

# Turning A Challenge into Education: MA Museum Administration Students Undertake a Real-Life Collections Management Project

Society of American Archivists – Research Forum 2019

## Introduction

In advance of the Spring 2019 semester, a Professor in the MA Museum Administration Program and the Archivist at St. John's University met to plan an educational assignment for the upcoming Collections Management course. The Professor and the Archivist discussed artwork and artifacts that students might study. At about the same time, Special Collections received a seemingly disparate group of paintings, posters, and other artifacts from a donation made to the university. It was immediately clear that while many of these nearly 100 objects had educational or historical value, they would require a significant amount of research. The Archivist decided to present this collection as an option for the Collections Management course, and the Professor readily agreed.

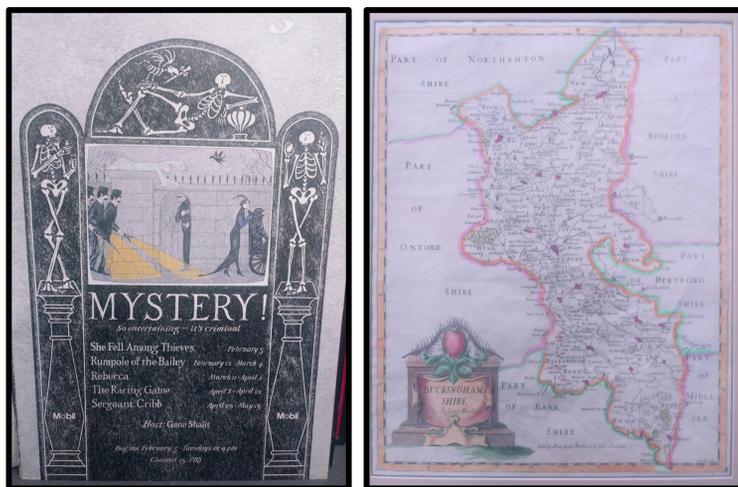
## Learning Objectives

The goal was for students to be able to **examine objects from the collections** and learn about how they were **organized, described, stored, preserved, and utilized for research, teaching, and exhibitions.**

Since the opportunity arose for working with a collection recently transferred to Special Collections and not yet formally accessioned, the students were **highly motivated**, since they knew their final reports would be submitted to the archivist to aid in making a final decision for each item from the collection.

Students were asked to **think critically about the collection in the context of the institution**, St. John's University, and the repository, University Archives and Special Collections. These operate as one department, including as the home of any artwork in the university's "permanent collection" such as a typical university museum might hold.

Another important goal was for each student to have hands-on experience in collection management to describe to potential employers.



## The Collection

We will call this the "Entertainment Collection" which consisted of over 100 items, primarily advertising posters from 1970s and 1980s theatre, television and film productions, as well as several original paintings, documents, and other artifacts. When these items were donated to the university, they did not make their way to Special Collections until several years later.

Poster by Alyse Hennig

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## Class Visits

Visit 1: The Collections Management class met in the University Archives & Special Collections:

- Introduction to the repository
- Proper handling of materials
- Background information on the assigned Entertainment Collection
- Students examined the collection and divided the objects amongst themselves for further research.

Visit 2: The class met in the University Archives & Special Collections again:

- Tour of storage areas and explanation of offsite storage processes
- Deeper discussion on the repository's holdings and how the assigned collection fits in (or not)
- Collection development policies for the library, archives; records management policies
- Software and procedures for collection management.

Visit 3: Archivist attended the student's final presentations.



## Individual Student Projects

Students were required to conduct background research on each of their assigned objects; compose a condition report for each item; and analyze the value of their objects in relation to the larger Entertainment Collection and the overall holdings of the University Archives & Special Collections. **Potential educational, research, historical, and exhibition value were taken into consideration.** The students then made recommendations on whether or not each item should be formally accessioned into Special Collections.

Most of the students scheduled individual appointments to spend more time examining, measuring, and photographing their objects, and to ask the archivist more questions.

Although the students completed condition reports, the focus of the class was not on condition reporting, which is taught in-depth in another class that visits the University Archives & Special Collections.

## Learning Outcomes

For the 100+ objects, the following recommendations were made:

- Accession: approximately 55% of items
- Donate/Discard: approximately 35% of items
- Unsure/Other: approximately 10% of items

Factors taken into consideration by each student:

- Educational value
- Research/historical value
- Artistic/Aesthetic value
- Condition
- Storage challenges
- Donor relations and university history
- Relevance to other items in the Entertainment Collection
- Relevance to other collections in Special Collections

Students often had different interests and backgrounds (libraries, museums, archives, history, etc) which may have been reflected in their decision-making.

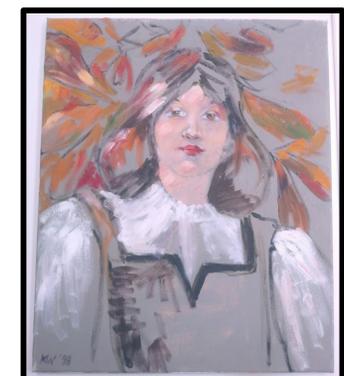
The professor noted that the students who did the most research typically made recommendations to keep, rather than discard, the items they researched. We hypothesized that the more you learned about the objects, the more you realized others may benefit from learning via these objects.

## Challenges and Observations

If this learning activity is repeated, standardized condition reporting forms and accession forms should be adopted by the University Archives & Special Collections and distributed to the students.

After the project, it became clear that more time should be spent discussing the different priorities and practices of archivists, librarians, and museum collection managers, as well as their differing concepts of objects as works of fine art versus archival documents of historical value.

The work of the students was extremely valuable to the archives staff since it provided many hours worth of background research, although many hours of fact-checking and standardization of data entry were also required.



## Opportunities for the Future

Most of the students appeared to be more motivated by a real-life, hands-on project than by an exercise done repeatedly by classes each year. This opportunity may not always be available, as the arrival of a new collection of artwork or artifacts is unknown, but other collections for consideration include minimally processed or unprocessed/uncataloged objects that would benefit from further research, as well as evaluation of whether or not they truly belong in the collection and should be deaccessioned.