‘A Different Way of Learning about History’

Ph.D. candidate
Christopher Dingwall
explores race and consumer culture as a curator

The exhibition Race and the Design of American Life: African Americans in Twentieth-Century Commercial Art runs through January 4 in the Special Collections Research Center. Rachel Rosenberg interviewed Christopher Dingwall, a Ph.D. candidate in History, to learn about his first experience as a curator and the exhibition itself.

Tell me a bit about the exhibition.

Images of African Americans have appeared on a wide range of consumer goods throughout the twentieth century, from Aunt Jemima’s pancakes to the Air Jordan basketball shoe. But these images did more than sell things. The exhibit explores how commercial art capitalized on—and gave powerful form to—widely held racist attitudes among white Americans throughout the twentieth century. It also illustrates how many corporations and designers, white and black, used graphic design to envision the place of African Americans in American society—from the nadir of Jim Crow racial segregation...
Preparing for Crossroads

The historic mission of libraries—to build collections and make them available to users now and in the future—is just one aspect of our Library’s mission today.

Libraries have successfully served generations of users, making only incremental changes in an environment with stable expectations. Today, technology introduces change at a pace that was infeasible before. New technologies, changing approaches to learning and research, and dynamic user expectations raise important questions and call for informed decisions about the choices we make.

How can we respond to the expectation of broad access to exponentially growing physical and electronic collections when we have limited budgets for acquisitions?

We must explore ways to complement our local collections with collections we have limited budgets for acquisitions? We must invest in the development of shared physical and electronic collections when we have limited budgets for acquisitions?

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projects tackling complex questions through cross-disciplinary collaboration via the Neubauer Family Collegium for Culture and Society. In one, faculty and library staff are collaborating with technologists to explore how the methods of “big science” might elucidate and facilitate the humanistic understanding of music, speech, and other audio expressions via the Audio Cultures of India project (see page 6).

How can we maximize the impact of library spaces in support of user needs for study, teaching, and research?

We must build a spatial environment that provides seamless integration of study, teaching, and research with Library resources and services. We must mine the information from our user surveys and invest in flexible solutions that meet the needs of our faculty and students. A generous gift from John Biever (see page 8) supports research and teaching with rare materials in a group study in the Special Collections Research Center while joint investment by the Library, College, and Computer Science Department (see page 7) is enabling the creation of an enhanced instructional laboratory in the John Crerar Library that supports the needs of a growing program.

How can we equip library staff to help users identify and locate information, undertake research, and synthesize and create knowledge?

We must invest in the ongoing development of an excellent staff, conversant in emerging technologies and creative in applying their transformative power in support of study, teaching, and research.

We would like to keep you—our faculty, alumni, and friends—informed about these changes and the role you can—and do—play in preparing us to navigate crossroads. Toward that end, we have redesigned and expanded our newsletter, Libra, so that it not only provides news about how the Library supports research, teaching, and learning at the University but also thanks and recognizes those who join us in making this investment.

Judith Nadler
Director and University Librarian
to the advent of the Civil Rights Movement.

With racial imagery, American advertisers and consumers gave social meaning to the mass-produced things of modern consumer culture. Particularly for African American entrepreneurs and artists, the graphic design of race could be used as a powerful tool to claim their place as consumers and as citizens in American society.

What got you interested in this subject originally?

It comes out of my dissertation, Selling Slavery: Memory, Culture, and the Renewal of America, 1876-1920. There I explore how images of slavery get commodified, mass produced and consumed. I’m asking why slavery became a way to sell movies, albums and three-dimensional objects, books and printed material but also things like records, games, playing cards, and little figurines.

The exhibit came out of my curiosity about what happens next, after 1920. In a way, it’s an epilogue to the dissertation I’m currently writing, but curating the exhibit is a different sort of intellectual challenge and involves different ways of thinking about how I’m using objects and how I’m going to try to explain them to audiences. It’s a way for me to explore a different kind of scholarly communication directed at a public audience rather than scholarly, academic readers.

Did your ideas about the subject evolve much as you worked on it?

Yes. Originally I thought that the exhibition would focus on racial memorabilia and would present a narrative of how racial imagery evolved over the twentieth century. The Special Collections staff was pretty keen on the idea, and Dan Meyer, the Director of the Special Collections Research Center, gave me other suggestions for collections to look at. He pointed me to sheet music and record albums, the archives of Chicago printing company R. R. Donnelly & Sons, and the Yoffee Ephemera Collection, which includes records, games, playing cards, and little figurines.

So my focus expanded from racial memorabilia to how race works in consumer society more broadly. The different collections I saw spoke to different ways that race worked and different kinds of dynamics between graphic designers, corporations selling these images, the products they were selling, and where the products were used at home. In the end, although each part of the exhibit advances a history that moves forward through time and shows changes, particularly in the role of African Americans as consumers and designers, I decided that each section of the exhibit should focus on a different kind of relationship between the image, its makers, and its ultimate consumers.

Can you tell me about some of the imagery in the exhibit?

One thing that fascinated me was how the advertisements represented blackness in abstract forms to different effects. In blackface minstrelsy, white men impersonated African Americans by blacking their faces with burnt cork, which allowed them to turn blackness into an object of hate and profit, but also to project onto it all kinds of fears and anxieties facing white working men in the new industrial age. The blackface mask was so powerful that advertisers adopted it as an image to sell modern industrial products toward the end of the nineteenth century.

But blackness could be abstracted in other ways to project different visions of African American life. Take, for instance, the albums produced by African American entrepreneur Henry Pace for Black Swan Records in the 1920s. “Black Swan” was an allusion to a nineteenth-century black opera singer Elizabeth Greenfield, and the image of a swan on the records became a sign that signified musical talent and heritage. A more modern example would be the Nike Air Jordan jump man. A silhouette of Michael Jordan holds a basketball in mid-air. It coded blackness as physical prowess, but also transcendent flight, escape.

Obviously, some of the images on display here have been and continue to be especially painful for African Americans.

Have you given special thought to how you want in address and analyze these images in the exhibit?

Yes. Absolutely. That’s something I’ve been thinking a lot about. I don’t want to show these images gratuitously. They come from a dark time in American history when this was a part of everyday life. But I think to leave it at that would be a huge mistake because we are not yet over this history. The blackface images are not just some bygone, antiquarian caricature; they were here at the heart of the birth of our modern mass culture, and we are still dealing with that legacy. But these images change. African Americans protested, revised, and transformed the imagery and changed the terms by which images of race could be figured in consumer culture.

I’m trying to show this material in a way that provokes thought about how race is still a big part of consumer culture. I hope that, after you see this exhibit, you can go outside and see a sign on a billboard with an African American figure on it and ask yourself how it plays on the same kind of tropes, feelings, and associations that were used in earlier racial imagery in American design, as well as how the imagery has changed.

Visit the associated web exhibit at lib.uchicago.edu/exhibits/raceanddesign

So you have important educational objectives for visitors to this exhibition. Are there other ways you expect to use your curatorial experience in your teaching?

Right now I’m a preceptor and supervise history seniors as they write their BA essays, and I’ll be teaching a course of my own in the spring. I hope to bring these students to Special Collections to show them the range of materials available there: books and printed material but also things that you wouldn’t expect a library to have, albums and three-dimensional objects, consumer goods. They offer a different way of learning about history.
The Neubauer Collegium kicks off its first programming year with Library collaboration

Chicago and David Nirenberg, who moderated. Speaking on “The Virtues of Bastardy: Mixed Metaphors and Collaborations in the Studio,” Kentridge and Taylor discussed their experiences collaborating with artists ranging from puppeteers to writers to opera singers on projects such as Taylor’s play Ulula and the Truth Commission and Shostakovich’s opera The Nose.

A Worldwide Literature: Jâmî (1414-1492) in the Dar al-Islam and Beyond

This project is developing a research agenda on intellectual trends in the post-classical Muslim tradition by studying the reception of works by the luminary fifteenth-century ‘Abd al-Rahmân Jâmî. The Library’s Southern Asia Department is assisting Professor Thibaut de Hurbert in the preparation of a digital collection and searchable corpus of Unicode texts comprising Jâmî’s works and the Indian commentaries published by Naqal Kishore in the nineteenth century. The project is benefitting from well-established bonds between the Library and colleagues in Lahore, Pakistan, who are undertaking digitization of the texts by agreement with the ARTFL Project (Project for American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language) on campus for presentation of the texts in collaboration with the Digital South Asia Library.

On November 14 and 15, specialists working with languages ranging from Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and Arabic to Malay, Chagatai, Chinese, Sanskrit and Bengali are scheduled to attend a conference at the University of Chicago Center and the College de France in Paris. They will study comparatively, for the first time, the varied impact of Jâmî’s works on the post-classical Islamic intellectual traditions, and particularly on the formation of new vernacular literary idioms.

New Computer Science Instructional Lab in Crerar

The first floor of Crerar is a real hub of activity now, with students in CSiL on one side of the glass wall and faculty, students, and researchers on the other side using library resources and consulting with reference librarians. The upper floors remain the silent study and research spaces that Crerar is well-known for providing.” said Barbara Kern, Co-Director of the Science Libraries. “The first floor of Crerar is the Library, the Department of Computer Science, and the College will continue to work together to think about existing possibilities for the future,” Kern said. “For now though, we are simply enjoying the view.”
**Interacting with Collections: A Gift from John Blew**

The renovated Special Collections Research Center, located in Regenstein on the pathway to Mansueto, cannot be missed by passersby. The rare materials and welcoming spaces visible through its glass doors beckon students, faculty, and visitors alike. Since its recent redesign, expansion, and upgrades, the Center is also the perfect destination for interactive and collaborative study, where researchers work to discover, study, and analyze primary sources together.

John Blew, an enthusiast of American history and a serious collector of Americana, is a longstanding friend of the Library and a champion of Special Collections. Through his generous support of Special Collections’ renovation project, he has helped make possible the kind of group study space students and faculty frequently requested.

“I was delighted to support the renovation and expansion of the Special Collections Research Center, and I’m especially pleased that my contribution will enable it to host more groups of students—especially undergraduates—and will allow them to work on projects together,” said Mr. Blew. “The experience of viewing and handling rare books and manuscripts in one of the SCRC’s group study rooms adds a level of immediacy to a course that can be achieved in no other way.”

“Introducing students to the pleasure and, often, the excitement that comes from direct exposure to these materials in physical form is especially important,” he added. “Mr. Blew’s gift is a contribution to scholarship, learning, and inquiry. In recognition of his generosity, the new group study within Special Collections has been named for John Blew.”

**Internships that Preserve Collections: A Gift from Albert Somit**

Six of the 2013 Mary and Samuel Somit Preservation Interns at the University of Chicago Library, William Schlaack spent six weeks this summer helping staff to prepare for a broad range of potential challenges. Deliberating with Preservation Librarian Sherry Byrne and Head of Conservation Ann Lindsey, Schlaack assisted in crafting a response and recovery plan to ensure that the Library’s physical collections are protected and properly treated in the event of an emergency.

Thanks to the generous gift of Dr. Albert Somit, AB’41, PhD’47, the Somit Preservation Internship provides a hands-on experience for students entering the fields of preservation, digitization, and conservation, complementing the classroom education they receive in academic programs. Throughout a long career as a professor, Executive Vice-President of SUNY-Buffalo, and eventually President of Southern Illinois University, Dr. Somit has believed firmly in providing growth opportunities for students that have an immediate impact on the students as well as their host institutions.

By creating this endowed internship, Dr. Somit has helped the Library to sustain its collections into the future and has provided students like Schlaack with an excellent opportunity to launch their careers. “I have learned an extraordinary amount,” said Schlaack, “regarding not only preservation administration but also how to be an effective and collaborative librarian in a world-class institution.”

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William Schlaack (right) exchanges ideas on best preservation practices with Head of Conservation Ann Lindsey.
Weber Exhibit: Building for a Long Future: The University of Chicago and Its Donors, 1899-1930

The University of Chicago’s remarkable and distinctive success in the world of higher education cannot be understood without recognizing the daring and vision of an extraordinary group of resolute donors whose generosity continues to sustain the University they made possible. Based on a 2001 gallery exhibition mounted at the suggestion of Dean of the College John W. Boyer, this web exhibit explores the numerous motivations of the early contributors to the University of Chicago.

Gifts of Special Books and Collections

The Library gratefully accepts gifts of special books and collections. A highlight from 2013 was this unique collection of African American popular fiction.

Alfred Willis Collection of African American Popular Fiction

Alfred Willis, a 1986 graduate of the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago, presented a collection of over 1,200 paperback volumes of African American popular fiction, chiefly romance novels. The collection includes a copy of Entwined Destinies by Elise Washington (writing under the pseudonym Rosalind Welles), published by Dell in 1980 and described as the first mass-market paperback original written by an African American to feature African American characters. All the major writers, series, and imprints in this genre are very well represented.

Hen you receive an invitation to “Visit Our Web Page?” does your heart skip a beat in eager anticipation, and do you clear your weekend schedule for the joys of exploring every link? I thought not. Great libraries are and will always be more than web pages—think of the ancient library of Alexandria, with every learned scroll of the era, or the fictional library of Borges, which held every work ever published as well as every conceivable work that could be published.

The University of Chicago Library is closer to Alexandria and Borges than to a web page, with its wonderfully deep and well-curated physical collections and exhibits, and we are alone among major research libraries in the U.S. in which have taken action to keep our collections entirely “on site” for the next two decades, including at the magnificent new Mansueto Library. The Library Society serves as a bridge between the greater University community and the Library.

We sponsor exhibits at the Special Collections Research Center to bring highlights of the collections to attention, and we hold meetings to bring this community of common interests together for discussion and celebration. The meetings’ speakers are drawn from our own faculty as well as from an international community of scholars with strong Library interests; they have included Nobel Prize winners and Assistant Professors, always with a perspective that is fresh and new to the audience. Often the meeting is followed by a dinner with conversation with other members and representatives of the Library.

We also support faculty, staff, students, and visiting scholars who use the Library by enabling the acquisition of needed books and electronic resources. In addition, our donations support the Library by funding exhibits and catalogue this exhibition that we create for the full cost, with the title The in the lend field, to The Library Society, 100 East 57th Street, Room 180, Chicago, IL 60615. You may also call Barbara Palmer-Bostick at 773-702-7695. Thank you for your generosity.
From Sausage to Hot Dogs: 
**The Evolution of an Icon**

The John Crerar Library, Atrium

**October 29 – December 31, 2013**

The hot dog is an American creation, and Chicago even has its own style. But where did this popular food come from and how did it develop? This exhibit looks to the hot dog’s origins in sausage-making practices brought by European immigrants to the Midwest. We consider techniques used in neighborhood butcher shops and the rise of industrial meat production. Homemade recipes and artisanal makers past and present are also examined.

**Race and the Design of American Life:**

**African Americans in Twentieth-Century Commercial Art**

Special Collections Research Center Exhibition Gallery

**October 14, 2013 – January 4, 2014**

Images of African Americans have outfitted myriad mass-produced consumer goods in the twentieth century, joining the politics of race to the stuff of everyday life. How has graphic design shaped the relationship between race and consumption? Drawing from collections of food packaging, print advertisements, children’s books, album covers, and toys, this exhibit traces the vexed history of racial design, from stark racist caricature to the productions of black-owned advertising firms.

**Firmness, Commodity, and Delight:**

**Architecture in Special Collections**

Drawn from the holdings of the Special Collections Research Center, this exhibition suggests the diversity of the Library’s architectural rare books, manuscripts, and archives and their rich potential for research across a broad range of topics in the arts of building and design. Included are theoretical works and popular manuals, records of the University’s physical development, papers of urban planners, postcards and ephemera, photographs, and architectural drawings and blueprints.

Libra can be found online at lib.uchicago.edu/e/libra.