

The Populist Conservator: A Sticky Case Study

ABSTRACT

How do colleagues in related professions and the general public regard the conservator? As a scientist in a white lab coat, bent over an object with a tiny paintbrush in hand? The unseen expert referenced in family treasure shows on public television? As a pie-in-the-sky idealist whose best practices seem to belie an understanding of the limitations facing small museums and archives?

This paper is an overview of the author's research, born out of necessity, on preserving a treasured—yet not well preserved—part of American popular culture: the bumper sticker. Such objects would rarely warrant individual conservation treatment, yet are held in many permanent research collections and small cultural heritage institutions. In the midst of a traditional, materials-science-based research project on how these items were made and how they changed and deteriorated over time, the author overcame her own and others' prejudices about what constitutes an object worth preserving.

Thus the goals of the research shifted outward: to communicating the preservation message for materials that usually do not receive conservation notice—such as these challengingly sticky and ephemeral objects—and to providing economical solutions for items widely held by institutions routinely strapped for funds. Surprisingly, once the work was couched in terms of its impact on the public, the public took notice. The bumper sticker project garnered significant interest in the popular press and blogosphere, and even resulted in a video created by the author's institution. This example will contextualize a discussion of positive and accessible approaches toward publicizing the preservation of cultural heritage, in ways that make use of modern technologies.

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INTRODUCTION

Conservators routinely present oral and written case studies of treatments, normally delivered in third-person language that distances the conservator from his or her work. While this paper is a case study, it focuses instead on personal, first-person experience, and on developing collection-care best practices for an object unlikely to be treated by conservators—the bumper sticker. In the process of determining preservation strategies, I began to think more broadly about how we as a profession might do a better job of selling ourselves as experts in more public spheres.

I chose “The Populist Conservator” as my title in order to call for a more grass-roots, in-the-trenches, down-to-earth approach to what we do. We have information to share with others: How do we get the word out to the people who might benefit, establishing ourselves as knowledgeable, approachable scholars who are part of the more general conversations about objects?

When I first conceived of this project, a conservator colleague told me that I should not expect to be taken seriously when I chose to focus on bumper stickers. I respectfully disagree. Bumper stickers are a wonderful example of the types of materials that people and—perhaps more to the point—cultural heritage institutions collect. Ephemeral, 20th century materials like these—so common as to be overlooked—deserve our consideration.

Because this paper is derived from a presentation focused on the 2012 AIC Annual Meeting theme of outreach, it does not describe in great detail the research project from which it originated. For more information on the composition and preservation of the bumper sticker, see Baker (2011).

METHODOLOGY

The project on bumper stickers resulted from being aware of what was being used in the special collections and archives library at the University of Kansas. Hence, rule number one of outreach: Know your audience and the

collections it uses. For a few years I spent two hours a week in the reading room, and it was a fascinating experience. I saw how patrons used materials (one hopes, gently and with respect), but I also saw *what* was being used. It is not always what the curators and conservators perceive as the most-used collections.

One day while I was at the desk, a patron returned a stack of archival folders, some containing bumper stickers. I recall staring at them, racking my brain for what I might know about them as a conservator. While it is highly unlikely that a bumper sticker would make its way into a conservation lab, the items should still be stored safely, and I did not recall anything in the conservation literature on the topic.

I conceived of a research project to determine the history of the bumper sticker, particularly from the perspective of materials evolution. I hoped to devise simple, accessible preservation recommendations for low-budget museums and archives. In addition, by studying how bumper stickers had changed materially, I could provide data to aid in dating and characterizing stickers: useful information for conservators, collection managers, and archivists.

I developed an extensive survey to document the physical attributes and condition of stickers found in research institutions, a mixture of archives, presidential museums, and other museums (see Acknowledgments). I closely examined more than 2000 stickers, largely political in nature. Political campaign stickers have the advantage of being more readily datable than other types of stickers, and since printers did not differentiate among topics, the conclusions I reached were most likely relevant to all bumper stickers.

Information was recorded about the bumper sticker message or text, manufacturer, printer (including union information), and date, when known. There were also categories for the component parts of bumper stickers: printing method, inks, adhesives, substrate material, and backing liner material. Finally, I paid particular attention to how bumper stickers were stored—and made notes about what didn't work as well as might be expected.

BRIEF HISTORY OF BUMPER STICKERS

The creation of the bumper sticker is widely credited to Forest P. Gill, a silkscreen printer from Kansas City, Kansas, in the late 1940s. Before and during World War II, Gill printed on canvas products needed for the war effort, such as tents, gun covers, and truck covers. But how could he bundle the canvas items and keep the bundles together? Gill turned to the new pressure-sensitive paper stock and highly visible daylight fluorescent inks, known by the popular trade name "Day-Glo" (Gilman 2010). Aware of his idea's potential for other applications but uncertain how to market it, Gill contacted promotional-products marketers, who embraced the new concept as a boon to the specialty advertising industry.

Thus the bumper strip, as it was called in those early days, was born (Pechuls 2003).

The bumper sticker is a genuine American product, rooted in post-World War II experimentation with wartime materials—including daylight fluorescent inks, pressure-sensitive adhesives, vinyl, and silicone—and the maturation of commercial screen printing as distinct from fine art serigraphy. After World War II, more Americans purchased automobiles and had increased leisure time for travel. With the advent of a national highway system, it was easier than ever to take a cross-country trip. It didn't take long for advertisers to recognize the car's promise as a moving billboard, in particular to advertise tourist attractions. Other early bumper stickers promoted civic events, new products, and public-safety campaigns.

In the early 1950s the bumper sticker became closely associated with political campaigning. The 1952 election between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson is thought to be the first presidential race in which bumper stickers were widely used (Hanners 2000). Political campaigns, like tourist attractions before them, employed volunteers to frequent supermarkets, sporting events, shopping-center parking lots, and other public spaces to attach stickers to the bumpers of—one hopes—willing supporters' cars (*Bob Dole Campaign Guide*).

BUMPER STICKER COMPOSITION AND PRESERVATION

Almost exclusively until the 1990s, and still in large part today, bumper stickers have been screen-printed. This printing method was vital to the war effort, and was relatively easy to commercialize following World War II. The inks are durable and weather resistant, and the process is well suited to short-run orders with fast turnaround times. The popular daylight fluorescent inks, which helped the message stand out, were used extensively from the 1950s through the early 1970s and worked best with the screen-printing method (Biegeleisen 1971).

The pressure-sensitive stock of a bumper sticker is a composite "sandwich" of three basic parts: the bodystock, or main printing surface; the adhesive; and the release liner, or throwaway backing paper. The earliest bumper stickers were printed on paper. Paper predominated through the early 1970s, and it enjoyed a resurgence in the early 1980s. The early paper stickers deteriorated quickly and were difficult to remove, but they were not designed for permanence. In the early 1950s, their useful life was estimated at just two to four weeks. Despite the tendency toward quick disintegration, one optimistic advertiser—interviewed in a 1952 *New York Times* article touting the new-fangled bumper stickers and their rising popularity—suggested that "even after a strip falls, crumpled and dirty, to lie in the street of some far-off

Item level	
Most paper and vinyl stickers in good condition	Individual alkaline folder; do not fold or crease
Stickers with tacky surfaces or oozing inks and plasticizers	Separate; place within folded piece of silicone release paper inside alkaline folder; use polyester sparingly
Oversize items	Separate and store unfolded in alkaline folders in flat storage boxes
Box level	
Vinyl vs. paper	Separate paper from vinyl stickers, if possible
Ventilation	Use boxes with handle openings or keep lid slightly ajar
Offgassing control	Consider adding a buffered or zeolite paper in box, but not touching stickers

Fig. 1. Bumper sticker storage recommendations

town, it is still doing an advertising job as long as it is still face up" (Schwab 1952, X13).

As early as 1955, advertisements in printing trade journals touted the advantages of a new bodystock—vinyl—over paper because it was completely impervious to weather, flexed to fit curved surfaces, and wouldn't tear when removed (Avery Paper Company 1955). Despite the hopes of manufacturers, vinyl did not really gain popularity until the early 1960s, at least according to my survey results.

Readers of a certain age may recall using a razor blade to gingerly remove a recalcitrant sticker from a bumper. Paper stickers often left a gummy mess of paper and congealed adhesive behind on the bumper. Because of their adhesive formulation, early bumper stickers did not peel off cleanly when needed (e.g., at the end of a political campaign). Manufacturers quickly sought to develop a pressure-sensitive stock that could be removed without residue, marring, or staining. They continue to pursue removable adhesives that will keep the sticker firmly attached as long as needed, yet detach easily when desired.

The function of a bumper sticker liner, as it is called in the industry, is to protect the adhesive layer until the sticker is used. Release liners for bumper stickers are usually a paper that has been coated with silicone, normally on one side. Because the first pressure-sensitive release liner was marketed in 1954, silicone is probably present in almost all bumper stickers. In order to improve the ease with which the liner could be removed, the liner paper was slit using a machine or tool that would cut the liner without damaging the sticker.

Information printed directly on bumper sticker liners often provides a wealth of information for the collection manager, including product information such as the pressure-sensitive stock manufacturer, location of origin,

patents, and, occasionally, a date. I continue to compile a master list of information found on liners to get a fuller sense of when materials and products were introduced; this information could be of great use to conservators and collection managers (Baker 2011).

Many of the materials used in bumper stickers degrade in ways that harm themselves and adjacent materials. While vinyl seems relatively sturdy, it may be damaged by bending, creasing, and scratching. In addition, degrading (poly)vinyl chloride releases acidic gases that may damage paper materials and silver-based objects or photographs typically housed nearby. Vinyl stickers should therefore be separated from vulnerable materials. Stickers may off-gas, discolor, shrink, and adhere to adjacent stickers or paper collections over time. Storage, therefore, is more challenging than for a straightforward paper item. A summary of storage recommendations for small historic museums and archives with limited resources appears in Figure 1.

OUTREACH: BUMPER STICKERS IN CYBERSPACE

Although this project was not envisioned as an outreach opportunity per se, it took on a life of its own. The quirkiness of the topic may have influenced its popularity—after all, bumper stickers are familiar to everyone. What I found, as more and more publicity opportunities arose, is that a conservator could provide a unique voice. I could talk not just about the history of bumper stickers (which is what most reporters asked about), but steer the message to what bumper stickers are made of and why that matters for preservation. On top of that, I could make a case for why to preserve them at all.

The publicity surrounding this project caused me to reconsider the public image of conservation. If the average person on the street has heard of a conservator, which is not as likely as we would prefer, his or her information is often from the context of public television shows such as *Antiques Roadshow*, in which the conservator is mentioned but is usually absent. The message is that conservators will make objects worth more, but only if they are worth spending substantial money on in the first place.

If you look up "conservator" in Google images, you will invariably find a picture of a person in a white lab coat hunched over a microscope, using tiny tools to probe an object. While the lab coat establishes conservators as trustworthy, scientific professionals, do we look friendly? Do we appear to be able to explain concepts in language regular folks will understand? From an outreach perspective in an increasingly image-driven society, conservators could work on looking more accessible.

Outreach is much simpler than it used to be. Modern technologies provide many positive and user-friendly tools for publicizing cultural heritage. Most are inexpensive, with costs in time rather than money. Blogs, Facebook, RSS feeds,

and Twitter—extensively discussed in breakout sessions at the 2012 AIC Annual Meeting in Albuquerque—provide easy ways to publicize a project, although one may have little control in determining where the message goes.

I have found that reporters are genuinely interested in new stories, and conservation or preservation projects—when sufficiently general in perspective—are welcome. Our work is conveniently visual, which is a boon for most of the modern publicity formats.

The following are suggestions that I developed in publicizing the bumper sticker project. It is entirely fitting that the bumper sticker—an informational medium that is all about the message—might serve as a method for improving our own public image.

1. Know your collections: What is the public using and why? Granted, bumper stickers are quirky, but this approach can work for other types of materials as well.
2. Identify unmet needs that a conservator could research and fill.
3. When publicizing your efforts, control the message. When reporters ask off-topic questions, steer the conversation back toward your expertise.
4. Talk and think in sound bites. What are the three main points you hope to convey? Television and radio spots are just minutes in length; Tweets are just a few words.
5. Use accessible language and avoid jargon. You do not have to dumb down the message, but make sure the vocabulary will not get in its way.
6. What is your audience? Talks aimed at fellow conservators, museum professionals, or folks at a public library event should be different, with good reason. Only one of those groups is the least bit interested in inks cured by ultraviolet radiation, no matter how fascinating they may seem to you.

Remember, we in conservation have a huge advantage from the start. Our work is fascinating, slightly mysterious, full of interesting stuff, and visual. Use these features to your advantage. Remember that although many cultural heritage objects are not deemed valuable enough to warrant conservation treatment, we as conservators should still be involved in determining storage protocols for them.

The bumper sticker research is a case study, but it represents the larger picture. Is it, in fact, important for conservators to reach out to broader audiences? How can we use available technologies to aid in the cause? Does the way in which items are selected for preservation and treatment affect our perspectives?

Let's take off the white lab coats, step outside the lab, and make ourselves more visible. In a world of countless voices and perspectives, let's move toward populism, using our scientific reasoning, aesthetic perspective, and years of training to impact the preservation of our cultural patrimony more

broadly. I've found that if you can pitch it right, people are only too willing to listen.

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