PROBLEM

In 2009, George Mason University Libraries purchased over 7,500 posters documenting the history of East Germany from just after World War II through the first free elections in the early 1990s. Although the collector shipped the posters in groups, library staff sought out funding for item-level cataloging. CLIR awarded the Libraries’ Special Collections & Archives a Hidden Collections Grant for a two-year project, “Uncovering a Forbidden World: Providing Access to East German Art, Culture, and Politics.” The grant provided funds to hire staff to item-level catalog the posters and to create series-level finding aids based on the major groups: political, film, theatre, art exhibitions, performing arts, and culture and science.

PROJECT

The project began with the hiring of two graduate students with reading knowledge of German and training them on basic item-level visual cataloging. Initially, they worked on the same group, the political posters, which was not as large as some of the other groups, but the cataloging work required more attention to detail. For instance, some of the posters lacked words and obvious titles. This same problem arose later on with the art exhibition posters.

One of the unexpected outreach activities was an invitation to contribute an article to Theatre Survey. The editor read a press release online that discussed the collection and the grant award. The project manager worked with the editor on image copyright issues and the final copyediting, but he turned over the bulk of the writing to the project students. Following the political posters, the students worked on the theatre and film posters. Although more numerous, those posters turned out to be much easier to catalog because, unlike the political posters, they all had easily discernable titles and other information.

OUTCOME

The outreach and cataloging work proved valuable with two important events. In the fall of 2010, SC&A hosted German artists who were on campus for a German unification celebration. In the fall of 2011, SC&A worked with a Mason German language professor to identify posters for her class to use for an exhibition during “Do Deutsch” week.

A poster from the collection appeared on the front cover of College & Research Library News before the grant project began.

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