

The collection of ephemera at the Bibliothèque Forney in Paris

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Labels, packaging, bills, colour prints, blotters, fans, trade cards, publicity leaflets, social stationery, pious images, good-points cards, wrapping paper, golden crowns from *Galettes des Rois* . . . Far from being complete, this list¹ gives just a glimpse of the iconographic collections of the Bibliothèque Forney. Alongside the prestigious collections that have always been part of the history of the institution (posters, wallpaper, printed fabrics, ancient books), the Library has in fact long been developing a collection of ephemera. These can be counted in hundreds of thousands of items, but it is difficult to be more precise; the ephemera collections grow daily, often as a result of small donations, and remarkable acquisitions enrich the collections.

English version by Gillian Varley

Historical background

The Bibliothèque Forney, a library of art belonging to the Ville de Paris, was founded in 1886, some 120 years ago. It is named after an industrialist whose legacy to the city of Paris – intended for evening schools for adults of both sexes, public libraries for the people and training in professional schools – was finally used to create a library for Parisian craftsmen who could meet there, read and borrow books or models. It was situated in the heart of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, the historic district for artisans in furniture and decoration. Responding to a real need, since no other establishment of this type existed, it was very soon a victim of its own success in its extremely cramped location. Although it had been decided to transfer the collections to the Hôtel de Sens in the Marais from 1929, this did not happen until 1961 and it was only in 1973 that the collections were rehoused in their new quarters in their entirety. Today, 30 years later, it is once again bursting at the seams and in pressing need of modernisation.

Curators of great stature, Henri Clouzot² and Gabriel Henriot,³ worked to give the library national renown, and subsequently Jacqueline Viaux⁴ contributed to its international fame. Under Anne-Claude Lelieur⁵ the library became known for its

holdings of graphic arts and posters. The library is notable for the diversity of its documentary material: monographs and periodicals, of course, exhibition catalogues from all over the world, catalogues of public sales and of the salons, and those of commercial firms, and also an important iconographic collection.

Responding to a very specific need, both for the craftsmen and for students, that of being able to consult and borrow images, to stimulate creative inspiration or simply to provide illustration of general knowledge, the iconographic collection began at the same time as the library itself. Today it houses a rich heritage collection of 25,000 publicity posters, both ancient and modern (the third largest in France), of wallpapers, fabric samples, postcards (one and a half million), original designs and archival models, as well as a substantial collection of ephemera.

Definition

The ephemera held at Forney are all the small publicity documents and popular illustrations, those modest witnesses to daily life, which have become rare because until very recently they were considered to be of no interest and without value, documents which are distributed free or which accompany ordinary consumer products and which are

essentially throw-away. Each document is a two-dimensional object, therefore flat. There are few exceptions to this rule (various lids and boxes which are notable for their iconography and their printing). Large and small posters and cardboard boxes are excluded from this category and are part of a separate collection.

The ephemera collection is central to the library's acquisition policy for decoration, graphic art, imagery and commercial art. It complements other resources (books, periodicals, trade catalogues) and cannot be separated from them. While the popular nature of the imagery and the weight of nostalgia of these documents that survive from daily life draw in a large public, researchers also value their historical value. These ephemera provide historians with information about the evolution of taste, the graphic arts, advertising, customs and society in general. Perhaps most characteristic among the areas of research for which these documents provide evidence are trade marks, printing, the ethnography of daily life and popular traditions.



Label for thread 'Fil au géant'.
Lithograph.

D. Leclerq, Lille.

Holdings and acquisitions

The collection was built up throughout the 20th century through a succession of gifts, and was relatively unknown until the beginning of the 1980s, when it was decided to systematically exploit this accumulation of material that had become so valuable. Its origins lie in the partial acquisition of legal deposit material from printers, something which benefited the collections of posters and postcards equally. At the same time as these old documents were being dealt with, it was decided to deal also with the more contemporary material which was being collected free, and to buy additional older examples including documents from the years just before 1950-1970. The activities of Sylvie Pitoiset, the librarian responsible for this collection for more than 20 years, were crucial here.⁶

Purchases were made from booksellers who specialised, amongst other areas, in ancient imagery (D. Bordet, S. Charbonnel, C. Courtet, D. de Latre, B. Sepulchre, J. Yzarne, etc.), from auction houses, from vintage paper fairs but especially from private collectors. As far as these last were concerned, although they knew in general terms about the Forney's collections, a subtle approach was sometimes required since what was involved was the breaking up of an original collection which had been put together with passion and erudition, in order to enhance a public collection, certainly of heritage status but one that demanded suitable conditions. Often these transfers were made over a period of several years. To supplement the acquisitions budget of the library, the *Société des amis de la bibliothèque Forney*⁷ added their financial support.

The following are some examples, amongst hundreds of others, which show the variety of the last few years' additions, whatever their value in the market place:

- 1 lot of tobacco packets 1930-1940
- 1 album of matchbox labels
- 1 important collection of lingerie labels from the years 1935-1950
- 3 albums of labels decorated with tinplate lithographs
- several albums of 19th-century labels for thread (very valuable)
- numerous illustrated diaries circulated by advertising firms for publicity purposes
- 1 lot of 3500 colour-printed publicity images
- 2 albums of packaging and labels for Houbigant perfume (again very valuable)
- 1 lot of 20,000 labels for cheeses
- 1 album containing a collection of calendars from the printer Oberthur

- 3 albums of lids from boxes of sugared almonds
- 1 lot of 200 exercise-book covers
- 1 collection of fruit wrappers
- 1 colouring-in book from the end of the 19th century
- 18 chemists' fliers illustrated by Vasarely
- 1 lot of 160 colour prints (chromolithographs) from the Chocolaterie d'Aiguebelle
- 1 lot of 80 boards for games from the end of the 19th century

Some very important purchases have been made possible through the dispersal of printers' archives, amongst them publicity documents (Tolmer, Draeger). And as a result of the intervention of collectors or people with family archives, it has been possible to acquire large collections from one particular printer (Dureysen, Ghesquiers and Lecat).

Word-of-mouth has been key in interesting potential sellers but also in attracting numerous benevolent collectors who, by their numerous and diverse gifts, have helped us to enrich the ephemera collections on an almost daily basis. Amongst them are a number of library colleagues who, attracted to the originality of this collection through its frequent exhibitions, never fail to contribute the small treasures they have collected on our behalf when they visit Forney. Displaying the collections in exhibitions devoted to particular subjects (lingerie, domestic arts, writing materials, advertising personalities, labels), and the publishing of postcards and illustrated catalogues, have created an ephemera-loving public for whom the library has become a rallying point. In addition the library subscribes to current magazines from clubs or associations of ephemera collectors and possesses numerous early periodicals about curiosities that are useful for research.

Conservation and processing

All this illustrated material has to be sorted and classified into a coherent bibliographic unity to allow it to be conserved, identified, catalogued, indexed and publicised. The number, the diversity and the fragility of these media (illustrating numerous printing methods on a great variety of paper, boxes and cut-outs), and their precarious state of conservation, means that they require meticulous treatment. It is necessary both to protect them from ageing and also to make them accessible to readers. In general, processing is carried out on large quantities of similar material: in this way one can deal with several hundreds of menus in one go, or a collection of documents from one printer, a group of boards for

games which need to be mounted on fabric, preservation of the collection of exercise-book covers or the complete collection of sugar papers.

We differentiate between different categories of material needing to be dealt with.



Label for perfume 'Pommade Figaro au musc'.
ca. 1890. Eugène Pichot, Paris.
Golden chromolithography

Individually-processed documents

In the 1990s we moved away from sticking documents onto Canson card (using a neutral glue or a combination of double-faced Japan paper and photographic corners) and having them boxed in the library's bindery, and began putting these documents into Mylar conservation pockets, according to format, and then housing them in files or boxes, either bought or made in-house (all these are in a neutral material). 'Atlantis' files can house up to 18 of these transparent pockets, permitting easy consultation and maximum protection. They are used for the colour prints and allow material to be arranged by subject, product type or brand. One particularly time-consuming aspect of the treatment can be unsticking the images before they are reconditioned.

This type of treatment is lengthy and expensive and is reserved as a priority for the most precious documents (those that are rare, expensive, old or fragile) such as labels, cut-outs or original designs.

Individual unprocessed documents

This category includes those less urgent pieces that can wait for appropriate treatment in pockets (for older material) and also more recent items. They are filed in archival boxes, plan chests (for mosaics, games, crowns) or metal racks, left unsorted or

classified according to a variety of criteria (date, brand, iconography, etc.) into sleeves or envelopes.

Printed items and made-up albums

Documents in these two categories (programmes, diaries, albums of colour prints, albums of samples) are filed in made-to-measure covers. Note that the shelfmark label is stuck onto the envelope or the box, file or cover in preference to the documents themselves.

Items that have not yet been processed can be filed into boxes (programmes for example) or in different cupboards and drawers devoted to the iconographic collection (e.g. albums). Here again the difference between methods of processing is not due to the type of document but to their age and number.

The library would like to create surrogate versions of its ephemera as far as it possibly can. It has therefore started digitising printed fabrics and a thousand or so wallpapers, which are already recorded on transparencies, like the collection of posters. It will never be possible to digitise all the hundreds of thousands of images held by the library. A choice will be essential and will be made to suit the automated catalogue, which is conceived as an illustrated catalogue which will bring together records for the items and digitised images, according to different formats.



Invoice. Lefèvre-Utile, Nantes.

Catalogues

The documents are far too numerous to be catalogued individually. The made-up albums and the collections that have been created are catalogued, indexed and subject-indexed like the other documents in the iconographic Reserve and are recorded on cards in the catalogue. The library is in the process of automating its catalogue, and part of it is already consultable on the web⁸ but it will not be until 2007 that the pre-2005 records for the Reserve, including the ephemera, will be retro-converted to Unimarc and will therefore be available. By contrast, the database is already being enhanced with online cataloguing. In addition to indexing the images, the cataloguers have to spend time identifying the illustrators.

Loose documents, arranged by type in boxes, appear in content lists in these boxes.

Consultation and exploitation

Since its creation the mission of the Bibliothèque Forney as an institution open to everyone has never been challenged; as a result the library makes its collections as easy to access as possible, and ephemera are no exception to this rule. Nevertheless, they are invigilated scrupulously during consultation, which takes place in a special reading room to which the



Invoice (back). E. Petit & F. Sevette.

documents are delivered individually. A number of different publics use the collections; these can be grouped by their type of research as follows:

- iconographic research for models and inspiration
- loan of documents for exhibitions (and their catalogues)
- illustration of publications of all types
- research into commercial history and the history of advertising
- research into the history of printing
- research into the history of popular graphic art
- collectors.

As has already been mentioned, the collection is exploited especially in those of our thematic exhibitions that illustrate the totality of the library's heritage collections: posters, periodicals, diverse iconographies, trade catalogues. This gives us the opportunity to publish copiously illustrated catalogues where this imagery, able to be seen in conjunction with other iconographic sources, reveals all its richness.

In 2002, a major exhibition entitled *Questions d'étiquettes* was organised, on the theme of the label. An important catalogue⁹ was published on this occasion. This was Forney's first large exhibition to be devoted exclusively to ephemera, and allowed these small documents to be the stars. Labels constitute one of the richest aspects of the collection and certain items are particularly spectacular. To be sure, some other French collections are even richer, for example those of the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the Institut national de la propriété industrielle. But no other collection can be consulted as freely as ours.

Another way of exploiting the collection of labels is to publish, with financial help from the Société des amis de la bibliothèque Forney, a series of postcards, a medium that is well adapted to the format of the items themselves.



Label for ink 'Encre du Globe'.

Lithograph.



Label for hotel 'Parkhotel Alpenhof Garmisch'.

The future of the collection

The ephemera collection must continue to develop. There is a great deal of work still to be done in its treatment (arranging, cataloguing, reconditioning). We hope we shall continue to find wonderful acquisition opportunities but here, of course, an element of chance enters the game. We would especially like to attract the generosity of donors, who will grow in number as the collection becomes better known. The provision of photographic images for publishers and the organisation of exhibitions are particularly important here. We also have a lot of faith in the ability of our digitisation programme to create collections of well-chosen images which will be integrated into our catalogue and will thus give still more visibility to our collection.

The collection of ephemera, together with the poster collection, the collection of wallpapers or the collections of books specialising in iconography, constitute a body of material which ensures that the Bibliothèque Forney truly deserves the name of 'library of the image'.

References

1. See the appendix.
2. Curator from 1905 to 1920, when he became curator of the Musée Galliera.