephemera can be even more challenging. Two examples from academic libraries collecting political ephemera are bumper stickers with adhesives, and giant political posters with tricky glues and oversize shelving needs.³ While many

³In the case of bumper stickers, archivists have to learn about adhesives. Andy Hyland, "KU Libraries Conservator Finds Kansas Company Played Role in Development of Bumper Stickers," *LJ World*, February 20, 2011, accessed May 8, 2011, <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2011/feb/20/ku-libraries-conservator-finds-kansas-company-play/>; Susan Tschabrun discusses preservation issues with political posters: They were printed on acidic paper because they were for short-term use, their size is not standard, they might be posted on a wall using adhesives, staples, pins, etc. If the posters hung outside, they were exposed to elements and sometimes have irreversible damage upon arrival to a repository. Susan Tschabrun,

libraries represented here at Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) might not encounter these types of ephemera, think about your synagogue bulletins, or the leaflet collection at the National Library of Israel.⁴ Plus, for ephemera, there are fewer resources available because of their diversity: as opposed to standard paper or digital materials, ephemera collections can run the gamut from flyers to playbills to the gray line with realia. But archivists and special collection librarians do have an obligation to preserve cultural heritage. We should also remember ephemera are not unique materials, and for archives, specializing in the “unique”, that poses a question for archives collecting “unique” materials.

Therefore, the main question for this paper is what are the current descriptive practices employed by archivists and librarians to provide access to ephemera in their collections?

“Off the Wall and Into a Drawer: Managing a Research Collection of Political Posters,” *The American Archivist* 66:2 (Fall/Winter 2003): 317-18.

⁴Meira Harroch, “The Ephemera Collection at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem” (paper presented at the annual convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, Brooklyn, New York, June 20-23, 2004).

To answer this question, we need a working definition of ephemera. Ephemera can be described as paper materials, usually printed, that are not bound in books. These materials were not intended for long-term use, but rather as a method of conveying information to many people quickly. Ephemera, include, but are certainly not limited to, posters, bookmarks, bumper stickers, matchbooks, pamphlets, menus, flyers, cigar wrappers, and much, much more. Ephemera generally do not include three-dimensional objects, like ash trays, tee-shirts, or other cultural artifacts, but in many institutions, ephemera includes non-paper materials.

In the spring of 2011, I set out to answer these questions by interviewing librarians and archivists. While doing a literature review of current practices in cataloging ephemera and access to ephemera in collections, no article talks with archivists or librarians about current practices. I therefore

hope, through these interviews, to provide some answers to my question.

The libraries and archives chosen are all Association of Research Libraries members and selected based on collection size – small, medium, or large.⁵ After excluding the national libraries of the United States and Canada, and research libraries with no special collections, thirty-one libraries were contacted initially via email. The interviews (with the exception of one respondent who answered all the questions over email and two who gave brief, helpful answers via email) were performed over the phone. I received sixteen responses, plus two short emails, for a total of eighteen respondents, or a 58% response rate.

Each respondent was asked five questions:

⁵ The Association of Research Libraries post collection size information for their 126 member libraries on their website. The most current statistics are from 2008-2009. I broke down the size chosen by general collection size. "ARL Statistics 200-2009," last modified April 18, 2011, <http://www.arl.org/stats/annualsurveys/arlstats/arlstats09.shtml>. I took libraries with the smallest and largest collection and the middle of the two, done purely by collection numbers.

1.How do you arrange and describe ephemera materials in your collection?

2.Do you keep ephemera materials with the rest of the collection?

3.How do you promote ephemera within the collections (if at all) for patrons to use?

4.Do you ever deaccession ephemera?

5.Out of curiosity, just to get a feel for the collections, what are your favorite pieces of ephemera in your collection? Is there a most-requested piece? A quirkiest piece? A best example?

The fifth question was my favorite because it allowed the respondents to talk about what they really had in their collections and to get a feel for the range of materials hiding on shelves of research institutions.

What I found was quite interesting. Arrangement usually had to do with the size of the institution and collection. Usually

librarians kept the materials in original order and, with the exception of physical size, they seldom separated materials.

For description, I asked the difference of item level versus collection level cataloging. Answers varied, but most worked with collection level cataloging and only used item level for the “important” items.

How individual libraries promote their ephemera collections are also different. Some use ephemera in exhibits or for tours, since these objects are more visually appealing. One large university librarian always points out ephemera while giving undergraduates tours; they never expect to see these items in a library. Some schools talked about using web tools and social media – Flickr was mentioned as a tool to engage patrons and allow for social tagging.

Most institutions do not deaccession materials, but they might weed duplicates. Some objects that cross the line between ephemera and realia might not be accessioned in the

first place, rather than deaccession. An example that stood out was matchbooks. While the librarian knew they were entirely ephemeral, she never felt comfortable keeping them in the stacks with the rest of the ephemera and often left them on her desk.

The collections question, my favorite, got respondents talking so I learned more about what their institutions owned. One respondent said she tries not to collect ephemera in her archive, since the material was not unique. An archivist at a smaller institution, however, stressed how much she enjoys collecting ephemera. Having an ephemera collection distinguishes this smaller, younger institution from other ones. This university cannot compete with older, more established, institutions with better endowments, but they have the opportunity to “go rogue.”

Certain types of ephemera collections appeared in several institutions; many talked about underrepresented groups as

integral parts of their ephemera collections. In at least five institutions, the archivists and librarians talked about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) collections. These materials were usually catalogued on item level and often the most popular collections for users. Student groups appear in many of the ephemera collections. In university archives, many records of student life are kept through ephemera: posters, flyers, handouts, and signs from football games.

Archivists cited these ephemera collections as the jewels of the archive: they show what student life was all about. Especially in the 1960s, ephemera from student life demonstrates how students were interacting with the greater political issues. In some cases, posters from student groups are excellent candidates for digitization, since they have such a connection to the university.

While not interviewed for this paper, many Jewish libraries and archives include significant ephemera collections.

The Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest donated their archive to the University of Minnesota just this year and it includes “family papers, club and association materials and ephemera, personal narratives of Jewish life in the Upper Midwest, materials documenting family owned businesses in the Jewish community, as well as books and publications.”⁶

The New York Public Library includes ephemera in their Dorot Jewish division, theater placards from the Nahum Stutchkoff’s Yiddish play and radio script collection.⁷ In 2004, Meira Harroch talked about the NLI’s collection of approximately 5500 cataloged leaflets at the AJL conference in New York, as well as the issues surrounding the proper cataloging of these materials.⁸

Where does this leave us now? How are other institutions and organizations assisting with ephemera

⁶“Jewish Historical Society Completes Transfer of Archives to U of M Libraries,” *Targeted News Service*, March 13, 2013

⁷ Amanda (Miriyem-Khaye) Siegel, “Nahum Stutchkoff’s Yiddish Play and Radio Scripts in the Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library,” *Judaica Librarianship* 16/17 (2011): 56-57.

⁸ Harroch, “Ephemera Collection.”

cataloging? The 2007 Pre Conference for the Rare Books and Manuscript Section of the ACRL was the first conference devoted entirely to ephemera and the most highly attended pre-conference in the organization's history.⁹ The Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) has some resources for librarians and archivists, such as a preservation leaflet on the storage methods and handling practices of archival materials that includes a section on ephemera and scrapbooks.¹⁰ They also offer webinars and training courses for handling ephemera.¹¹ The Ephemera Society of America also offers resources for both professionals and individual collectors.

While ephemera are no longer as marginalized in archives and special collections, more work needs to be done

⁹ Raine, "From Here to Ephemerality," 14.

¹⁰ Sherelyn Ogden, "Storage Methods and Handling Practices," Preservation Leaflets, Northeast Document Conservation Center, accessed May 7, 2011, http://www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets/4Storage_and_Handling/01StorageMethods.php

¹¹ "Preservation 101," Education, Northeast Document Conservation Center, accessed May 7, 2011, <http://www.nedcc.org/education/preservation101/preservation101.php>

by professionals to bring ephemera into the spotlight. The title of this paper comes from an interview with an archivist who said ephemera are still the poor-step child of the archive.¹² In almost all the interviews, most librarians and archivists had very positive views about ephemera, though several still had doubts about its place in the repository or how they should handle ephemera. An email from a university archivist proves this point: “I can tell you we don’t do a lot and mostly hope we don’t get this kind of material.”¹³ Many are split between how much time and effort needs to be put in for cataloging ephemera as evidenced by the lack of standardization for item, folder, subject, or collection level cataloging. However, many did say they almost never do item level cataloging unless the collection is small or important for the institution, which at least demonstrates some level of standardization. And, most tellingly, the term “ephemera” remains ambiguous. In most

¹² Interview with archivist, April 7, 2011.

¹³ Archivist, e-mail message to author, April 4, 2011. This was sent as a response when trying to set up an interview.

interviews, archivists and librarians said they only accept paper ephemera, they then included realia and three-dimensional objects into the conversation, sometimes without realizing their error. If they did realize their error in terminology they made an excuse: it is important to the institution, how can we separate it from the collection, it fits in a box on the shelf, etc.

Perhaps the AJL should offer resources to their institutions for proper cataloging and social media ideas. Many collections represented here likely also have interesting ephemera but no proper way to catalog the materials. With all institutions strapped for time and money, proper storage and preservation issues might even discourage librarians from accessioning these materials. While researching, I was disappointed but not surprised to see how little has been written from Jewish librarians, or even counterparts in other religious library circles, about ephemera. I would hope to

spend more time in the future interviewing librarians of specifically Jewish institutions to see how their cataloging standards might differ from colleges and what we as a community can stand to learn from each other.

As the librarian for the Iraqi Jewish Archive at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, I now understand first hand the challenges of cataloging ephemera. This paper started as a class assignment and, while I hoped professionally do work with ephemera, I never anticipated running into the problems other librarians discussed; I would never catalog ephemera poorly. The materials in our collection became wet and then moldy so paper that was of poor quality became even more damaged. A team of conservators and technicians painstakingly repair the documents for digitization, but the time I have to catalog the materials is entirely limited. Part of the project's digital launch will include a website which will hopefully allow users to

comment on the materials and let users catalog and tag, similar to how some universities embrace Flickr for their collections.

While I catalog on item levels, items levels are often huge binders of materials, containing upwards of 500 pages. A wedding invitation, a business card, a handbill, and more ephemera, gets lost in the cataloging but hopefully, with social media, these items can be seen by others.

I hope this gives more of a glimpse into the challenging world of cataloging ephemera and I am excited to see how much better we as a profession can get in the future.

Note:

This presentation was first written as a seminary paper in April 2011 for a Seminar in Archives and Records Management at the University of Maryland, taught by Kevin Cherry.