



Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, Patricia P. Buckler, eds. *The Scrapbook in American Life*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006. x + 332 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59213-478-6.

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## Reflections of the Self and Society: The Scrapbook as Cultural Artifact

The proliferation of scrapbooking books, materials and paraphernalia is sometimes perceived as a recent phenomenon—not so, according to evidence presented in *The Scrapbook in American Life*. This collection of essays carefully examines historical aspects of the development and use of the scrapbook in American life with attention to the way in which the scrapbook both reifies an individual's construction of meaning and frames that meaning within the culturally available ephemera, material, and/or scraps of a particular geographical location and historical epoch.

The work begins with an excellent historical introduction to scrapbooks by Katherine Ott, Susan Tucker and Patricia P. Buckler, and then presents two compilations of essays, the first of which examines scrapbooks and scrapbook making as an historical socio-cultural phenomenon, and the second of which explicates the ways in which the self is represented via collection and presentation of materials in a scrapbook (or, sometimes, in a photograph album). Taken together, these essays provide the student of cultural studies with an insightful and provocative investigation into the historical, economic, social, psychological, familial, and aesthetic elements of this seemingly trivial practice.

Noting the custom, by medieval pilgrims, of attaching souvenirs to the pages of religious texts, Ott, Tucker, and Buckler trace the practice of compiling albums through collections of art encouraged by Giorgio Vasari (1511-74), and the use of a commonplace book to record words for speeches and other uses, to—with the proliferation of printed materials, especially color images—bound books that resembled scrapbooks. Like previous authors, this historical analysis notes the significance of friendship albums in the development of the scrapbooking tradition, but also gives attention to the importance of the intersection between technological advances and economic innovations in the emergence and proliferation of scrapbooking.[1] Such developments as the explosion of printed

color ephemera (advertising cards, religious cards, wrapping paper, ticket stubs, and so on) and photography, for example, are explicated *vis-à-vis* the rise of scrapbooking here more thoroughly than elsewhere.

Indeed, there is no extant examination of scrapbooks as historical, socio-cultural, economic and psychological artifacts. Buckler's previous work analyzes an historical scrapbook and offers some generalizations about understanding it in context, but no previous analysis matches the ambition and breadth of this work.[2] Essays explore not only specific scrapbooks; but each considers the socio-cultural milieu in which the collection was created, and explores the impact of the larger historical and social context on its construction. In addition, the authors provide careful attention to economic, political, educational, and other influences on the phenomenon.

Careful to note that scrapbooks are created by individuals but shaped by socio-cultural context, the essays in the work are divided into two sections, each of which focuses on one part of this equation. In the first half of the work, authors detail scrapbooks of nineteenth-century medical practitioners; a multi-generational scrapbook kept by women on a Southern plantation between 1855 and 1983; a scrapbook of the Mexican War and another of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair; use of advertising and religious cards in scrapbooks; scrapbook houses for paper dolls; and artist Hannah Höch's Weimar-era scrapbook. In the second half of the work, authors explore individual aspects scrapbook creation, still with attention to historical and cultural influences. Here there is explication of the scrapbook of a nineteenth-century prostitute; Willa Cather's childhood scrapbook; images used in children's scrapbooks historically; photograph albums as representations of social networks in the 1860s; scrapbooks of Fletcher Henderson and Juanita Page Johnson, nineteenth-century African Americans; the family albums of writers Ernest Hemmingway and Christopher Isherwood; nineteenth-century advice on how to keep a

photograph album; and the scrapbook of Lucy Jenkins, a Depression-era adolescent.

This work is important in several regards. Despite a plethora of popular works on scrapbooking, and the proliferation of the practice itself, this work is the first to provide a systematic qualitative examination of the historical development of scrapbooks, and to explicate not only the individualistic aspects of their creation, but the ways in which the material culture available to an individual influences the collection and display of ephemera. The authors are able to provide both micro-level analysis of individual collections—their aesthetics, construction, materials, and so on—and macro-level insights into, for example, the ways in which technological innovations influenced availability of materials, the ways in which political culture influenced individuals' representation of events, and how social location (race, class, and gender) influence both individuals' perceptions and representations of culture. The authors call into question some widely held misconceptions about scrapbooking—that it is fundamentally a female pastime, that collections of

ephemera are trivial and tell us little about culture—in a way that invites scholars to explore these representations of self and society in the future more often and more systematically.

While many of the essays included in *The Scrapbook in American Life* could stand alone as interesting works on various historical aspects of the scrapbooking tradition, together they provide the first methodical and wide-ranging examination of a widespread but often ignored aspect of material culture. At a minimum, this work will draw scholars' attention to these individual and social constructions of material culture.

#### Notes

[1]. For discussion of the friendship album see Starr Ockenga, *On Women and Friendship: A Collection of Victorian Keepsakes and Traditions* (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1993).

[2]. Of particular import is Patricia Buckler's "A Silent Woman Speaks: The Poetry in a Woman's Scrapbook of the 1840s," *Prospects* 16 (1991): pp. 149-69.

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