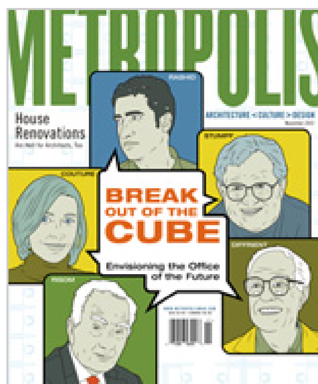


Burying the Past

In our rush to digitize the past, we may be destroying vast swathes of graphic-design history.

By Dan Nadel
November 2002

"We have the actual film from a battlefield camera that's directly captured the light reflected from a dying soldier's eyes," says Henry Wilhelm, consultant on long-term preservation to Corbis, the Bill Gates-owned image archives and digital resource, explaining the necessity of Corbis's move of the Bettmann archives to an underground facility in Pennsylvania. For Wilhelm, Ektachrome film shot by United Press International war correspondents is not only an instrument of information but a historical artifact and preserver of something as irreplaceable as, well, the light on a battlefield in Vietnam. That light would vanish forever were it not for Wilhelm and Corbis's preservation efforts. Other collections haven't been so lucky.

Corbis Bettmann is preserving its photo archive in an underground facility in Iron Mountain, PA (above). Digital storage methods can't capture the charm and interest of ancillary materials like the text that accompanies this photo (below).

Henry Wilhelm

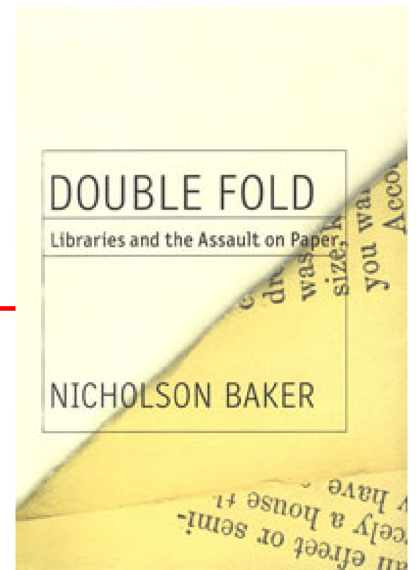
Corbis--a private for-profit corporation--has raised the hackles of photo researchers, but has unfairly been given a bad rap. In fact it should be a model for the institutions whose mandate is preservation. The core of the Corbis image archives is the Bettmann collection, which grew from two steamer trunks that Otto Bettmann left Germany with in 1935. Since its inception the collection has grown to 7.5 million unique images and has spawned several quirky books, such as *The Bettmann Portable Archives*, in which Bettmann arranged images by theme and phrase, producing humorous, idiosyncratic juxtapositions. But by the early 1990s the materials stored at Bettmann's Manhattan office were rotting: acetate negatives were badly decomposed, and photos were curling and yellowing. In the past researchers could go to the archives and look through prints and negatives under supervision. For New York-centered media, losing access to the archives is troubling, but preferable to losing the materials completely in the long term.

Offsite:
American Newspaper Repository, www.oldpapers.org.

Enter Corbis: its 1995 purchase of the Bettmann collection meant that funding was finally in place for long-term preservation. So in fall and winter 2001-2002, 18 semitrailer truckloads of documents went to a newly constructed repository in the Iron Mountain storage facility in western Pennsylvania, which opened last April. All Bettmann properties will be stored there at subzero temperatures to preserve them for what Wilhelm estimates will be thousands of years. It is open to the public by

appointment. Some 225,000 images are already available online for browsing, and scanning at the Iron Mountain facility is an ongoing daily activity; if the Web resource doesn't suffice, any researcher can call Corbis and ask after images and topics. Once a choice is made, images can be scanned or a trip to the archives can be arranged to view the original. Contrary to rumors and the funereal symbolism, Iron Mountain is not the burial of the Bettmann archives but rather a renewed life. Wilhelm hopes that the standard set by Corbis will "serve as a living example for other institutions."

Anyone looking to be alarmed would do better to talk to private patent researcher Randy Rabin, president of PatentArts, who rifles through recycling bins for lithographed patents by the likes of Thomas Edison. Since October 2001 the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) has thrown out nearly 50 percent of its examiner collections of patents dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. Three things are being lost: a filing system, a specialized drafting technique, and a historical record of invention. And the history of an entire design medium is being destroyed.



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The patent examiner's former classification system contained almost 500 classes of technology, each with hundreds of subdivisions. It allowed researchers to easily learn the history of a patent and compare it to other similar designs. "Seldom does an invention come along that is as out of the blue as the first lightbulb, or electric motor, or laser," Rabin says. "Most are incremental improvements that fit in or between other similar patents. Being able to quickly span a decade or so of similar work in a matter of an hour provides an inventor a context and history he can't find anywhere else, and usually results in a better invention."

Unfortunately the computer system that will replace the paper library functions much the way a search engine does on the Web. Rabin explains, "You fish around with some selected words and hope the patent you are seeking (the one that may mean trouble for your invention) has the same words that you have chosen to look for it." If a match doesn't come up, a researcher is out of luck.

Three-quarters of the patents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century contained beautifully lithographed drawings made by artisans that specialized in patent drafting; now their work is vanishing from public view forever. Beyond the delicate line quality and light and shade on display in, for example, Edison's 1893 patent for the Electric Locomotive (a recycling bin find), some of the patents, like R. S. Kibler's Continuously Variable Transmission, from 1936, were meticulously colored. The USPTO keeps a complete set of pristine patent drawings in the very same Iron Mountain facility as Corbis's collections. But the patent examiner's collection was a working one. Generations of examiners have added notes, new findings, and thoughts to the patent sheets, often in handwriting that can be dated by the style of its scrawl. This enabled each new examiner to see what his past colleagues thought of the invention, providing an invaluable picture of patent history. The black-and-white low-resolution scans available online at www.uspto.gov omit not only those notes (now lost forever) but the sheer beauty of the line quality, color, depth, and shade of the drawings.

"To save everything would," Rabin says glumly, "take a K-Mart"--about 75,000 square feet--to house the 6.5 million patents, which average 16 pages each. But he is doing his part via www.edisonsark.org, a Web site that includes color scans of the patents he has found, thus at least preserving the documents as they should be seen. For Rabin "the dilemma is how to preserve these patents and show what's being lost."

Nicholson Baker, author of *Vox*, *The Mezzanine*, *The Size of Thoughts*, and other books, is in a similar predicament. As detailed in his recent book, *Double Fold*, Baker is trying to save more than a century's worth of newspapers from destruction through his nonprofit American Newspaper Repository (www.oldpapers.org), a warehouse in New Hampshire that's open to the public. Out of the millions of

daily editions published over the decades, Baker has in many cases the only extant runs of hundreds of major metropolitan, small town, and foreign-language immigrant newspapers. He discovered that because of an unfounded theory that all newsprint would degenerate into dust, libraries--including the Library of Congress--have since the middle of last century microfilmed and then destroyed or auctioned thousands of bound volumes of newspapers. Now only black-and-white microfilm versions, often badly photographed, are all that's left of crucial chunks of American graphic and cultural history. More strikingly for the histories of comic strips, illustration, and graphic design, turn-of-the-century newspapers frequently had lengthy color sections including comics, fashion, sheet music, paper toys, and all manner of illustrations. The Yiddish *Forward*, like the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, is a deep well of rotogravure images, many of pre-WWII village life in Europe.

That doesn't translate into microfilm. Reading it, one can't duplicate the nonlinear process of scanning columns, headlines, and captions while holding the newspaper open. Baker believes that the "only way to understand what a city was like is to read the paper. Because all these problems were thought about constantly, day after day, cumulatively in a given year. When people begin to read the paper as it was meant to be read, it will change the texture of historical writing." Because many of these papers don't have indexes--including two of the most significant, the *New York Tribune* and the *New York World*--discoveries are just waiting to be made. Many of O. Henry's first short stories appeared in the *World* alongside his own illustrations, and Stephen Crane was a crime reporter for the *New York Tribune*.

Baker's book and the founding of the American Newspaper Repository (which he hopes eventually to give to a major institution) have helped the cause, but he continues to make unusual finds, such as the only extant complete run of *USA Today* from 1992 to 2000. That a graphic-design landmark so recent and so widely distributed could be so rare highlights the necessity of Baker's cause. He hopes his example of storage and accessibility will show that "it's not that hard to do, especially for public institutions whose job it is to keep what's published."

In her essay "Researching Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*," Susan Buck-Morss describes her encounter with Benjamin's recently rediscovered notes, incidental writings, and other ephemera related to his incomplete masterpiece, *Passagen-Werk*. The papers were festooned with traces of the author's elaborate color-coded filing systems, doodles, and notes to himself. All of that at the time of her research was also being lost to microfiche and then stowed away. Feeling the loss acutely, Buck-Morss notes that "the fascination of this new find was not the information it contained.... Rather, it was [its] unintentional inclusion of traces from Benjamin's life, the day's residue that entered into his work in a material sense."

For her--as for Wilhelm, Rabin, and Baker--it's the essence of the life lived that dwells within these artifacts. When we destroy it, what potential clues to be followed by unknown sleuths are vanishing? What is insignificant now may be monumentally important in 50 years. The loss of patents, newspapers, and images of all kinds amounts to a loss not only of vast swathes of graphic history but of the records of our collective cultural life. We should be grateful that, regardless of the inconvenience, some people are trying to save it.

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