

“Author, Author!”

Address to the Caxton Club of Chicago, June 20, 2007,

By Gary T. Johnson, President, Chicago History Museum

Information on the Caxton Club of Chicago is available at:

<http://www.caxtonclub.org>

The Caxton Club of Chicago was founded in 1895 by fifteen Chicago bibliophiles who desired to support the publication of fine books in the spirit of the prevailing Arts and Crafts Movement. They named the new organization the "Caxton Club" in honor of the first English printer, William Caxton. Now in its second century, the Club is an organization of authors, binders, collectors, conservators, dealers, designers, editors, librarians, publishers, and scholars who share a common interest in the arts pertaining to the production of books.

Recently, a project that I started at the Chicago History Museum circled back on me and two of my colleagues asked me a series of questions. The first was this: “When it comes right down to it, what do we do here at the Chicago History Museum?” After a year and a half on the job, my answer was very simple: “We *collect* and we *engage*.”

Engaging is what the public is most interested in. It’s what they usually want to hear about when they invite me to give a speech. And we engage in a wide variety of ways, because it’s not enough to just put something out in a display case and hope for the best.

We engage with young children by letting them become a Chicago hot dog.

We engage with Chicagoans by displaying artifacts and interpreting the city’s own story.

We engage with Chicago’s immigrants through Spanish labels and a growing number of foreign language audio tours.

We engage with civic discussions by talking about the past, present and future of Chicago as a global crossroads.

We engage schools through field trips, curriculum and school visits. I have visited over 100 classrooms myself, with photos and artifacts from the Great Chicago Fire. I am proud to report that this past May of 2007, over 10,500 students visited our museum on field trips – the second highest ever, and the highest since 9/11.

We have public programs. We have our website. We host the Encyclopedia of Chicago's on-line version.¹

Thanks to John K. Notz, Jr., we are the Chicago Public Library's partner in this year's summer reading program, a program that last year, engaged 45,000 students. Maybe those kids will be as lucky as I was as a kid. (Here's the book I remember reading one summer, a book that absolutely delighted me and nourished my love of history and especially English history. You guessed it! *Caxton's Challenge*.²)

But today, thanks to the Caxton Club, I finally have the opportunity to talk about our other activity – not *engaging*, but *collecting*.

And boy, do we collect! Our collection numbers some 22 million holdings.

The web creates the illusion that knowledge exists in the ether, but I let me assure you that knowledge has a weight—measured in pounds; a length—measured in linear feet; and a bulk—measured in what can be piled on forklift pallets. Including our own museum, we have four major storage facilities in two counties. The age of the computer has done nothing yet to relieve this bulk;

¹ Janice L. Reiff, et al. **Encyclopedia of Chicago. The Chicago Historical Society, The Newberry Library and Northwestern University.** (2005-7). <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/>

² Cynthia Harnett, **Caxton's Challenge.** Cleveland, World Publishing Company. (First American edition, 1960).

maybe just the opposite. The papers of a one-term U.S. Senator were donated to us in 1,000 banker's boxes. As your mental paradigm shifts to the new digital world, keep this in mind: There are still people in this world who physically care for our memories. Memory has a weight, and the memory of a great city has a very great weight.

But you at the Caxton Club know this better than anybody. You are the ones who have a loving care for knowledge in its physical form. You are the ones who understand bindings and folios. You know that, at bottom, knowledge is three-dimensional. Knowledge is something that you can hold carefully in your hands.

What I would like to talk about with you today is what I have learned from the way that *other* people use our collection. That sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it? "Learning from other people," but that's the way it is when you have the care of a world-class collection. People come to you for *their* reasons, but if you look carefully, the lessons are there.

It came to my attention early on, that whenever an author gets permission to use our collection, whether in the form of an extended quotation or through the use of an image, part of the deal is that they agree to send us the finished product, whether a book or a movie. Any medium, really.

So I exercised a presidential prerogative and asked that every month, I wanted all those books and films to come to me before they land in the library. I have created a website called "**Author, Author!**", where I list those publications that show up each month and choose some for a capsule review. The goal is to illustrate the diversity of our collection and, more importantly, to learn about the different ways that people use our collection.

Some of what I have learned is unwelcome. Guess what attracts the largest number of hits on our website and on the on-line site of the *Encyclopedia of Chicago* that we manage? You guessed it -- Al Capone. (Did I tell you that they

even need to send us games when they license our collection?³ I found that out when an Al Capone game arrived!)

We can be proud of certain trends. It is almost impossible to write a serious book about Abraham Lincoln without using our collection, and the credits show it. Not only Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*⁴, but so many others.⁵

It is almost impossible to write a serious book about Chicago without using our collection.⁶ Many wonderful books have been published since I arrived, one of the most important is Carl Smith's *The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City*.⁷ Another is Tim Gilfoyle's, *Millennium Park: Creating a Chicago Landmark*.⁸

I am happy to say that works about Chicago minorities rely to our collection including, *Forgotten Genius*, (a television documentary on the life of Dr. Percy Julian, produced for "Nova". Percy Julian was born in 1899 Alabama and lived his most productive years in Chicago as a pioneering organic chemist.⁹)

We are proud to have been helpful to Chicago's Olympic Committee.¹⁰

³ TUSBAS Alliance, *King of Chicago*. (2005).

⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Simon and Schuster. (2006).

⁵ Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf. (2006).

⁶ Jerry Crimmins, *Fort Dearborn*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press. (2006).

See also: Charles J. Masters, *Governor Henry Horner, Chicago Politics and the Great Depression*. Illinois, Southern Illinois University Press. (2007).

Our own Chief Historian, Russell Lewis, recently provided the text for a beautifully-produced volume with 200 images from the collection of the Chicago History Museum. Russell Lewis (ed. text and captions): *Historic Photos of Chicago*. Nashville, Turner Publishing Company. (2006).

⁷ Carl Smith, *The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press. (2006).

⁸ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *Millennium Park: Creating a Chicago Landmark*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press. (2006).

⁹ Stephen and Llewellyn M. Smith, *Forgotten Genius*, (a television documentary on the life of Dr. Percy Julian) Nova/PBS. (2007). Another recent example is: Robert J. Blakley and Marcus Shepard, *Earl B. Dickerson: A Voice for Freedom and Equality*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press. (2006).

¹⁰ Chicago 2016 Committee, *Chicago 2016: Stir the Soul* (video). Chicago, City of Chicago. (2007). If you have any doubt that history is an integral part of Chicago's Olympic bid, let me quote from the film: "This is a city that reversed the flow of a river. A city that rose from the Great Fire of 1871. A city that

Books about Chicago architecture always include us, whether written in English or in foreign languages.¹¹

Of course, we are in a book about jazz.¹²

These are the areas where you would expect to see our collection used. But there are so many others, as the stream of publications crossing my desk indicates. It almost seems at random.

Sometimes a Chicago twist comes as no surprise: ***American Jewish History***.¹³

But Fred Basten's book, ***Great American Billboards?***¹⁴

Mark Allen Jackson's bio of Woody Guthrie?¹⁵

But a history of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania?¹⁶

Sometimes we take particular pride in our inclusion. We have two million photographs in our collection, and one of them is in **Janson's History of Art**.¹⁷

works, but also a city that plays...with world-class festivals, museums, sports teams and more. Chicago has always been associated with fire. This time, it would be at the end of an Olympic torch." The Chicago History Museum is proud that its archives and images are playing a role in Olympic history in the making.

¹¹ Arnt Cobbers, **Frank Lloyd Wright: Life and Work: Architecture in Focus**. Germany, Konemann. (2006). Jeannine Fiedler, **Bauhaus (Design)**. Germany, Konemann. (English edition published 2006).

¹² Richard Lawn, **Experiencing Jazz**. United States, McGraw-Hill. (2006).

¹³ Norman H. Finkelstein, **American Jewish History**. United States, Jewish Publication Society of America. (2007).

See also: Peter M. Ascoli, **Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South**. Bloomington, Indiana University Press. (2006).

¹⁴ Fred E. Basten, **Great American Billboards: 100 Years of History by the Side of the Road**. California, Ten Speed Press. (2007).

¹⁵ Mark Allen Jackson, **Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie**. Mississippi, The University Press of Mississippi. (2007).

¹⁶ Randall M. Miller, **Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth**. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press. (2002).

¹⁷ H.W. and Anthony F. Janson, **A Basic History of Western Art**. New Jersey, Prentice Hall. (Seventh edition published 2006).

It's Alexander Gardner's **Alexander Gardner**, "**Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter**" (5th July, 1863).¹⁸

I can report that Chicago art is hot. Recently, there was an exhibition of Chicago paintings in Philadelphia. This is the Childe Hassam, "**The Electricity Building, World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.**" It is much requested, most recently for this exhibition on American art put together by an Italian museum.¹⁹

How in the world do people find out that our collection, or any collection, has what the world is looking for? Lincoln, yes. Chicago, yes. But billboards? Childe Hassam?

Now the story gets complicated, despite the fact that we supposedly are living in the digital age.

So we're going to take a little detour into astrophysics. Our inspiration will be Geoffrey Chaucer. You know, of course, that Chaucer wrote the first technical manual known in the English language, **A Treatise on the Astrolabe**, written in about 1391. It apparently was written for Lewis, the son of a friend, on how to use this mysterious new device for reading the stars:

Lyte Lowys my sone, I aperceyve wel by certeyne evydences thyn abilite to lerne sciences touching nombres and proporciouns....²⁰

So here we go, members of the Caxton Club. With Chaucer as our inspiration, literary people can tackle astrophysics (at least metaphorically).

¹⁸ Alexander Gardner, **Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter**. (5th July, 1863). There is an intriguing theory that the body portrayed in the photograph actually was moved 40 yards to the site. See: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphhtml/cwpcam/cwcam3c.html>.

¹⁹ Marco Goldin, **America!** Treveso, Linea d'ombrali Libri. (2007). Catalogue for exhibition prepared by Santa Giulia in Brescia, Italy.

²⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, **A Treatise on the Astrolabe**. (1391). See: <http://www.schoollibrary.com/eBooks/Wordtheque/en/221695.TXT>

Let's start with the visible universe. That's our world, the world of our five senses. The world of what we can perceive directly.

Its counterpart is this digital era is what you can find on the web. That's the most visible universe of knowledge. It's what you can see directly without leaving your chair. Just like the visible universe, what you see on the web is colorful and stimulating. There's so much there on the web, that you fall into the illusion that *everything* is there. It all seems so self-sufficient. It's so rich and so vast. What more could there be?

But it turns out that we can see directly only about 4% of the total energy density in the universe.²¹ That's the visible universe – just 4%. And so it is with collections. I can't tell you what the percentage is, but only a tiny portion of what museums hold has been digitized and put on the web. Probably even less than 4%!

We are making progress, but only slowly. Thanks to the Dorothy and Gaylord Donnelley Foundation, we are digitizing the legacy of the architectural photography firm of Hedrich-Blessing. Thank goodness that Hedrich-Blessing continues to capture our city's new architecture, with its "consummate photographic artistry, verve, and authority!"²²

The undigitized holdings in our collections are our own versions of dark matter. You know about dark matter, don't you? Dark matter cannot be observed directly. We infer its presence from indirect effects on what we *can* see.

²¹ **Dark Matter.** Wikipedia. (2007). See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_matter

²² Charles Waldheim and Katerina Ruedi Ray, eds. **Chicago Architecture: Histories, Revisions, Alternatives.** Chicago, The University of Chicago Press. (2005). The article by Robert A. Sobieszek gives the architectural photography of Hedrich-Blessing its due, with its "consummate photographic artistry, verve, and authority." Its photographs of the Century of Progress reveal "the visual exuberance, the flare for the operatic, and the essential spirit of futurism that is shared by both image and building." Thank goodness that Hedrich-Blessing continues to capture our city's new architecture, with its "consummate photographic artistry, verve, and authority!"

Cosmologists believe that dark matter accounts for some 22% of the known universe, much larger than what we can see in the visible universe.

In the world of collections, the largely undigitized museum and library holding are dark matter. You cannot observe it directly on the web. You may see indirect indications that it exists in *references* on the web, but to observe it directly, you need to pay a visit to the museum, where, because of the sheer weight of the collection, it is rare that you can show up and get what you want in an instant.

People continue to stream into our Research Center, and the results of their work appear on Author, Author, but it is axiomatic that in the digital world, this old-fashioned work of visiting collections represents a declining portion of *all* the writing that is done. If you have children or grandchildren in school, you may have noticed that they seem to be able to write reports that earn top grades without leaving their chairs. The visible world of knowledge is rich and seems complete. But of course it is not complete. Most of the holdings are undigitized dark matter.

In fact, it's worse than you think. Even digitizing our catalogues is an enormous task. Again, I would venture to say, that most catalogues of most museums and libraries, are not fully digitized.

But we're making progress. The different formats that we have inherited from libraries, archives and special collections have converged into a computer-based version that can migrate when one application is replaced by another. Our retrospective conversion, as we call it, is making great progress. And we have our catalogue on-line with a fine search capability called "Archie," named for Archibald Motley, our late archivist. It covers a large part of our collection.²³

²³ In 1999, the Chicago History Museum acquired Horizon software, a MARC-based integrated library management system, made by a company whose name keeps changing (now SirsiDynix). CHM's Horizon online public library catalog, named ARCHIE, is at www.chsmedia.org.

So there still is a physical side to all of this. Visits still matter. Otherwise, the dark matter in our collections, like the dark matter in the universe, can only be observed indirectly.

Remember Chaucer and our lesson in cosmology? Maybe you've been doing the math. If 4% is the visible universe and 22% is dark matter – what about the rest? The remaining 74% is called “dark energy.” That's a category about which we know just about nothing, but it must be diffused in space. “The data paint a picture of the universe as a virtual sea of dark energy, with billions of galaxies as islands emerging from the sea....”²⁴

We cannot even observe the effects indirectly as we can for dark matter. Visual representations of dark energy are very hypothetical.

What is the counterpart for dark energy in the world of collections?

That, of course, is everything that has not been collected at all, the ephemera that is discarded, the books that get moldy, the photos that get thrown out when you clean out granny's apartment, the family stories that are told, but never written down. And in particular, the stories of marginal groups who do not have the attention of collectors.

And we're swimming in it. We're swimming in the stories of Chicago's communities, stories that vanish before they are recorded. Stories of how people arrived here, the conditions that they faced, the obstacles they overcame.

²⁴ “The data paint a picture of the universe as a virtual sea of dark energy, with billions of galaxies as islands emerging from the sea, said Fabio Governato, a University of Washington research associate professor of astronomy and a researcher with Italy's National Institute for Astrophysics.”
http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.universetoday.com/am/uploads/2005-0317energy-full.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.universetoday.com/am/publish/dark_energy_neighbourhood.html&h=800&w=800&sz=168&hl=en&start=5&um=1&tbnid=akmupZNHHSZJjM:&tbnh=143&tbnw=143&prev=/images%3Fq%3Ddark%2Benergy%26snum%3D10%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26rls%3DGGLG,GGLG:2005-40,GGLG:en

Stories of their families, their houses of worship, their schools and their economic and social life.

And every day, there is loss. Loss of the letters sent home from the front in World War II that were tossed when the house was sold. Loss of personal knowledge of living through the Depression. Loss of the memory of what it was to live in the Mississippi Delta and dream of making a break for another life in Chicago.

James Russell Lowell said, “New occasions teach new duties....”²⁵ But he might have added, “but we must never forget the old duties.”

Yes, museums will digitize, and we are doing it as best we can, as fast as we can, but we also need to care for the physical side of our collection and put it to work by engaging with the students and the specialists who need to experience it directly.

And private collectors play a part, maybe even the biggest part, in rescuing material. You are out there engaging with historical material every day. It is very active work. You rescue material and you gather it together. You care for it. You treasure it. You are on the front lines of transforming the sea of memory into something collectable and something workable.

And museums, with all the physical weight of their holdings, are surrounded by seas of memory that may wash away. So the collecting must go on -- the collecting of artifacts, the collecting of documents, the collecting of oral histories. And to do that, we need to engage with communities.

Have you noticed something? Even when it comes to collecting, what it comes down to is **engaging**. It turns out there *is* a grand unified theory of what we do at the Chicago History Museum. What we do is **we engage**.

²⁵ James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Man and Nation.” (1849).

As with exhibitions, so with collections. We have a duty to make our catalogue transparent to the world through the new visible world of the web. We have a duty to engage the public through our physical collection, the collection you still have to come and visit. And we have a duty to engage with Chicago's communities because we are swimming in a sea of memories, memories that otherwise may be lost could be lost.

Thank you for the privilege of sharing our thoughts with the Caxton Club of Chicago.