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Advertising Icons: Preserving the Cultural Record of Brand Ambassadors

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Preserving the Cultural Record of Brand Ambassadors

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Brandcenter icon collection. Photograph by PJ Sykes

Background

Advertising icons permeate our cultural lexicon[1]. The use of advertising mascots is centuries old, with itinerant peddlers and established merchants on occasion employing these colorful characters to promote their carts or shops. The advent of mass production led to a host of brand ambassadors in the early twentieth century that still appear today, including the Michelin Man (1898), the Minnesota Valley Canning Company Jolly Green Giant (1928), and Borden's Elsie the Cow (1936). During the post-war television age, advertisers launched an unprecedented variety of mascots to distinguish their products and provide someone or *something* with which to

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[1] Douglas Holt, *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 1.

identify[2]. While many of the television programs may have faded from our collective memory, we vividly recall the commercials and a world of vibrant characters selling breakfast cereals, fast food, cleaning products, and even offering public service announcements. Presenting and preserving these icons in a digital format can further our knowledge and understanding of their impact.

Digitizing advertising documents and ephemera is not unusual. In fact, there are examples of collections like these in universities and museums. At Duke University, The Ad*Access Project, funded by the Duke Endowment "Library 2000" Fund, presents images and database information for over 7,000 advertisements printed in U.S. and Canadian newspapers and magazines between 1911 and 1955[3]. The Museum of Brands in London, "explores how brands shape – and are shaped by – people, culture and society"[4]. The museum was created by consumer-historian Robert Opie in 1984, using his personal collection of advertising materials he had collected for over fifty years. Since that time, the museum has moved twice to larger quarters with the current museum hosting a variety of educational and community events and exhibits such as the *Time Tunnel* (chronicling how our consumer society has evolved since Victorian Times) and *Can Marketing Save Lives?,* showcasing ad campaigns that "motivated, frightened and educated the public" for the past century. The success of the museum indicates the interest for this type of collection.

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[2] Warren Dotz, *What a character!: 20th century American advertising icons* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books (1996).

[3] "Duke University Digital Repositories" Duke University, accessed March 21, 2019. (http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess/)

[4] "About Us", Museums of Brands, accessed March 19, 2019, (https://www.museumofbrands.com/about-us/)

Virginia Commonwealth University, located in Richmond, Virginia, houses the award-winning and internationally recognized VCU Brandcenter[5] as part of the School of Business. In its 20+-year history, the Brandcenter has become part of the fabric of the Richmond community. It is known for its unique approach to educating creative problem-solvers; its faculty and students are passionate and bright and want to change the world. One of the faculty at the Brandcenter, Kelly O'Keefe, has amassed a large collection of advertising icons. According to O'Keefe, the collection started 30 years ago as a small shrine to some of the advertising icons he grew up with in Detroit, including Big Boy and Little Caesars. As the collection grew he started a shelf for them in an advertising agency he owned. When the new VCU Brandcenter building was built, the director asked if he would consider moving the collection to the school and it has been on display ever since. Digitizing these images and making them accessible can provide a valuable resource for researchers interested in the history of advertising and brands, Of course, we all have our favorites, and it's fun to reminisce about times when we ran to the TV to see characters like Snap, Crackle, and Pop entertain us.[6]

Snap, Crackle, and Pop icons. Photograph by PJ Sykes

[5] "VCU Brandcenter" VCU. accessed March 1, 2019, (https://brandcenter.vcu.edu/)
[6] Kelly O'Keefe, personal communication, March 14, 2019.

VCU Libraries will be presenting a digital photographic collection of the 300+ advertising icons as part of its institutional repository, Scholars Compass. Digitizing this collection has created a stronger link between the library and the Brandcenter. Having the digital images and metadata of the advertising icon collection available through Scholars Compass, provides the opportunity for students and scholars to access and research them from anywhere, anytime, something that is not currently possible. This world-wide access brings attention and notoriety to the collection, the Brandcenter, VCU, and the VCU Libraries. In addition, this collection can be used as an example of the power of brand and how brands often have such a following that they are honored in ways that were never expected.

Each icon is being professionally photographed and will include associated descriptive metadata presented alongside the photograph. An explanatory paragraph, written by Kelly O'Keefe, also will accompany the photographs.

Big Boy icon. Photograph by PJ Sykes

Behind the scenes

As with any digital project, once the Libraries decided to work on this, we had to make many decisions early on. There were several assumptions in place for us. The components of the

project (images and metadata) would be presented online as openly as possible to encourage research, study, and educational re-use. The material would be presented in an educational framework, and the project would be executed using accepted standards for creation and description.

Those assumptions drove the next decision-making stages for us, in the broad areas of rights, presentation, and execution. Since these were to be photographs of trademarked, instantly recognizable figures, we wanted to be sure we had the right to put them on the internet. Without doing an in-depth fair use analysis, on the surface we felt there was a good fair use case to be made for the project in that we would be presenting them for educational, non-profit use with transformative scholarly commentary and context. After a close examination of the principles outlined in the Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Academic and Research Libraries,[7] we prepared a project briefing and took it our university's legal counsel, discussing the project's potential risks.

Based on these discussions and their recommendations, we decided that there was a fair use case to be made. To bolster that case, we decided to add as much description and contextual material as feasible, to include item-level description, provenance, and examples of the use of the icons by students and scholars. In terms of possible image size, we wanted the images to be as high-resolution as possible, to facilitate detailed visual analysis, but we would also need to balance our desire for the highest resolution against the potential risk. One possibility we considered, and subsequently rejected, was to present them as 3D rotating images to give a sense of the physicality of the figures. While there is no fixed rule on image size, we had a hunch that 3D

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[7] "Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Academic and Research Libraries," Association of Research Libraries, last modified January, 2012, https://www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/code-of-best-practices-fair-use.pdf.

would weaken our fair use argument. In considering possible takedown notices, we were

prepared to offer a thumbnail in place of a full image if it came to that.[8] We did not consider

trademark infringement to be a big concern, especially if we included trademark information

where possible. We would be including clear terms of use for the images, standard practice for

our digitization projects anyway. One suggestion we rejected was to first create a pilot collection

as university-only with targeted student involvement to further demonstrate transformative fair

use. Besides our desire to keep the project as open as possible, we also felt the scope of the

collection did not justify that additional time and expense.

Mr. Peanut icons. Photograph by PJ Sykes

Once we felt confident that we were well within our rights to present this material, we moved on

to decisions focused on presentation: what platform to use and what kind of metadata to supply.

Broadly speaking, we had three main possibilities for putting the images online as a discrete

collection: the VCU Libraries Digital Collections (on CONTENTdm),[9] Scholars Compass (our

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[8] "Bill Graham Archives v. Dorling Kindersley Limited RR," United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit, accessed March 22, 2019, https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-2nd-circuit/1289897.html.

[9] "VCU Libraries Digital Collections," VCU Libraries, accessed March 22, 2019, https://digital.library.vcu.edu/digital/.

institutional repository, using Digital Commons),[10] or a custom website designed in-house by web development staff. At the time, the Libraries did not have a formal digital collection policy in place, but we did have informal practices and guidelines to help us decide where to put new digitized material. Decisions were made by the Digital Technologies Department, where the Digitization Unit resided, in close conjunction with Special Collections and Archives (SCA). Early on, we rejected the idea of a custom web site; while the Libraries had done this for some other projects, we felt that we could not devote our limited staff and resources to this one, especially since the collection was not actually owned by the Libraries or part of our Community Digitization Program.

And in fact, ownership of the collection was the most important factor determining overall treatment, choice of platform, and level of description. The Libraries gives preference for devoting staff time and resources for digital collections to material originating from our own collections and archives. In negotiations with the professor about the potential transfer of ownership of the collection to the Libraries, SCA determined that the icons were outside the scope of our collections. The ownership remained with the faculty member; thus, the scope of the project changed. It went from being a fully-curated digital project, with the in-depth metadata and higher-level presentation that that would entail, to being a primarily visually-oriented display of the icons, with metadata more limited in scope (while still supplying some context). It went from being a project featuring items from our collections to being a faculty-owned project. This in turn helped determine the platform; the VCU Libraries Digital Collections are devoted almost exclusively to material owned by the Libraries or by community partners, while the institutional repository largely consists of works owned and created by faculty, students, and staff.

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[10] "VCU Scholars Compass," VCU Libraries, accessed March 22, 2019, https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/.

This also helped determine our level of treatment: items in the VCU Libraries Digital Collections typically receive more in-depth metadata with more attention paid to subject analysis, authorized headings, and more detailed description, done by our metadata/cataloging staff. While this may seem like an arbitrary definition of scope, it developed that way from availability of time, qualified staff, and other resources. Works on the institutional repository typically have less specificity; metadata is often assigned by the contributors themselves or by student workers. While keeping in mind the recommendation of counsel of the importance of context, we determined that we could apply a more bare-bones metadata approach.

Because the collection was not owned by the Libraries, we also decided that the actual photographing of the icons would take place onsite, at the Brandcenter where they are currently housed, rather than in the Digitization Unit of the Libraries. We were fortunate to have an Brandcenter employee who is a professional photographer and who was willing and able to digitize the icons in a way that highlighted their features in a clear and crisp way. After consulting with a metadata specialist, we designed a basic spreadsheet with simple Dublin Core fields that could be supplied by the photographer at the time of image capture. For the photographic process, he took photos of the front and back of each icon in a lightbox. In photoshop, he did minor clean-up work and isolated each icon from its background. Selected student workers logged important physical information and metadata for each item. Student workers also performed additional research based on markings on each icon to get the most accurate information.

Another factor in platform and presentation matters involved portability concerns. We needed to be able to take advantage of the unique features of any particular platform without limiting the collection for use in any future one. It is a given that collections will change homes over time;

the functionality of platforms change, or the platforms themselves cease to exist. In this sense, our design decisions were platform-agnostic, based more on digitization and metadata standards that could apply to any platform, making them easier to migrate. Our collection decisions, then, were based more on the external factors of the source and provenance of the icons than on the features of the potential platforms we could use.

These kinds of deliberation and determining factors for choice of platform and level of treatment are largely opaque to users, but they typically take place for many digital collections and other resources created and offered by libraries and archives, and have a major influence on how they are presented. Indicators of the source of many of these deliberations can sometimes be gleaned by policy statements or collection policies, but they are rarely stated explicitly. An understanding of these kind of deliberations can be helpful in analyzing the not always desirable aspects of "silos" on library web sites.

Conclusion

This project has been in progress since 2015, when the idea was first proposed to the VCU Libraries. Like any project, it has had its fits and starts but over three-quarters of the 300+ items have been photographed and logged. We anticipate that the collection will be completely digitized and described by the summer of 2019. The collection will be available in Scholars Compass by the fall of 2019. The Libraries will also host an event to introduce the collection and invite the community to join us in celebrating these important artifacts.

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