Archival Exhibits as Interdisciplinary Teaching Tools: A Case Study

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A Case Study

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This case study describes a recent exhibit of archival photographs at the University of Dayton and how it was used as a teaching tool in an undergraduate course. The exhibit, *Faith, Reason, and One-Hour Processing*, showcased archival photographs from the Marian Library, a special library on campus devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This article outlines how the project was developed in conjunction with a campus-wide theme on “Faith and Reason” and used as a teaching tool in an interdisciplinary undergraduate course, Development of Western Culture in a Global Context (ASI 120). This article also suggests the interdisciplinary potential of Catholic archival collections and several ways to leverage archival exhibits, including partnerships for promotion and curricular integration.
Exhibits are an important component of many archives and special collections programs. As Jessica Lacher-Feldman notes archives exhibit their collections for several reasons including outreach, education, advocacy, and to reinforce the mission and goals of the repository. Many archival repositories view exhibits as a critical component of their educational mission. Exhibits have the potential to provide invaluable educational opportunities in diverse learning environments, including a university setting.

Several authors report positive experiences related to exhibits in higher education. Michelle M. Maloney describes a case study on leveraging library collections in order to foster diversity and inclusion on campus. In her findings, she notes that exhibits can serve as a platform to cultivate collaborative campus relationships, elevate library visibility, and engage patrons with library collections. Exhibits can also foster student engagement with collections via curricular integration. Tammy Ravas and Megan Stark provide an example of this at the University of Montana. Ravas and Stark partnered with faculty to use an exhibit of Pulitzer Prize-winning photographs to teach visual literacy in a freshman seminar. They note that using the exhibition as a meeting place “resulted in discussions that were rich, thoughtful, and indicated genuine growth in critical thinking.”

Catholic archives in particular hold rich potential for exhibition. Several authors describe traditions of Catholic visual practice in both sacred ritual and popular culture. James T. Fisher and Margaret M. McGuinness provide context in their assertion that “spiritually-enriching visual materials were more accessible and more efficacious than written texts; these visual materials inspired theological reflection and helped shape Catholic devotional and liturgical practices.” Such visual and material traditions can be evidenced in the holdings of many Catholic repositories. For example, the Marian Library at the University of Dayton contains a broad range of visual resources such as Marian holy cards, hand-illuminated pages from fifteenth-century manuscripts, mid-twentieth century catechetical posters, Épinals (brightly colored nineteenth-century prints from France), and a variety of artifacts and printed ephemera including advertisements for “Mary-like” clothing, Catholic bumper stickers, and pilgrimage souvenirs from Marian shrines. Archival resources such as these may provide compelling subject matter for a broad range of exhibits.

Partnerships and collaboration are critical in both planning an archival exhibit as well as using it as part of classroom instruction. Teaching with exhibits can invite a new audience of students and faculty to engage with Catholic collections while at the same time enriching undergraduate experiences. Furthermore, using collections to support the teaching mission of a university can help ensure continued relevance of Catholic archives and special collections.

This case study describes a recent exhibit at the University of Dayton, how the exhibit was promoted in conjunction with a campus-wide initiative, and its use as a teaching tool in an undergraduate course. The exhibit, titled Faith, Reason, and One-Hour Processing, showcased archival photographs from the Marian Library, a special library on campus devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This article provides an overview of the Marian Library and the collection used in the exhibit, campus partnerships, and how the exhibit was used in the interdisciplinary undergraduate course, Development of Western Culture.
in a Global Context (ASI 120). Finally, the author discusses the outcomes of this project including lessons learned and potential next steps.

The Marian Library and the Marian Apparitions Collection

The Marian Library was founded at the University of Dayton in 1943 with the mission of making the Blessed Virgin Mary better known, loved, and served. It is a special library housed within the main library and includes more than one hundred thousand books in fifty languages as well as periodicals, artwork, rare books, and archival materials. Its collections are developed and maintained to preserve and provide access to materials that support its mission of fostering Marian scholarship and devotion. The library serves the research needs of faculty and students at the University of Dayton and scholars throughout the world. It is recognized both nationally and internationally as a center for scholarship on the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The Marian Apparitions Collection (an archival collection at the Marian Library) can be challenging to describe, particularly because of the complex, and sometimes controversial, subject matter. Before describing the collection, it is beneficial to first propose an abridged framework for thinking about apparitions in the context of the library’s collection. Marian apparitions generally include a supernatural vision, message, or interaction with the Blessed Virgin Mary. In his article on the apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Conyers, Georgia, Brian Britt points out that for over five hundred years, “Marian apparitions have shared a number of general characteristics…they express divine anger at particular sins (e.g., irreverence and atheism); and they are accompanied by a message of warning as well as miraculous signs, especially healings.” Typically, the Catholic Church has been cautious to approve, disapprove, or condemn the authenticity of reported apparitions. For example, about fifteen apparitions are recognized as “approved” Marian apparitions, the earliest being Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico (1531). This number contrasts drastically with more than four hundred documented reports of apparitions in the twentieth century alone. These reports, which are either uninvestigated, under review, or undetermined by the Church, are the focus of this particular archival collection.

The Marian Apparitions Collection contains photographs, correspondence, personal accounts, newsletters, audio recordings, and artifacts (including feathers, holy water, and rose petals). These materials document alleged visions, messages, or supernatural experiences related to Mary in the United States and around the world. The photographs, which were the subject of the exhibit, date from circa 1950 through the late 1990s. Most of the images were captured by amateur photographers on film cameras. Many photographs were taken during pilgrimages to the sites of reported Marian apparitions. Some apparition sites such as Conyers, Georgia, and Bayside, New York, gained followings of thousands of visitors and pilgrims, many of whom attempted to capture a miraculous image on film. In many ways the photographs in this collection document what Ann Matter refers to as the “phenomenon of miraculous photography” that was cultivated at apparition sites, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s.
The Exhibit:
Faith, Reason, and One-Hour Processing

*Faith, Reason, and One Hour Processing,* an exhibit showcasing the apparition photographs, was on display in Gallery 249, the University of Dayton Department of Art and Design gallery, from January through February 2015. The exhibit included twenty enlarged reproductions of archival photographs from the Marian Apparitions Collection. The exhibit planning process was a collaborative endeavor between three University of Dayton faculty members: Joel Whitaker from the Department of Art and Design, Dr. Anthony Smith from the Department of Religious Studies, and myself, archivist in the Marian Library.

The exhibit tied in with a university-wide initiative to promote interdisciplinary approaches to arts and languages called Rights.Rites.Writes. (RRW). RRW selects a theme each year to encourage and highlight interdisciplinary scholarship initiatives on campus. For the 2014/2015 academic year, the theme was “Faith and Reason.” As curator of the exhibit, Joel Whitaker was proactive in ensuring that it supported and complemented the year’s theme. Polly McKenna-Cress and Janet A. Kamien note the importance of this type of advocacy in exhibit planning. They state that an advocate for the institution creates a means for the project to happen and has a clear idea of how the project fits into greater goals. Tying the exhibit in with existing programming helped to ensure that it would gain exposure and help to enrich the year long, campus-wide theme.

As part of his curatorial statement in the exhibit catalog, Whitaker notes, “these photographs address the intersection of the sacred, aesthetic, and descriptive aspects of the photograph and the role the camera and photographic processes play in the making of the photograph and giving meaning to the photograph prior to the onset of digital photography.” He also emphasizes that the exhibit does not attempt to prove or disprove what is claimed to be evident in the images. Rather, it used the photographs as an investigation into personal artifacts, aesthetic qualities, vernacular photography, and an individual’s need to “see” and thus provide evidence of a belief. He adds, “the photographs serve as a reference to a person’s faith, that reason is relevant, and that the images included in the exhibition are made with inexpensive film cameras and commercial film processing; a process that historically was
marketed as ‘one-hour processing.’” Also as part of the exhibit catalog, Dr. Smith’s contextual essay touches on themes that included the durability of religious belief and practice through modern media and the revival of Marian devotion in the late twentieth century.

The exhibit opened on January 22, 2015 and was well attended by faculty, students, and the general public. All three collaborators spoke as part of the opening lecture.

Several aspects of this exhibit planning process made it unique. First, the tie-in with university-wide programming on faith and reason helped raise awareness about the exhibit around campus. Second, all three collaborators began meeting regularly to discuss the project a year in advance. In addition to logistical planning, this provided a forum for cross-disciplinary conversations that included insights from the fields of photography, religious studies, and archives. Additionally, since this project was a non-traditional way of using Marian Library collections, it was important to discuss the project with vowed religious in the library’s administration. This helped to ensure that exhibition of the photographs, and later use as interdisciplinary teaching tools, would not conflict with the library’s doctrine and devotion-centered Catholic mission.

Teaching with the Apparitions Exhibit

During the six week exhibition, five sections of an undergraduate humanities seminar, Development of Western Culture in a Global Context (ASI 120), held course sessions in Gallery 249. This interdisciplinary seminar incorporates the study of English, history, philosophy and religious studies from the Enlightenment to the contemporary period.

At this point in the semester, the class was discussing faith and reason in the Enlightenment. Prior to visiting the exhibit, students had readings of David Hume and lectures on reasonable Christianity and enthusiasm during the Great Awakening. After the lecture, they were given a handout of five questions. Using the questions as a guide, students then viewed and reflected on the images in the exhibit. Towards the end of the session, they had time to respond to the questions and then discuss them in small groups.

As a collaborator on the exhibit, I visited one session of ASI 120. During the visit, I introduced students to the Marian Library’s archival collections and discussed the role of archives in the current exhibit. I also had the opportunity to engage with students individually and in small groups as they viewed and responded to the photographs.

In conversations with two professors after the seminar, I was able to gather feedback on some of the outcomes of using the exhibit as a teaching tool. Dr. Una Cadegan from the Department of History taught one section of ASI 120. She noted that the exhibit supported one of the overall emphases of the course: it played a role in helping students...
recognize the ways in which historical topics resonate with contemporary issues. Dr. Anthony Smith (also a collaborator on the exhibit) taught the section of ASI 120 that I participated in. He pointed out that the photographs in the exhibit functioned as a type of alternative text and that “reflecting on questions about religion and belief became more concrete as students encountered visual expressions that served as claims about the miraculous.”

Although the exhibit included film photography (as opposed to digital), the photographic medium is relatable for many current undergraduates. Students engage with photography via phone or digital camera, often as part of everyday life. This may have been an important factor in an outcome suggested by both professors: that the exhibit function as a visual aid that allows students to draw connections to their personal experiences, affecting deeper engagement with the concepts of faith and reason.

Discussion, Analysis, and Outcomes

There were several positive outcomes from this project. First, it evidenced the necessity and advantages of campus partnerships. Collaborative planning encouraged viewpoints from multiple disciplines to help form the exhibit in its initial stages. Second, developing the exhibit in conjunction with the 2014/2015 RRW theme “Faith and Reason” helped it gain exposure by being part of campus programming. Along with other programming on faith and reason throughout the year, it contributed to a campus-wide dialogue on the theme. Collaborative planning also helped lay a foundation for using the exhibit as an interdisciplinary teaching tool. Partnership with the RRW programming not only helped promote the exhibit, but also positioned it to be a meaningful contribution to an important university initiative.

The ASI 120 project was an example of how archival collections can be used in the undergraduate curriculum. The value of using these materials in the course was asserted through positive feedback from the two instructors. Dr. Anthony Smith further emphasized this by noting that “visual and cultural objects are very useful for making complex issues more concrete and accessible for undergraduates.” Constructive feedback on the use of archival materials in this interdisciplinary setting suggests immense potential for future curricular integration projects.

Lastly, since the exhibit touched on concepts relevant to a range of disciplines such as religious studies, art and design, philosophy, and history, it invited a broad audience (faculty, staff, students, and the public) to encounter Catholic archival collections.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

There were also several areas in which the project could have been improved. Identifying ASI 120 instructors and discussing curricular integration with faculty earlier in the academic year would have allowed me to participate in more of the sessions. Additionally, assessment should be an integral component of future curricular integration projects. The feedback provided by two instructors who used the exhibit was invaluable. Assessment was not within the scope of this project, but it is necessary in future curricular integration projects in which the archivist plays a greater role in project development and instruction. However, including a student rubric, for example, would provide greater insight into the effectiveness of the sessions that incorporated archives. As Margia G. Kraus notes, assessment “can assist archivists to reflect upon the effectiveness of their teaching and encourage them to be more explicit about specific learning outcomes, skills, and how students will demonstrate what they are learning.”

As mentioned above, this project demonstrated the benefits of developing an archival exhibit in conjunction with a university-wide theme. Subsequent collaborations on exhibits or programming can also be intentionally developed in relation to future Rights.Rites.Writes. themes or other university programming. These types of partnerships will help extend and deepen the impact of exhibits. Contributions to campus initiatives will also help demonstrate the broad relevance of archival collections at the university.
Lastly, this project indicated the importance of cultivating faculty partnerships to support the use of archives in coursework; however, it also revealed that few faculty members are aware of the archival resources available on campus. One way to address this, for example, could be to host an informative session on using archives in the classroom. The session could introduce faculty to the archival resources that are available, provide examples of how archives can help support learning outcomes, and include a hands-on exercise to demonstrate practical approaches to curriculum integration. Using the example from ASI 120 could also help faculty understand ways that Catholic archival collections can be used in an interdisciplinary setting. This type of information session could help promote dialogue and collaboration between teaching faculty and librarians on the use of archives and special collections in the classroom.

Conclusion
Exhibits continue to be an important component of many archives and special collections programs. This case study suggests several considerations for leveraging archival exhibits. First, partnerships are a critical component of archival exhibits in both planning and promotion. Archivists working with exhibits can seek to encourage their use in the curriculum. Additionally, developing exhibits in conjunction with campus programing, such as Rights.Rites. Writes., can increase visibility, impact, and relevance. This case study also suggests the interdisciplinary potential of Catholic archival collections. Based on the outcomes of this project, next steps may include increasing outreach through a faculty education session and incorporating assessment rubrics as part of future curricular integration. Finally, cultivating partnerships around the use of archives can be mutually beneficial for the library, educators, and ultimately students.

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1 Jessica Lacher-Feldman, Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013), 7-16.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
10 For more on collaborative models in exhibit planning, see Polly McKenna-Cress and Janet A. Kramen, Creating Exhibitions: Collaboration in the Planning, Development, and Design of Innovative Experiences (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2013).
14 Heintz, A Guide to Apparitions of Our Blessed Virgin Mary; Laurentain, Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary Today; Varghese, God-Sent; and Zimdars-Swarta, Encountering Mary.
20 McKenna-Cress and Kramen, Creating Exhibitions, 23.
21 Joel Whitaker, Faith, Reason, and One-Hour Processing exhibit catalog (Dayton: University of Dayton, 2014), 2.
25 Una Cadegan, email message to author, May 27, 2015.
26 Ibid.
27 Anthony Smith, email message to author, May 28, 2015.
28 Ibid.