

“There’s a Great Future in Plastics”:¹ Mainstreaming a Special Collection

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“**S**ean. Plastic. What do you think?” Those were the dean’s exact words. I replied with hesitation, “I like plastic.” I did, in fact, like plastic, or rather, the idea of plastic. A few years earlier, I found myself captivated, somewhat unexpectedly, by Jeffrey Meikle’s book *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), which makes the case for plastic—malleable and imitative—as a defining metaphor for the post-modern age. Then, in the fall of 2008, an alumna of Syracuse University (SU) and retired plastics entrepreneur alerted the SU Library to the fact that the National Plastics Center and Museum (NPC), situated in the industry’s ancestral home of Leominster, Massachusetts, had decided to close and was looking to transfer its collection of books, archives, and artifacts elsewhere. With my enthusiastic support, the dean and the assistant dean for advancement visited the museum and brought back information on its collections to consider whether accepting this gift would add value to our existing special collections. The museum’s artifacts included a variety of early plastics made of celluloid; thermoset plastics such as Bakelite; as well as those made popular after World War II, such as acrylics, polystyrene, polyethylene, polypropylene, and nylon. The archival materials documented important companies, including sunglasses manufacturer Foster Grant, as well as papers of inventors and entrepreneurs who helped make the 20th century the “Age of Plastic.” The print collection included some 3,000 volumes, from early trade publications like *Modern Plastics* to esoteric books on polymer chemistry. The following case study describes SU Library’s strategies and processes for mainstreaming this gift.

Alignment to Mission

Why, in an era of shrinking spaces and expanding backlogs, did the Syracuse University Library agree to accept this unconventional gift? First, the SU Library had a precedent for collecting artifacts. Second, the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) is home to more than 100 archival collections documenting the history of modern architecture and industrial design. Plastic, as a moldable material, has fascinated generations of designers. Among them was Russel Wright, whose dinnerware brought modernism (and plastic) to the tables of everyday Americans in the post-war years. Other designers from the same era, and also represented in SCRC’s archival holdings, from Marcel Breuer to Richard Neutra, were drawn to the seemingly limitless potential of plastic. At the same time, faculty in the university’s School of Architecture and the SU Humanities Center had recently hosted a symposium called “Plastic Modernities” that brought designers, theorists, historians, artists, and engineers together to consider plasticity as a concept, or design ideal. The symposium lasted just two days, but it helped the library identify a group of faculty members from various disciplines who would form an audience for the plastics collection. Chief among them was a professor of biomedical and chemical engineering, who heads up a research group that develops biodegradable, self-healing, and shape-memory polymers.

Given that the university was in the midst of an ambitious billion-dollar capital campaign and that, in 2008, plastics represented America’s third-largest manufacturing sector, the dean, director of special

collections, and assistant dean for advancement agreed that this collection provided an opportunity to establish—and finance—a new research collection that appealed to a wide range of faculty and students, from engineering and industrial design to history and women's studies.² The small group imagined public programs, such as the "Plastic Modernities" symposium, courses, exhibitions, and publications that drew on the collection. After consulting widely within the library about the workload associated with this collection, the dean approved the project and assigned the assistant dean for advancement and the director of special collections as project co-managers to interface with prospective donors and coordinate library resources and staff. This set a collaborative tone that has persisted over the project's five years.

Work Begins

The assistant dean for advancement and the director of special collections drew up a fixed-term deposit agreement that allowed the library to take custody of the NPC collection and assured that the library would eventually own it. Then, in November 2008, the director of special collections drove the cargo-van filled with artifacts and several pallets of books and archives from Leominster to Syracuse. Along with the physical materials, the center transferred its archival finding aids, artifact metadata, and MARC records. The donor who initially brought the collection to the library's attention was now a member of the library's advisory board. He worked with some of his plastics business colleagues to provide seed money for the digitization of the artifact collection, something that they felt was vital to the project's success, and followed with time-limited funding for a curator.

To store materials temporarily, the dean reached an agreement with the university's Coalition of Museums and Art Centers (CMAC) to use space in a recently renovated, climate-controlled warehouse. The library plans to move the artifacts in 2013 to a newly constructed high-density storage facility, which has a constant temperature of 50 degrees and a relative humidity of 30 percent. Of the 3,000 or so artifacts, only half had been previously accessioned at the item-level. As item-level accessioning was required for the nascent digital project, this task was an early priority. With a workflow in place for archival collections, SCRC's archivists were able to create collection-level accession records and to import the electronic inventories into the SCRC's Encoded Archival Description (EAD) template.

Mainstreaming the Collection

Difficult-to-find printed volumes—mainly trade publications and obscure company histories, such as the amusingly titled *Be Seated by Bemis*, a history of the toilet-seat manufacturer—were retained in special collections. Other monographs, mostly volumes on polymer chemistry, found a temporary home in an unused meeting space. An item-level review revealed that many of them were duplicated in the circulating collections. The library's data systems administrator was able to streamline this process by extracting bibliographic records from NPC's catalog and matching them with the library's own holdings. With assistance from the library's subject specialist in chemistry, the new titles were integrated into the circulating collection. Where possible, the library retained NPC's copy and added a note that would identify them as being "On deposit from the National Plastics Center." (This was later changed to "Gift of...") New items were cataloged by staff in the cataloging unit. After consulting with NPC's representatives, the library decided to de-accession duplicate monographs.

Thousands of plastic artifacts placed unprecedented demands on the library's preservation program. The term "plastic" derives from the material's most desired quality—malleability. In spite of its reputation for longevity, most plastics degrade over time. As they "off-gas," many plastics become increasingly brittle, sometimes leaving a soupy residue. The library's conservator recommended stabilizing the environment (cool, but not cold, and dry) and re-housing the artifacts in acid-free cardboard containers that facilitated cross-ventilation and reduced the effects of off-gassing. Processing staff were able to fold this re-housing step into the digitization workflow. More recently, the conservator has reached out to institutions, such as the Smithsonian, that are actively investigating plastic's long-term preservation and conservation needs.

Digitization of the artifacts began soon after their arrival. (The library opted not to digitize paper-based materials at this point in part because of copyright considerations and in part because the advisory board felt that the website should feature the artifacts most prominently.) Rather than do this work in the library, which would have involved significant expenditures for equipment and staffing, the library contracted with the university's Photo and Imaging Center, a fee-based unit that reports to campus information technology. The director of special collections negotiated a reasonable per-item cost, which made it possible to present donors with an accurate budget for digitization. The photographer captured the images and used the item-level accession numbers as the filenames, which made it possible to match images to artifacts after the fact.

Newly captured images and existing metadata were imported into an instance of CONTENTdm that had been heavily customized by the library's information technology unit to provide access to the artifacts and associated metadata, as well as a growing corpus of interpretative content. Some of the more interesting objects, including a polystyrene Maccaferri guitar popularized by Django Reinhardt, were imaged as QuickTime Virtual Reality (QTVR) files, which allowed researchers to examine them from a variety of angles.

Ongoing Collaboration

From the outset, the library's assistant dean for advancement played a key role in coordinating the project's advisory group, which includes current and potential donors as well as subject-area experts. Besides co-authoring the deposit agreement, he worked successfully to transform the deposit into an outright gift one year ahead of schedule. Above all, he serves as an interpreter among the donors, translating terms like "metadata" and "faceted browsing" for them. His continuing involvement is particularly important given the degree to which the plastics advisory board is involved in the day-to-day development of the website. Moreover, he has helped secure more than \$300,000 in project funding. A portion of that funding was used to hire a temporary curator when, after discussions with the advisory board, it became apparent that the goal was not simply to build a website that showcased the collection, but rather one that functioned as an authoritative resource and included rich interpretative content. A subsequent gift of \$150,000 has supported the design and construction of a small reading room in Bird Library that features permanent exhibition space, a selection of books and artifacts, a workstation dedicated to browsing the collection website, as well as mid-century modern soft seating that evokes the "Age of Plastic." The reading room will be dedicated in 2013.

In the summer of 2011, the project co-managers decided to move the plastics collection website from the CONTENTdm platform to a custom XML database application that was developed under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Rather than simply transferring images and metadata from one application to another, the project team took the opportunity to reimagine the website altogether. The team included staff from SCRC, library advancement, and library IT, and incorporated input from the advisory group. Early in the project, speed mattered to the donors who were accustomed to the pace of the marketplace, so the initial website was developed quickly. To accomplish this, the team relied heavily on metadata inherited from the National Plastics Center, which was sometimes inaccurate. For version 2.0, all parties agreed to a more measured, methodical approach. The project curator and lead archivist from SCRC undertook extensive fact-checking and copyediting of the existing metadata to insure that the migration process was smooth. Continuing donor support made it possible to hire the Manhattan-based web design firm Flat to develop a clean, facet-driven interface that allowed patrons to navigate the site's multifarious content. The project launched version 2.0 in May 2012.

The position of curator, a temporary donor-funded position, was critical. The curator, a PhD in architectural history with relatively little library experience, faced a steep learning curve, having to familiarize himself with the jargon of two fields while accessioning the remainder of the objects (with assistance from a museum studies intern), drafting a collection development policy, acquiring and processing new archival materials, helping to raise funds, organizing an exhibition, and leading the campus outreach effort. He also worked with the library's Program Management Center to organize a user study of the website prior to the redesign. The user study helped the library to differentiate better between the collection itself—artifacts, books, and archives—and the interpretative content written by the curator. Unfortunately, donor funding for the position has run out. For the time being, many tasks have been incorporated into special collections day-to-day work while the dean and assistant dean for advancement work to endow the position permanently. Website development has been assigned to the SCRC staff member responsible coordinating the digitization of the Marcel Breuer archive. She has experience with the new technological platform and has established a strong working relationship with the advisory committee.

Integrated for Sustainability

So, what is the future of plastics at Syracuse University? The collection is here to stay. The SU Library has committed considerable time, space, and expertise to caring for it. Because the plastics collection aligns with emerging academic programs in the sciences and humanities, it has been a strategic priority for the dean. She has ensured that stewardship is shared across relevant library units and has maintained an active involvement with the project, especially in donor cultivation. The director of special collections has been responsible for managing the collection. The associate dean for administration helps coordinate budget planning, the director of communications ensures that the collection publicizes new developments, and the assistant dean for advancement continues to seek permanent funding for the curator position. On the ground, the library's main cataloging unit makes sure that any newly acquired circulating volumes relating to plastics or polymer science are linked intellectually to the larger plastics collection, while programmers from library IT are working to enhance the website's functionality.

The success of this project to date is due in part to the extensive network of collaboration across the library, the campus, and among donors. The project's "hands-on" advisory committee comprises plastics donors, scholars, and librarians. Such collaboration is not always easy; it requires patience, attention, and flexibility from all parties. The dean, assistant dean for advancement, and director of special collections engage in frequent—and sometimes spirited—debates over how to best synchronize donor goals with those of the library. At the same time, the plastics project signifies the sort of interdisciplinary cooperation that is much talked about, but not always realized, on college campuses. The dilemma is that, while this is a great collection, it falls low in priority when measured against other critical position needs in the library. Looking ahead, the library continues to acquire new materials, notably a world-class collection of celluloid, to refine the collection's web presence, and to encourage faculty use of the collection. When all is said and done, the future of plastics at SU Library will depend upon the ability to raise the funds required to support the ambitious program envisioned at the outset—visiting scholars, seminars and colloquia, changing exhibitions—the sort of activities that signal a truly vibrant library.

Endnotes

- 1 *The Graduate*, directed by Mike Nichols (1967).
- 2 Society of the Plastics Industry, "New SPI Report Shows Global Recession's Impact on State of US Plastics in the International Marketplace," news release, October 21, 2009, <http://www.plasticsindustry.org/Press/newsdetail.cfm?ItemNumber=3381>.

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