

Political campaign buttons have been around since the nineteenth century. In the 1960s, environmental groups adapted the communication genre to bring awareness and support to their causes. One new button collection at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History serves as a "Baedeker guide to the history of environmental concerns."

THE MATERIAL CULTURE

OF ENVIRONMENTALISM: LOOKING FOR TREES IN THE SMITHSONIAN'S PINBACK BUTTON COLLECTION

Since its establishment in 1846, the Smithsonian Institution has acquired millions of human-created artifacts—from the stone tools wielded by early hominids to today's bumper stickers and smart phones. At the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, those artifacts span the centuries and the globe,

documenting changes in the extractive industries, such as hunting, fishing, whaling, agriculture, horticulture, forestry, mining, petroleum drilling, and ice harvesting, and in transportation, communications, and public health. The museum's rich collections in music, sports, entertainment, numismatics, and textiles also contain many objects reflecting human interactions with the natural environment.

One expanding collection specifically documents the material culture of post-1960s environmentalism. To record the political movement's regional variations, topical priorities, and tactical approaches, the museum has acquired such ephemeral material as placards, flyers, calendars, refrigerator magnets, mugs, and games. The largest and most diverse subset of this collection consists of thousands of pinback buttons.

Pinback buttons have long been used in the United States and elsewhere to promote candidacies, advance or oppose causes, and legitimize political positions. As a form of advocacy, these physical symbols are designed to attract attention and possibly change attitudes or behavior. Beginning in the 1960s, the evolving environ-

mental movement left a colorful and telling trail of such artifacts.

The subjects addressed by the buttons in the Smithsonian collection can seem like a Baedeker guide to environmental concerns: wilderness preservation, wild and scenic rivers, public parks and forests, deserts, wetlands, water projects, fish and wildlife, endangered species, ocean conservation, and global warming. Some buttons pled for animal rights; others advocated organic farming, renewable energy, public transportation, and environmental justice. The thousands of different buttons created since the first Earth Day in 1970 constitute a tangible timeline of the cross-pollination of ideas, tactics, and organizational influences, dramatically conveying environmentalism's breadth and fractionalization. Especially in the United States, environmentalism covered an ever-expanding range of concerns, but as a movement, it lacked a cohesive center. The splintered causes pursued their individual agendas and competed with one another for resources and attention, leaving behind their slogans and symbols.

The core of the Smithsonian's trove of environmental buttons came into the public trust thanks to two individuals, Michael

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McCloskey and Jerry Meral, who generously donated their substantial personal collections.

McCloskey's collection came about rather informally. During his association with the Sierra Club (1966–1999), the last 17 of those years as the organization's executive director, he traveled around the country to meet with activists, who often presented him with buttons promoting their campaigns or causes. McCloskey later said he "was quite mindful that we were making history, so I was anxious to hold onto things that illustrated our movement." To him, the buttons served as "mementos of the vitality and diversity" of the growing environmental movement.¹

Meral's approach to collecting was far more proactive. Following assignments with the Environmental Defense Fund (1971–1975) and the California Department of Water Resources (1975–1983), Meral spent two decades directing California's Planning and Conservation League, a coalition of 100 conservation groups formed to lobby for environmental legislation at the state level. In his efforts to underscore the commonalities and national significance of local environmental campaigns, Meral found himself serving as a clearinghouse of information, ideas, tactics, and strategies. Recognizing that the multitude of often-isolated struggles reflected patterns of pervasive social changes, he began amassing environmental buttons in 1970 as a means of documenting the movement. Decorating his office walls with buttons, he used their messages to inspire, to emphasize shared public passions for environmental ideals, and to demonstrate the wide range of perspectives.

The buttons collected by McCloskey and Meral feature images and phrases ranging from humorous to sober, from clever to mundane. Many incorporated iconic images, such as the symbol for ecology used in association with Earth Day or the 1968 "Earthrise" photograph taken by astronaut William Anders from Apollo 8. Others, such as a series ridiculing President Reagan's secretary of the Interior, James Watt, satirized personalities and events.

As you will see on the following pages, trees often provided button designers with a common visual link and vocabulary. Some of their creations dealt directly with forests and forestry, of course, while others utilized sylvan images to address a broad spectrum of concerns. □

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NOTES

1. Michael McCloskey quoted in Jennifer Hattam, "Medals of Honor," *Sierra* 86 (May/June 2001), 68. A personal recounting of his career with the Sierra Club can be found in Michael McCloskey, *In the Thick of It: My Life in the Sierra Club* (Washington: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2005).



Jerry Meral spent decades collecting buttons. Shown is about half of the collection he donated to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

COURTESY OF JERRY MERAL

Few post–World War II images (1 and 2) gained wider international recognition than the peace symbol, which British artist Gerald Herbert Holtom designed in 1958 by combining the semaphore letters N and D (for “nuclear disarmament”) within a circle. Like other movements in the 1960s and 1970s, environmental organizations freely appropriated the peace symbol and often incorporated trees into the image to signal their concerns.



1



2

Some campaigns were oriented toward urban conservation efforts, such as combating tree diseases (3 and 4).



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Many messages encouraged civic engagement, such as recycling or tree planting (5–6).



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Some buttons, like this ecofeminism button from the early 1980s (7), referenced the intersection of environmentalism with other movements.



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Trees came to symbolize conservation values. Recognizing the power of those symbols, designers made liberal use of them in their business advertisements (8–10).

Efforts to protect California’s redwoods intensified during the late twentieth century. Environmental advocates sought to introduce redwood conservation into the 1980 presidential campaign and even gave the trees a political voice (11–14).



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Rising timber harvest levels on national forests in the Pacific Northwest made the U.S. Forest Service a target for both ridicule and protest (15–17).



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Irony and satire have long distinguished political buttons. The Forest Service's famous fire prevention icon Smokey Bear proved irresistible to designers, who used the ursine character as a stand-in for the agency (18–21).



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One striking aspect of the Smithsonian collection is the growing international focus on environmentalism. In the late 1980s, the accelerating rate of logging in the Amazon rainforest stimulated the creation of new protest buttons (22–25).



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Sometimes the simplest message could convey the most meaning (26).



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