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

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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.

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

Together, the museums hold about 12,000 items (approximately 360 boxes and 450 oversized/irregular objects) documenting the New York World's Fairs of 1939–1940 and 1964–1965. Items include 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 were to create finding aids uniting both museums' collections, cataloging 1,650 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. The QM, founded in 1972, has 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 World's Fair, and its Panorama of the City of New York, of worldwide fame, was commissioned by Robert Moses for the 1964 Fair.

Benefits of Collaboration

The goal of creating joint finding aids for the World's Fair materials at MCNY and QM was 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 World's Fairs. The joint finding aids (one for the 1939 Fair and one for the 1964 Fair) elucidate where the holdings are similar and where they diverge. Additionally, local

versions of the finding aids were created to aid the reference process at each institution. Links to the joint and local versions of the finding aids can be found in Appendix A: Project Links.

The joint nature of the project 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; this helped me develop standards used at QM. Dealing with the smaller MCNY collection first also allowed us to refine our processing plan for the immense QM collection. Louise Weinberg, the QM registrar, provided valuable context regarding the provenance and history of the collections and the World's Fair site.

When the grant proposal was written, neither institution had an online platform for sharing archival finding aids.[1] MCNY has an online collections portal (http://collections.mcny.org); however, the portal is not equipped to share metadata for objects without an accompanying digital image, and the grant did not cover digitization. The QM's collections management system is only available internally. 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. As Queens is the borough that hosted both fairs, its library is uniquely positioned to serve the needs of the local and scholarly community.

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1   Since the start 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 (Encoded Archival Description) 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 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.

Hoang Tran, a recent graduate of Drexel University's Master's in Library and 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. Lee is pictured in Figure 1.

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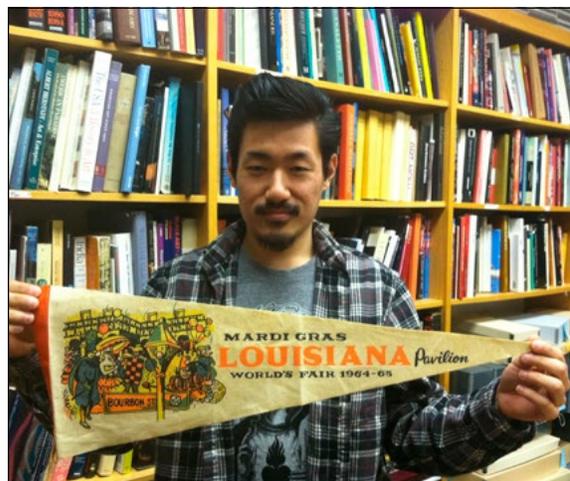

Fig. 1: Fellow Richard Lee at the Queens Museum

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.

A second challenge of the project was to create 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. To ensure a smooth transition from one institution to the other, the project staff made early visits to the QM and surveyed its collections. We were pleasantly surprised by the similarities of the materials, which allowed for more seamless intellectual integration. However, we discovered that some object types, such as architectural elements and audiovisual materials, existed only 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.

It was also a challenge to scour both museums' collections for all World's Fair materials. We searched both museums' collections management systems, physically surveyed their spaces, consulted legacy documentation, and harvested the institutional knowledge of the staff. At MCNY, World's Fair materials located in other artificial manuscript collections (e.g., the pamphlet collection) were removed and physically integrated into the World's Fair boxes. Items found in the

decorative arts, costumes and textiles, and theater collections were intellectually described in the finding aids, though they continued to "live" in their respective departments. At QM we had to inventory items stored offsite and in the Visible Storage Gallery. It seemed that every couple of months, new boxes and materials would appear, unearthed from various nooks and crannies of the Queens Museum. Although 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.

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 or restoring provenance and decided to create a subject-based arrangement for most of the materials. This arrangement reflected prior institutional practice and the nature of the collections, which consist largely of mass-produced ephemera. Maintaining provenance in an artificial collection comprising 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?

To remain true to the character of the fairs, we turned to the official guidebooks to organize materials as the fairs themselves had been physically and intellectually organized. The 1939–1940 World's Fair was divided into seven "zones"; the 1964–1965 World's 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 collections were inter-mingled. 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 sub-series. Overall, the finding aids for the collections 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 and providing proper context. Administrative, biographical, and historical notes were incorporated through-out where pertinent, and complete donor appen-dixes were created for each institution.

Finally, rehousing the materials in these collec-tions was no simple task, considering the diver-sity of object-types represented. For example, three-dimensional objects were stored in boxes with partition trays lined with volara polyethyl-ene foam (Figure 2), and textiles were stored in flat boxes lined with abaca fiber tissue.

Fig. 2: Rehoused objects at Queens Museum

Cataloging and Sharing Metadata

As specified in the grant proposal, 150 collec-tion highlights were cataloged at the item level at MCNY, and 1,500 were cataloged at the QM, reflecting the relative size of the collections.

At MCNY, archivist Lindsay Turley trained proj-ect staff in the use of Argus, the museum's collec-tions management system, and on their catalog-ing standards, which are based on the Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO) data content standard. We created a spreadsheet to identify highlights while we were processing and carried out the cataloging toward the end of our four months at MCNY. The provenance of each item was inves-tigated and numbered based on whether it could be connected to a deed of gift.

The Queens Museum uses the PastPerfect collec-tion management system, but did not have cata-loging standards in place. To ensure consistency, I created a QM cataloging guide, making deci-sions about which PastPerfect fields to use and how to populate them (see Appendix A for a link to the guide). I consulted CCO for data content instructions, selected authority lists to use for particular elements, and developed a local vo-cabulary 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 in-terns and volunteers. At QM we cataloged about 500 commemorative objects, 900 photographs, and 100 printed items, giving priority to the most unique materials. As at MCNY, we had to inves-tigate provenance and number items before cata-loging them.

As previously noted, the finding aids and item-level catalog records were shared with the Queens Library 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. Although PastPerfect 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 is ideal for interoperability because it allows for a straightforward 1:1 relationship. Moreover, the Queens Library could readily ingest such records into its database, and PastPerfect's export utility includes a Dublin Core XML output. See Appendix B for the final version of the crosswalk deployed during the project.

Upon testing, I found that the Dublin Core metadata crosswalk in the PastPerfect software differed significantly from the crosswalk I had created in consultation with the Queens Library staff. However, the PastPerfect technical support team was willing to modify the export behind the scenes to match the project specifications. Since we used all four of PastPerfect's "catalogs" (objects, library, archives, and photographs), we essentially had to create four versions of the crosswalk.

The 150 highlights cataloged at MCNY became the test batch for the project. Since Argus (the software used at MCNY) did not have the capability to export records as Dublin Core XML, I exported them as CSV files, imported them into PastPerfect, and finally exported them as Dublin Core XML. Upon review, the Queens Library metadata team identified some minor problems that we were able to fix by modifying our standards. Once all issues were resolved, we set up a workflow wherein we sent 300 QM records to the Queens Library on the first Wednesday of every month over the course of five months.

Publicity

The project team used a variety of methods to publicize the collections. Several World's Fair-related posts were published on MCNY's blog over the course of the project (Figure 3), resulting in cross-posting and publicity on other blogs and news outlets. We also repurposed a Tumblr page that had been previously established by MCNY to advertise a World's Fair exhibition for use during the CLIR project (Figure 4). We posted two to four times a week, sharing gems we discovered while processing and celebrating the fiftieth and seventy-fifth anniversaries of the fairs. The Tumblr's audience grew from about 70 followers to more than 30,000 by the end of the grant. Tumblr posts were also shared through MCNY and QM's Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Fig. 3: Screen shot of MCNY blog

To publicize the project to the museum and archives community, we announced the opening of the collections on a number of professional list-servs. I also contributed 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 (see Appendix A for link to the article). Finally, lessons from the project about provenance issues were shared at CLIR's Hidden Collections symposium and on a panel at the MARAC/NEA (Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives and New England Archivists) conference in March 2015.

Fig. 4: Screen shot of project Tumblr

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 (QM only version): https://anniearchivist.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/1939wf-finding-aid-qm-10-10-2014.pdf.

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 (QM only version): https://anniearchivist.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/1964wf-finding-aid-qm-10-10-14.pdf.

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

Social Media

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

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

Post on METRO.org blog: http://metro.org/articles/a-glimpse-of-new-yorks-past/.

Appendix B: Metadata Crosswalk

PastPerfect Fields to Dublin Core

Dublin Core Elements	PastPerfect Object Catalog Fields	PastPerfect Photo Catalog Fields	PastPerfect Library Catalog Fields	PastPerfect 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		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 (ID)	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	Publication place	Publication place
Rights	Legal status	Legal status	Legal status	Legal status