

From Preservation to Preservation: Sharing Treasures from the Jim Henson Company Archives

By Karen Falk, Archivist, The Jim Henson Company

Upon joining The Jim Henson Company in 1992 as the first full-time archivist, my priorities were clear. There was a small but fascinating collection that had been gathered during the 1980s by one of Jim Henson's colleagues and then augmented by the efforts of an enthusiastic Public Relations intern. These materials needed organizing, cataloging and re-housing into archival materials. While these items were important and historically valuable, much more was needed to complete the historical documentation of the company. An aggressive search for additional materials was in order and was begun immediately. I was also eager to implement a computer database system to make the collections more accessible. And, finally, I needed to press the administration for a reasonable space to house the archives as they were, at that point, stored in four different locations on two floors.

With the help of an assistant who was added to the department the following year, I was able to accomplish many of my goals. The archives was up and running, providing reference services to much of the company, particularly the Public Relations department. We were well on our way to creating a historical record of the work of Jim Henson and his creative team.

As I cataloged the existing materials and the newly found files, I was excited by what I saw and read. The information was fascinating and little known by Muppet fans, and the artwork was delightful. I became more and more interested in finding a way to

share these treasures with the rest of the company and the public. In particular, I found a large group of Jim Henson's files from the 1960s concerning his little-known pre-Sesame Street projects. These files held a wealth of information as well as wonderful character designs and commercial storyboards. Some of this material was included in Christopher Finch's 1993 book, *Jim Henson: The Works*, but there was so much more to say and show. I had always been interested in curating exhibits, but the company had a separate exhibits department that, up until that time, did not generally collaborate with the archives. The opportunity to begin presenting materials from our collections came with the establishment of The Jim Henson Legacy.

The Jim Henson Legacy, a not-for-profit foundation dedicated to perpetuating and celebrating the work of Jim Henson, was created by Jane Henson (Jim's widow) in response to the overwhelming interest from both the public and private sector to acknowledge Jim's work with awards and honors. The Legacy, whose board is made up of Jim's friends, colleagues and family members, has provided representation and supporting materials for numerous awards ceremonies, and it has organized and sponsored many film, video and slide presentations, as well as historical exhibitions. Most of these events occur at museums, libraries and on college campuses.

In late 1993, the Legacy board was approached by the Greenwich (CT) Public Library about creating an exhibit for their gallery. The

Henson family had lived in Greenwich from 1964-1971, so it was decided that the exhibit would focus on Jim's work during that period. I was delighted that those were exactly the years covered by my newly discovered files. Working with Leslee Asch, director of the company's Exhibits department, we created a multimedia exhibit that combined puppets, photography, historical documents, video and original art. Visitors were able to see Jim's original designs for Big Bird and Rowlf the Dog, read an editing script from one of his experimental films, and view commercials for LaChoy Chow Mein. It was the first time one of our exhibits addressed this area of Jim's work, and it was a great success. I was eager to find more opportunities to display materials from the archives.

When the Legacy board expressed interest in doing something historical about Jim during the 1994 International Festival of Puppet Theater (sponsored by The Henson Foundation which supports puppetry companies), I suggested a display concerning Jim's involvement in puppetry organizations. Using photographs and information gleaned from the archives, we were able to demonstrate Jim's commitment to and love of the field of puppetry. The display was complemented by video screenings of *Jim Henson Presents The World of Puppetry*, a documentary series he had produced celebrating six internationally acclaimed puppeteers. After the festival, I continued my efforts to find ways to exhibit materials from the archives.

Jim was a wonderful artist, and his drawings and designs are enchanting. Though created to be transformed into three dimensions, his sketches easily stand on their own as finished work. From the time I began working with his artwork, I wanted to find a way to share it with the public. I often discussed this with Jane Henson, and I expressed my desire to put together a simple show emphasizing Jim's artistic abilities with the pencil. In 1996, the Legacy agreed to sponsor such a show. The company was very supportive, and they allowed me to devote several months to the project. In April of that year, Jim Henson: Designs & Doodles opened at the National Arts Club in New York. Including art ranging from Jim's high school days to about 1980, the exhibit received a positive response from both the press and the public, and also from those who knew and worked with Jim. I was gratified to hear from many of his close colleagues that Jim's sketches were a revelation to them, showing a side of the man that they had not known.

With the success of Designs & Doodles, the archives' contributing to the Exhibits department corporate exhibits has become automatic, and we have had more opportunities to do our own. A large part of Designs & Doodles was shown at the University of Maryland (Jim's alma mater) as part of a larger exhibit. At the same time, we produced a small show on Jim's involvement in the development of Sesame Street with the National Public Broadcasting Archives (also at Maryland and housing the Archives of Children's Television Workshop). The Legacy also has plans to tour Designs & Doodles.

But the best is yet to come. We are currently collaborating with the Exhibits department and the

curators of the National Museum of American History in Washington on a Jim Henson/Muppet retrospective to open at the Smithsonian in 1999. Along with our continued work to preserve and document the work of Jim Henson and his company, we now have the opportunity to present materials from our archival collections to a national audience.

Coupled with the archives' contributions to The Jim Henson Company's newly launched website (www.henson.com), these exhibits have proven to be successful venues for sharing Jim Henson's creations. They also help The Jim Henson Legacy achieve its goals while providing good exposure and public relations for the company. In the end, by adding exhibits to the archives' list of priorities, we have strengthened our position, gaining recognition, support and respect from within and outside the company.

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