The Future of Latin American Library Collections and Research

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Published by Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials

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9. Archive It Old School: Solo Collecting, Networking, and eBay

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“A library represents the mind of its collector, his fancies and foibles, his strength and weakness, his prejudices and preferences.”

This quote by William Osler certainly holds true for poster collections. While collections have an intrinsic historical and cultural value of their own, learning how they were acquired provides an interesting facet that adds context to what is there, why, and how it made its way into a collection. In this study, I will discuss three poster collections acquired by collectors with three distinct collecting approaches: collecting on the run by David Holtby, methodical and efficient networking by Sam L. Slick, and buying on eBay by Ramón Figueroa. Holtby focused on a single event—the Spanish general elections of 1977—and, as such, his collection covers this unique political moment. Slick collected broadly from all the Latin American countries as well as Spain, with posters representing such varied themes as elections, imperialism, solidarity, human rights, and revolution. Figueroa focused on Mexican film posters. The Holtby and Slick collections are housed at the University of New Mexico Libraries. Figueroa donated his film poster collection to the University of Florida in 2008 in honor of Efraín Barradas, his former professor and friend.

Collecting “On the Run”

David Holtby spent a year in Madrid as a Fulbright scholar, between September 1976 and August 1977, researching his dissertation on the Spanish civil war. His research did not focus on poster art even though he was familiar with the work of Spanish political poster artist Josep Renau. In June 1977, Spain held its first elections since the death of Francisco Franco in November 1975 and the first free elections in Spain since 1936. On May 1, 1977, May Day—a day not celebrated by the Franco regime—political posters spontaneously appeared all over town, especially in the subway stations. During the Franco regime, political posters had not been allowed. Holtby realized that this was a unique moment in history. Since campaigning on Spanish television and radio was still very controlled, and candidates were only allowed a limited amount of airtime, posters were a unique way to reach a mass audience. Even though putting up posters was spontaneous and part of a grassroots movement,
printers and political parties were still required to register with a government agency.

In a 2005 lecture, Holtby explains how he got started. He tells the story of how the poster *Fiesta de la Libertad* by José Ramón Sánchez inspired him to collect as many political posters as he could find. This particular poster appeared in early May 1977, weeks in advance of the official start of the twenty-one-day political campaign. One morning, near the metro’s entrance by Madrid’s Biblioteca Nacional, he came across about half a dozen people looking at this particular poster and heard an elderly woman, radiant with enthusiasm, say, “If we can celebrate liberty, we’re really free, aren’t we.” This poster radiated a hope, a new sense of togetherness, a *convivencia* that drew people to it. The poster’s theme—the exuberance, esprit, and joy borne of celebrating liberty—resonated deeply with people, himself included. It symbolized Spain’s transition to democracy and the nation’s recovery from its long, oppressive era.

Between May 1 and the day of the elections, June 15 (won by Adolfo Suárez, leader of the Unión de Centro Democrático), Holtby collected posters using a simple strategy. He would travel during the day on busy subway lines looking for posters and assessing which ones he would take. He picked the ones that did not have too much glue and therefore were easier to remove. Luckily, the walls of the subway were tiled and glue did not adhere well, so it was fairly easy to detach them. On his way home around 10:00 p.m., he would wait to make sure nobody was around and then take the posters he was interested in. He believed that militants put the posters up late at night or in the early mornings. He tried not to draw attention to himself. His fear was that militants would go after him if he removed one of their posters. He had memorized a few sentences ready to blurt out in case he would be confronted by someone. His apprehension was understandable since elections had taken place against a backdrop of demonstrations and some violence. Fortunately for the collection and himself, he never encountered any problems.

Holtby felt that being a foreign national, especially an American, was not a particularly popular thing at the time in Spain. The U.S. government had supported Franco’s regime for many years and anti-American feelings were running high, so he did not want to be mistaken for a U.S. agent. After each taking, he was shaking. Holtby does not describe himself as a risktaker and had no experience dealing with militants. He also related how he dealt with the ethical questions posed by the “stealing” of election posters. He reasoned that since many identical posters were plastered on the walls, removing a single one did not negatively impact the message. Moreover, posters stayed on public display for a very short period of time anyway. Within a day or two, they were torn down or replaced by others. He could not wait too long to peel them off because new posters were plastered over the existing ones. As an American, he
did not feel comfortable visiting political parties to collect posters directly, and he did not attend political rallies. In all, he collected some forty-five posters.

As a historian, Holtby knew he had to collect posters from all groups, from the far right to the far left in order to give his collection historical validity. Some posters were about particular issues such as Basque groups, anarchist groups, and leftist groups. This coverage makes the collection more valuable and interesting. Holtby collected them the way the Spaniards posted them: on the run.

Collecting Systematically

Sam Slick, a professor at Sam Houston State University and later at the University of Southern Mississippi, collected posters with a clear purpose: to use in teaching. Interestingly enough, his collecting also started with Spain: he asked a colleague who was going to Spain in the mid-1970s to bring back posters to the United States. This colleague returned with forty or fifty posters that formed the basis of his archive. He became captivated with posters as visual, textual, and political documents. In 1976 Slick founded the International Archives of Latin American Political Posters (IALAPP); he also built an adjunct archive to IALAPP consisting of Spanish political posters from the post-Franco era.

Over the next quarter century, he collected over twelve thousand posters from the twenty-two countries of Latin America and Spain. The archives document contemporary Latin America, covering a broad range of topics including social problems and popular graphic art but with an emphasis on political election posters. For a detailed description of this archive, see my earlier article “Latin American and Iberian Posters: The Sam Slick Collection at the University of New Mexico.” Slick found the posters stimulating and interesting and a good way to study and teach politics and cultural life, but he also realized that he was saving an ephemeral artifact and was preserving a distinct genre.

Professor Slick soon developed a systematic strategy for collecting posters and built a network of contacts in Latin America and Spain. He contacted cultural attachés in the United States; he asked his Latin American graduate students to collect posters while visiting home; and he also asked them to write to their families for help. Often these students were from well-off families and were able to send their maids to political offices to collect posters. He also collected posters on his own trips, establishing good connections with government offices and personal connections with graphic artists. He participated in seminars dealing with Latin American posters, including SALALM, and traveled and spread the word about his collection. The only exception to this approach was the Cuban posters, which he obtained directly from Cuban government agencies. The specific way he acquired Cuban posters is covered in
more detail in a previous SALALM conference paper titled “A Poster Is Worth 10,000 Words: Cuban Political Posters at the University of New Mexico.”

Collecting on eBay

Ramón A. Figueroa, currently associate professor of Spanish at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, began collecting Mexican film posters in 1994. His collecting was a confluence of two interests: Mexican culture and a passion for collecting. As a native of the Dominican Republic, he grew up with Mexican soap operas, comics, music, and film. He visited Mexico in 1989 and fell in love with the country. Figueroa was always a collector. He collected books, records, Mexican masks, and pottery, and he became interested in collecting art—but he could not afford it. Poster art was the answer. He was inspired by his friend and mentor Efraín Barradas, a disciplined and experienced collector of Puerto Rican posters. Barradas told him “you learn to love what you can afford.” This proved true for Figueroa.

He started collecting on eBay. His strategy was straightforward. He would start with a broad search for “Mexican posters,” which never produced overwhelming results. Normally, from a result of three hundred items at most, he could easily narrow his search to movie posters. Since the Mexican movie industry went into decline in the 1960s, he restricted his collecting to the golden age of Mexican cinema covering the 1940s and 1950s. Figueroa’s motivation was purely aesthetic. What interested him most was the beauty of the poster rather than specific movie stars, directors, or poster artists. He found that in general, though, the better movies with the most famous stars had the best posters. Figueroa stated that the artistic quality of the Mexican movie posters of this era was much higher than their American counterparts, because in Mexico the posters were created by artists whereas in the United States they were created by illustrators.

The collection spotlights the work of many of the great actors and actresses of the era (for example, María Félix, Pedro Infante, Pedro Armendáriz, Ricardo Montalbán, Tin-Tan, Alicia Alonso, Carlos Cruz, and Jorge Martínez), film directors (for example, Luis Buñuel, Miguel M. Delgado, Joaquín Pardavé, Juan Orol, Leopoldo Laborde, Daniel Díaz Torres, Luis Felipe Bernaza, Mario Rivas, and Enrique Pineda Barnet), and renowned poster artists (for example, Alberto Vargas, Eduardo Muñoz Bachs, Josep Renau, Ernesto García Cabral, Leopoldo Mendoza, and Antonio Fernández Reboiro).

Between 1994 and 2005, Figueroa checked eBay many times daily and most of his purchases were through bidding. He learned to read eBay descriptions carefully and was always aware of the condition of the posters: whether they had holes, rips, or other imperfections, even when they did not show in the eBay picture. The vast majority of posters of that era were not in mint condition, and he said that usually the sellers’ descriptions were truthful. Typically, they were printed on poor quality paper and are now brittle. Depending on the
image and the condition, prices ranged from a low of $10 to an average of $25 or $30. A few select ones, for example, a Buñuel poster, could go as high as $700 or $800, but these were the exception rather than the rule. The relatively low prices are a reflection of the lack of interest in Mexican movie posters by American collectors.

Sellers of Mexican movie posters constitute a rather small group of people with a keen interest in Mexican cinema. Most of them have a Mexican connection, either through their background, family relations, or even the Mexican movie industry. For example, one seller was the son of a movie actor from this time period. Figueroa believes that the best Mexican film poster collections are in the United States, either in universities or private collections such as the Agrasánchez Film Archive.

Figueroa collected but did not have a methodical way of organizing or displaying his collection. He kept it under his bed. As a result, he could not easily keep track of what he had and even purchased some duplicates. In the fall of 2008, he donated 378 film posters to the Department of Special and Area Studies Collections at the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida in Gainesville, where they were preserved, digitized, and made available for public viewing.

**Preservation**

The posters collected by Holtby and Figueroa have been scanned and are available online in the New Mexico Digital Collections at the University of New Mexico, and in the University of Florida Digital Collections, respectively. Slick’s posters are currently being digitized. All three collections needed preservation work. The physical preservation of the posters collected by Holtby was problematic since many had excessive glue slopped over them. Holtby simply bought tubes and brought the posters back with him to the United States, where they were flattened and placed in map cases. Similarly, Slick received posters in tubes, flattened them, marked them, and placed them in map cases, but these posters were in very good condition. Many of Figueroa’s film posters were brittle and needed cosmetic repairs before being encapsulated.

**Conclusion**

These three collections reflect different motivations, interests, and approaches to a process that in the end produces a similar result. Like all other creative endeavors, collecting, and especially collecting something as ephemeral as posters, reflects the individual’s own personal style. Opportunity, availability, and chance play a crucial role in what ends up in library collections. While Holtby reflected on piracy, I do not know if Slick or Figueroa considered who owns posters, who can use them, why, and for what purpose. Do poster collectors struggle at all with taking or purchasing pieces that belong to a country’s cultural heritage?
Historian David Holtby was present in a unique political moment documented through its propaganda, via a transitory medium not designed to preserve history. His action preserved this unique record of a tumultuous and brief period of political transition. Without the historian’s eye, the posters might have only appealed as novelties to someone interested in a strictly political point of view. His attempt at even coverage of all sides of the issue—left, right, center, anarchists, nationalists—offered a truly vivid picture of the energy that existed at the time.

Collecting posters was Sam Slick’s passion, and he did it throughout his career. Slick used his posters for educational and pedagogical purposes and tried to gather as large a swath of this cultural and social output as he could. He cast a wide net and his collection reflects the communal intellectual production of an era. Organizations and individuals who create posters do them for a specific event, not for documenting history for the future and this, paradoxically, makes their historical importance so unique. Just by chance, there is no duplication of posters between Holtby’s and Slick’s collections. Holtby, a small collector, filled out a major part of Spanish history.

Ramón Figueroa’s interest in Mexican movies from the golden age produced a collection of posters that most likely, if not gathered systematically, would have deteriorated and disappeared from the cultural record. His private interest in Mexican movie posters renders the same significance to a nonpolitical activity as the other two collections do for politics, history, and culture. Like political events, movies are “a moment in time.” Yet, like the first free elections in a newly democratic country, or the various social or cultural reforms initiated by governments, they are part of the intellectual and cultural discourse of a society. The posters condense the message and become a propaganda tool of their own.

These three very different collections, gathered by such different methods and for such different purposes, illustrate the importance posters play in the political, social, and cultural life of a society. Whether effective propaganda tools or illusion, they capture a mode of thinking in a specific moment in time.

NOTES

2. David Holtby is Senior Program Manager, Center for Regional Studies, Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico. He donated his Spanish poster collection to the University of New Mexico Libraries in the spring of 2007. I interviewed him on February 23, 2010.
3. Sam L. Slick is a collector, scholar, and former Spanish professor at the University of Southern Mississippi. The University of New Mexico Libraries acquired his collection in 2001. I interviewed him on May 2, 2002.
4. Ramón Figueroa is Associate Professor of Spanish at Millsaps College in Mississippi.

