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“But I Believe Survival Is Based upon the Many and Not the Few:” Connecting Librarians and Artists to Build Special Connections

This paper examines the significance of social relationships between artists and special collections librarians in the acquisitions process, especially regarding ephemeral works. The ways the authors observed printer Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr. interacting with librarians are both inspiration and case study in this paper. Interviews with librarians who worked with Kennedy reveal that some artists or makers are not aware of the value that their ephemeral materials hold for future research, teaching, and scholarship.

Introduction

Letterpress printer Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr. (Kennedy) is known for his dedication to wood type and chipboard. Though his impressive career spans some three decades, he has been in passionate conversation with the printed word almost his entire life. Kennedy has made paper, studied calligraphy, bound books, printed, and he completed an MFA in Graphic Design at the UW–Madison. At one point, he was even an aspiring archivist! A peerless “book builder” with sterling credentials, Kennedy is internationally known as the purveyor of colorful, didactic letterpress posters collected by cultural heritage institutions (like the Library of Congress) and consumers alike.

Perhaps this is a reason peer-reviewed research that engages with his oeuvre is scarce. Posters, after all, are ephemera—a category of whose importance librarians and other cultural heritage workers may have a vexed understanding. Kennedy sees this category—ephemera—as central to his work: “I want to stress the importance of ephemera. Ephemera is the stuff that gets away. This gives so much information about everyday life, etc.”¹ Examples of ephemera Kennedy has produced include postcards, pamphlets, and business cards.

1. Amos Paul Kennedy Jr., interviewed by Courtney Becks, April 21, 2019.

The Importance of Being Ephemeral

The authors first considered Kennedy's work through the lens of material culture.² Researchers, scholars, and librarians may tussle over ephemera's definition. As defined by Rickards, it is a key component of many social and historical research methods used across various humanistic disciplines.³ In "The Long-Term Significance of Printed Ephemera," the redoubtable Michael Twyman wrote that ephemera referred to "documents that have relevance only for a short time, normally the day or days of the event or situation they relate to." Furthermore, he imparted the Ephemera Society of Britain's definition: "the minor transient documents of everyday life."⁴

To support these research methods, cultural institutions have long engaged in the challenges of prioritizing collection areas, organizing, and documenting these collections.⁵ Librarians are urged both to establish collection development policies that address ephemera as well as coordinate with colleagues to understand the wider distribution of collecting priorities.⁶ Information professionals have emphasized the importance of descriptive standards that enhance user access to collections.⁷ The authors' most gripping concern is that educators also prioritize teaching and learning activities that include ephemeral collections, which have been shown to be beneficial for students.⁸

Methodology

Kennedy has maintained long-term professional relationships with at least three major academic research institutions throughout his printing career. Special collections at University of Wisconsin–Madison, (UW–Madison) University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (UIUC RBML), and Indiana University Bloomington (IU Bloomington) hold significant examples of Kennedy's work. These are institutions at which the authors attended library school, worked, and encountered Kennedy's work.

2. This research was initiated for a workshop held at the Center for Material Culture Studies (CMCS) biennial conference at the University of Delaware in 2019.

3. Maurice Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*, 1st American ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988); Martin Andrews, "The Importance of Ephemera," in *A Companion to the History of the Book* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2008), 434–50, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470690949.ch32>.

4. Michael Twyman, "The Long-Term Significance of Printed Ephemera," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 19.

5. Hermina G. B. Anghelescu and John H. Slate, "Visual Ephemera," *Collection Management* 25, no. 4 (July 30, 2001): 77–80, https://doi.org/10.1300/J105v25n04_08; Jim Burant, "Ephemera, Archives, and Another View of History," *Archivaria* 40 (1995).

6. Michael Launder, "Saving Printed Ephemera: Setting Priorities in Preserving Evidence of the Every-day," *Current Studies in Librarianship* 26, no. 1/2 (Spring/Fall 2002): 67–76.

7. Elizabeth Holcombe, "Difficult to Find and Keep: Providing Access to Ephemera Collections," *Australian Law Librarian* 10, no. 2 (2002): 113–24.

8. Margaret Schaus, "Hands-on History," *College & Research Libraries News* 51, no. 9 (October 1, 1990), <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/23260/30359>; Shan Sutton and Lorrie Knight, "Beyond the Reading Room: Integrating Primary and Secondary Sources in the Library Classroom," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 3 (May 1, 2006): 320–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2006.03.001>.

This article investigates special collections acquisition methods, and excavates the role of social relationships in collecting artists' books and related ephemeral print material by interviewing Kennedy and several art and special collections librarians. Specifically, the authors will address methods librarians can use to create connections with artists throughout the various stages of their careers in order to establish and support ephemeral collections. The librarians interviewed for this paper include Lyn Korenic, former director of the Kohler Art Library (the Kohler) at UW–Madison; Valerie Hotchkiss, University Librarian at Vanderbilt and former director of UIUC RBML; UIUC RBML director Lynne Thomas; and Betty Jo "B.J." Irvine, retired head of the Fine Arts Library at IU Bloomington.⁹

Forming Connections

The Artists' Book Collection is among the Kohler's most popular holdings. Korenic previously worked at the University of California-Santa Barbara and IU Bloomington—two institutions whose art book collections are enviable in their own right.¹⁰ "And I will say that one of the great influences on me was Bill Bunce, the former librarian at the Kohler," Kennedy said in a UW–Madison oral history interview. "I would have long conversations with him about books and about life."¹¹ Bunce was a generous mentor and tremendous resource for all the book arts students, Korenic said: "When I came on board, Amos had already left town for a couple of years, and, again, I only saw him sporadically when he was visiting. So, I would say the relationship really was already built up with [Bunce]."¹²

At IU Bloomington, Irvine engaged faculty strategically during her tenure. She remembered consistently reaching out to all newly-hired faculty, as well as attending faculty meetings. This was her attempt to stay in contact with faculty research interests, as well as their evolving bibliographic and pedagogic needs. Irvine was particularly interested in Kennedy's work because he had been hired in 1998 to establish a book arts program at Indiana. Irvine discussed the Fine Arts Library's existing artists' books collection, and described how she was able to give lectures for his future students. She remembered that she and Kennedy had, "an immediate affinity for each other's interests and expertise," and that, "Amos was just in and out of my office all the time. I loved it!"¹³

Irvine reported that Kennedy also brought works in progress to her office to review and comment on. In general, she said,

9. This research follows on from an ephemera workshop the authors presented to scholars, researchers, and students from various disciplines at the 2019 CMCS biennial.

10. Lyn Korenic, interviewed by Courtney Becks, July 1, 2019.

11. Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr., interviewed by Sarah Lange, September 4, 2018, OH #1764, transcript, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, WI.

12. Korenic, interview.

13. Betty Jo "B.J." Irvine interviewed by Sarah Carter, April 9, 2019.

Accessibility and flexibility were always important in all my work with faculty and students—whenever Amos or other faculty or students took time to come to my office to talk about their interests, I stopped whatever I was doing because I always felt their interests were paramount to the collections and services of the Fine Arts Library.¹⁴

Throughout their working relationship, Irvine recalled, Kennedy carried small books with him throughout the day and would show them to her. One chance encounter highlighted the importance of their close relationship and coincidence of timing. Irvine said:

The last collection which I purchased from Amos was the [Amos P. Kennedy, Jr. poster collection from the Kentucky Museum Association exhibit], acquired in the parking lot on the side of the Fine Arts Building. I was coming into work on a Saturday morning and spotted Amos getting into his car. I ran over to talk with him and asked him if he had any work with him. He humbly mentioned the posters which were in his trunk. Of course, I had to see them. He had created them to keep working while living in Alabama. I loved them and told him I wanted to buy all of them for FAL [the Fine Arts Library]. He asked how I could do that because they were not artist's books or a "collection." But I said they were a "portfolio" of his work and I would have them added to our artists' books collection as such. I asked him to sign each one and had him make out an invoice on a slip of paper in the car. It was an exciting moment to be able to add these beautiful works to the Fine Arts Library artists' books collection.¹⁵

After Kennedy's departure from Indiana, he stayed in touch with Irvine by sending her postcards from his *NappygRam*¹⁶ series, which she added to the artists' files, the uncatalogued folders of ephemeral materials related to artists' careers and practice.

Collecting Kennedy's Work

Each librarian the authors interviewed indicated that Kennedy's work is valued by different collections for different reasons: geographic representation, aesthetic brilliance, or alumni affiliation. Kennedy's work is valued both as a UW–Madison alumnus, as well as a light in the book arts firmament. Under the tutelage of eminent artist faculty like Walter Hamady, Kennedy and many of his contemporaries became graphic and book arts luminaries in their own right; for this reason, the student work of many UW–Madison alumni is found in the Kohler's Artists' Book Collection. "We were

14. Irvine, interview.

15. Irvine, interview.

16. This article applies internal capitalization as presented in Kennedy's work.

collecting the works of the students, you know, over a large period of time,” Korenic said, “so, that was an immediate interest of ours.”¹⁷ Kennedy was prominent enough that he was one of the approximately twenty “faculty and students . . . connected to the book arts here at UW” chosen to participate in the 2018 oral history.¹⁸ Also, his work featured prominently in the 2020 artists’ book exhibition at the Chazen Museum of Art that resulted directly from that project. Korenic spoke of her collecting philosophy and priorities in terms of geography, noting the Kohler’s special collections holdings are comprised of materials from Wisconsin artists, global artists, and work by current students and alumni, resulting in a rich collection of many artists’ earlier works. Furthermore, Kennedy’s voice as a printer is unique for its political import. His work unflinchingly confronts injustice. “His interest was in making art more democratic,” Korenic said, “Amos has kind of brought back sort of a democratic idea of sharing art through his ephemera. I think that most artists today aren’t necessarily doing [that].”¹⁹ It could be said there is a throughline between UW–Madison and Indiana’s holdings of Kennedy’s work. Shortly after completing his MFA at the former, he was employed by the latter where, in 1998, as Irvine noted, Kennedy became the first Black American faculty member in the Henry Radford Hope School of Fine Arts. There is a symmetry in UW–Madison’s holdings of his student work, and in Indiana’s that he did as a professor.

Additionally, in the late 1990s Kennedy was also the only Black American book artist from whom Irvine could directly buy books. Kennedy’s work was notable to Irvine because it addressed African proverbs and American Civil Rights issues, which was singular at that time in Indiana’s Fine Arts Library artists’ book collection. Irvine noted Kennedy’s artists’ book *Strange Fruit* as an important work for the collection at the time it was produced. She believed that interpretive information about lynching in a visual medium was extremely important to document, in that era and particular geographic location. Moreover, Irvine “acquired his work primarily because I felt, and continue to do so, that he is an important American book artist.”²⁰ Irvine concluded that Kennedy’s work made a cultural, political, and social contribution through the book arts medium.

At UIUC RBML, Thomas noted that two types of printmaking—community-based and fine printmaking—are both a part of her collecting philosophy. She observed that the two don’t always “work together.”²¹ Thomas saw Kennedy’s influence primarily as the zone of possibility, created by the interface of audiences and his work, which:

17. Korenic, interview.

18. Korenic, interview.

19. Korenic, interview.

20. Irvine, interview.

21. Lynne Thomas, interviewed by Courtney Becks, April 10, 2019.

makes white people uncomfortable. It is easy to become comfortable as a white person in fine printing. The viewer is required to confront [things] in a way that is disruptive, important, and deeply valuable. His work doesn't sanitize. He doesn't allow us to ignore our complicity in these structures [of oppression].²²

Hotchkiss understood Kennedy's contribution to be in both the visual aesthetic of overprinting, and in his ability to "agitat[e] society with simple quotes."²³ She also commended Kennedy as a printmaker "more akin to fifteenth-century originators of printing, because [his work is] inventive." Hotchkiss took a comprehensive approach, asking that the library at UIUC RBML become a depository for Kennedy's work.

Kennedy's Impact on the Field

Kennedy is one of the few Black Americans in the printing field. He has said: "I sincerely believe that my only purpose in what I do—outside of the gratification, outside of the growth that printing gives to me—is to say 'Black people are here.'"²⁴ The truth is that infinitely fewer people will ever see an artists' book than, for example, a poster that retails for \$20. Kennedy realized this, and it factored into his decision to move his production to signs, cards, and posters in the early 2000s.

As the interviews with librarians illustrate, Kennedy is remarkably open to forming and maintaining long-lasting relationships with libraries and library-adjacent persons, which he formed early in his student and professional career, and sustained after departing individual institutions.²⁵ All told, his relational tendencies are perhaps best illustrated by his ongoing connection to UW–Madison. Korenic pointed out:

A lot of the ephemeral stuff that we have in our collection were actually from Bill Bunce's, the former director's, personal collection. He passed away in 2002, and I was able to go to his house and go through his books and his personal collection. And he had collected a lot of things from Amos, and/or Amos had sent him things over the years.²⁶

Moreover, UW–Madison is happy to claim Kennedy as one of its own. He designed the cover of *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American*

22. Thomas, interview.

23. Valerie Hotchkiss, interviewed by Courtney Becks, June 17, 2019.

24. Kennedy, interview.

25. Another example: in 2018, Kennedy undertook a printing project to honor African American collections curator Randall Burkett upon his retirement from Emory University.

26. Korenic, interview.

Print, which was published by the University of Wisconsin Press.²⁷ The unused project design drafts were added to Kennedy's artist's file at the Kohler.²⁸

The appeal of the Kennedy's work lays in his connection to particular institutions, as well as its singular sociopolitical message. Kennedy's output was initially of significance in the late twentieth century because of its unflinching focus on race, lived experience of Black Americans, and engagement with African traditions.

Collecting Ephemera: Conference Presentations and Workshop

The authors led a workshop at the Black Bibliographia: Print/Culture/Art conference hosted by the University of Delaware's Center for Material Culture Studies in April 2019. Presentation topics ranged from digital exhibits of a wide array of hand-held church fans, to creating a Black bibliography, to print laborers. Conference attendees and presenters included academics from various areas and disciplines interested in material culture. Co-authors Carter and Becks gave a presentation about their interviews, and co-author Hennen guided the workshop.

The authors used examples of both process-oriented ephemera and completed ephemera to show that both types could be used as learning objects (Appendix 1). Using prints produced in a class taught by Kennedy the day before as one of the learning objects helped shed light on using ephemera in new ways. The fact that those print artifacts had not existed before the previous day gestures to the emphasis that definitions of ephemera place on its inextricable link between temporality and materiality. These samples were distributed throughout the room, and participants were divided into small groups to answer seven questions (Appendix 2). The workshop was well attended, and all participants were engaged in conversation. Each small group was absorbed in discussion of their experiences and needs as researchers, and gained new insight into librarians collecting ephemera and establishing relationships with faculty and community artists. Participants left energized by new ideas for using ephemera as learning objects to talk about issues of materiality.

The workshop yielded three major conclusions:

1. Communicate the value of ephemera as a tool for contextualizing cultural production
2. Model the productive exchange of ideas between professors/community artists and libraries, in order to encourage others to do the same

27. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne, eds., *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, History of Print and Digital Culture Series (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019).

28. Korenic explained that *Against a Sharp Background*'s co-editor Jonathan Senchyne, director of the Center for the History of Print and Digital Culture at UW–Madison and information school faculty member, gave them to her.

3. Engage with university and local community in purchasing items—bringing faculty/community artists into the library

These takeaways established a way to help bring artists and researchers into the library, and to form lasting relationships that go beyond building special collections. The session's outcomes also showed the importance of connecting artists and librarians, to grow and learn together, to cement relationships with artists in the future.

Librarians can establish an environment of worth, collecting artists' work and being active in their circles, by establishing and maintaining relationships with faculty, and building collections of their work. The authors created an integrated framework, shared below, for collections policies that connects acquisitions to establishing relationships with artists in professor, student, and community phases of their careers.

Framework

Defining Material Collection

1. Understand its context within the library's strategic plan and department curriculum
2. Scope within Special Collections collection development policy
3. Selection Criteria and uniqueness or rarity
4. Develop and collect for future research and reflection

Establishing Relationships

1. Engage and show leadership in faculty and community meetings
2. Attend internal and external art shows
3. Foster relationships by showing interest in artists and their art practice
4. Education

It is important to begin with collection development guidelines, which help shape the way connections are built. The authors hope this framework decreases anxiety, and guides librarians, both in establishing collections and in forming enduring relationships with faculty and artists over their careers. Collections in development, especially those deemed "special," need documentation and top-down guidance; in *The Special Collections Handbook*, Cullingford stressed the importance of a mission-critical collection development policy framework.²⁹

The onus is on librarians to create comprehensive collections, built on institutional strategic plans, that will assist and guide current and future students and faculty. Cullingford recommended "... looking for gaps, opportunities and fresh ideas that

29. Cullingford, 86.

can be unique and distinctive to your institution.”³⁰ Changes in the library—including museum shifts, change in departmental structure, or change in programs—will necessarily impact collection scope. — This is illustrated by this article’s examples: librarians interviewed at UW–Madison, IU Bloomington, and UIUC RBML developed different aspects of Kennedy’s portfolio.

Irvine repeatedly mentioned, during her interview, that many Black artists were missing from the collection at IU Bloomington. Thus, many Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) were excluded from the collection until Kennedy’s items were acquired. This begs the charge for all librarians to audit their collections and to identify voids in the collections they steward. There is another connection between identity, experience, ephemeral works, and special collections: Becks asked Kennedy, “How does your work . . . foster an ephemeral collection or culture of ephemera in a library’s collection?” He responded:

I think because . . . of the uniqueness of being Black . . . I think that fosters [that need] in a special collections because most special collections of ephemera is primarily ephemera related to the white culture . . . of the United States. And, so, to have this brief snapshot, this tiny snapshot, into the rich culture of people of color, I think, gives a boost to collections.³¹

In *Fundamentals of Collection Development & Management*, Johnson asserted, “Academic librarians obtain information about their faculty members’ needs and interests through conversations with individual faculty members and by attending departmental meetings.”³² It is imperative that librarians be present; Irvine stressed how important it is that librarians attend and participate in interviews, art shows, studio events, and both student and faculty art history lectures. Library visibility—both on campus and in the community—is important.

Anticipating the future is critical for collection building. As Irvine said:

“You have to make a decision, and to me as a librarian, I wasn’t just collecting or building a library for the present. . . [W]hat would a contemporary art historian want to look at twenty years from now? Fifty years from now?”³³

30. Cullingford, 87.

31. Amos Paul Kennedy Jr., interviewed by Courtney Becks, April 21, 2019.

32. Peggy Johnson, *Fundamentals of Collection Development & Management*, 3rd ed. (London: Facet Publishing, 2014), 268.

33. Irvine, interview.

Librarians must make decisions when developing collections, purposely thinking about future trends, new ideas, and how new faculty will fit into the library. Cullingford wrote, “Special Collections are special also because of their potential relevance to people outside the library service and long term.”³⁴ The authors hope that the framework included here provides guidance for constructing policies that can weather unanticipated changes.

It is important to alert art professors to the importance of their work. Sometimes, faculty do not think their work is worth collecting—as illustrated by Irvine’s discussion of Kennedy’s portfolio. The interactions Irvine, Korenic, and Bunce had with Kennedy—and the connections they created—show librarians can and must meet artists on the same plane to help ascertain what is collectible. The relationship between artist and librarian is so integral to the development of complete, well-rounded, and representative special collections. The authors hope that the framework included here provides guidance for constructing policies that can weather unanticipated changes

Conclusion

Libraries have a unique opportunity to collect ephemeral materials from artists. Research shows that strategic communication between librarians and artists is an effective method for gathering documentation of their work. The authors urge librarians to reflect on their special collections strategies and collection development policies, particularly focusing on social relationships.

Librarians are in the position of power. It is, therefore, incumbent upon them to extend themselves to various artistic communities. Information about library-specific selection criteria, development practices, and details of acquisition should be shared with artists in the community and folks at their institution. This paper highlights the centrality of personal relationships to building special collections, because relationships shape collections so fundamentally. Librarians must reflect upon who they know, “get along with,” take seriously, or otherwise interact with: these factors affect the shape of institutional collections, and represent librarians’ unacknowledged power in shaping a canon.

34. Cullingford, xiii.

Appendix 1. Interview Questions

1. What is your position? How would you characterize your relationship to the printed/graphic arts?
2. How do you define ephemeral works?
3. How did you meet Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr.? How did you become familiar with his work?
4. How did a relationship birthed from the interactions you and Mr. Kennedy have, to building a sizable collection at your library? Was there a prompt, or did the relationship grow organically?
5. Can you describe events or conversations that led to the inclusion of Mr. Kennedy's more ephemeral works from classroom teaching in institutional collections?
6. What about his work made it a desirable acquisition (for a special collection)? How did Mr. Kennedy's work differ from other printmakers at the time?
7. Is there anything about his processes that lends itself to the making of ephemeral material, pedagogically speaking?
8. How do Mr. Kennedy's artists' books foster an ephemeral collection/culture in an institution/library?
9. What impact would you say Kennedy's work has on the field? What is his place, if you will, in letterpress printing and artists' book creation?
10. Is there anything you want to tell me or a question that you think I've failed to ask?

Appendix 2. Participant Questions from the Delaware Workshop

1. How would you add these items into your collection?
2. If you were the artist, how might you create a relationship with a librarian to enter your pedagogical materials into the collection (artist files?)
3. How might you use the item, critically, in the classroom?
4. What strategies would you use to collaborate with this artist (or someone like this)?
5. How might you promote collaboration with an artist at your institution?
6. Thinking critically, how do artists think about collaborating at your institution?
7. At your own institution, what artists/librarians (depending on your situation) can you work with? Can you envision an entry point to talk to them?