

Discovering the Future: The New York World's Fairs Collections of 1939 and 1964 at the Museum of the City of New York and Queens Museum

By Annie Tummino, Project Archivist, Museum of the City of New York and Queens Museum (past); Project Manager, Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO) (current)

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Abstract: This paper discusses the major components of the 18 month CLIR Hidden Collections project to process the World’s Fair collections at the Museum of the City of New York and Queens Museum. Challenges and strategies for collaboration, staffing, processing, cataloging, metadata sharing, and publicity are shared.

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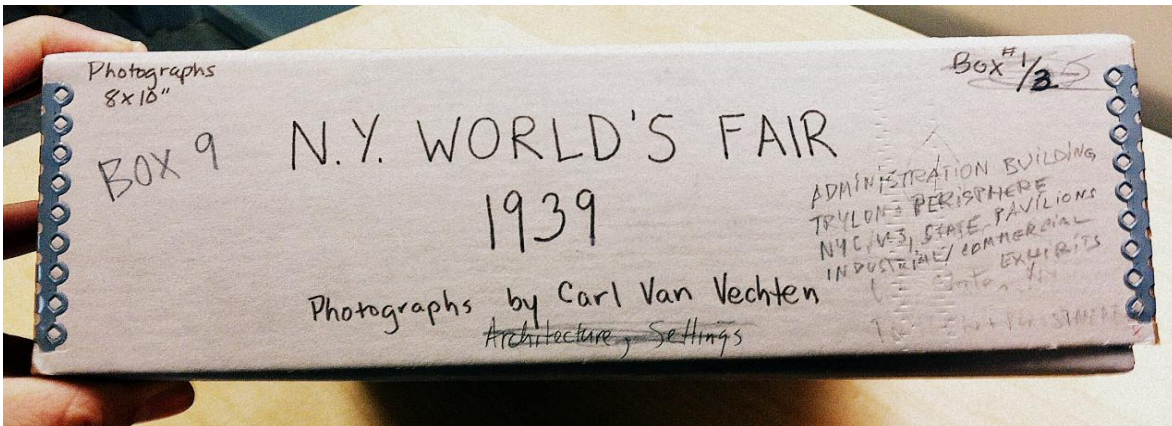
Overview

In October 2014, the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) and the Queens Museum (QM) completed an 18-month Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) funded Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant to process the World’s Fair Collections held at both institutions. With the 50th anniversary of the 1964 Fair and the 75th anniversary of the 1939 Fair in 2014, interest in the Fairs is at an all-time high.

Together the museums hold around 12,000 items (approximately 360 boxes and 450 oversize/irregular objects) documenting the New York World’s Fairs of 1939/40 and 1964/65, including books, pamphlets, printed ephemera, rare architectural blueprints, original artworks, film and audio recordings, photographic prints and negatives, architectural models, textiles, and realia.

Primary goals of the project included creating a single finding aid uniting both museums’ collections, cataloging 1650 highlights from both collections at the object level, and promoting the collection to the public and within the archival/museum community. I was hired as Project Archivist along with two part-time employees to implement these objectives under the leadership of the MCNY Archivist and QM Registrar.

MCNY connects the past, present, and future of New York City. It celebrates and interprets the city, educating the public about its distinctive character, especially its heritage of diversity, opportunity, and perpetual transformation. Since its founding in 1972, QM has had an intimate connection to its community and the history of its site. The QM building was originally designed to house the New York City Pavilion at the 1939 Fair and its Panorama of the City of New York, of world-wide fame, was commissioned by Robert Moses for the 1964 Fair.



An example of what a box looked like before processing at MCNY

Benefits of Collaboration

The goal of creating joint finding aids for the World's Fair materials at MCNY and QM is to facilitate more efficient researcher access to these two related collections. The CLIR grant allowed these previously hidden collections to emerge into the light of day together, providing a single point of entry for researchers looking to learn more about the Fairs. The finding aids elucidate where the holdings are similar and where they diverge. Additionally, local versions of the finding aids were also created to aid the reference process at each institution.

The joint nature of the project also allowed the strengths of each institution to benefit the other. MCNY's collection is considerably smaller, but it is embedded within a more formal manuscripts and archives program. Lindsay Turley, MCNY's Assistant Director of Collections, provided input on the processing plan and training in MCNY's cataloging, processing, and preservation standards; which, in turn helped me develop standards used at QM. Additionally, dealing with the smaller-sized MCNY collection first allowed us to refine our processing plan for the more immense QM collection. Louise Weinberg, the QM Registrar, was able to provide valuable context regarding the provenance and history of the collections and the Fair site.

When the grant proposal was authored, neither institution had an online platform for sharing archival finding aids.* MCNY has an online Collections Portal – <http://collections.mcny.org>, but the Portal is not equipped to share metadata for objects without an accompanying digital image, and the grant did not cover digitization. The QM has an internal content management system but did not plan to create the infrastructure to share collections objects publicly. Thus, the Queens Library was brought into the project as a consulting partner to share the finding aids and item-level catalog records through their

online database. The Queens Library is uniquely positioned to serve the needs of the local and scholarly community as the borough that hosted both Fairs.

*Since the onset of this project, MCNY launched a “catablog” to share finding aids. The “local” versions of the World’s Fair finding aids are shared on the MCNY catablog as PDFs, while the “joint” finding aids are marked up in EAD and shared on the Queens Library site.

Diversity Fellowship Model

The CLIR World’s Fair project built upon the previously established “Diversity Fellowship” program at the QM which aims to increase diversity in the archives and museum professions. The fellowships are intended for candidates from minority backgrounds or of recent immigrant origin. The fellowship pays a stipend of \$10,000 for a year of part-time work.



Fellows Richard Lee and Wendy Jimenez at the Queens Museum

Hoang Tran, a recent graduate of Drexel University’s Master’s in Library & Information Science program, and Richard Lee, a student in Pratt’s School of Information and Library Science, were selected for the fellowship from a pool of highly qualified candidates. Wendy Jimenez, a student in City College’s Art History and Museum Studies Master’s program, replaced Hoang Tran approximately two-thirds of the way through the project.

The fellows carried out a wide variety of tasks, including processing, re-housing, drafting portions of the finding aids, contributing to the project Tumblr, researching provenance, and item level cataloging.

Processing Decisions

The original project plan called for intellectually uniting all World’s Fair material from both fairs under the rubric of one finding aid, but it quickly became clear that this would have been confusing and unwieldy. Bringing together such diverse object types from across two institutions already provided

more than enough complexity. Thus, the decision to create two finding aids, one for the 1939/1940 Fair and one for the 1964/1965 Fair, was a key early decision regarding archival arrangement.

A second challenge of the project was creating a processing plan that would satisfy the needs of both institutions. As outlined in the grant proposal, I spent the first 4 months of the project at MCNY, followed by the next 14 months at the QM. In order to insure a smooth transition from institution to the other, the project staff made early visits to the QM to survey their collections. We were pleasantly surprised by the similarities of the materials, which allowed for more seamless intellectual integration. However, we did discover that some object types, such as architectural elements and audio-visual materials, only existed at the QM. Additionally, the QM held large quantities of unique materials on particular exhibitions, such as the Panorama of the City of New York of the 1964 Fair, which later became a permanent feature of the Museum.

Another challenge of the project was scouring both Museums' collections for all World's Fair materials. This involved searching both Museums' content management systems, physically surveying spaces, consulting legacy documentation, and harvesting institutional knowledge from staff. At MCNY World's Fair materials located in other artificial manuscript collections (such as the Pamphlet Collection) were removed and physically integrated into the World's Fair boxes. However, items found in the Decorative Arts; Costumes and Textiles; Photographs, Drawings, and Prints; and Theater collections were intellectually described in the finding aids while continuing to "live" in their respective departments. At QM we had to inventory items stored off-site and in the Visible Storage Gallery. It seemed that every couple of months new boxes and materials would show up, unearthed from various nooks and crannies of the Queens Museum. While some of the items we located at each museum had already been cataloged (or at MCNY, even digitized) they had never before been presented to the public as part of a unified World's Fair collection.



Rehoused objects at Queens Museum

Much of the World's Fair collections at both museums had been loosely grouped according to subject and material type, with multiple gifts intermingled. The project team weighed the pros and cons of maintaining and/or restoring provenance, and decided to create a subject-based arrangement for the majority of the materials, reflecting prior institutional practice and the nature of the materials, which largely consist of mass produced ephemera. Maintaining provenance in an artificial collection comprised of so many different gifts would create major headaches for researchers. Who would want to look in dozens of different places to see all the pamphlets on the General Motors exhibit?

In order to remain true to the character of the Fairs, we turned to the Official Guidebooks to organize materials as the Fairs themselves were physically organized: by zone or area and by exhibit. The 1939/40 Fair was divided into seven “zones” and the 1964/64 Fair into five “areas.” As we used the guidebooks to familiarize ourselves with the organization of the Fairs, we were occasionally surprised by what we learned. For example, the Infant Incubator at the 1939 Fair, which housed premature infants viewable through glass windows, was located not in the Medical and Public Health Building as we had guessed, but rather in the Amusement area. Such distinctions demonstrate how public ideas of “amusement” have changed over time, illustrating the essential nature of primary sources when describing and investigating the past.

Not all of the items in the collection were intermingled: provenance was retained for most of the photographic collections, and several gifts of unique materials with clear relationships to each other – such as Series I:B Donald Oenslager papers - were retained as their own series or subseries. The finding aids reflect an eclectic mix of subject, object-type, and provenance based arrangements woven together into a cohesive narrative, with the overarching goal of facilitating ease of access. Administrative, biographical, and historical notes were incorporated throughout where pertinent and complete donor appendixes were created for each institution.

Cataloging and Sharing Metadata

As specified in the grant proposal, 150 collection highlights were cataloged at the item level at MCNY and 1500 were cataloged at the Queens Museum, reflecting the relative size of the collections.

At MCNY Archivist Lindsay Turley trained project staff in using Argus, the Museum’s content management system (CMS), and on their cataloging standards, which are based on Cataloging Cultural Materials (CCO). We created a spreadsheet to identify highlights while we were processing, and carried out the cataloging towards the end of our 4 months at MCNY. The provenance of each item was investigated and numbered based on whether or not it could be connected to a deed of gift.

QM uses the Past Perfect CMS, but did not have cataloging standards in place. In order to ensure consistency, I created a QM cataloging guide, making decisions about what Past Perfect fields to use and how to populate them. I consulted CCO for data content instructions, selected authority lists to use for particular elements, and developed a local vocabulary for Fair-specific terms. Because the QM staff is squeezed for time, I made the guidelines as detailed as possible for the benefit of future interns and volunteers. At QM we cataloged about 500 commemorative objects, about 900 photographs, and about 100 printed items, prioritizing the most unique materials. Like at MCNY, we had to investigate provenance and number items prior to cataloging them.

As previously noted, the finding aids and item level catalog records were shared with the Queens Library in order to make them publicly accessible. Sharing the finding aids was relatively simple, as the Queens Library staff agreed to mark them up in EAD for posting. However, sharing the item-level catalog records was a bit more complicated.

Queens Library uses VRA Core 4.0 xml to catalog their photographs and archival ephemera. While Past Perfect and Argus can both export records into basic xml, creating crosswalks and further transforming them into VRA Core records would be a fairly complex task. Thankfully, we were able to

settle on an alternative option that worked for all parties: sending the records to Queens Library in Dublin Core xml. The simple 15 element Dublin Core standard may not offer the most complexity, but it's ideal for interoperability, allowing for straightforward 1 to 1 relationships. Moreover, the Queens Library could readily ingest such records into their database and Past Perfect's export utility includes a Dublin Core xml output.

Upon testing, I found that the Dublin Core metadata crosswalk in the Past Perfect software differed significantly from the crosswalk that I had created in consultation with the Queens Library staff. However, the Past Perfect technical support team was willing to modify the export behind the scenes to match the project specifications. Once the modification was made, exporting the records was as easy as a few clicks of the mouse.

Because Argus, MCNY's CMS, did not have the capability to export records as Dublin Core xml, I first exported the 150 MCNY highlight records as CSV files, then imported them into Past Perfect, and finally exported them as Dublin Core xml. These 150 records served as the initial test batch. Upon review, the Queens Library metadata team identified some minor problems that we were able to fix by modifying our standards before cataloging the bulk of the 1500 highlights at QM. Once all issues were resolved, we set up a workflow wherein we sent 300 records to the Queens Library on the first Wednesday of every month over the course of 5 months.

Publicity

The project team utilized a variety of methods to publicize the collections. Several Fair-related posts were published on MCNY's blog over the course of the project, resulting in cross-posting and publicity on other blogs and news outlets. We also re-purposed a Tumblr that had been previously established by MCNY to advertise a World's Fair exhibition for the CLIR project. We posted two-four times a week, sharing gems we discovered while processing and celebrating the 50th and 75th anniversaries of the Fairs. The Tumblr's audience grew from about 70 followers to over 30,000 by the end of the grant. Tumblr posts were also shared through MCNY and QM's facebook and twitter accounts.

To publicize the project to the museum and archives community, we announced the opening of the collections on a number of professional list-serves. I am also contributing an article to the "News" section of the website of the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO), the largest reference and research resources (3Rs) library council in New York State. Finally, lessons from the project regarding provenance issues will be shared at CLIR's Hidden Collections symposium and on a panel at the MARAC/NEA conference in March 2015.

Discovering the World's Fair Collections

Posted on June 18, 2013 by alumino2013 | 7 Comments

Thanks to a generous Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), as Project Archivist, I now have the pleasure of exploring and organizing the rich array of World's Fair objects at both the Museum of the City of New York and Queens Museum of Art along with Hoang Tran, the project's Archival Fellow. The two museums have embarked on an 18-month project to make their collections from the 1939/40 and 1964/65 New York World's Fairs accessible.

Since late March when Hoang and I began to work with and explore the materials, I have often longed to transport myself back to the Fairs and take in the sights, smells, and sounds in person. While archivists don't possess time traveling machines, we do the next best thing by providing historical context through our arrangement and description of the materials. In this case, we hope that our guide to the collections, or "finding aid," will allow researchers to construct their own Fair "visits."



Archival Fellow Hoang Tran surveys objects at the Museum's offsite collections storage facility.

One of the unique characteristics of this collection is the diversity of object types represented. In addition to the boxes that had been set aside for processing, World's Fair related items are present within the Decorative Arts; Costumes and Textiles; Photographs, Drawings, and Prints; Theater; and Toy collections.

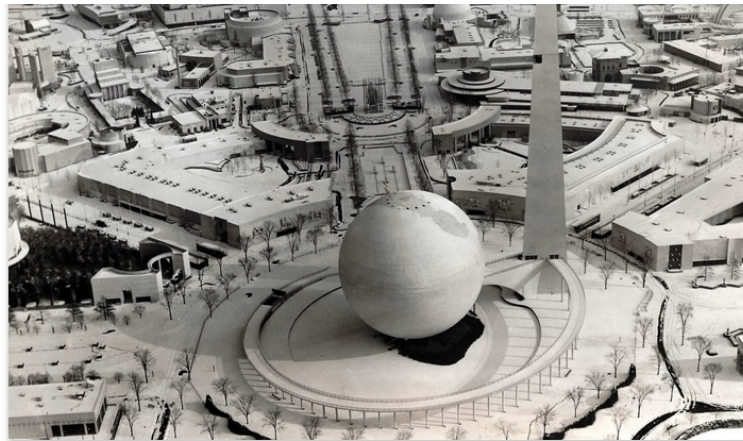
To locate and describe these materials, we searched the Museum's collections management system and consulted with curators to take advantage of their knowledge of their collections. A highlight is a group of several hundred design renderings which have already been digitized and made available on the Museum's online [Collection Portal](#). The majority of the items, however, have been



Project Archivist Annie Tummino surveys design renderings in the Museum's Curatorial Center.

Above: Screen Shots of post on MCNY's blog.

Below: Screen shot of project Tumblr.



1 MONTH AGO
81 NOTES
#WINTERTIME
#FLUSHING MEADOWS CORONA PARK
#TRYLON AND PERISPHERE
#SNOW
#HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS
#AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Happy New Years from the Queens Museum Archives!

Snow blanketed New York City yesterday for the first time this year causing for a pretty sight of white between the usual Flushing Meadow Park markers.

Seventy-six years ago, snow also covered the 1939 New York World's Fair which reopened to the public the following April. Above is an image of the fairground in a calm white with the Tylon and Perisphere in the center and the drained Lagoon of Nations behind it. The sculpture of George Washington was encased in scaffolding to protect it from the elements.

Photograph taken by William Morris, Chief Photographer of the New York World's Fair, 1939

Appendix A: Project Links

Finding Aids

1939/1940 New York World's Fair (MCNY only version):

<http://mcnycatablog.org/2013/10/01/collection-on-the-1939-1940-new-york-worlds-fair-1934-1993/>

1939/1940 New York World's Fair (joint version unifying MCNY and QM):

<http://digitalarchives.queenslibrary.org/vital/access/manager/Repository/aql:5891/EAD>

1964/1965 New York World's Fair (MCNY only version):

<http://mcnycatablog.org/2013/10/01/collection-on-the-1964-1965-new-york-worlds-fair-1959-1967/>

1964/1965 New York World's Fair (joint version unifying MCNY and QM):

<http://digitalarchives.queenslibrary.org/vital/access/manager/Repository/aql:5893/EAD>

Catalog Records

<http://digitalarchives.queenslibrary.org/vital/access/manager/Collection/aql:5839>

Standards

Queens Museum Guide for Cataloging Collections in Past Perfect

<http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/resources/queens-museum-guide-for-cataloging-collections-in-past-perfect/view>

Social Media

Collections Tumblr: <http://nyworldsfaircollections.tumblr.com/>

Posts on MCNY blog: <http://mcnyblog.org/tag/worlds-fair/>



At the Queens Museum we made graphic labels so that staff could easily identify 1939 and 1964 World's Fair boxes.

Appendix B: Metadata Crosswalk

Past Perfect Fields to Dublin Core

Dublin Core Elements	Past Perfect Object Catalog Fields	Past Perfect Photo Catalog Fields	Past Perfect Library Catalog Fields	Past Perfect Archives Catalog Fields
Type	Object name	Object Name	Object Name	Object name
Format	Dimensions, Material, Medium	Print Size, Dimension Details, Medium, Processing Method	Physical Description	Extent and medium of the unit of description
Title	Title	Title	Title	Title
Description	Description	Description	Summary	Scope and Content/Abstract
Subject	Subjects, Search terms	Subjects, Search terms	Subjects, Search terms	Subjects, Search terms
Creator	Artist	Photographer	Author	Creator
Contributor	Artist 2, Artist 3	n/a	Author added entry	Other creators
Publisher	n/a	n/a	Publisher	Publisher
Date	Date	Date	Publish date	Date
Identifier	Object Id	Object Id	Object Id	Object Id
Source	Your institution	Your institution	Your institution	Your institution
Relation	Collection, Related objects	Collection, Related objects	Collection, Related objects	Collection, Related objects
Language	n/a	n/a	Language	Language
Coverage	Place of origin	n/a	Pub place	Pub place
Rights	Legal Status	Legal Status	Legal Status	Legal Status