

# Ephemera



Ephemera is simply material that is intended for only short-term use. Bus tickets, biscuit wrappers, cinema posters, election leaflets, instruction leaflets, labels—these are only a few examples of the vast range of ephemeral items printed every day. Although some are produced with great care and attention to detail, particularly when they are for large companies with an eye to their image, many are produced casually, and in consequence reflect the tastes and attitudes of their time in an unaffected way. This was even more the case in the past, when most printing was designed during production by the craftsmen involved, rather than by an artistically-trained external designer. Ephemera can therefore provide an interesting insight into social history: “Whistling, shouting, & standing on the seats” in small print at the foot of a nineteenth century theatre poster reveals a different world to today’s theatre-going. Making your own collection

of ephemera (restricted to some theme for practicality!) could prove interesting: a collection of takeaway menus from 1960 to today, for example, would surely reveal much about changing tastes, prices, and even culture.

While book printing is the most prestigious branch of the industry, and newspaper and magazine production is also a major and high-profile section, the printing of ephemera outweighs both in scale and variety, and actually pre-dates both of them. When Gutenberg was perfecting his invention, and printing his first book, the 42-line bible, he was having financial difficulties, and the first dated piece of printing was a church indulgence certificate produced in 1454, a year before the bible was ready. Even before Gutenberg and letterpress, the block printing process (being less suited to books in any case) had been used for ephemeral items such as

prayer sheets and banknotes for hundreds of years.

In Gutenberg’s time the church was the biggest bureaucracy around, and bureaucracies are major consumers of ephemera, from receipts to certificates, and the growth of civil government, and then industrial offices led to a steady increase in the production. While these were the bread-and-butter routine work of many small printing firms, they offered a great variety in the minor problems of production, and must have provided many craftsmen with an outlet for their creativity and a relief from the boredom of the length of time spend on routine type-setting and running of the presses.

Because of its commercial importance, particularly in the nineteenth century, ephemeral printing stimulated the production of different typefaces and decorative material. While this resulted in plenty of dreadful distortions of letter

shapes, it also produced many robust and lively styles including the basic sans-serif and slab-serif concepts.

The major change in ephemeral printing was the rise of the advertising industry in the twentieth century, and with it the separation of the designing from the printing. This was part of the general industrial move from shop-floor craft skills, to subdivided professional careers. Where in the past, each printer or firm would in one way or another often leave their mark on the style of the work they produced, this was no longer the case: the aim was to make printing for one customer look identical, no matter where it was produced. Globalisation has affected printing, as it has so many other areas.

So commonplace its very ubiquity makes it unnoticed, ephemera is in any ways the ‘real’ face of printing: printing in its everyday clothes.