

Exhibition Review



Archivaria

Enduring Outrage: Editorial Cartoons by Herblock.

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. Opened at the American Treasures Room of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, 17 July 2006–20 January 2007.

Known by his signature as “Herblock,” Herbert L. Block (1909–2001) was one of the most influential editorial cartoonists of the twentieth century. Block’s career began at the *Chicago Daily Tribune* when he was only nineteen. He moved on to the Newspaper Enterprise Association Service in Cleveland, Ohio, where he won his first of three Pulitzer Prizes, and arrived at the *Washington Post* in 1946 after serving in the U.S. Army from 1943 to 1945.¹ In 2002, the Herb Block Foundation donated more than 50,000 preparatory sketches, 14,000 original drawings, manuscripts, and photographs to the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. This donation in 2002 added greatly to the smaller donation Block himself made in 2000, which was honoured in the same year in the Library of Congress exhibit, *Herblock’s History: Political Cartoons from the Crash to the Millennium*.² The 2002 donation, which included numerous sketches, allowed for a more in-depth examination of his work, and resulted in a second exhibit, *Enduring Outrage: Editorial Cartoons by Herblock* that ran from 17 July 2006 to 20 January 2007 in the American Treasures room of the Library of Congress.

In addition to the Block collection, the Prints and Photographs Division at the Library of Congress holds approximately 13.7 million images documenting photography, drawing, and design in the United States. Although the initial beginnings of the Prints and Photographs Division could be traced to Thomas Jefferson’s substantial donation of materials from his personal library in 1815, the establishment in 1870 of the Library of Congress as the repository of United States’s copyrighted works initiated a series of major acquisitions from both the public and private realms that included illustrations from *Harper’s* magazine, prints from James McNeill Whistler, and architectural

1 About Herb Block,
http://www.herblockfoundation.org/herblockfoundation/content.aspx?page=5648657&_redir=684
(accessed 1 May 2007).

2 *Herblock’s History* (Political Cartoons from the Crash to the Millennium), Library of Congress Exhibition, <http://www.loc.gov/tr/print/swann/herblock/intro-jhb.html> (accessed 1 May 2007).

drawings from the Historic American Buildings Survey.³

The power of editorial cartoons to elicit a response from the American public gathered traction around the time of the American Revolution as artists depicted overbearing British soldiers forcing policies on an unwilling populace. This method of political protest continued to intensify in the nineteenth century with the increase in the publication of newspapers all over the country. One of the best known examples of the power of these images occurred in New York City at the hand of Thomas Nast when he used images of corrupt Tammany Hall Boss Tweed to convey a message much more powerful than the written word.⁴ Block carried on this tradition as he lambasted the national political scene during his lengthy career.

The “Enduring Outrage” exhibit included thirty-three cartoons and sketches from the 1940s through the 1990s. With the exception of the self-portrait, curators organized all of the cartoons and sketches under categories that reflected Block’s frequent subject matter. One of the most striking aspects was how much the subject matter (such as political graft, Middle East conflicts, privacy/security issues, and the environment) remained relevant over the course of fifty years. For instance, the cartoons and sketches under the Privacy/Security heading included wiretapping in 1955, wiretapping in 1961, individual privacy in 1977, and classified document issues in 1985. The work *Enduring Outrage* from which the exhibit title was taken was accompanied by an image from one of the cartoons under the “Get out the vote” heading, illustrating a voter yelling at the television in 1970 because of the unrelenting attack advertisements during the election. The section titled, Middle East, contained one eye-opening cartoon that questioned the United States government’s 1975 agreement with Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to sell Iran nuclear energy equipment. The overall effect presented visitors with a sense of historical continuity, as well as the difficulty of finding permanent solutions.

While the exhibit did not have a dedicated space (mounted, as it was, in the American Treasures room), the area used did provide an adequate sense of focus. American Treasures is a rotating exhibit that displays some of the most important objects and documents in the Library of Congress, organized under the title, Memory, Reason, and Imagination, reflecting Thomas Jefferson’s arrangement of his own library. An introductory sign and chronology about Block signaled that the visitor had entered a discrete section from the rest of

3 Prints and Photographs Reading Room (Library of Congress), <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print> (accessed 13 May 2007); *Defining Moments: A Chronology (Prints and Photographs: An Illustrated Guide)*, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/guidechron.html> (accessed 13 May 2007).

4 Stacey Bredhoff, *Draw!: Political Cartoons from the Left and Right* (Washington, DC, 1991), p. 4.

the American Treasures displays. The display cases with the Block drawings formed a separate space in a square-shaped layout that included cases in the middle. Most panels contained 16x20" ink, graphite, and opaque white over blue or graphite pencil cartoons and 8x10" graphite sketches; some panels had two graphite sketches related to the final cartoon. The exhibit panels used low-level lighting with an automatic dimming feature.

While signage for navigating the exhibition space was adequate, there was no indication of curatorial responsibility for the exhibit. However, two members of the exhibition team did participate in the cellular phone-recorded tours, a pilot program the Library of Congress used for *Enduring Outrage*. Signs notified visitors that they could dial a number and punch in a code located on one of three signs located throughout the exhibit to hear co-creators Martha Kennedy and Sarah Willett Duke, discuss the significance of particular cartoons and the adjoining sketches. Although those without cellular phones could not enjoy this feature of the exhibit, the proliferation of cellular phones no doubt made it possible for the Library of Congress to easily provide informative commentary without spending additional funds on single-use headsets. In addition to Duke and Kennedy, Seth de Matties and Irene Chambers, both of the Library of Congress Interpretive Programs Office, worked on the exhibition team.⁵

Although the physical exhibit closed in January 2007, an on-line exhibit remains on the Library of Congress website indefinitely.⁶ Nearly all of the on-line text is also in the physical exhibition, with the noticeable addition of the names of the project staff. The identical cartoon prints are on the website, with an obstructing watermark being the only noticeable difference. Even though the on-line exhibit allowed for zooming in on the images by clicking on them, the size and detail of the actual physical document could not be reproduced on-line. The experience of looking at the original cartoons reinforced the artistic nature of the individual cartoons because they were set right next to the sketches on which they were based. Visitors to the physical exhibit could easily glance back and forth from the sketches to the final drawings and get a sense of Block's thought process.

The Library of Congress website also includes an on-line representation of Herblock's *History: Political Cartoons from the Crash to the Millennium*, the earlier exhibit mounted in 2000. This exhibit contained many more of his cartoons and more biographical information than *Enduring Outrage*, with the exception of the preliminary sketches. Both on-line exhibits provided infor-

5 The exhibition team is listed as part of the *Enduring Outrage* on-line exhibit, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/herblock-credits.html> (accessed 1 May 2007).

6 *Enduring Outrage: Editorial Cartoons by Herblock* (American Treasures of the Library of Congress), <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/herbolck-home.html> (accessed 1 May 2007).

mation on the materials used to create the cartoons as well as detailed document information so a visitor could contact the Prints and Photographs Division with a specific identification number.

Although the Library of Congress closed the physical exhibit, another Block exhibit will undoubtedly surface at the Library of Congress at a future date. As *Enduring Outrage* showed, particular themes and subject matter reappeared over the course of his long career in the twentieth century, and the exhibit showed that some political issues presented challenges without clear solutions. However, Block would no doubt be the first to argue that those in power must be challenged equally hard, and journalists must be some of the first to question the applicability of those solutions.

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