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—but 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.

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 any thing 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 institutes, a mixture of archives, presidential libraries, 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 text, manufacturer, printer (including union information), and date, when known. There were also category notes. Bumper stickers are printed using a 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 small labels to promote techniques 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 colorful designs on flat or curved surfaces. Gill used a reusable stock of a silkscreen material, which helped the message stand out, were used extensively from the 1950s through the early 1970s and worked best with the screen-printing method (Bleiglasien 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, the optimistic advertising—"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, 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 election in which bumper stickers were widely used (Hanners 2000). Political campaign stickers, 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 cars—willing supporters’ cars (Bob Dole Campaign Guide 1995). As early as 1954, 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 could be of great use to conservators and collectors. For instance, many of the materials used in bumper stickers degrade in ways that harm themselves and adjacent materials. While vinyl seems relatively stable, it may be damaged by bending, creasing, and scratching. In addition, degrading (poly)viny! 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, dissolve, 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 quickness 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 great deal of information 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 who sees the street has not personally seen a bumper sticker, it could be as likely as we would prefer, or their 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 objects. 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 their perception management.

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. Facebook, Blogs, RSS feeds,
Going All the Way: Achieving the Full Potential of Collaboration between Conservators and Scientists to Produce Information, Products, and Processes of Demonstrated Use at the Bench

ABSTRACT
Heritage Science for Conservation at Johns Hopkins University was established in 2009 through a generous grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Its purpose was to bring scientists into a closer working relationship with conservators. Bringing scientists into the conservation laboratory of an academic library fosters deep research collaborations relating to book and paper conservation. This alliance of scientist and conservator in a common laboratory also serves as a model for how the next generation of book and paper conservation science laboratories might be structured. The Heritage Science for Conservation model addresses the need for a stable locus for science and engineering dedicated to the ongoing needs of the book and paper conservator. In Heritage Science for Conservation, scientists and engineers design research projects and develop agendas in collaboration with conservators and carry out the work in the same physical space. Following this collaborative work, research is disseminated to a wide and targeted audience of conservators, engineers, scientists, librarians, curators, industrialists, students, and the general community.

During its pilot phase, 2009–2012, Heritage Science for Conservation was successful in achieving its programmatic milestones: (1) to conduct research into the fundamental causes of heritage materials degradation and the fundamental applicability of conservation technologies; (2) to expand the tools and techniques of conservation science; and (3) to produce information, products, and processes of demonstrated use at the conservator’s bench. In this paper, the authors introduce the Heritage Science for Conservation model, which facilitates both ongoing research on behalf of book and paper conservation and the development of new technologies that can serve the conservation scientist and the practicing conservator. The authors present evidence of the model’s success by describing three technologies developed at Heritage Science for Conservation, one for each milestone. The authors also suggest that establishing regional Heritage Science for Conservation centers at academic institutions with strong science programs and robust conservation programs will move the field toward a national conservation research agenda and strategy by capitalizing on institutional strengths and providing sustainable collaborative research, while avoiding redundant or disparate research efforts.

INTRODUCTION
Heritage Science for Conservation (HSC) is a part of the Department of Conservation and Preservation in the Sheridan Libraries and Museums of Johns Hopkins University. Sonja K. Jordan-Mowery is the Joseph Rutzick and Marie Rutzicka Feldman Director for Conservation and Preservation, and the principle investigator of HSC, and co-author of this article. The Sheridan Libraries and Museums is home to one of the oldest ongoing library conservation and preservation departments in the United States that included in its original mandate the training of book and paper conservators. Established in 1974 by John Dean and modeled on the City and Guilds of London Institute, the conservation program has, for more than three decades, served as the only apprenticeship program for book and paper conservation education in an academic library.

The other co-author of this article, John W. Baty, is Assistant Research Professor and HSC Scientist—hereafter, ARP/HSC Scientist—and is jointly appointed to the Johns Hopkins Department of Materials Science and Engineering (DMSE). Bunting School of Engineering, DMSE has a record of conservation science research on diverse cultural heritage materials, with master and PhD graduates who are active members of the conservation science community. From the mid-1960s until the early 1990s, DMSE also had a PhD program in conservation science. As an engineering department, DMSE focuses on products and processes not present in a core-discipline physical science department, adding an important dimension to its partnership with the...