

# Ephemera [i-fe-mər-ə, i-fem-rə]

**Noun.** Something of no lasting significance or something lasting a very short time.

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Tibetan monks create detailed mandalas with colored sand or crushed stone. When the mandala is complete, it will be ritually destroyed.

We are surrounded by ephemera, from bookmarks and vocabulary cards to concert tickets and stamps, from maps and menus to receipts and postcards. *Ephemera* is related to the adjective *ephemeral*, which was used in English as early as 1576 to refer to phenomena lasting for merely one day or for a very short time.<sup>1</sup>

The etymological origin of the word *ephemera* traces back to the writings of Aristotle (384–22 BC), who deployed the expression to refer to short-lived insects and flowers.<sup>2</sup> The creation of the modern English word is traditionally attributed to the polymath Samuel Johnson (1709–84), who coined the term *ephemerae* in 1751 in reference to the print media of his day.<sup>3</sup> Since this time, *ephemera*, or *print ephemera*, has been used to refer to transient prints, such as printed posters, cards, and so forth that are usually one page or not exceeding 32 pages, although some hold broader perceptions of the term.<sup>4</sup> Although Johnson lived in the age of the Printing Revolution and we live in the era of the Digital Revolution, the production of ephemera has not diminished. The internet may be seen as the ultimate repository of digital ephemera (e-ephemera) with its vast amounts of unstable information and advertising, like pop-ups and digital coupons.

Difficult to define, ephemera is a broadly inclusive genre used by librarians to classify random materials, from photographs and sheet music to trade cards and propaganda posters. Things that were once viewed as ephemera, like baseball cards and comic books, are now treasured and preserved by collectors. Where they exist, ephemera can be a rich resource for researchers because they illustrate something of the

zeitgeist in which they were produced. Digitization has made many collections of ephemera accessible for use by scholars and historians.

Ephemeral art exists in many forms, including ice sculptures, sandcastles, and performance art, but the term is often used to describe “a work of art that only occurs once, like a happening, and cannot be embodied in any lasting object to be shown in a museum or gallery.”<sup>5</sup> For instance, Tibetan Buddhists spend hours crafting sand mandalas and butter sculptures for use in rituals. In these cases, the transitory nature of the art also communicates religious significance beyond the function of the ephemera in the ritual context: the ephemeral nature of conditioned existence.

Most of us have memorabilia—keepsakes of notable events from our lives or history, such as theater and graduation programs, bumper stickers, pressed pennies from Disneyland and famous historical sites. These objects, too, fall under the broad classification of ephemera. We have desk drawers and storage boxes full of these transitory objects that remind us of our past, help us function in the present, and prime us for the future. ■

1. Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed. (1993), s.v. “ephemeral.”
2. Timothy G. Young, “Evidence: Toward a Library Definition of Ephemera,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 4, no. 1 (2003): 11–26.
3. Anne Garner, “State of the Discipline: Throwaway History: Towards a Historiography of Ephemera,” *Book History* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 244–263.
4. Gillian Russell, “The Neglected History of the History of Printed Ephemera,” *Melbourne Historical Journal* 42, no. 1 (2014): 7–37; Sandro Jung, “Literary Ephemera: Understanding the Media of Literacy and Culture Formation,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 44, no. 2 (April 2020): 1–16.
5. “Ephemeral art,” Tate, [www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/ephemeral-art](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/ephemeral-art).