

Off the Wall and into a Drawer: Managing a Research Collection of Political Posters

Susan Tschabrun

Abstract

Scholars exploit an ever-expanding corpus of evidence in their research, including materials that have fallen traditionally outside the purview of most repositories' collecting policies. This article examines political posters as an example of this useful but undercollected class of materials, from the vantage point of their research value and the challenges they pose to institutions that collect them. Such challenges include the nontraditional production and distribution modes that make acquisition of political posters difficult; the lack of consensus on cataloging methods; the preservation problems arising from the political poster's function to communicate quickly but ephemerally in public spaces; and the technical and copyright issues associated with digitization. Solutions are proposed in each of these areas in an effort to identify best practices and enable institutions to assist scholars with adequate collections to meet the needs of evolving research agendas.

Don't stick it up in your dining room or in your study, don't keep it in your bedside table. Don't misplace it. Don't collect it, don't archive it, don't keep it in your library. Don't give it away. Post it on the walls of the city.

—Venezuelan poster from the 1970s¹

Brash and aggressive, raw and yet often poignant, political posters urge, instruct, encourage, and exhort. Classified under “declaratory and advertising artifacts” by the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus*, they share with banners, flyers, signs, and promotional materials of all kinds the purpose of communicating instantly, effectively, and powerfully. As byproducts of the major social and political movements of the twentieth century, political posters testify to the attitudes and thought patterns of several generations of political actors—from reformers and militant activists to government

¹ David Kunzle, *Che Guevara: Icon, Myth, and Message* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1997).

propagandists. And yet, despite such posters' obvious historical value, few institutions have found the resources to tackle the challenges they present by their size, fragility, and untraditional publication and distribution channels. "Don't collect it, don't archive it, don't keep it in your library": the message of the poster quoted above has found, apparently, an audience in the majority of public historical heritage repositories.

Political posters compose a subclass of a much larger class of material, including posters of all kinds: product advertising, theater, film, magic, minstrel, circus, and art posters among others. Although political posters share attributes with these forms of visual communication as well as with other types of mass-produced pictures, such as postcards, they also make up a distinct category in form and content. Today in the United States, the term "political poster" conjures up for many people campaign posters and bumper stickers along the lines of "Bush-Cheney 2000" or "Vote No on Proposition 21." This equation of the political poster with aesthetically uninspiring election materials is undoubtedly symptomatic of the overwhelming role that mass media, especially television, play in American politics.² Like television, posters engage in a form of political communication that melds words and images into a single potent message; unlike television, the poster medium has historically not been easily controlled or monopolized by any one group or category of people. The result is that the political poster has often allowed the disenfranchised to experiment with alternative styles of political discourse.

Like many other types of ephemeral material whose importance to scholarship has been appreciated only recently, political posters have not been actively and aggressively collected by libraries, archives, or museums. Of these three types of repositories, libraries probably hold the largest number of posters, but many poster collections remain uncataloged and therefore largely inaccessible. Archives have undoubtedly acquired numerous political posters as a byproduct of their collecting, but the principle of *respect des fonds* has resulted in this and other types of ephemeral material becoming scattered throughout the more valued record and manuscript holdings, making their retrieval difficult at times.³ Museums have traditionally scorned posters as too popular a medium, but there are indications that this may be changing as the expressive power and grassroots nature of poster art becomes recognized.⁴

² For an interesting comparison of U.S. and Italian election posters, see Howard Anthony Risatti, "The Contemporary Political Poster in Italy," *Art Journal* 44 (Spring 1984): 11–15.

³ James Burant, "Ephemera, Archives, and Another View of History," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995): 193.

⁴ "Posters have been exhibited and published occasionally by the National Museum of American Art but not previously collected at the Museum as an essential chapter in the story of our nation's visual culture. This book and show, and the fledgling collection now begun, signal the Museum's new awareness of the vital role played by these high-keyed and exciting images." Therese Than Heyman, *Posters American Style* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 6.

MANAGING A RESEARCH COLLECTION
OF POLITICAL POSTERS

Given the lukewarm interest of traditional repositories, we can surmise that the bulk of political posters surviving destruction remains in the hands of private collectors.⁵

The purpose of this article is to give a broad overview of the challenges institutions face in the areas of acquisition, cataloging, preservation, and digitization when making political poster collections available for research. Since the research value of such collections has not always been appreciated, a brief exploration of the uses researchers make of such visual historical material is also in order.⁶

The Research Value of Political Posters

Maurice Rickards, in his posthumously published *Encyclopedia of Ephemera*, defines ephemera as the “minor transient documents of everyday life.”⁷ Wheat-pasted on walls, transformed into placards and carried in picket lines, or tacked up in college dormitories, posters were never designed for permanency. Like broadsides, flyers, buttons, bumper stickers, handbills, and other forms of political communication, posters are designed to quickly and forcefully transmit a message and then disappear.

The built-in obsolescence of political posters endows them with a quality not always shared by more permanent forms of primary source material, namely that the creators of posters rarely, if ever, thought they were creating historical evidence. As advertisements for political events (rallies, marches, demonstrations), political posters may sometimes attest to underreported or even illegal activities that may be documented in no other way. However, unlike many other forms of transient political communication that tend to be strictly textual, the poster from the beginning of its history as a communication medium exploited the power of mixing text with imagery. Mined solely for the textual information they contain, posters occasionally disclose facts and details that are not recorded elsewhere, but studied for the messages they communicate by the

⁵ William H. Helfand, “The Search for Ephemera Images,” *Visual Resources* 11 (1995): 104. Helfand’s estimate of ephemera in general probably holds true for posters as well, namely that 80 to 90 percent of cataloged collections are in private hands.

⁶ Much of the information that forms the basis for this article comes from the author’s experience at the Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG). CSPG is located at 8124 W. Third Street in Los Angeles, California. It is a nonprofit, tax-exempt, educational archive dedicated to the collection, preservation, and exhibition of domestic and international posters relating to historical and contemporary movements for peace and social justice. The author is indebted to CSPG consultants Sara Shatford Layne and Susan Sayre Batton for their cataloging and preservation insights. Professionals at the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, the Hoover Institution, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, and the National Museum of American Art have also generously shared their knowledge with the author.

⁷ Maurice Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2001), v.

juxtaposition of words and images, they open wide a window on the social movements that generated them.

The political poster as a historical artifact has not been randomly distributed in space and time. The origin of the poster is tied to improvements in printing technology, in particular, the development of color lithography in the mid-nineteenth century, which for the first time allowed efficient and inexpensive large-format color printing. The poster is a socially constructed mode of communication, linked in its infancy to the deepening of democracy and the spread of universal suffrage in Western Europe. Early posters communicated within public spaces and transformed them in ways that some government officials found subversive, even when the poster had no political message, but merely advertised a product or a service.⁸ World War I educated governments and others in the usefulness of political posters as a means of appealing to the literate and illiterate alike, thereby mobilizing a mass audience behind the war effort. The interwar period was perhaps the golden era of the political poster, judged by its relative dominance as a communication medium, especially for governments, political parties, and unions. But, the post-World War II period has been notable for the transformation of the political poster into a communication modality used in political protest by much smaller political entities, collectives, and even individuals, while simultaneously witnessing the spread of the political poster to all four corners of the globe.

The last few years have seen an explosion of research on political posters across a number of disciplines—social, cultural, and art history; political science, communication, and gender studies—compared to the trickle of studies that had made it into print over the previous thirty years.⁹ Political posters are fruitfully exploited as written documents, visual documents, and tools of persuasion. They may be studied using the time-honored methods of art historians that focus on iconography and style; or the insights of literary critics that delve into such staples of persuasive discourse as satire and allegory; or the panoply of visual decoding techniques popular in interdisciplinary and cultural studies

⁸ Miriam R. Levin, "Democratic Vistas—Democratic Media: Defining a Role for Printed Images in Industrializing France," *French Historical Studies* 18 (Spring 1993): 82–108.

⁹ Examples of recent publications include James Aulich and Marta Sylvestrová, *Political Posters in Central and Eastern Europe 1945–95* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Leah Dickerman, *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design 1917–1937* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996); John D. H. Downing, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2001); Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Yvonne Murphy, et al., eds., *Troubled Images: Posters and Images of the Northern Ireland Conflict from the Linen Hall Library, Belfast* (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 2001); Cary Nelson, *Shouts from the Wall: Posters and Photographs Brought Home from the Spanish Civil War by American Volunteers* (Waltham, Mass.: Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, 1996); Chon A. Noriega, *¿Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2001); Dominic Wring, *Framing Politics: 20th Century British Political Posters* (London: Politicos, 2002).

MANAGING A RESEARCH COLLECTION
OF POLITICAL POSTERS

that include compositional interpretation, content analysis, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and discourse analysis.¹⁰ Scholars of all kinds are increasingly aware that, in the words of David Perlmutter, images not only “allow us to catalogue and order historical persons, objects, and actions, to document what happened during historical periods, to understand how people in the past viewed their world, and to analyze contemporary society by examining how we visualize our history,” but also that “[they] can function as active and determining historical forces.”¹¹ Perlmutter’s work deals with photographs created as part of persuasion or propaganda campaigns that share some unique similarities with political posters, but his work forms part of a larger effort within historical scholarship to make use of visual materials of all types.

Collecting and Acquisition

To understand not only how institutions might begin collecting political posters, but also how existing political poster collections came to be, it is useful to consider how posters are produced. Political posters originate usually from one of two sources: governments or civil society organizations. Governments since 1900 have tended to issue political posters in large quantities whenever they felt an urgent need to mobilize the population. In the United States, this occurs mainly during wartime, but in countries like the Soviet Union, Cuba, or Nicaragua, the desire to mobilize the people behind a large public effort often extends to nonmilitary goals, such as economic development, social reconstruction, literacy, or health care.

Nongovernment poster sources include political parties, labor unions, civil and human rights organizations, coalitions, political graphics collectives, small printing houses, and individual artists. Sometimes, nongovernment posters are produced in fairly large runs (more than a thousand) using mass printing techniques such as color lithography or offset printing. Depending on conditions, however, political posters are just as likely to have been created using printing techniques that may be more time consuming but require less in the way of expensive equipment, like screen printing, linocuts, wood blocks, and even photocopying.

Although the larger scale and more elaborate printing and distribution methods of the government should in theory have led to the development of larger collections of government-sponsored posters, in reality, governments here and abroad have been as negligent about preserving these materials as

¹⁰ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: Sage Publications, 2001).

¹¹ David D. Perlmutter, “Visual Historical Methods: Problems, Prospects, Applications,” *Historical Methods* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 167.

most libraries, archives, and museums.¹² In the United States, the posters of World Wars I and II have generally entered public repositories indirectly through the donations of private collectors, and only a fraction of the huge Works Progress Administration (WPA) output has been preserved anywhere.¹³ Elsewhere, countries like Cuba and Nicaragua have had to approach private collectors and institutions in the United States to reconstruct important bodies of their poster heritage never preserved during an era when more pressing issues took precedence.¹⁴

As in the case of other types of ephemera, most extant political poster collections owe their existence to private collectors. Many of these collections remain in private hands, but many have found their way into public repositories. Speaking of ephemera in general, Florence Jumonville summarized the motives of many collectors as follows: "Sentiment, a perceived need to refer to these materials in the future, or admiration for their physical appearance impels persons to preserve items of personal or professional interest."¹⁵ In the case of political poster collectors, the first and third reasons for collecting seem most often operant. "Sentiment" often springs from the feeling that posters document a historical moment, a cause, or perhaps even a personal involvement in the events for which a poster was created. Other political poster collectors are inspired to collect posters for their physical appearance or their value as art. Activists, art critics, and the poster artists themselves are often the most active collectors, but it is surprising how many people have one or more political posters rolled up under their bed, in the closet, or stashed up in the attic.¹⁶

An institution wishing to acquire political posters will normally focus on the identification of private collectors who may be willing to donate or sell their collections to the repository in question.¹⁷ Repositories can sometimes acquire

¹² In the United States, many libraries have received government materials through a library depository program, which has included at various times a greater or lesser percentage of the Government Printing Office's poster output. Diana Gonzalez Kirby, "Managing Government-Sponsored Posters in the Academic Library," *Government Information Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1989): 283.

¹³ DeNoon estimates that only 2,000 examples of roughly 35,000 total WPA poster designs have been preserved, even though two million copies were printed. Christopher DeNoon, *Posters of the WPA* (Los Angeles: Wheatley Press, 1987): 7.

¹⁴ Lincoln Cushing, *¡Revolucion! Cuban Poster Art*, available at <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/%7Elcushing/CubaGen.html> (accessed 11 November 2003).

¹⁵ Florence M. Jumonville, "Printed Ephemera—The Raw Materials of History," *LLA Bulletin* 53 (Fall 1990): 55.

¹⁶ The political poster collection of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG) has grown rapidly (from 8,000 to 53,000 posters) mainly through donations since its founding in 1989, in part because CSPG sponsors an active traveling exhibition program that "recycles" the messages of posters treasured by earlier generations of activists.

¹⁷ On-line auction houses such as eBay may be considered sources of "vintage" political posters.

MANAGING A RESEARCH COLLECTION
OF POLITICAL POSTERS

posters directly from their source: some organizations and poster makers can be persuaded to donate or sell a copy of each design for long-term preservation. The appraisal of an individual poster or group of posters for inclusion in an institution's collection will take into consideration the overall mission of the institution. For instance, an arts repository may require that the posters exhibit a minimum level of aesthetic competency, while a historical society may limit political poster acquisition to those produced within a particular city, county, or state.

Cataloging Political Posters

Since no single type of institution (library, archives, or museum) clearly predominates in the collection of posters, it is not surprising to find that there is great diversity in the cataloging methods institutions use to record and document posters, including use of the MARC record, museum registrar methods, archival finding aids, and a slew of homegrown systems. Just as with acquisitions policy, an institution's cataloging policy must factor in the particular needs of the users for whom the collection is being created and the amount of resources that can be directed toward describing that collection. Beyond these institution-specific concerns, characteristics of the poster object itself may present special problems to the cataloger in the areas of authorship, editions, titles, and subject indexing.

Most institutions prefer to catalog posters at the item level rather than the collection level for several practical reasons. First, the central role of private collectors in the creation of most extant political poster collections means that most collections have no real organic unity nor a single provenance. The fragile nature of most posters also makes it expedient to catalog them at the item level; otherwise, staff must conduct frequent physical searches through filing cabinets to locate individual designs.¹⁸ Where collection-level cataloging has been practiced, as at the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, the collections are grouped artificially based on poster type (theater, circus), authorship (WPA), or collector (Yanker). Collection-level cataloging is an inexpensive means of providing limited access to posters and should be considered when a political poster collection is exceptionally homogeneous or item-level cataloging is not an option.¹⁹ Most researchers, however, will not be satisfied with the limited access of collection-level cataloging.

¹⁸ Marcy Flynn and Helena Zinkham, "The MARC Format and Electronic Reference Images: Experiences from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division," *Visual Resources* 11 (1995): 48.

¹⁹ Hadley's description of different methods of organizing visual ephemera—provenance-based, artificially created, and within larger collections—does a good job of presenting the advantages and drawbacks of each option. Mary Hadley, "Access and Description of Visual Ephemera," *Collection Management* 25 (2001): 44–48.

Item-level cataloging is practiced on two major categories of material, both of which can serve as partial models for the cataloging of posters: books and original art works. Like books, posters are publications. They are created in multiples for the purpose of public distribution using printing processes that run the gamut from mass printing methods to small runs using hand-stenciling techniques. But the similarities between books and political posters also serve to highlight a wealth of differences. Political posters are published, but by a much wider range of “publishers” in a much less regulated environment than the book trade. Publishers of political posters include governments and large organizations that might run off many thousands of offset posters, but they are just as likely to be the work of small groups or individual artists churning out small runs in lofts or garages.

Because political poster production is often an underground, ad hoc activity, the problem of identifying editions in political posters is far more complicated than with traditionally published materials or original art. Poster designers often neglect to add publication information to posters, such as copyright notices or the edition numbers common on limited issues of fine art prints. Variations in posters may run the gamut from minimal differences in paper types, size, or colors to major alterations, such as when the same design or design elements are used with an entirely different message. In the case of minimal differences, catalogers should note variants of the same political poster as they encounter them and cross reference one to the other.²⁰ Major alterations that result in a distinct, but related, poster may also be noted.

The authorship of political posters is often problematic, again because of their untraditional publication methods. Protest posters are frequently created anonymously for the simple reason that their authors are promoting political activity that might bring personal retribution like the loss of a job, or, in some countries, arrest and worse. To counter the danger of producing political posters, artists often find safety in a collective identity. The graphics collective—a group of artists working anonymously for a common cause—is simultaneously a response by artists to the personal risks associated with making political art and a statement about the desired role of the artist in society. Graphics collectives frequently coalesce in times of political upheaval only to fall apart as the political or personal paths of the members diverge, though some groups have been remarkably long-lived.²¹

²⁰ Both the Hoover Institution Archives and the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division include cross-references to poster duplicates and close variants of posters in their collections using the “description” or 500 (general note) fields respectively.

²¹ An example of a short-lived graphics collective is Group Graphics, a Los Angeles group of about twelve artists who came together for three months in 1970 around opposition to the Vietnam War and support of the Soledad Brothers. A few examples of long-lived collectives include Chicago Women’s Graphics Collective (Chicago 1970–1983), Black Cat (New York, 1978–1995), Royal Chicano Air Force (Sacramento, Calif. 1969–1994), and the Guerrilla Girls (New York, 1985–present).

MANAGING A RESEARCH COLLECTION
OF POLITICAL POSTERS

Authorship of political posters is also complex because of the number of individuals and organizations potentially involved in the production of political posters. The poster designer is the person who completes the final layout of a poster, including the placement of text and graphics. Sometimes the poster designer is both the author of the poster text and the developer of the graphic elements in the poster layout, but often, he or she is putting together creative elements authored by others, including writers, illustrators, and photographers. Works by well-known artists, company logos, and published photographs are often incorporated into political poster designs without attribution, because organizations and groups challenging the status quo are not usually overly concerned with the intricacies of intellectual property law.

In addition to individual creators, one or more organizations may have authoring responsibility for political posters. Frequently, an organization, sometimes called the issuing agency, sponsor, or advertiser, commissioned the poster. These organizations might be relatively well known, such as the Green Party, the United Farmworkers, or the Cuba-based OSPAAAL (Organización de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Asia, África y América Latina), but they can also be fly-by-night outfits, like an ad hoc defense committee with a lifespan just long enough to get a political comrade out on bail, or a transitory task force coming together for the purpose of putting on a single demonstration or rally. Print shops may also play a role, large or small, in the creation of a political poster beyond simply printing it. Some print shops with a political mission may initiate the creation of posters, or at the very least, supply political artists with the necessary equipment or machinery to undertake their own production runs.²² The line separating a politically active print shop from a graphics collective is sometimes hard to draw.

Given the complex authoring of political posters, catalogers should consider two factors when deciding how much authoring information to include in the catalog record: 1) the importance of the individual or entity in the creation of the poster, and 2) the availability of authorship information on the poster itself. At minimum, the cataloger will attempt to include the names of the sponsoring body and the poster designer in the catalog record, although there seems to be no consensus as to which of these two is the more important.²³ If other authorship information (e.g., about photographers, illustrators, print-

²² Examples of such print shops include Inkworks Press in Berkeley, California, and Self-Help Graphics & Art, Inc. in Los Angeles, California.

²³ The Hoover Institution clearly gives prominence to the issuing agency, but the Library of Congress Prints and Photograph Division seems equally likely to assign the poster designer or sponsor to the MARC fields mapped to "Creator" or "Related Names." Compare, for instance, Library of Congress posters, POS 6 – U.S., no. 423 (C size) and POS 6 – U.S., no. 367 (C size). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, "P&P Online Catalog," <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/pphome.html> (accessed 11 November 2003).

ers, publishers) is readily available on the poster, the cataloger may decide to include it, though it is rarely worth his or her time to spend much effort researching this level of authorship detail.

Authority control for most individuals and organizations concerned with political posters is challenging. Only a tiny handful of political poster makers have gained sufficient recognition in the art world to merit a listing in the Getty's *Union List of Artist Names* (ULAN) and then usually for work other than their poster making.²⁴ The representation of political poster artists or their sponsoring organizations in the Library of Congress Name Authority File (LCNAF) is only marginally better.²⁵ Catalogers will normally have to create their own in-house authority records for most of the people and organizations they encounter while cataloging political posters.

Poster titles are also tricky compared not only to book titles, but also to print, painting, and many other fine art titles. Poster artists almost never assign a title to a poster, and yet it makes little sense to call such works "Untitled" given that posters are generally endowed with plenty of text. If the poster has very limited text or a slogan that is particularly prominent because of the size or location of its type, a title often readily suggests itself. Otherwise, the cataloger may want to develop specific guidelines for assigning a title, or devising one in the case of a poster with graphics but no text—a practice common with photographs and other visual materials.²⁶ Unlike strictly visual materials, the titling of posters is not completely arbitrary, but there is no guarantee that different repositories will come up with the same title. Including the entire text of a political poster in the record helps to differentiate posters with similar slogans (and therefore identical titles). Moreover, since the poster text carries much valuable historical information, it may merit inclusion *in toto* in the catalog record, depending on its length.

The prospective users of a research collection of political posters are likely to wish to retrieve posters using a variety of search criteria, including the makers, place and date of publication, medium, and title. However, the most frequent type of searching is by subject, which involves the most difficult type of

²⁴ J. Paul Getty Trust, "Union List of Artist Names Browser," 2000, <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabulary/ulan/> (accessed 11 November 2003). Barbara Kruger (b. 1945) and Rupert Garcia (b. 1941) are two political poster artists who have gained enough recognition in the art world to be included in ULAN.

²⁵ The Library of Congress Name Authority file is available through OCLC or RLIN. A publicly accessible interface is available through the Public Academic Library Network of Indiana at http://www.palni.edu/Z3950/LC_Names.html (accessed 11 November 2003).

²⁶ Catalogers looking for a source of rules for cataloging graphic materials may consult *Graphic Materials: Rules for Describing Original Items and Historical Collections*, which is based on the work of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. U.S. Library of Congress, "Graphic Materials — Rules for Describing Original Items and Historical Collections," 1982–1996, <http://www.tlcdelivers.com/tlc/crs/grph0199.htm> (accessed 11 November 2003).

MANAGING A RESEARCH COLLECTION
OF POLITICAL POSTERS

cataloging. Posters, as we have seen, are composed of a combination of text and graphic elements. By itself, the text of a poster presents some difficulties, but none that book catalogers and other document indexers have not solved over the decades. The subject indexing of images is an entirely different matter, so it is the graphic or pictorial elements of a poster that pose the biggest challenges to the cataloger.

To the extent that the subject indexing of posters must wrestle with the graphics elements of the poster, it stands to reason that documentation methods developed for fine art or other visual materials should provide a model. Unfortunately, traditional museum documentation methods are not particularly helpful, mainly because museum organization has created a system that submerges content in favor of form. As William Helfand observes, “the fundamental obstacle in retrieving information from images in museums derives from the traditional way great collections have been organized by medium rather than by content.”²⁷ Formal art history, with its emphasis on schools, styles, movements, and artists, also classifies art in a way that does not reveal the subjects of any given work or expression.²⁸ The content of the work of art—what it is “of” and what it is “about”—remains undisclosed.

In contrast, the subject indexing of photographs has much to offer catalogers of political posters, with one major caveat.²⁹ As Nancy Malan points out, “photography is a copy medium. The first step is to copy reality.”³⁰ As “copies” of real-life subjects, photographs reproduce reality in a much more direct way than posters, even when their use in research involves detangling the threads of artifice, manipulation, or cultural myopia woven in at their creation. As a result, catalogers of photographs focus their efforts on describing what is pictured in a photograph—what a photograph is “of”—whereas poster catalogers must also seek to elucidate poster “aboutness”—what the poster creator intended to say.

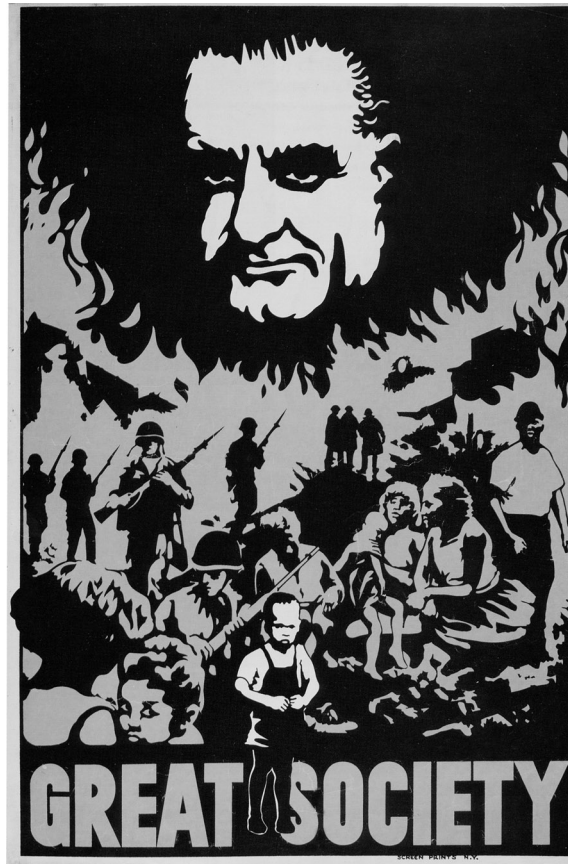
The Getty *Categories for the Description of Works of Art* (CDWA), one of the earliest and most copied efforts to standardize museum data, provides a breakdown of subject fields well suited to capturing the complexity of poster subject

²⁷ William H. Helfand, “The Search for Ephemera Images,” *Visual Resources* 11 (1995): 110.

²⁸ Helfand, “The Search for Ephemera Images,” 110.

²⁹ See Barbara Orbach, “So That Others May See: Tools for Cataloging Still Images,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 11 (1990): 163–91, and Linda McRae and Lynda S. White, *ArtMARC Sourcebook: Cataloging Art, Architecture and their Visual Images* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1998).

³⁰ Nancy E. Malan, “Organizing Photo Collections: An Introspective Approach,” in Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walsh, eds., *A Modern Archives Reader* (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1984), 181.



Artist Unknown, Screen Prints, *Great Society*, New York, ca. 1967. Silkscreen on paper, 101.5 × 66 cm.

data.³¹ The CDWA provides several subject matter fields, each of which may be rendered in the form of a prose description or a list of indexing terms: Subject Matter — Description (what the work depicts or what is depicted in the work generically); Subject Matter — Identification (named subjects depicted in a work of art—persons, places, or things); and Subject Matter — Interpretation (the meaning or theme represented by the subject matter). A political poster may make use of all three fields extensively. For example, a political poster opposing the war in Vietnam might warrant a generic description of images depicted (U.S. soldiers, Vietnamese civilians, African Americans, child, fire); identification of specific individuals or places depicted (Lyndon Johnson,

³¹ Murtha Baca and Patricia Harpring, eds., "Categories for the Description of Works of Art," 2000, <http://www.getty.edu/research/institute/standards/cdwa/> (accessed 11 November 2003). The CDWA maps to other metadata standards using the "crosswalks" available at J. Paul Getty Trust, "Introduction to Metadata: Pathways to Digital Information," 2000, http://www.getty.edu/research/institute/standards/intrometadata/3_crosswalks/index.html (accessed 11 November 2003).

Vietnam, United States); and a description of the overall meaning of the poster. (Johnson's war in Vietnam hurts people both in Vietnam and in the United States as war spending cuts into spending on poverty programs like the Great Society.)

No one can doubt the utility of being able to search the generic and identifiable images present in political posters in the service of both historical and art historical research. The visual vocabulary of political posters is simultaneously rich and limited, with artists constantly recycling, reinterpreting, and transforming a large but restricted body of icons and images. Patriotic images (Uncle Sam, the Statue of Liberty, the American flag) are prime material, easily wielded as a weapon of criticism. Other political images are noteworthy for their persistence over time; for instance, the recycling of José Guadalupe Posada's *calaveras* (skeletons) in twentieth-century Chicano poster making³² or the pervasiveness of the Che Guevara image since his death in the late 1960s.³³ The ability to identify and compare the images depicted in posters invites interesting cross-cultural studies of political movements and their political languages.

Interpretation, the third type of CDWA subject category, is an equally important type of subject cataloging, indeed probably the most important for political posters, although for fine art this interpretive work is left to curators and scholars, not catalogers. The key role that interpretation plays in the subject cataloging of political posters stems from their nature as political communication.

To be effective, posters need to attack the viewer's emotions and at the same time have an immediate, cognitive impact. The image and *message* [emphasis added] enter the mind of the viewer from a distance, with a limited number of exposures, and are experienced in the public realm, unlike a more contemplatively-viewed book or painting.³⁴

In other words, political posters strive to communicate a specific political message, most often through a combination of text and graphics. In the best political posters, the text and graphics work together to express meaning as an intertwined, symbiotic whole. The goal of the cataloger must be to capture this intended message and make it searchable.

Some posters are so poorly conceived or designed that no overt message is communicated, but unlike fine art, this is rare. In fact, the need to commu-

³² Shifra M. Goldman and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Arte Chicano: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of Chicano Art, 1965–1981* (Berkeley: Chicano Studies Library Publications Unit, University of California, 1985), 34.

³³ Kunzle, *Che Guevara*.

³⁴ Christine Nelson and Joel S. Rutstein, "Posters as a Library Resource: The International Poster Collection at Colorado State University," *Collection Management* 20, no. 1/2 (1995): 129.

nicate a message is so central to the poster medium that the Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs Division devised a classification system specifically for posters based entirely on identifying their "promotional goal." The Promotional Goals Poster Categorization Tables were developed to classify the Library of Congress's entire poster collection, not just political posters, so they enable the classification of posters promoting farming, manufacturing, product advertising, tourism and transportation, social clubs, and the performing arts, as well as political parties, patriotism, and war propaganda.³⁵ The tables even provide notes to help the cataloger to correctly classify, for instance, a union poster with a political message under H1 (Political Ideology) rather than F2 (Labor). The Library of Congress no longer employs this unwieldy classification system, using subject headings instead to achieve the same collocation of similar posters. However, that such a system was once created testifies to the importance of the message in the poster and the need for catalogers to acquire the necessary background knowledge to read poster messages accurately.

Modern on-line catalogs require the use of controlled vocabularies in subject indexing, but finding the right mix of vocabularies for political posters can be challenging. The Getty's *Art and Architecture Thesaurus* (AAT) is a rich source of terms for describing the materials and processes used to create posters, and its "Agents" and "Objects" facets supply a wealth of potential subject terms for representing generic people and things depicted in posters.³⁶ But the AAT's focus on art, architecture, and material culture is too restrictive to allow the cataloger to rely exclusively upon it. The Library of Congress's *Thesaurus for Graphic Materials* (TGM) is a less rigorously constructed subject thesaurus, but one that has evolved out of the actual practice of cataloging the Library of Congress's print and photograph collections, including posters.³⁷ It therefore frequently provides useful terminology missing from the much larger AAT and is especially valuable for interpretation or subject indexing of the poster message.³⁸ The Getty *Thesaurus of Geographic Names* is an excellent source for

³⁵ "Promotional Goals Poster Categorization Tables" (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, n.d., photocopy).

³⁶ J. Paul Getty Trust, "Art and Architecture Thesaurus Browser," 2000, <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabulary/aat> (accessed 11 November 2003).

³⁷ Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, "Thesaurus of Graphic Materials I: Subject Terms (TGM I)," 1995, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/tgm1/> (accessed 11 November 2003).

³⁸ For a comparison of AAT and TGM, see Jane Greenberg, "Intellectual Control of Visual Archives: A Comparison between the Art and Architecture Thesaurus and the Library of Congress Thesaurus for Graphic Materials," *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1993): 87–101. For a study of how image indexers use (or don't use) AAT, TGM, and other controlled vocabularies, see Linda McRae, "Indexing Images for Subject Access: Controlled Vocabularies in the VISION Project," *Art Documentation* 19, no. 2 (2000): 4–9.

geographic place names useful for describing the poster's place of publication and its depicted geographic locations.³⁹

Preserving Political Posters

A collection of political posters may include specimens from all four of the major mechanical printing techniques, including relief (woodblock, linoleum cut), intaglio (etching, engraving), stencil (screen printing), and planographic (lithography and offset lithography). However, the producers of political posters favor printing techniques that maximize output and minimize costs, which means that most political poster collections are likely to be made up largely of lithographs. This is in contrast to collections made up of fine art prints, the producers of which generally seek to minimize output and may use complex printing techniques or expensive materials to increase the value of their work.

It is important to be able to identify the type of printing technique used to create a poster, both for cataloging purposes and to understand its preservation requirements. Distinguishing between samples of the main printing processes (e.g., a screen print compared to a woodblock print) is not usually difficult, but accurately identifying works created using similar printing techniques (e.g., different types of lithographs or relief printing) can be very tricky. *Ink, Paper, Metal, Wood: How to Recognize Contemporary Artists' Prints*, by Kathan Brown, gives many helpful tips on how to distinguish between printing methods; for instance, how to recognize "squash," a darkening that betrays when the edges of an image have been cut and not drawn.⁴⁰ For the novice, the "What Is a Print?" section of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Web site explains the four main printing methods using animated demonstrations of the actual printing processes.⁴¹ Whatever the exact process used to create a political poster, it is likely to suffer from poor quality paper, large size, and rough handling, all of which make preservation difficult. One problem stems from the support material typically used in political poster making, namely poor quality wood pulp paper. The short-lived purpose of most political poster art makes it unlikely that the makers invested in the better grades of acidic paper, much less acid-free

³⁹ J. Paul Getty Trust, "Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names Browser," 2000, <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabulary/tgn> (accessed 11 November 2003).

⁴⁰ Kathan Brown, *Ink, Paper, Metal, Wood: How to Recognize Contemporary Artists' Prints* (San Francisco, Calif.: Point Publications, 1992). Also consult Luis Nadeau, *Encyclopedia of Printing, Photographic, and Photomechanical Processes*, 2 vols. (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Atelier Luis Nadeau, 1989–1990).

⁴¹ Museum of Modern Art, "What Is a Print?" <http://www.moma.org/whatisaprint/flash.html> (accessed 11 November 2003). Another useful Web resource, although focused on the art print, is The Max Kade – Erich H. Markel Department of Graphic Arts, "Image Maps of Printmaking Techniques," 1995–2001, <http://www.ukans.edu/~sma/techmap/techmap.htm> (accessed 11 November 2003).

paper. This general rule goes double for posters created in Eastern bloc or developing countries where the paper used for posters tends to be particularly substandard. The paper upon which posters are printed is an inherent vice, namely a characteristic of the object that makes it likely to chemically degrade if professional conservators do not intervene. Political posters can be expected to become increasingly acidic and brittle, a chemical process that can be slowed, but not reversed.

Another inherent feature of the political poster that affects its longevity is its large size. Political posters may range in size from a standard letter-sized piece of paper to exceptionally large objects designed for the sides of buses, but most political posters tend to come in one of several standard paper sizes, usually ranging between twenty-four to thirty-six inches on the long side. These large objects are easily damaged even during normal handling and will usually possess creases, wrinkles, and tears of various sizes. Collectors frequently store them under less than ideal conditions because of their size, for instance, folding them, leaving them rolled for long periods, or storing them in attics, garages, or basements where they pick up dirt, mold, and mildew.

Finally, political posters are created to be displayed publicly, and this usage alone can damage them in numerous ways. A poster will rarely survive having been wheat-pasted on a wall, and other forms of adhesive (such as all types of pressure-sensitive tape) or attachment (staples, tacks, pins, etc.) will normally leave visible traces and permanent damage. Posters that have been hung outdoors must survive the depredations of sunlight, rain, and a host of other hostile environmental conditions, including defacement by individuals who take exception to the politics expressed in the poster. Posters that have been cherished by their owners are frequently in the worst condition, thanks to unfortunate repair or strengthening efforts, such as backing them with highly acidic cardboard, dry mounting them, or reinforcing them with masking tape.

While there are potentially many conservation treatments that could be employed on posters, the reality is that most institutions will not have a budget to lavish the same level of conservation expertise on a political poster as on a Picasso.⁴² Indeed, it can be argued that the aesthetic impact and evidential value of posters are enhanced by retaining the marks of their use in the streets. For this reason, institutions will normally target their preservation efforts toward improving the handling and housing of their poster collections.

The requirements for safely housing political posters are no different than for other oversized paper collections, such as maps or art prints, and include proper storage equipment, archival supplies such as acid-free folders and Mylar,

⁴² For a description of the lengths to which a conservator might go with a poster, see Gay Tracy, "The Disposable Collectible: Conserving Posters," *Northeast Document Conservation Center News* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 1.

MANAGING A RESEARCH COLLECTION
OF POLITICAL POSTERS

and climate control with stable temperatures under seventy degrees Fahrenheit and relative humidity in the 30 to 50 percent range.⁴³ Before storing posters, it is often necessary to perform some simple treatments upon them. The most typical problem needing immediate attention before the poster can be processed results from its having been transported and perhaps stored in a rolled-up state. In many cases, it is possible to flatten a poster simply by reverse rolling it on a plastic roll and leaving it for a few minutes or sometimes more. Posters that have lost their suppleness or have been stored rolled up for many years need to be flattened using controlled humidification, a process explained at length in a National Park Service *Conserve O Gram*.⁴⁴ Other common treatments include the removal of damaging fasteners, such as staples, paper clips, rubber bands, and pins,⁴⁵ and gentle cleaning of the surface using a soft, natural fiber brush.

More complex interventions on political posters may also be undertaken if the object is at risk. Such treatments include the repair of tears, removal of adhesive and stains, and de-acidification. Posters frequently arrive with dozens of tiny tears along their edges. These tears are usually not worth the effort to repair. Poster repairs should focus on the rips and tears that threaten the integrity of the object. Repairs should never be attempted using tape or other adhesives, even those labeled “archival,” such as Filmoplast. Instead, the preferred archival repair methods use reversible materials like heat-set tissue or a combination of Japanese tissue and glue stick applied with a tacking iron. The removal of adhesive tape residues and stain is also possible, but it often requires a more expensive set-up using organic solvent and a suction table. De-acidification is another option that not every institution has the budget or expertise to attempt. De-acidification can be a particularly daunting prospect given that most posters may be assumed to be acidic, and yet there remains

⁴³ Sherelyn Ogden, “Temperature, Relative Humidity, Light, and Air Quality: Basic Guidelines for Preservation,” *NEDCC Technical Leaflet*, Section 2, Leaflet 1, 1999, <http://www.nedcc.org/plam3/tleaf21.htm> (accessed 11 November 2003); Mary Todd Glaser, “Storage Solutions for Oversized Paper Artifacts,” *NEDCC Technical Leaflet*, no. Section 4, Leaflet 9, 1999, <http://www.nedcc.org/plam3/tleaf49.htm> (accessed 11 November 2003); Sherelyn Ogden, “Storage Furniture: A Brief Review of Current Options,” *NEDCC Technical Leaflet*, no. Section 4, Leaflet 2, 1999, <http://www.nedcc.org/plam3/tleaf42.htm> (accessed 11 November 2003); Susan Nash Munro, “Polyester Encapsulation,” *National Park Service Conserve O Gram*, no. Number 13/3, 1993, <http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/publications/conservoogram/13-03.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2003).

⁴⁴ Diane Alper, “How to Flatten Folded or Rolled Paper Documents,” *National Parks Service Conserve O Gram*, no. 13/2, 1993, <http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/publications/conservoogram/13-02.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2003).

⁴⁵ Northeast Document Conservation Center, “Removal of Damaging Fasteners from Historic Documents,” *NEDCC Technical Leaflet*, 1999, <http://www.nedcc.org/leaflets/clips.htm> (accessed 11 November 2003).

little consensus within the profession about the overall utility of existing mass de-acidification programs.⁴⁶

Digitizing Political Posters

Given their fragile, oversized, and frequently highly acidic condition, political posters are good candidates for preservation reformatting. In the past, most institutions chose photographic reproduction (in the form of 35 mm slides or 4 × 5 inch transparencies) as the best method for making posters available to the public and ensuring survival of their designs over time. As digital reproductive technologies became available, most institutions still usually chose to create photographic intermediaries of posters, which were then subsequently scanned. More recently, institutions have begun to scan posters directly, using a variety of scanning technologies.

The decision to digitize a political poster collection is highly individual. An institution must weigh the expected gains to its users against the multifold costs of any high-quality digital imaging project.⁴⁷ Certain characteristics of political posters make them excellent candidates for scanning while other characteristics may present challenges.

On the positive side, political posters are a class of high-interest objects that display well on a computer screen. Unlike some other oversized objects (maps, charts, etc.), political posters were designed for quick viewing at a distance, not close study. Their bold, often simple designs usually translate well in the digital medium, and they can be enjoyed as thumbnails and in other small sizes. It is perhaps for this reason that several American institutions—including the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, the University of Minnesota, Northwestern University, Yale University, and Cornell University—have selected political posters for digitizing projects.

Another characteristic that makes political posters prime candidates for digitization is their status as publications under copyright law. That political posters are created in multiples for the purpose of public display makes them by definition publications.⁴⁸ However, more posters created prior to 1989 have fallen into the public domain than books or other more common publication

⁴⁶ Henk J. Porck, "Mass Deacidification: An Update of Possibilities and Limitations," 1996, <http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/publ/porck.htm> (accessed 11 November 2003).

⁴⁷ Diane Vogt-O'Connor, "Selection of Materials for Scanning," in *Handbook for Digital Projects: A Management Tool for Preservation and Access*, edited by Maxine K. Sitts (Andover, Mass.: Northeast Document Conservation Center, 2000), 35–63.

⁴⁸ See the definition of publication under the *Copyright Act, U.S. Code* 17 (1971) § 101. A gray area is the protection afforded creators by the *Visual Artists Rights Act, U.S. Code* 17 (1990) § 106A, which covers limited edition prints (200 copies or fewer) if signed and numbered by the artist.

MANAGING A RESEARCH COLLECTION
OF POLITICAL POSTERS

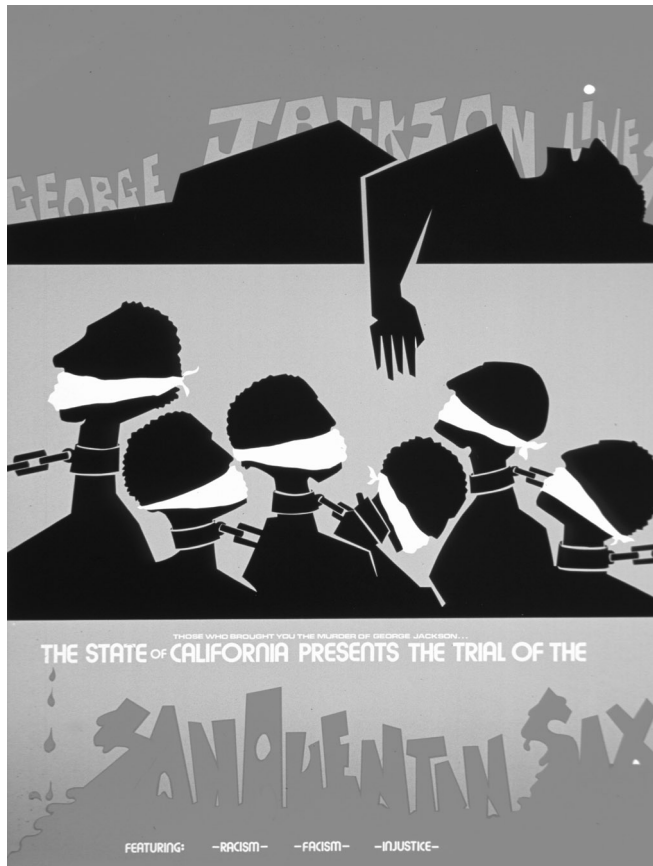
types thanks to the untraditional publication methods used to create many posters. In addition, posters published by the U.S. government are automatically in the public domain just by virtue of being government publications.

Although copyright acts passed in 1978 and 1989, and all of their amendments, have simplified the law for recent publications, the status of older publications remains governed by the use of copyright notices. In short, publications made prior to 1923 have entered into the public domain, whether they were published with a copyright notice or not. Works published between 1923 and 1978 must carry in all their forms a notice of copyright, but their current copyright status depends on whether their copyrights were properly renewed. The Copyright Act of 1976 (effective 1978) lengthened the duration of copyright and, though still requiring copyright notice, introduced ways of redeeming noncompliant works. The Copyright Act of 1989 eliminated, going forward, the need for published copyright notice. The overall effect of this sequence of laws is that prior to 1989 copyright protection was secured by an act of publication with notice of copyright (e.g., © 1966 John Doe) and registration with the Copyright Office. Works published without copyright notice and registration before 1989 have *largely* gone into the public domain.⁴⁹ Because many political posters, created in the heat of the moment using untraditional publication channels, were issued without copyright notices, a good number of contemporary works made prior to 1989 have fallen into the public domain. This fact places posters in a more favorable situation compared with many other types of contemporary image collections, for instance photographs and fine art, where virtually all the material is subject to copyright.⁵⁰

The reasons for digitizing political posters should be weighed against a number of distinct challenges. The requirements of large formats and color scanning, coupled with the need for resolution high enough to reproduce small details (such as imprints) have meant that until recently most institutions have settled for a two-step process whereby posters were photographed, and their smaller-sized surrogates scanned. In the last few years, however, several new technologies have begun to make the direct scanning of posters feasible and affordable. The most affordable option is now the digital camera, often combined with an elaborate copy stand or other arrangement that allows the photographer to put the necessary distance between the camera lens and the oversized poster as well as to control lighting. High-quality digital cameras are readily available for around \$5,000, but institutions that choose this scanning

⁴⁹ U.S. works published without copyright notice between January 1, 1978, and March 1, 1989, may have retained their copyright if they were registered within five years of their publication. *Copyright Act, U.S. Code* 17 (1971) § 101.

⁵⁰ For a useful chart, see Lolly Gassaway, "When Works Pass into the Public Domain," 2001, <http://www.unc.edu/~uncclng/public-d.htm> (accessed 11 November 2003).



Malaquías Montoya, *George Jackson Lives*, ca. 1973. Offset, 24 × 18 in.

method must expect to recruit a fairly skilled camera operator, since the challenges involved in any type of photography (lighting, avoiding parallax and other distortions) are present when using a digital camera for scanning. Still expensive, but worth investigating are wide-format scanners (which horizontally feed large paper objects across the scanning surface) and extra large flatbeds. Both these methods would, in theory at least, require less expertise on the part of the scanner operator, although the expense of maintenance for these costly pieces of equipment needs to be factored in.

The post-scanning production issues involved in a digitizing project involving political posters are not much different from those of other image formats (such as photographs or fine art genres like painting, drawing, etching, etc.) with one exception. The vast majority of political posters are likely to have been created by some screen-printing method (usually lithography or silkscreen printing), which may be subject to an unusual scanning distortion, called the moiré effect. The moiré effect turns up in the scan looking like a herringbone,

MANAGING A RESEARCH COLLECTION
OF POLITICAL POSTERS

crosshatched, or dotted pattern. The effect results from a tiny, unavoidable misalignment between the scanner samples (dots) and the halftones (tiny dots) created during the original printing process. (The same moiré pattern may be obtained in nature by placing identical pocket combs or pieces of window screen at a slight angle, one in front of the other.) One can compensate for the moiré effect, when it turns up, by using the scanning software's de-screen function or manually blurring the image with PhotoShop Gaussian Blur filter, or other methods. In general, it is best to minimize the amount of post-scanning image processing and manipulation performed on archival scans, but in some cases such manipulation is necessary to restore the image to its original look.

Conclusion

The characteristics that put the political poster at the margins of scholarship—and therefore beyond the pale of most archival, library, and museum collections—in an era when a more positivistic social science held sway are precisely those that are valued in many contemporary research agendas. Such characteristics include the poster's ephemeral nature, its privileging of visual communication, its nonmainstream modes of production and distribution, and its status as propaganda.

Popular culture studies thrive on the careful consideration of the cultural detritus of industrial society—postcards, comic books, travel brochures, TV commercials, and so on—whose lowly status, fleeting nature, and/or ubiquity speak volumes about the social groups that made and used them. Equally flourishing is the field of visual culture. The analysis of images, their social or cultural construction, and their reception by distinct audiences has burgeoned in recent years, as scholars perfect methods for discerning both the layers of meaning embodied in a single image and entire regimes of visibility encompassing social strata or historical epochs. Visual research methodologies enable new interpretations of the visual language of political posters, which in turn illuminate the nature of the movements, institutions, and organizations that created them. Contemporary research has finally pushed into the foreground those social groups around which political poster making has been concentrated: people of color, women, immigrants, labor, gays and lesbians, among others. While mass media studies typically dissect the oppressive ways in which mainstream media has replicated hierarchical social relationships, studies of political posters allow the researcher to engage with the discourses of both power and powerlessness. From the image of the proud blacksmith-worker of the early Soviet period⁵¹ to the “new images of victory” of the Black Panther

⁵¹ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 277–78.



Pablo O'Higgins and Alberto Beltrán, Taller de Gráfica Popular,
1° de Mayo de 1947, 1947. Offset, 82 × 61 cm.

Party in the 1960s, political posters shed light on what Nicholas Mirzoeff has called “those moments where the visual is contested, debated and transformed as a constantly challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racialized identities.”⁵²

As with any collection of unusual materials, the careful nurturing and management of a collection of political posters requires sensitivity and commitment on the part of the collecting institution to the changing needs and interests of the users of its research collections.

⁵² Nicholas Mirzoeff, “What Is Visual Culture?” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998), 6.