SCRAPBOOKS: AN AMERICAN HISTORY
BY JESSICA HELFAND, YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS/190 PP./$45.00 (HB)

Some of the richest historical documentation has been found in the personal writings of both ordinary and extraordinary people. Through personal journals, letters, memoirs, and collections we are able to study what lives and the people who lived them were like at a particular point in history. Some of the most generous sources for this study have been scrapbooks. In her new book, Scrapbooks: An American History, Jessica Helfand explores the visual, cultural, and historical significance of these often overlooked and under-appreciated artifacts.

Dispelling the contemporary notion of scrapbooking as a pasttime for the “crafty housewife,” this book showcases scrapbooks created by men and women of all ages and from all walks of life including author Anne Sexton and artist Saul Steinberg. Although most of the creators lacked formal art or design training, the pages show a great sense of wit, whimsy, and design. Helfand calls the scrapbooks “visual biographies” and “ephemeral portraits,” and describes them as “a unique form of self expression that celebrate[s] visual sampling, cultural mixing, and the redistribution of existing media” (xvii). Such terms and descriptions could just as easily be applied to many contemporary artists’ books.

This emphasis on the visual nature of these objects is evident through the inclusion of 475 full-color illustrations and photographs of scrapbook pages and elements. Interspersed throughout the book are sections where turning the pages gives the feeling of looking through an actual scrapbook. These glimpses serve as an introduction to each of the five chapters, and help to reiterate the material nature of these objects. Beautifully illustrated and explained, the chapters guide us through the major functions and concerns of scrapbooks: time, space, sentiment, nostalgia, and posterity.

Helfand asserts that people feel the need to express themselves visually and to tell their stories using more than words alone. This book illustrates that notion for both scrapbook practices in America and the people whose scrapbooks are included in this collection.

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POSTERS FOR THE PEOPLE:
ART OF THE WPA
BY ENNIS CARTER, QUIRK PRESS/216 PP./$50.00 (HB)

The Poster Division of the WPA’s Federal Art Project was one of many cultural programs of the New Deal. From 1935-43 the division employed more than five hundred artists, who created over thirty-five thousand designs, resulting in two million posters produced and distributed. Ephemeral by nature, most of these posters were long ago torn down, pasted over, lost and forgotten.

Which is what makes Ennis Carter’s new collection Posters for the People: Art of the WPA so valuable. In her handsome and well-printed collection, Carter—the founder and director of Design for Social Impact—reproduces nearly five hundred of these posters that advertised national parks, warned citizens of the dangers of germs and jaywalking, and made the case that “planned housing fights disease.” Graphically, some of the posters are tired and tame, adaptations of the aesthetics of commercial advertising. The Gerber baby, for example, is repurposed for the fight against tuberculosis. Others borrow more imaginatively from European poster design, poaching at times from German and Soviet political models. But also evident is the development of a unique American poster aesthetic, the bold strokes of modernist design softened with an almost nostalgic depiction of the people and places of the United States. Carter wisely includes a range of styles, grouped thematically for comparison.

Through the poster project “the artist and the public have come to know each other,” Ralph Graham, supervisor of the Chicago Poster Division, wrote in the 1930s. Thanks to Ennis Carter, we can now get to know the graphic record of this experiment to create art for the people.

STEPHEN DUNCOMBE is the author, most recently, of Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy (2007).