

Doc Chat Episode Six Transcript

IAN FOWLER: All right. Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for coming to Episode 6 of Doc Chat. I am Ian Fowler, the curator of maps and geospatial librarian for the New York Public Library. If it's anybody's first time, Doc Chat is a weekly program series from NYPL Center for Research in the Humanities. That digs deep into the stories behind the Library's most interesting collections. And highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Tal Nadan, reference archivist for the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division of the New York Public Library, Schwarzman Building, welcomes Dr. Ann Schoenfeld, an art and graphic design historian. Ann's areas of expertise are 20th-century art and graphic design. In other words, modernism in art and graphic design. And she joins us today to discuss how this is played out in the graphic material of the 1939 New York World's Fair. Take it away.

ANN SCHOENFELD: Hi everyone.

TAL NADAN: Hi everyone, and welcome. I'm happy to be joining you from the Center for Research in the Humanities at the Schwarzman Building. It's really appropriate that you're the one having this conversation. Not only as a historian and scholar of the time period but also someone who has talked with this material. So we welcome your expertise in both of those areas. We plan on starting this conversation, a very traditional art historical class set. Which is a formal analysis of this poster that you are looking at -- the digitized image of a poster that you are looking at on your screen. So we welcome your sort of initial reactions in the chat if you could set your settings to all panelists and attendees. We'd love to see what resonates with you when you first glance at it.

So what do you notice about the composition of this form? There's certain things that you can't see such as the size, but there are things that you can read.

ANN SCHOENFELD: And what we're talking about when we say composition is specifically not the objects as objects, but colors, lines, shapes.

TAL NADAN: Yeah, There's two great comments here already. The upward vectors giving that sort of directionality, what's going on in the poster? But also, both people have said that it's very futuristic, which you can sense. But it's putting that into actual words about its physical composition is difficult. I know it's kind of hard to see the --

ANN SCHOENFELD: -- that's a good description since we're talking about the World of Tomorrow as we can read on the poster.

TAL NADAN: Yeah, And since this is something if you've gone to the link, you can zoom in. but I'm also going to put up a couple of details. And at this point, yeah, let's start naming a couple of objects that you see in the posters.

ANN SCHOENFELD: What are the red things in the upper -- we have a question. What are the red things in the upper corner?

TAL NADAN: Answered by Laura, those are airplanes.

ANN SCHOENFELD: Definitely, airplanes. Notice, not jets.

TAL NADAN: It is 1939 after all. A ship, there's footsteps?

ANN SCHOENFELD: Actually, yes. We're seeing train, boat, travel. These are all really important objects that suggest an important theme of the poster, which is travel. Which encourages people to come to the world's fair. But all of these images, all of these boats, airplanes. And on the left is a detail of the poster, and that red line going horizontally across as a train. So these are major modes of transportation that can bring you to the fair. But it also speaks about the very modern nature of the fair. Okay, these are technologically advanced and very, very popular ways to travel. Well, the steamship and the -- if you're coming from Europe, most likely you would travel that way or on the train. Airplane travel is more of a formal, well, you could say formation or pattern. It suggests the present and the future.

TAL NADAN: Excellent point from Nora here, thinking about transportation. Also that LaGuardia Airport opens in 1939. We're already talking about the cultural context of what's happening during the time of this fair. I would, like if anyone wants to take a stab at the item on -- the detail on the upper-right. It's a little bit hard to read, but that is actually the signature of this artist. So he is named.

ANN SCHOENFELD: Right, Joseph Binder, who was an Austrian immigrant to the United States at the almost height of his career. So he was hired by the New York World's Fair Corporation to design this particular poster.

TAL NADAN: Yeah. So there's a couple of significant features that commenters have already called out. That this is a night scene; you're seeing a skyline of New York sort of very stylized. And the approximate geographic location, where it is on this orb to be assumed as a globe. One thing about color, which is very tricky with working with digitized objects. This is a poster that was digitized in 2010, but the colors are already fading. The New York World's Fair had a very significant color story. And it's the same as the New York Mets'; it's white, orange and blue, which actually is the same as New Amsterdam.

ANN SCHOENFELD: The state of New York's colors.

TAL NADAN: Yeah. We're going to talk about this poster in context of other world's fair promotional materials. Anne, would you like to tell us a little bit more about the overarching style of these?

ANN SCHOENFELD: The overarching style? Well, I do want to point out something about posters, in general, is that they're intended to be glanced at and understood quickly. Which means that both the aesthetic elements and as they're composed along with the text, should come across in a striking way and almost immediate way to the viewer. Of course, you know, these communicate directly to people who speak English because of the languages that they're printed in. But I want -- I would -- note that we could start with just something that you don't notice right away. But in almost every case, you start with a background, just the background that's flat. And that becomes almost a springboard for the other elements that are included in the posters. Now, I don't want to take up too much time. I could go on and on about this. I want to know if there are any questions or comments that we're looking at in the chat that --

TAL NADAN: Well, you can see similarities between all of these posters in the vibrant colors. And some of these are by named artists; some of them we don't know as much. But you're starting to also pick out the Tylon and Perisphere, which is the emblem of the world's fair. Which we'll talk about more in a little moment. I just want to point out that one of the great aspects of working with digitized images in this way, is that physically you wouldn't be able to see all these examples together. Like, think about a museum; you can't just rearrange things as you'd like. But for teaching purposes, you can actually put things together to show the narrative of modernism in that way. And we also are both wondering about the woman on the poster

ANN SCHOENFELD: And that idea of narrative in modernism is interesting because, on the left, my left is the Joseph Binder poster. And in the center poster, the designers use stencil techniques and airbrush. On the right, you see photographs. And that is a real hallmark of a new way to incorporate imagery in this almost collage-like way. At the time it was called photo montage

TAL NADAN: To return to Binder for one more moment, we have talked about it as sort of a visual object. But we haven't talked about its content too much. So the text itself, The World of Tomorrow, is the slogan of the 1939 World's Fair. It's interesting because a modern viewer definitely knows that 1939 is a pretty scary time, internationally. But think about how this was created, that they had to think of the slogan in the mid-1930s. And they were aiming towards the suspicious time at the same point that international conflict is rising.

ANN SCHOENFELD: The Fair was planned, as you say, in the mid-1930s. And had it's one of its goal to help people coming out of the depression. And present the strengths of business, technology, both nationally and internationally to whoever comes to the fair and sees the publicity.

TAL NADAN: To return to the Tylon and Perisphere for a second, these were physically the center of the fairgrounds. They would orient you as you're navigating all the different regions that the fair set up. It also becomes the emblem of the fair. It's used in -- If you look at any document from 1939 like the Department of Parks, they all have the Tylon and Perisphere on it. It was a concerted effort across many municipal agencies to promote the fair. And you can see here, that the Tylon and Perisphere shows up along with the same color story that we're talking about in some of these cases, as a fabric, as a design for a hat, as a button.

Which brings us to --

ANN SCHOENFELD: And all their materials that, Tal, you found in your collections.

TAL NADAN: Yes, these are all examples of the New York World's Fair. But they're from a pretty specific area of the records. So I'm going to be an archivist for a minute and talk about where you would actually find these in the physical collection. And how we learn about that on the library's digital collections platform. There are over 13,000 digitized images from the New York World's Fair collection. But about more than 12,000 of them are promotional images.

So if you're on the digital collections platform, if you've followed Ian's link. And you can scroll down and see where this material is organized in the papers. And this is what this collection, sub-collection notes here. And you'll actually find that this poster, the Binder poster that we're speaking about, is in the Promotions, Rights and Merchandising section of the collection.

Which is interesting because it's -- we're talking about it as an art object, as a physical object. But it's also very much a commercial purpose for the world's fair to produce this poster.

And you'll see here, how it was used as a marketing tool, as a commercial object.

ANN SCHOENFELD: Right. On the right is a poster that has over-printed, in the dark blue area, over-printed in white, 'come stay at the YMCA'. So, when -- go on.

TAL NADAN: Essentially, the world's fair licensed this image to other places trying to promote in concert with the Fair itself. So the YMCAs here is offering group tours. But that also just brings to mind, like the commercial uses of posters overall. They could switch into different languages and be the same backing. And Ann, I would love if you could speak a little bit, how this, like logistically, would work?

ANN SCHOENFELD: Of how -- Oh, how it would logistically --

TAL NADAN: How the Binder's design could get to other --

ANN SCHOENFELD: Right, a poster may be designed with the visual elements, but without the textual elements set in, but there would many, again, 10 stencils or templates of text that could

be inserted by the printer -- printing company, printing company. In this case, I believe Grinnell Lithographic. So the example here is that the image was used for the YMCA. Theoretically, this poster could have text that was in French, or Spanish, or Italian, rather than English. And I haven't seen any examples of that with this particular poster. But, as I said, theoretically, that could -- a poster can be printed up in that way.

TAL NADAN: Yeah, It's interesting to see these two next to each other. Because these two artifacts had clearly different lives before they were conserved and digitized around the same time. You can see the differences in how the colors have aged, which might meet something in the printing process as an aside.

So one of the reasons we wanted to talk about teaching with the fair is there's a number of potential assignments that can be linked to these visual resources. It's to acknowledge the fact that many students are quite visually literate; they navigate a visual world. But often the language isn't there yet and needs to be encouraged through a sort of assignment with a teacher or a professor.

A teacher might decide to discuss this poster as a class. And then derive an assignment where the students can design their own. So perhaps for a text that they're reading, perhaps for an event that they're thinking about. And maybe doing even one version as an art project and another version as a commercial project. And just the different forms and languages that can take when creating a poster.

And further to that, you can also think of this poster as sort of an entry point to the world's fair. We already talked about transportation as an event or a new technology that they're highlighting on this poster. But you can also connect this World's Fair in 1939 with the student's own experience as perhaps going to Disney World, or going to a theme park, or a fair, anything along those lines. Or Epcot Center; the World's Fair has a lot of connections at Epcot Center.

ANN SCHOENFELD: Absolutely, And in fact, a teacher might use this poster to compare The Trylon and Perisphere to the Eiffel Tower in Paris. And then use it to think about, well, what kind of graphic or -- architectural and graphic imagery are important in your neighborhood, or in the larger world at large, or something the student cares about a lot.

TAL NADAN: Yeah, there is a --

ANN SCHOENFELD: An app.

TAL NADAN: You can teach them very many things with the New York World's Fair. Because it was presenting the sort of most up-to-date version of everything at the time, like frozen in 1939. So it's great for using popular culture and like things that people are familiar with: television, radio, refrigeration, all of those things. To get students thinking about how their life was impacted by things that were just being newly promoted at that time.

ANN SCHOENFELD: As a way to delve into this poster as a signpost to use it formally, one might start an assignment by talking about nighttime imagery. Here, the dark sky that we all talked about, allows us to see that North Star I saw on the chat someone mentioned it as a guiding light. Which, in fact, is what we -- how it was intended to be understood. But as nighttime imagery, we see here, different ways of lighting up. Of presenting a contrast of dark and light from the searchlights to the electric lights on those buildings on those New York skyscrapers. To the lights on the train and in the boat of the steamship. We really can get a lot from thinking about the contrast. Again, formally, contrast of dark and light. Ways that we light up the darkness.

TAL NADAN: And then, of course, the world's fair itself had a whole night scene that was often talked about, like, when you read about histories of the fair. Like a burlesque area and a whole after-hours recreation. So it is significant that the nighttime is featured in this poster, even if it wasn't -- if it was designed earlier. Oh, one thing that I just want to mention that will also be in our blog post, is that there was a digital exhibition that the Library made about the fair. Which has a lot of entry points for different, either popular culture or technological stories that are found within the New York World's Fair records. That might be very useful for educators. But I do want to hear what people are thinking. So I think we're going to open it up for questions. I wish I can --

IAN FOWLER: So I did put something in the chat. But please, if you have a question for either Ann or Tal, please put it using the Q&A function. Those same different lead for us at the end and helps us for future programming. I'm looking through the chat, when we did start the program, there were some -- when you were asking about people's interpretations of the Binder poster. A lot of people were making some parallels to what the current events were in 1939 when the Fair started. Could you speak a little bit more about that?

ANN SCHOENFELD: Sure. Well, remember the fair -- work began on the fair in 1935. So we have to look at these four years as the late 1930s. And yes, the United States was in the depths of the depression. And then world tensions grew and grew, excuse me, over time. By 1939, in fact, at the world's fair, there was no German Pavilion. The -- Germany had pulled out. And I think there was -- one of the [inaudible] you saw was for something called the Freedom Pavilion. The Freedom Pavilion never found its way into the light of day. It was -- it remained a proposal. But the theme of the Freedom Pavilion was to be Germany in exile; an exhibit of Germany in exile. And showcase the work of creative, well, immigrants to the United States from the areas of science in every cultural area as well.

TAL NADAN: Yeah, there's a lot of correspondence with the public about the German Pavilion, and also the Italian Pavilion. Which is interesting to read, but not yet digitized, unfortunately. Just to chime in on this, but also to address the question from Allan in the chat. In 1940, the New York World's Fair changed its entire theme. It's no longer The World of Tomorrow, which in turn was sort of a response to the Century of Progress, which was the previous U.S. World's

Fair. Like everything up until now, and then they flipped it thinking about the future, while also celebrating the Sesquicentennial of Washington's Inauguration -- what's going on? But they changed the theme itself before peace and freedom and develop a new visual language around that. It's very patriotic. And also, it's a little bit more jubilant. Because as you point out, the fair wasn't a resounding success by any means. It was a pretty fraught endeavor and --

IAN FOWLER: Yeah, New York does not have a high success rate for world's fairs.

TAL NADAN: This is true.

IAN FOWLER: So many questions, in the slide, the second slide, I believe, it had the multiple posters. We've got a few questions, many on 'if the woman in the bottom right was real. And then also, the use of classical imagery in the other posters.

TAL NADAN: Okay. The woman in the poster is a question to both Ann and I. we're not sure yet, but we hope this stimulates someone to research it. We do assume that it's someone recognizable to the audience, and it would be compelling. But --

ANN SCHOENFELD: Absolutely.

TAL NADAN: -- that is another mystery that has yet to be solved through archival research.

ANN SCHOENFELD: And that the classical imagery that would be in the poster in the center, the classical imagery is kind of an allegorical figure. And there were a number of very large scale sculptures at the world's fair that were allegorical figures. Sculptures that are symbolic of light, progress, the future. And this is using one of them. So while it speaks somewhat to the past, it's also a preview of what you'll find at the fair, one thing you'll find.

IAN FOWLER: We have another question here on the Binder poster, the planes and formation on the top left. Looking backwards, we can say that maybe that suggests wartime imagery. Is that accurate or is that putting what we know on poster?

ANN SCHOENFELD: Well, the war hadn't started, of course. And -- I mean, when this poster was designed. And, of course, the U.S. entered at the end of 1941. I believe I don't have all the facts on this. But I believe that they're intended not to refer to war, but to certainly be a sign of, again, progress in aerodynamics. That air travel, as we know, was not common in 1939. But it does stand in as one form of transportation to the fair for a few. But more of technological progress at the time. I mean, I think it is -- I know that it's orange and blue, but I think it's interesting that they're these bi-colors, So to speak.

TAL NADAN: I wonder what the average Americans' familiarity with planes might be. Like I don't know if air shows were really prominent or formation, wouldn't be a foreign thing. But I'm just

speculating here; we haven't researched that info.

ANN SCHOENFELD: Okay --

IAN FOWLER: But I can say that, that here in New York City, we would have been familiar. Because I think by 1939, they passed the ordinance that you could not capture Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloons with your airplane. Or at least here in the Big Apple if you are familiar.

ANN SCHOENFELD: And I think they first were used in World War I. So there is that association in general. But one use of planes, but certainly what you just said is more relevant.

IAN FOWLER: So obviously, New York has a world's fair again in 1954. And I think when people think of the world's fair in New York, they think of the Unisphere and things relating to that. What design-wise is the continuity between this world's fair and that world's fair, and the legacy of both?

ANN SCHOENFELD: Well they're located in the same place. The Unisphere does stand in the same place as the Perisphere and the Trylon. And the Trylon and Perisphere were conceived as the architectural and graphic symbol, you know, the symbols of the world's fair just as the Unisphere. The Unisphere was sponsored by a corporation, I believe, U.S. Steel, the New York World's Fair Corporation, not a private company or manufacturer; not a manufacturer-sponsored the Trylon and Perisphere.

TAL NADAN: Yeah. And the Trylon and Perisphere actually housed an exhibit. And that's what the loop underneath is pointing towards. It's how you would enter Perisphere in order to access it. One thing that I always liked to -- because we do associate the world's fair site with the Unisphere and also the Park's Department buildings are all from the 64 World's Fair. It was first, it's a legacy of Robert Moses as well. He's involved with both of these fairs, and it was a part of transforming the Corona Ash sheet into a center. And also giving the excuse to build these transportation nexuses such as, I think the [inaudible] is part of the world's fair, there's a Marina out there. So all the different ways that you could access the fair were part of his, like overarching, urban design vision as well.

ANN SCHOENFELD: And someone referenced LaGuardia Airport as well. And it's the same ash heap dumped that if you're familiar with the great Gatsby, that figures prominently in the book, I mean, it's an amazing ...

TAL NADAN: What's interesting about the fair itself is that it has all these monumental structures. But they actually had to like repair almost everything in the middle. Because nothing was meant to last, right? So they had to do work on the Trylon and the Perisphere. The fair was open between April and October of 1939 and 1940. And there was a lot of buffing things back up for the new season that happened over the winter. And I think it also speaks to the

ephemeral nature of these posters themselves. Like it's funny that we have this when it was meant to be seen for six months and then, you know, move along.

IAN FOWLER: Speaking of that, we have a question in the Q&A. What happened to all of these famous aspects of the 39 World's Fair after it was over?

ANN SCHOENFELD: Oh, good one. Tal?

TAL NADAN: Researching demolition is super cool in the fair records as well. But actually, they were all made out of plaster. Like none of them were meant to be [inaudible] art., so.

ANN SCHOENFELD: They were built with the intention of being torn down. And the plasterboard and steel that the Trylon and Perisphere were made out of, did go to be recycled for armaments in World War II.

TAL NADAN: Okay. And to speak of the George Washington Statue and a connection it has to the New York Public Library. The people that worked on it were actually the Piccirilli family, who are also the stone crafters for the Patience and Fortitude out-front. But they were based in the Bronx and they -- one of the other interesting things about the world's fair is that anyone who was an artisan in New York, declarative designers or muralists, you can often find traces of them engage with the fair in some capacity. They're trying to get work through it, or actually executing something. Hildreth Meière is one that many people are interested in. These aren't names that you'll find in our finding aid search. But it's just one of -- it was a big economic agency for artists at the time as well.

ANN SCHOENFELD: Right.

IAN FOWLER: That's fantastic. Well, that will do it for this episode of Doc Chat. It goes by fast. And so I'll thank everyone very much for coming. And thank you, Ann and Tal. So for everyone, Doc Chats are held every Thursday, at the same time, 3:30. Our next one is October 22nd, which will cover the history of Eli G. Rochelson; part of the American Jewish community's oral history collection at NYPL. And you can register for that, following the links on our social media. And a blog post will go out with links to all kinds of resources related to this topic. So if you want to know more, you can click on that and follow that. And it will also have a video of this program. So thank you all so very, very much.

TAL NADAN: All right. Thanks, everyone.

ANN SCHOENFELD: Thank you all.