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They Came and Built It Themselves: Working with Students to Curate Digital Exhibits

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**THEY CAME AND BUILT
IT THEMSELVES!
WORKING WITH
STUDENTS TO CURATE
DIGITAL EXHIBITS**

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University Libraries,
Bowling Green State University

Digital Scholarship Colloquium
Case Western Reserve University
November 2014



In Fall 2013, BGSU's University Libraries began a partnership that allowed us to work with a graduate class to curate a digital exhibit using primary source materials from our special collections.

BACKGROUND

Digital Projects at BGSU

- Digital Gallery
- Great Lakes databases
- Institutional repository

Includes our Digital Gallery, Great Lakes databases, and our institutional repository.

The Digital Gallery includes both collections, such as Nickel Weeklies and digitized programs from the College of Musical Arts, and exhibits.

None of the exhibits was the product of collaboration with students.

BACKGROUND

Special Collections:

- Browne Popular Culture Library
- Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives
- Center for Archival Collections
- Government Documents

- The mission of the Browne Popular Culture Collection is to acquire and preserve research materials on American Popular Culture (post 1876).
- The Music Library & Sound Recordings Archives houses the largest collection of popular music recordings in an academic library in North America.
- The Center for Archival Collections is an archives and manuscript repository with a primary emphasis on the history of the University, Northwest Ohio, and the Great Lakes
- For the purposes of these classes, the Government Documents Collection was considered to be a special collection because the materials require mediation.

BACKGROUND

Fall 2013: American Literary Realisms

- Project initiated by Professor Jolie Sheffer
- Topic: Race in the United States, 1880-1940

- Jolie Sheffer, an Associate Professor of English and American Culture Studies asked if University Libraries would partner with her to introduce the students in her graduate-level American Literary Realisms course to the experience of curating a digital exhibit using primary documents from the special collections.
- The topic of the digital exhibit was: Race in the United States, 1880-1940.
- As in any new enterprise, there were some glitches, but the results were sufficiently successful to justify trying the same type of project for another course in the Spring semester.

BACKGROUND

Spring 2014:
The 1960s in Contemporary American Culture

And then...

OBJECTIVES

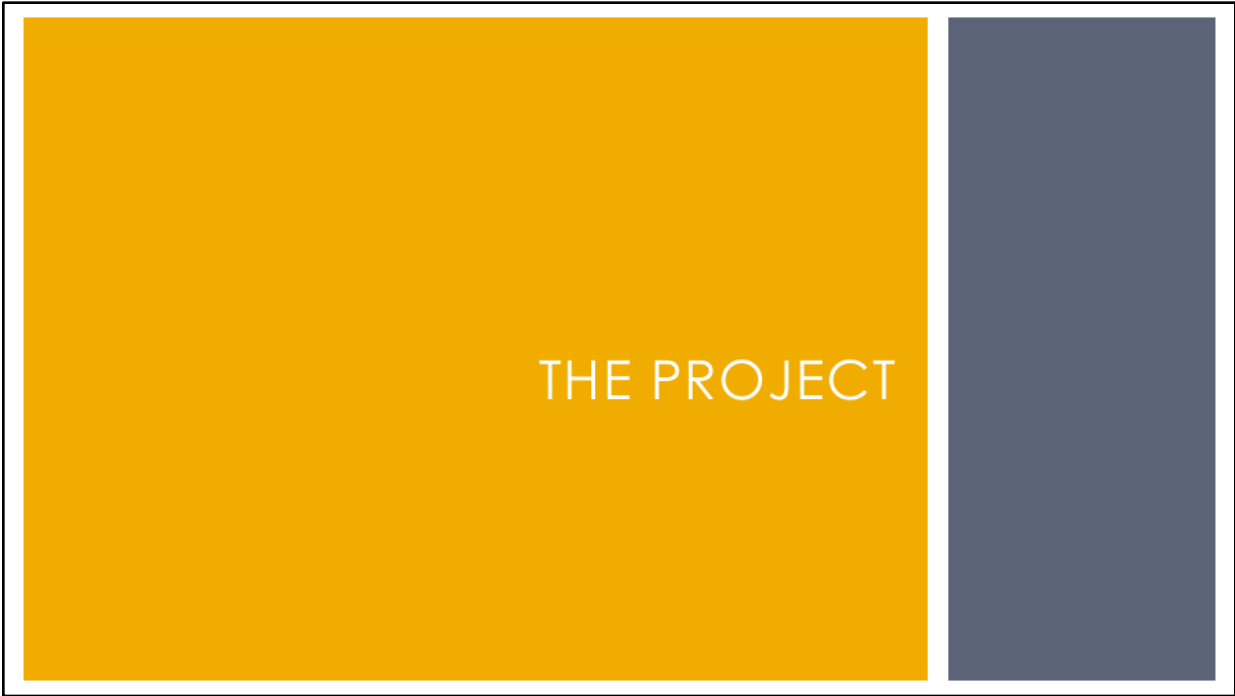
- To gain a sense of the two historical periods, 1950s-1970s and 1990s-2000s.
- To gain a sense of the range of literary and cultural representations of the periods.
- *To use new digital technology tools to curate historical material for audiences within BGSU and with the outside community.*
- To hone critical reading, interpretation, and writing skills.
- To demonstrate excellence in oral, written, and visual communication.

-Jolie Sheffer, "ACS 6750/ENG 6750 Syllabus," Spring 2014 [emphasis added]

THE ASSIGNMENT

“Students will work together as a class to create a digital exhibition based on visual, textual, and musical artifacts from BGSU Library’s special collections, with explanatory text and curatorial essays.”

-Jolie Sheffer, “ACS 6750/ENG 6750 Syllabus,” Spring 2014



INSTRUCTION SESSION I: INTRODUCING THE COLLECTIONS

- 4 collections, 1 class period, 2-4 students in each group
- Each group - 30 minutes in each collection

Each group had 30 minutes in each collection

- Had selected representative materials for students to study
- Students chose one item from materials to digitize for next library session

COLLECTION EXPLORATION

- Students then met with appropriate librarians one-on-one for in-depth session

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Task:

- explore collections
- develop topic based on available materials
- begin choosing no more than 10 items to be digitized for exhibit

INSTRUCTION SESSION II: TECHNICAL OVERVIEW

- 2 weeks after 1st session – “Omeka Day”

- Students given accounts in Omeka on development server.
- 1 hour session – overview of basic DC metadata, basic Omeka functions (collections and exhibits), practice time.
- Talked with student graphic designer to explore theme ideas.

CONTINUED EXPLORATION

- Kept digitized materials on hold for additional content exploration as well as metadata gathering
- Students had deadline in which to give us items chosen for digitization

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- Students had deadline in which to give us chosen items for digitization

DIGITIZATION

- Transformative exhibition
- Librarians digitized materials
- Librarians loaded digitized items into Omeka

- Transformative exhibition, didn't worry too much about copyright
- Librarians digitized – better equipment than students had, some materials too fragile for student digitization
- Librarians loaded digitized items into Omeka with basic title and student name as Contributor

RESEARCH AND WRITING

- Students:
 - assigned metadata
 - worked in groups to create parts of the exhibit
 - researched the topic and built the exhibit around their chosen items

- Student finished assigning metadata
- Students worked in groups to create parts of the exhibit (i.e. writing text/context, using materials to illustrate or to discuss)
- Students researched the topic and built the exhibit around their chosen items

DESIGN REVIEW

- Student graphic designer worked on a customized theme ideas (header graphic, colors, buttons, fonts, etc.) to submit for consideration
- Entire class chose theme



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MAKE IT LIVE!

- Used substantial class time to work on exhibit
- Once exhibit was approved by professor in development, it was moved into production

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- Once exhibit was approved by professor in development, it was moved into production on the live server for public viewing




OUTCOMES AND LESSONS

War at Home & Abroad Feminism Popular Culture & Counterculture Myths of the 1960s For Further Reading Contributors

1960S AND YOUTH CULTURE

The 1960s was a complex time period, with its movements and culture extending beyond the end of the decade. The pages that follow provide an exploration into some of the social issues that dominated the time period, such as racism, the Vietnam War, and police brutality, as well as the feminist, drug and counterculture movements. Young people, or the baby-boom generation, were key actors within many of the events of the period. As 36 million Americans came of age by the end of the decade, America in the '60s was driven by a youthful culture that sought to change and reinvent every aspect of the country.

Using the library archives at Bowling Green State University, the following exhibit features items of that time period, from newspaper and magazine clippings, to music clips, album covers, and artwork. As you explore, please be aware that an exhibit involving popular culture may include material with potentially explicit or offensive images.



<http://digitalgallery.bgsu.edu/exhibits/show/1960s>

From the final version of the exhibit, entitled 1960s and Youth Culture, we can see how the students organized the material they discovered. You can see the major themes across the top (War, Feminism, Popular Culture, etc.).

The students begin the home page with a brief overview and a slide viewer that highlights some of the sub-collections.

POPULAR CULTURE & COUNTERCULTURE

[Exhibit Home](#) / Popular Culture & Counterculture

Throughout the 1960s, there often was a thin line between mainstream culture and counterculture. The younger generation increasingly expressed ambivalence toward the state and repudiated traditional social mores. Yet while contemporary representations of the 1960s (such as films like *Forrest Gump*) depict the era with stereotypes of the "sexual revolution" and "hippie culture," such stock images fail to capture a multivalent, complex moment in modern American history. Grassroots activism and counterculture artistic movements challenged mainstream ideas of modernity, conformity, and progress. Mainstream culture was quick to adopt the attitudes and opinions of the young. The culture industry sought to capitalize on youth culture by sanitizing hot-button topics such as racial integration and anti-war protests toward commercial ends.

The Cold War is commonly remembered as a bilateral power competition between the USA and the former USSR, but the conflict also involved proxy states throughout Latin America. Nation states with colonial pasts were targeted as niche markets for non-profit and commercial enterprises. Accordingly, 1960s-era novels, film stills, and concept art for television series captured the symbolism of the "Space Race" as an extension of geo-political conflicts between the two super-powers. These high-tech, high-concept images of outer space exploration were matched by widespread images of explorations into the landscapes of the human mind. The counterculture was fascinated with the idea of mapping the terrain of human consciousness through the use of psychedelic drugs.



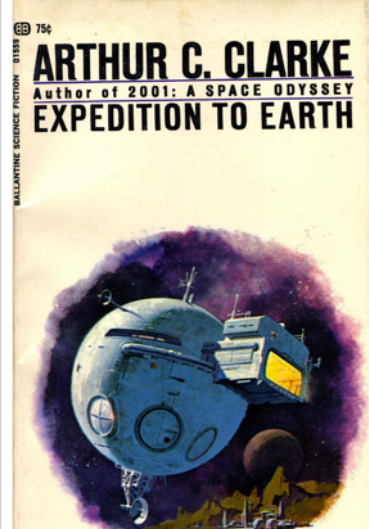
[From the Margins to the Mainstream](#)

[World Cultures in America](#)

[Popular Culture & Counterculture Landing Page](#)

If we drill down into Popular Culture & Counterculture, we see a sample object (that one's a record by The Incredible String Band, *The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion*), a topic overview, and, at the bottom, some subcategories.

INNER AND OUTER SPACE
[Exhibit Home](#) / [Popular Culture & Counterculture](#) / Inner and Outer Space



75¢
MALLANTINE SCIENCE FICTION 91333
ARTHUR C. CLARKE
Author of 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY
EXPEDITION TO EARTH




Figure 2

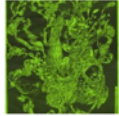


Figure 3

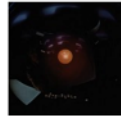


Figure 4

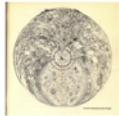


Figure 5




Figure 6




Figure 7

[Popular Culture & Counterculture > Inner and Outer Space](#)

A subcategory here is “Inner and Outer Space.” There is more topic overview below this view, but from this level, you can see that the focus has shifted more to the objects.

PSYCHEDELIC REVIEW ISSUE # 10 FRONT COVER ART

Dublin Core

Title
Psychedelic Review Issue # 10 Front Cover Art

Subject
Psychedelic drugs; the Consciousness Revolution; 1960s.

Description
Psychedelic Review is a bi-monthly periodical that aims to serve as information source on aspects of psychedelia and the consciousness revolution.


Creator
Ed Lutz

Source
William F. Ringle Collection; the Browne Popular Culture Library; Jerome Library; BGSU.

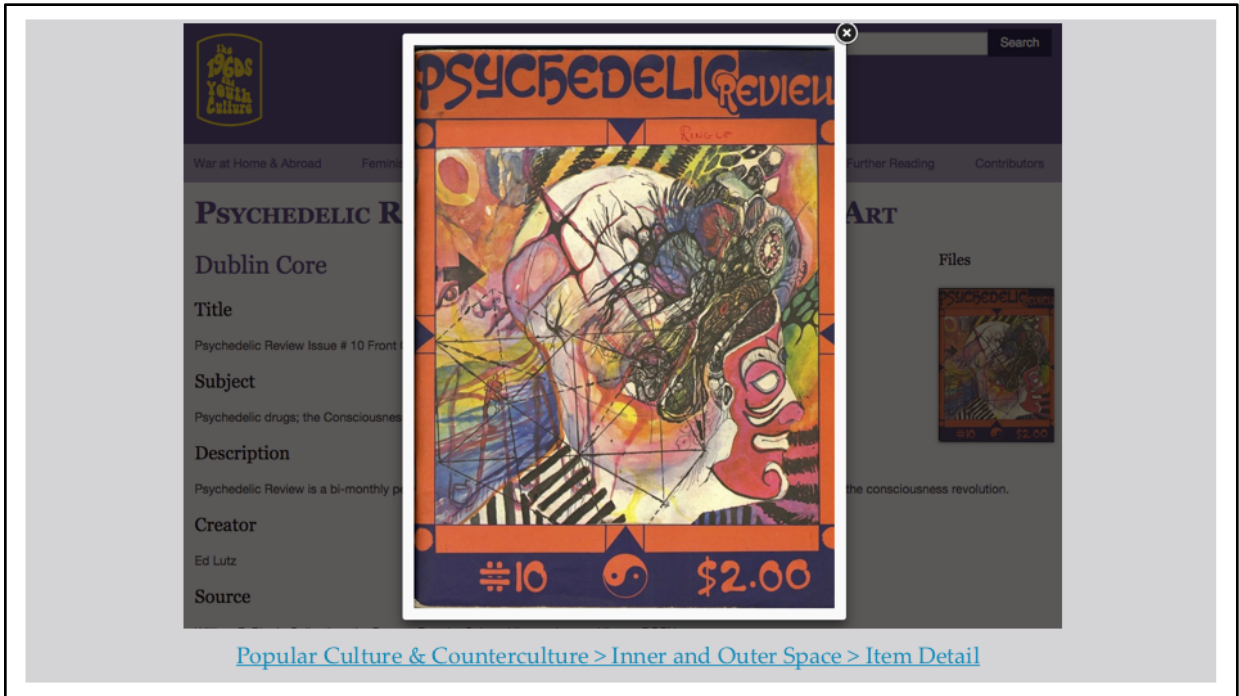
Publisher
Sri Krishna Endeavors

Date
1969

Files



Clicking on an object brings up the metadata, then clicking on the thumbnail in this view...



Brings up a full view of the object.
We'd love to show you the whole exhibit, but instead will invite you to explore it on your own.

ASSESSMENT

- **“The Digital Exhibit will be graded by the quality of the completed work, as well as by a short executive summary and analysis report:**
 - **An outline** of the particular tasks and responsibilities he/she has contributed to the Digital Exhibit...
 - **A personal reflection** in which you discuss how the entire project has shaped your understanding of American culture during this historical period...”

-Jolie Sheffer, “ACS 6750/ENG 6750 Syllabus,” Spring 2014

The instructor took a multi-pronged approach to grading. She wanted to assess not only the output of the project but also the role that each student played in the development and what each student learned from the process.

FEEDBACK

- “...students not only learned about the 1960s, but also about how scholars, artists, and curators create popular narratives about the era.”

-Jolie Sheffer, “Digital Curation: Pedagogy in the Archives,” presentation on panel, “Visual Ecologies: Archivization & Digital Curation in Theory and Practice,” Cultural Studies Association, 2014.

These aims are noted in reflections that the instructor made upon the project, specifically: “...students not only learned about the 1960s, but also about how scholars, artists, and curators create popular narratives about the era.”

FEEDBACK

- “...the very act of discussing the assignment as evidence of their expertise is helpful to them, to give them a language to talk about what they know and what they know how to do.”

-Sheffer, “Digital Curation...”

And: “...the very act of discussing the assignment as evidence of their expertise is helpful to them, to give them a language to talk about what they know and what they know how to do.”

BEST PRACTICES

Communicate early and often

As a result of this project and others that have followed in its wake, we have begun to develop an internal set of best practices for such projects.

First, more than even with traditional library instruction, it's imperative to communicate early and often with instructor to be in sync about objectives, appropriate collections, timelines, and more. This sort of project can require a complete curricular shift in a course, and early planning is a necessity to allow for pedagogical changes as well as clear understandings about what the library can offer in terms of collections and services.

BEST PRACTICES

Keep the training concrete

When training on technology side, be sure students have at least one digital object to work with. The first time we did this, the students selected objects AFTER they received technology training, and it didn't stick as well.

BEST PRACTICES: UNDERGRADUATES

Provide guidance on what makes an exhibit compelling

This semester, we've been working with undergraduates on similar projects and have found we need to think differently about how we do the work. If working with undergrads:

Provide clear guidance on what is compelling as digital exhibit to avoid pastiches of quotes. We knew we'd be dealing with different research behaviors with undergraduates, but we didn't anticipate the need to steer them away from digitization as textual quotation until we started getting requests for multiple chapters from secondary sources.

BEST PRACTICES: UNDERGRADUATES

Focus on the differences between primary and secondary sources

As an extension of this, it's necessary to spend time explaining differences between primary and secondary sources and why it matters. This was something we took for granted with graduate students that we didn't think (at first) to address with first-and-second-year undergraduates.

BEST PRACTICES: UNDERGRADUATES

Use groups to spur conversation and creativity

Have students work in groups to spur creativity and conversations about objects, as well as to manage the technical side in larger classes. We've found that when faced with archival objects, the students are curious but not inclined to make connections until they start working with their groups to identify themes.

BEST PRACTICES: UNDERGRADUATES

Hold office hours for structured collection exploration

Hold office hours to balance volume of drop ins for more intense collection navigation. With collections like archives and Popular Culture, students often have no idea what they might expect to find, so hosting drop-in hours is a great way of making sure that the help they need is on hand.

BEST PRACTICES: UNDERGRADUATES

Standardize digitization requests

And finally, create a form for digitization requests to get more specific citation information. One of the most time-consuming aspects of working with undergraduate students has been the correspondence surrounding their digitization requests, simply getting them to give us complete information about what they want to have digitized.



QUESTIONS?

We're finding these projects to be fruitful ways of getting our students aware of and engaged with our special collections. We've been able to teach our faculty more about what we have and how it can benefit their students while also publicly highlighting material from our collections in a meaningful way. It is, to be sure, a learning experience for all of us, but one that has proven beneficial for all involved.