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PAPER EPHEMERA

Eminently Collectible

THE vast amount of paper that passes through our hands during our lives is the printed ephemera of future generations, if only some of it gets saved for them to discover later. That is not as certain as it used to be, what with the less spacious accommodations people have and their propensity to throw things away out of necessity.

Luckily for present generations, 200, 150, 100, even 50 years ago people had attics, basements, garages, barns in which things of all kinds accumulated, including paper ephemera. And it's all collectible, once it comes to light.

Things got saved for sentimental reasons, such as invitations to weddings, graduations, and other social gatherings, as well as postcards, tickets, programs and the like. The most gorgeous piece of printing I've seen in that category was a large broadside proclamation of George IV's coronation. Who wouldn't have saved that?

Another powerful incentive is historical events; the first moon landing; the sinking of the Titanic, royal coronations and deaths, wars. Newspapers and magazines cover these events with drama, and all get saved, even today. Who didn't save something

about the World Trade Center disaster?

But we can all remember things we didn't save, like the first Superman comic I bought for 25 cents at a drug store in Mission that is now worth hundreds of dollars. But some saved it, and it is now collectible.

The heroes in all this are the ephemera dealers who find this stuff and take it to the great ephemera shows in Allentown, Hartford, Atlantic City, and Greenwich, where thousands of collectors gather to search for additions to their collections, or start new ones.

In Vancouver there is one such dealer, Antiquarius, in the old Dominion Bank Building, and I've made some great finds there. There are a few dealers down at the harbourfront in Toronto, but the really big treasure trove is in America, where there is more interest in saving things and more interest in collecting them.

I started collecting when I lived in New York, where there are paper ephemera shows every weekend in high school auditoriums and church basements in the winter and empty parking lots in the summer. My own collections will give an idea of what's out there to tempt the unwary with a bit of spare change in his or her pocket, because ephemera is not all that expensive. But it's like a dripping faucet – the drops can add up over time into a flood.

First I was attracted by the wonderful old Sunday comics, from the teens through the 1920s and 30s. Don't think newsprint doesn't last; there are perfect copies of the great coloured broadsheets of Terry and the Pirates, Mutt and Jeff, Flash Gordon, Pete the Tramp, Ella Cinders, Maggie and Jiggs, Prince Valiant, Tarzan, the lot. I had to have them for sentimental

reasons alone, but the quality of the drawing was superb, as was the printing, with colours in perfect register.

Next I was attracted by automobile advertisements from the 20s and 30s. What great, classic cars they produced in those days, each make distinctive and recognizable, usually from their grills alone.

Then there were luggage labels from the great days of the Grand Hotels, when travel by steamship was the only way to go. Graphex, a graphic arts firm in Vancouver owned by Jim Alexander, who produced *Amphora* for a while, produced a broadside of these.

Then I discovered railroad share certificates from the 19th century with beautiful engravings of locomotives on them. Since I'm a railroad buff, I had to collect those.

On it went: Soviet posters from the 20s; Soviet travel folders from the 30s; *Fortune* magazines from the 30s, when it was a tour de force of the printer's art, with fabulous covers; *Vanity Fair* from the 30s, beautifully printed and supremely intelligent, with a bridge column by Ely Culbertson; Victorian letterheads and invoices, elegantly written out in copperplate script; golf ephemera, which has accumulated into a serious collection; magazine covers from the 20s and 30s, when illustration was in its heyday, especially in the women's and home magazines.

In this issue of *Amphora*, however, I want to talk about another collection, put together by Terry Berger, my partner in book packaging in New York for many years. She introduced me to the paper ephemera shows there, as she was a mad collector herself. One of her major collections is business cards, which intrigued

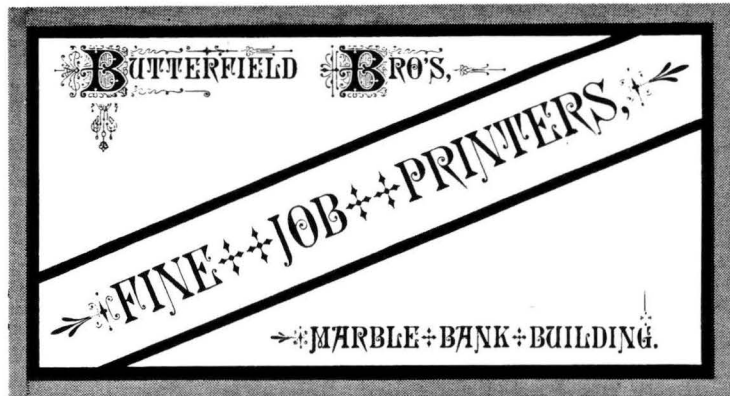
me as a printer because I've done many myself for people. The modern ones are graphically superb and eminently collectible, but the old ones from Victorian times are more printerly. I wrote a short article about them that I reprint here, with some samples to show their variety. One she didn't buy belonged to a slave trader, but it was worth \$250 at the time. Now, who knows.

Robert Reid

VICTORIAN BUSINESS CARDS

WE ONCE judged Victorian printing design as tasteless extravagance. Now we see it as exuberant vitality resulting from the immense technological and social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution.

As trades and business expanded and competition grew, there was a need for more detailed information and descriptions of the new goods and services available to the growing population of middle class consumers. The invention and proliferation of the platen jobbing press provided an economical means of printing



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UNDERTAKER
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Plainfield, N. J.
MAIN ST.



John M. Yerkes, Jr.
PROPRIETOR OF THE
YERKES TILE WORKS
ROMULUS, N. Y.

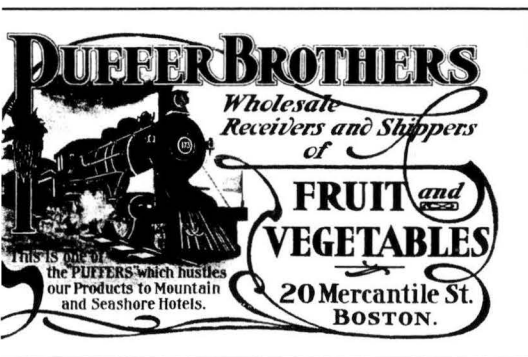
JOHN THOREN,

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business cards, a handy form of inexpensive advertising that descended from the more elaborate trade card, which had been in use for some time.

The first cards were simple typographic designs, the printer being limited to whatever types, borders, and decorative material he had in his shop. Later, wood engravers were available to supply custom engravings of buildings, shop fronts, or merchandise. Type foundries soon offered “stock cuts” in the form of copper electrotypes, along with an ever-widening selection of type faces, ornaments and borders. With the addition of the printer’s own “artistry,” such as setting type at angles or in odd shapes, Victorian printing design came into its own.

Today, we look on this period as quaint because we are so far removed from it, but at the time people of “taste” were appalled, and their opinions are summed up by this quote from Clarence Hornung’s *Early Advertising Art*:

“No lettering was too vile for the type founder to defile his moulds with; the insane contortions of typographical arrangements, the diagonal setting and diamonds of the compositor were abortions. Then came the crowning tragedy of all—the public liked it.”

BOOK REVIEWS

A Book Worth Revisiting

The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age. Sven Birkerts, Faber and Faber, Boston/London, 1994.

I have heard it said that people do not like to read books that disagree too strongly with their own opinions or biases. On the other hand reading a book that disagrees to a moderate degree with one’s own ideas can be a stimulating experience.

I found Sven Birkerts wonderful book *The Gutenberg Elegies* one that alternately supported my own biases and preconceptions in what I call the “Gutenberg” section of the book, and yet definitely challenged my own opinions in what I have termed the “Elegies” section.

The Power of Reading

The “Gutenberg” section of the book, entitled “The Reading Self” by Birkerts, is a poetically written testimony to the power of reading in our lives. However not just any reading, for Birkerts carefully delineates between what he calls “horizontal reading” and “vertical reading.” Horizontal reading is only too common in a world that bombards every person with too many “bits” of information. Television newscasts offer brief sound and picture bites which juxtapose serious stories about world disasters alongside quickly forgotten stories about the latest car accident or house fire. Newspapers are a crazy mélange of serious stories about in-