Beyond Books: Exploring Ephemera in The Rakow Research Library

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What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word “library”? If you are like most people, you think of books. While libraries often have great book collections, they have much more to offer. Collectors and researchers will find unexpected insight into glass history by perusing materials in addition to the traditional books and magazines at the Rakow Research Library. This article briefly introduces what we call “ephemera.” Ephemera are generally defined as non-commercial, non-book publications such as company trade cards, broadsides, posters, photos, postcards, and stereopticon cards. They were meant to be discarded after use, but by saving them libraries and collectors have discovered ephemera are valuable sources for research. The Rakow Library has a rich collection of ephemera related to the cut glass industry and American glass history.

The Library has a unique collection of 19th century glasshouse money, scrip, and early 20th c. promissory notes. This includes bank bills drawn against the account of a glass company (similar to current-day checks, they were intended to be taken to the bank and cashed). Scrip was issued by a company and only redeemable at the company store. (There was no U.S. federal currency until 1861, and all currency was tied to banks in each state.) Promissory notes bear a date in the future, not redeemable until several months after issuance. Our collection was significantly increased in 2004 with a gift of 121 pieces of glasshouse money and related information. Our collections date from 1800 to 1932, and originate...
from bottle and window glass factories in New York, Vermont, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New Jersey.

Another special group of materials are stereopticon cards, or stereographs. Dating from the mid-19th to early 20th century, the cards feature two almost identical photographs, placed side by side on cardboard, and were ideally viewed with a stereoscope, which allowed the images to appear three-dimensional (Fig. 1). The library has a newer version of the stereoscope, which is similar to the “View-Master,” a toy from the 1950s. Our 61 stereographs provide glimpses into displays at world’s fairs, including cut glass, glass manufacturing processes, and such items as Pairpoint lamps.

While stereographs and glasshouse money are two of the more unusual formats the Library collects, many photographs, engravings, and other images are in our collections. These images can help trace the path of a piece of glass, from concept to final product. A photograph of a Corning, NY cutting shop interior, c.1890s, shows the faces of the factory workers who cut blanks into intricate patterns (Fig. 2). Working conditions, equipment, and a punch bowl can also be seen. Another photograph, this one of a T.G. Hawkes showroom at the 1889 Paris Exposition, shows the finished glass objects in their brilliant splendor (Fig. 3). Each piece was polished and carefully arranged so visitors could admire the patterns on display.

Companies also produced ephemera in order to sell their glass. Advertisements in periodicals, trade catalogs, posters, and trade cards all touted the quality of a company’s products, often featuring images of a popular pattern or piece of glass. An advertisement for Mt. Washington Glass Company, makers of “rich cut table glass and fine art wares,” features a tall cut glass pitcher (Fig. 4). Advertisements such as this one are valuable both for the product images, but also for the textual information: the Mt. Washington ad includes the

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Fig. 2: Interior view of cutting shop (CMGL 94033), Collection of The Rakow Research Library, The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY.
Researchers often focus their search in books and periodicals, but ephemera can prove just as useful in the hunt for information. Graphic formats like photographs, postcards, and stereographs can provide visual clues, and advertisements, broadsides, and even glasshouse money include textual information that may not be found in published sources.

The Rakow Library is open to the public and our staff is happy to help with whatever questions you may have. You can contact the staff by phone, email, or letter, or browse the Library’s collections through the online catalog (see below for details). Some of the Library’s collections are available digitally, including many cut glass trade catalogs. If you are planning to visit the Library, contacting staff in advance may be beneficial, since they can often provide additional suggestions related to your topic. Library staff can also help those who cannot visit the Library in person. The Rakow Library participates in interlibrary loan for many (but not all) materials, and staff often send out bibliographies and research guides. We invite you to explore our collections and be inspired.

Fig. 3: T.G. Hawkes showroom, 1889 (CMGL 94031), Collection of The Rakow Research Library, The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY.

Fig. 4: Advertisement for rich cut table glass (CMGL 115595), Collection of The Rakow Research Library, The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY.