

Trade Catalogs: Opportunities and Challenges [Session]

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Through the Looking Glass: Trade Catalogues at The Rakow Library

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Our collections offer the most comprehensive library in the world on the art and history of glass as well as the history of glassmaking, or, as we say, we go from the cradle (nursing bottle) to the grave (glass casket). Our trade catalogs document production in the areas of tableware, bottles; architectural, flat and stained glass, mirrors, lighting, laboratory ware (including industrial and optical), and more. We have catalogs with illustrations of ware, price lists, broadsides, brochures, mail order catalogs, jobbers' catalogs, and retail catalogs. We also consider pattern books as part of the trade catalog collection.

The collection includes a variety of formats: original catalogs, microfiche and microfilm, photocopies of original catalogs, CD-ROMS, reprints of both entire catalogs, and reprints of pages from several catalogs. There is no limitation on time period or geographic location: we have some from Mexico, South America, the Middle East (including Turkey), and Asia as well as, of course, those issued in the United States, Canada, England and Europe.

The earliest item is a 1722 price list from Saint-Gobain. The most recent catalogs represent such diverse areas as the products of the Bullseye Glass Company in Oregon, selling the flat glass they make, as well as equipment and supplies; hand blown Christmas ornaments, and Swedish tableware.

We now have more than 18,000 catalogs, representing firms worldwide: manufacturers, distributors, jobbers, wholesalers and retailers. Of this number, there are 1042 trade catalogs only on microfiche - most obtained through borrowing and microfilming.

Our collection is used by curators, as well as collectors, and researchers – anyone wanting to identify objects, patterns, dates, etc. We encourage long distance users to visit our library, or utilize the digital or microfilm copies. We have an active digitization program, including trade catalogs, one of our more important and unique resources – I will talk about that later.

We acquire the catalogs through purchase (rare and second hand book dealers, Ebay, etc.), as gifts, and as parts of archives. Although we aim to collect all trade catalogs with glass content, but extent of glass in a catalog may determine whether we purchase it. Lighting fixture catalogs come to mind ... we really want information about the shades, globes, etc., not the fixtures. ...

Acquisitions always entails maintaining good relationships with vendors, but also collectors, who may in the future donate their collection of catalogs. Some collectors are supportive of our library's goals and availability of the catalogs; others are not, which can help or hinder our bidding on EBay. Another EBay problem is the seller who does not properly identify what he is offering!

One problem that of all the catalogs now available only digitally. We currently neither download for use electronically, nor make printed copies a the digital catalog. We would want to know that not only can we have copies, but that we would be at liberty to store them in our digital asset system, and disseminate the content freely, without copyright restrictions. To "receive" digital copies, we would need an administrative structure in place (including storage) and a mechanism in place to make sure that we can access the files in perpetuity. We don't have a system (technological tool(s)) or an understood non-system structure in place to allow the latter ... just as it is for auction catalogs at this time too.

Our first sharing of our trade catalogs was a guide published by Clearwater in 1987. Now, all of our holdings are included in our online catalog. This is unusual in the world of glass trade catalogs; some libraries with significant collections do not have their holdings listed online.

We use a template to process materials, providing full processing, with subject headings and a notes field which includes most of the types of ware in a catalog.

Some of the problems we encounter in cataloging are especially evident in dealing with reprints, including those from a German pressed glass periodical. These reprints allow us access to many catalogs we would never obtain, but they do require a lot of work.

- 1- Identifying the appropriate form of name of companies can be difficult, especially for less well-known companies that are named for the town in which they are located and endings in German or Czech vary depending on usage.
- 2- Identifying the title of the original catalog for linking purposes can be difficult if there is no title page.
- 3- We include additional information on contents for comparison with other catalogs from the same company, and often compare reprints with catalogs we own to see if they are the same or different, and then make notes in all of the records to differentiate them as needed.

Cataloging processing questions that our staff ponder include:

- Keep parts together or catalog separately?
- How to process trade catalogs which are not bound items. One example is a group of photos of Lalique glass, dating to the 1920s. It came in old binders on construction paper: we have since rehoused materials in better photo sleeves and notebooks.
- It can be tricky to determine is something is a trade catalog ... particularly if it is mostly company history and has no prices.

Much staff time is spent on thorough processing, which of course allows both our staff and patrons better determination of what we have, as well as limiting handling of original catalogs, and assists in prioritizing good candidates for digitization.

All of our trade catalogs are in our online catalog, as well as in our Library Collections Browser, both of which are accessible through the library's home page. Our online catalog is the catalog of choice for sophisticated searchers; the collections browser allows a more Google-like searching, is more user friendly and allows connections between our glass collections and the related library materials. We do not list our trade catalogs in WorldCat.

Our trade cat records will eventually be indexed by Google searches, which will allow an additional way to share knowledge of our collection.

All of our catalogs are housed in a temperature and humidity controlled environment, but depending on the format, trade catalogs will be found in various sections of our library.

Original catalogs are in closed (secured) stacks, but can be retrieved for the researcher to consult. Depending on size, they may be housed as regular, flat, or jumbo. Recently installed compact shelving has offered an amazing opportunity to reorganize and better house our collections.

Microfiche are in cabinets in our reading room, allowing for independent access by researchers. Some of our catalogs are part of Archives Collections, and kept with the collections.

Reprints of catalogs are usually housed in the open stacks, in call number areas which reflect their type of glass (laboratory, lighting, tableware, etc.). Location of each catalog is part of the information in the bibliographic record.

Although the original trade catalogs do not circulate, we offer interlibrary loan when there is either microfiche or two copies of a reprint. Researchers at our library are welcome to look at original catalogs, and may photocopy, scan or use digital cameras. Patrons are less interested in using this format. One of the challenges is that we have this extensive collection of microfilmed trade catalogs, but fewer libraries have microform readers today, and most people expect that everything has been digitized or that we will scan entire catalogs for them. We are looking for better microform equipment which has digital capabilities.

Our museum and library were flooded in 1972. Many of our rare books and trade catalogs were damaged, and much conservation work was required. It was decided that we would begin an in-house microfilming program, which lasted from 1973 to about 2000. This project had a two-fold aim: (1) to preserve the catalogs damaged in the flood, and (2) to allow for general preservation of original catalogs, published before 1970. This also allowed long-distance researchers access borrowing microfiche through interlibrary loan. When it was no longer practical from a financial aspect to maintain microfilming equipment, we ceased this operation.

Part of our current preservation efforts includes increased attention to Housing and Dressing: special acid-free, supportive enclosures and pamphlet binders. This is great for the catalogs, but not for the budget.

We have begun to digitize some of the older catalogs. Most of the work is done by a Boston firm who does some of the work in a 3 week annual visit, and some in his own studio. We determine priority for digitization by condition, high demand, historical importance, and of significant relevance to museum activities. The latter includes the 2014 special exhibits on Lalique and his contemporaries in our glass galleries and library. Of course, there is a long waiting list and lots of competition for a place on the scanning list! At the moment, we have more than 300 catalogs digitized. Once the digitization process is complete, one can view the pages through both our OPAC and the library collections browser. To determine what has been digitized, search the phrase < trade catalog?> and the word <Digitized>.

As you all know, digitization is costly, with the expense of an outside firm, and time consuming for staff. It is labor intensive to get the trade catalogs into our image database. In addition to the regular cataloging, there is the descriptive metadata. Once digitized, files have to be uploaded to our image system, Media Bin, which takes time, skill and expertise. The next step is the loading of the images into our online catalog. Additionally, we will need a plan to reformat or migrate digital items as technologies change.

We have implemented OCR. For standard text: one can do batch OCR, and do the job easily and quickly. However, the types and fonts of older style printing make OCR more difficult, and require us to now manually create OCR files, so that descriptions and pattern names can be read.

We are also looking towards enhancing our collection development through digitization, including collaborative digitization projects.

As we look to the future, and the challenges our library faces, perhaps it is best summarized as finding the right balance of staff time, the costs of processing and housing, and digitization, and other library projects under consideration. Making rare and fragile trade catalogs available to researchers poses a challenge. Preservation needs must be balanced with making them accessible.

The world of studying and collecting glass is a very visual one, and it is difficult to meet the expectations of our in house and distant users, especially given the number of trade catalogs, the concerns of copyright, and “guessing” what will be most heavily used/requested.

However, we will continue to make our trade catalogs available to our users, especially those who will never be able to visit our library, and allowing us to fulfill the museum’s vision “We tell the world about glass.”