“What Popped Up in a College Library?”

In 2008, Bowdoin alumnus Harold M. Goralnick donated his collection of pop-up books to his alma mater, Bowdoin College, a small liberal arts school in Brunswick, Maine. Numbering over 1,700 titles and reflecting his specific collecting tastes, the offer of this gift presented immediate questions for Bowdoin. How did this material fit in with other of the College’s book arts collections? How could pop-up books complement an essentially “traditional” liberal arts curriculum? Could an academic library with modest resources afford to catalog, house, and service such a substantial collection? Would the collection remain static, or did the donor have the expectation of continued growth and concomitant institutional commitment? What digital presence and public programming would the collection demand?

[READING ROOM] This is where I live (architect: Ann Beha). Cold call Nov. 2007 exploring gift v. purchase. Somewhere during the call, I referred to the term “movable book”, and this seemed to give me some credibility as someone who knew something about the narrow segment of the book world that was so important to him.

With Special Collections holdings numbering 45,000 volumes of rare books and over 1,200 linear feet of manuscripts, Bowdoin already had a written collection development policy, shaped by established holdings, faculty interests, and curriculum. Pop-ups seemed essentially outside the scope of those collecting parameters.

However, we had a long tradition of receiving large gifts, beginning with James Bowdoin’s library bequest in 1811 (3rd largest institutional library in the country). In the 20th century, we received the Susan Dwight Bliss collection, a beaux arts library of rare books in fine bindings, many acquired through the famous Hoe sales of the early 20th century, along with the actual library room that had housed them in the Bliss Manhattan mansion. Other large gifts included substantial collections of books from the Southworth-Anthoensen and Mosher printing concerns based in Portland, Maine.

On the other hand, we also have had a tradition, in the recent past, of avoiding or transferring collections that truly belonged elsewhere: eg.: large sci-fi fantasy collection, which had been given to Bowdoin but was transferred to Brown with the donor’s blessings, and substantial archives of a learned society, relocated to GW; research collections on Mediterranean archaeology, and on Manhattan, which we declined.

The importance of alumni relations, and reliance on gifts due to our limited purchasing power, remain important factors in puzzling gift offers. So, we were simultaneously
struggling about whether or not we really wanted this collection while we were trying to persuade him to give it to us.

How would these books, which the donor described as being mainly US pop-ups dating from the 1960s on, fit in with our collections, and would they find an audience here? We were especially concerned about leaving the impression that a large stash of “popular” kiddie-lit would trivialize the collection and compromise the reputation of the college—at least I was. The last thing I wanted was someone who had an imperfect understanding about pop-ups in general and this collection in particular complaining to whomever would hear him that Bowdoin’s acquiring a bunch of pop-up books was a sign that Bowdoin’s “losing its way.”

Although Bowdoin has had only occasional specific academic interest in popular culture, in our favor were:

- Strong curricular interests in children’s literature and, through Art History faculty, illustrating natural history.
- Collections of graphic and visual arts, which complement the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (where there are strong holdings in works-on-paper, especially printmaking)
- Book arts: Including works from fine presses such as the Gehenna Press, the Limited Editions Club, and the Arion Press, among others
- Artists’ books: approx. 300, produced both nationally and internationally, with about 1/3 by Maine artists, addressing teaching interests not only at Bowdoin, but for book arts classes regionally, especially from MECA and USM, neighbors to the south.

As a subset of “Toy and movable books”, pop-up share structural features often found among our artists’ books:

[COMPOUND FLAG BOOK, in which motion is an important element]
[CERAMIC quasi-diorama]
[TUNNEL BOOK, this one emulating a sheet film back]
[FLEXAGON, requiring manipulation for reading]
[DOS-A-DOS ACCORDION FOLD pop-up alphabet book]
[TABLE TOP PAPER SCULPTURE]
[POP-UP FEATURE in a fine-press book, Ron Keller (Red Angel Press)]
[POP-UP ACCORDION FOLD for table top display]

So, in the winter of 2007/2008, I traveled to Goralnick’s home in Haverhill, Mass. where a portion of his basement was devoted to shelves and piles of boxes filled with pop-up books—nearly 2,000—representing close to a decade of collecting.

[SUBJECT LIST] shown here, if you can see it, is a distributed display of subject headings for the collection—I should have distributed binoculars at the door....

A lifelong collector, Harry’s interest in pop-up books was piqued in the late ’90s, and he pursued the passion with vigor, introduced himself to important figures in the pop-up community, notably Ellen Rubin and Ann Montanaro, and spent the years buying and selling, sometimes complete collections, to acquire the materials that interested him most—as is usually the case for serious collectors, he loved the chase as much as the possession. He collected works categorically by engineers, pop-up series, and topic (dinosaurs, for example, or Star Wars), and he had determined for a variety of reasons (essentially philanthropic) to end that obsession and to disburse the holdings. I recognized early on that he would not appreciate our “cherry-picking” the collection, and I further could imagine the tremendous value that such a collection en masse could have for a us as a research
resource, and so we happily came to an agreement for Bowdoin to acquire the collection, duplicates excepted.

[BOXES] After a few months of back-and-forth communication, the gift was agreed to, and in February 2008 the books came to Bowdoin.

This is what 1,700 pop-up books looks like (almost—add another section)

[NISTER] We were under pressure to catalog the collection within 6 months, which we accomplished by getting different species of librarian staff to play well together. I can address our “expedited” process in detail later if there is interest—briefly, it involved student labor to compile lists of ISBN nos., batch searching those book numbers in OCLC, enlisting staff untrained in cataloging to perform “constant data” and update/export functions, and my review of records to fortify the cataloging with essential but frequently wanting access points, esp. for engineers and series titles.

[COMMAS] Although we think of a juvenile readership for pop-ups, and we should, many pop-ups have a mixed or an adult audience. In curating the collection, I am constantly seeking “a reader for every book.” Class use, exhibition, ILL, and the unwashed community have emerged most significantly, although I have yet to find a reader for this unusual piece, one of my favorites.

[CARTER] Some pop-up books are playful or intriguing rather than pictorial or narrative (this one is constructed on the “where’s Waldo” theme, with a yellow square hidden within a variety of intricate pop-up structures). It becomes difficult to single out particular titles for particular interests—we have compiled a “misc.” box of books, containing widely various samples, that we provide for curious and casual readers and that serve to instruct and to inspire students interested in book design and “narrative structures,” topics taught regularly both at Bowdoin and at nearby institutions, whose students are welcome to use our collections.

[CINDERELLA] For others, matching interest with use is obvious. An English Lit class on fairy tales, stressing how layout and illustration inform the reading, has drawn from the collection heavily, including this miniature set in 0.5 pt. type.

[MOBIUS] A prof in Math Dept installed an exhibition in the Art Museum entitled “Intersections Between Math and Art” that included this M.C Escher pop-up, [LEONARDO] and this one devoted to Leonardo da Vinci.

[WARHOL] There are so great a variety of works, beyond simply juvenile books, that we see a nearly infinite set of possibilities from this presumably pedestrian set of works. Even a medieval intellectual historian at Bowdoin, interested particularly in the creation story in Genesis, has made use of the collection.

[SEX] You knew this was coming—pull the tab, and the feather duster lifts and lowers in a spanking motion—this and other examples of erotica, including several pop-up versions of the Kama Sutra and a “mix-and-match” sex manual, have found no customers yet (except for today).

How do pop-up books, particularly ours, fit in with the digital world?

[MIT] An interactive electronic pop-up book created at MIT illustrates the intention and the problem. An interesting piece, but unreliably demonstrated. I’m not picking on MIT—we have plenty of 404s on our Web site, and so have all of you. But this example demonstrates both the transitory nature of the Web and also, paradoxically, its ability to proliferate and perpetuate.

[HACK A DAY]—while the MIT site is inhospitable, the book itself is demoed elsewhere—on at least two other sites, including this one, that GOOGLE provided with ease.

Meanwhile, there are dozens of Web sites that serve either as blogs or online exhibitions devoted to pop-up books.
This one hosted by the Smithsonian uses Flickr technology to showcase books from various of its libraries, especially at the Cooper-Hewitt. Others, hosted variously by dealers, publishers, paper engineers themselves, or academic institutions, offer narratives and images (sometimes using Flash, RealPlayer or QuickTime—in an attempt to animate the image or to simulate the functionality of a pop-up book). These sites are useful in characterizing collections and works, and they are important resources for exploration and edification. But none of them is adequate in satisfying the ultimate desire for a digital surrogate that replicates the “performance” of reading a movable book. Nor, by the way, has it been demonstrated that serving up such a surrogate would fall within “fair use” for works protected by copyright law.

The reason is obvious. For many of the visual resources we find in libraries and museums, although digital surrogates serve useful functions, replicating the experience of viewing or handling the original is not one of them.

At Bowdoin, rather than investing heavily in online publicity, we are focused instead on fortifying the online catalog. We want to provide catalog users with the ability to browse visually a thumbnail of works for which the prescribed descriptions found in normal book cataloging seem inadequate. The binding note for this item reads in part: “...in full black morocco with agate stone, red leather inlays, and Japanese paper cut "forest" diorama inside flap of upper cover....”

More useful, it seems to us, is to show a snapshot adapting technology that the vendor Syndetics customarily provides for book cover views within our online catalog. We create the thumbnails and enlarged views, which are batch-loaded through linking with the OCLC ID number that appears in the respective MARC record--clicking on the thumbnail renders the enlarge view.

Thus, until—if ever—copyright law and technology (maybe 3-D viewing will improve the results of digital surrogates for movable books) provide clearer paths through the maze of intellectual property rights and “virtual performance,” our efforts at promoting and providing access to our pop-up book collection will mainly be personal and individual. As Moerbeek’s The Pop-Up Book of Sex demonstrates, nothing truly compares with the real thing.