Examination of the British Library's collection of American underground comix and related ephemera

Reference: 2025-EI-JBR

Supervisor(s)	Joint supervision: Rachael Culley: Curator, North American Published Collections Post 1850 Alex Lock: Lead Curator, North American Collections
Team(s) and department(s)	Eccles Institute for the Americas & Oceania
Start date/timeframe	Earliest start: June 2025 Latest end date: March 2026
Duration	**Three months** (or part-time equivalent)
Part time/Full time	☐ Full time only ☐ Part time only ☒ Full time or part time Minimum days/week if undertaken part time: two
Location/Working arrangements	☐ Can only be offered on site at St Pancras ☐ Can be offered as fully remote placement ☒ Can be offered as hybrid placement (remote with some visits) A small amount of desk research could be undertaken remotely (e.g. when writing up findings) but the majority of time will be on site in St Pancras in order to access collection items.
Application deadline	Friday 21 February, 17.00 GMT

Eligibility criteria, funding information and details of how to apply are available on the British Library website: https://www.bl.uk/more/research-collaboration/

Context and nature of placement project

Are you interested in illustration, underground comix, or the history of comix publishing? Do you enjoy problem solving and project management? Would you like to come and work behind the scenes on collections in the cultural heritage sector?

This PhD placement will give you an invaluable insight into the holdings of US underground comix and related ephemera at the British Library. You will be given the opportunity to understand collection management and library cataloguing systems, and you'll be able to make a real difference in improving access to a number of important and unique items for the research, inspiration and enjoyment of future generations using the Library.

Continuing legacy work in this area you will have the opportunity to use and develop previous work, including meticulous record-keeping and cross-referencing of donations of comix and related ephemera. Among the holdings which speak to this subject are rare items with unique illustrations and inscriptions which offer a fascinating picture of the underground comix landscape from the 1960s onwards.

The collections are a cornucopia of material for interdisciplinary research examining comics/x, book dealing, publishing, and/or illustration. Underground and alternative comix are important to the study of 20th century American countercultures, offering socially relevant reflections on subjects that would often be excluded from mainstream publishing, for example sexuality, violence and drug use.

Tasks and outcomes

The primary focus of this placement will be to improve access to, and publicise, the Library's collection of American underground comix and related ephemera. The main outcome will be a collection guide to American underground comix at the Library, the exact focus of which can be influenced by the students' interests and expertise.

The project requires strong attention to detail and a methodical working approach. The student will be required to review the c.500 items, working with the support of Eccles Institute colleagues to keep accurate records of the checks made, and note down cataloguing and collection care needs that the materials could benefit from.

NB: some of this collection contains erotica and explicit material.

Typical tasks will include:
- Conducting thorough searches in the Library catalogue to confirm holdings of underground comix and related ephemera;
- Cross referencing catalogue and internal records of specific donations/holdings;
- Checking catalogue records and making recommendations accordingly to ease future searching for this material.

The main outcomes envisaged for this placement are:
- A collection guide to American underground comix and related ephemera;
- A blog highlighting interesting findings with potential to promote the collection guide;
- With the help of curators, noting down any cataloguing and/or conservation requirements/recommendations.

Training and development opportunities

PhD placement students are welcome to access a wide range of workshops, talks and training available at the Library. Supervisors will offer advice on which opportunities may be of particular relevance. Depending on availability, these wider training opportunities may include, for example, the Digital Scholarship Training Programme, Cultural Property Training, Research Roundtables, Business & IP Centre workshops and staff talks.

In addition, this particular PhD placement will provide the following opportunities:

- experience of managing a defined, short-term project within a national library setting as well as gaining the search skills needed to identify hard-to-locate materials;
- build professional networks and develop research interests through introductions to Library staff from other departments, such as those in Cataloguing and Conservation, as they help with the long-term custodianship and preservation of the materials;
- gain insights into the policies and procedures around stewarding a national collection of printed material through close work with the Curator for North American Published Collections Post-1850;
- develop cataloguing skills and specialist knowledge of bibliographic standards and systems;
- the potential to work with existing Library contacts at peer institutions who hold similar collections of underground comix.

Required knowledge and skills

All applicants will be expected to demonstrate the following:
- Ability to communicate effectively verbally and in writing, internally and externally;
- Working knowledge of Microsoft Office applications and online meeting tools;
- Ability to follow instructions and policies, in particular with regard to Health & Safety and the safe use of collections;
- Ability to work effectively with others while also completing tasks independently;
- Clear reasons for applying to a specific placement and good understanding of the project purpose.

In addition, this specific placement project requires the following:

- Interest in or knowledge of 20th century American printed culture;
- Ability to work methodically and with excellent attention to detail;
- Competency in using large library catalogues for comprehensive searching;
- Ability to synthesise large amounts of information and present in a clear, accessible format
- Willingness to learn new skills, write about their work in an engaging and accessible way, and present at team meetings/in informal research workshops.