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The Nature and Handling of Ephemera

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What Are Ephemera?

Ephemera are usually mass-produced items including brochures, pamphlets, newspapers, cards, broadsides, playbills, and other materials that are created to serve a specific information disseminating purpose for a short period. Whereas archives are unique and original sources, ephemera are created in bulk and are readily available for public distribution at the time they are created. Much like archives, ephemera should be prized in an archival facility for the information they impart and as a connection to the past. Unlike most monographs (with the exception of rare books), ephemera are often rare. Their “ephemeral” nature encourages rough handling by original users. Once ephemera serve their original information dissemination purpose, items are often discarded and the vital information they tell us about a community’s information needs at a specific time is lost.

Providing Access to Archives

Ephemera often come to the archivist mixed with original resources. Archivists have a myriad ways of handling these materials. This includes separating them from the original materials, creating a separate subject file of ephemera, or discarding it. Whatever means of handling we choose, we must be aware of the differences between ephemera and archives to make informed decisions based on standard archival theories of appraisal, arrangement, and description. Our means of handling ephemera must also cater to the needs of our researchers. Ephemera are most highly prized in historical society and local library collections where users rely on this type of material to make an immediate connection with the past. Scholarly institutions and institutional collections may place less emphasis on this type of material that is used less in these facilities than the archives themselves.

Basics of Handling Ephemera

Some types of ephemera may come to us as whole collections and their worth should be evaluated using our standard archival procedures. For example, a postcard collection that has nothing to do with our institutional mission may be better suited for another repository.

Ephemera that come mixed with other collections are sometimes desirable to keep with the archives. For example, postcards included with the correspondence of the collection creator should be maintained with other correspondence. Pamphlets created by the author of a collection may also remain as part of the archival collection.

The most commonly encountered ephemera in a collection include clippings. A photocopy of a clipping may be kept with the archival collection or placed in a “vertical file” arranged by subject and organized

alphabetically. Brochures and pamphlets that do not relate directly to the creator of a particular collection may also be moved to a vertical file or separate ephemera collection. In the finding aid, the archivist should be sure to cross-reference the user from the original collection to the vertical/ephemera file. Scrapbooks are another popular ephemeral source and should be handled as all other ephemera.

The transient nature of ephemera often means that it is usually created using lesser quality materials. The ink and paper out of which ephemera is created may be hazardous to other materials in the collection and should be preserved appropriately. It is recommended, for one, that newsclippings be photocopied for preservation purposes and the originals discarded or moved to a separate file if they have some intrinsic value. Pamphlets, brochures, and other materials mixed with the archives should be separated with folders, interleaving paper, or Mylar enclosures to prevent contaminating the entire collection.

As with archives, familiarity with our collections -- using our collection development policy and those of our sister institutions -- will help us better care for our ephemera. Evaluate your ephemera as you would your archives, but understand the different nature and handling procedures used for the two types of resources.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT EPHEMERA SEE:

The Ephemera Society of America - <http://www.ephemerasociety.org/>
The Ephemera Society (UK) - <http://www.ephemera-society.org.uk/>

National Library of Australia – “Ephemera: Is it Really Just Nostalgic Junk” – tells about the ways one Archives handles its ephemera <http://www.nla.gov.au/nla/staffpaper/sstreet1.html#1> and “Junk As Heritage: The Collecting of Printed Ephemera on a National Scale” <http://www.nla.gov.au/nla/staffpaper/rstone1.html>