

Memory, Material Experience, and Consumption: The Printed and Illustrated Ephemera of the Profumo Archive in 20th-Century Buenos Aires

Sandra Szir and Andrea Gergich

In the world of archives, we often identify collections of printed ephemera, from different origins, gathered by individuals or institutions that grouped them according to a thematic interest, particular use, or type of document. The Profumo archive, in Argentina, presents a unique case in archival terms, since it is made up not only of numerous printed ephemera, but it also includes documents that explain the industrial processes of a single producer, the Profumo & Br. printing house, which operated in Buenos Aires from 1910 to the early 1980s.

Its production archive, now part of the Buenos Aires Museo,¹ includes labels,



Figure 1: Author unknown, *Agua colonia "Hermosa"* ("Beautiful" Eau de Cologne) label, 1926, golden ink and relief on paper, 2.2 x 2.2 in. Client Harrods Bs. As. Lda. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc01_19. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

¹ The Museum opened in 1968 under the name of Museo de Buenos Aires. Its name changed to Buenos Aires Museo in 2021.

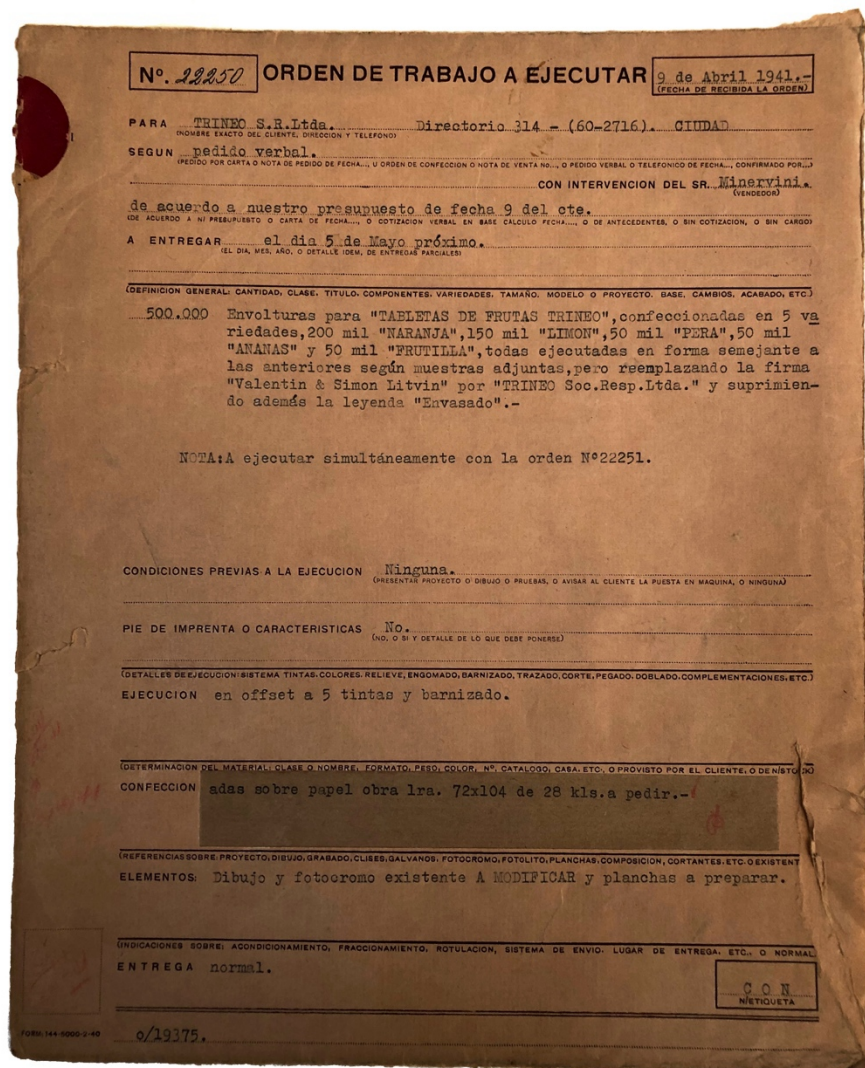


Figure 2: Profumo & Br. production order for Trineo fruit tablets wrappers, 1941, typewritten text on printed form, kraft paper, 8.5 x 11 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc04_36. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

advertisements, illustrated prints, and industrial documents like originals for reproduction and production orders (figs. 1-4).²

This archive enables a set of research questions and problems since their materials allow us to investigate the modes of production, aesthetic and design features, and cultural meanings carried by the representations they contain. The pieces in this archive, categorized as “ephemera,”³ are valuable in the first place for exploring historical industrial graphic production in the 20th century in Argentina. In addition, they can be helpful to

understand visual and design culture of the time, as well as the commodification of everyday life. Likewise, the Profumo archive is neither described and organized nor adequately available for research, as it lacks a complete catalog of its contents, a clear

² The printing technique is indicated only in those cases where it appears in the documentation, otherwise it is not possible to state with certainty the technique used.

³ The Society of American Archivists defines ephemera “as materials, usually printed documents, created for a specific, limited purpose, and generally designed to be discarded after use.” Examples of ephemera include advertisements, tickets, brochures, and receipts. Society of American Archivists (SAA), “Ephemera,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/ephemera.html>.

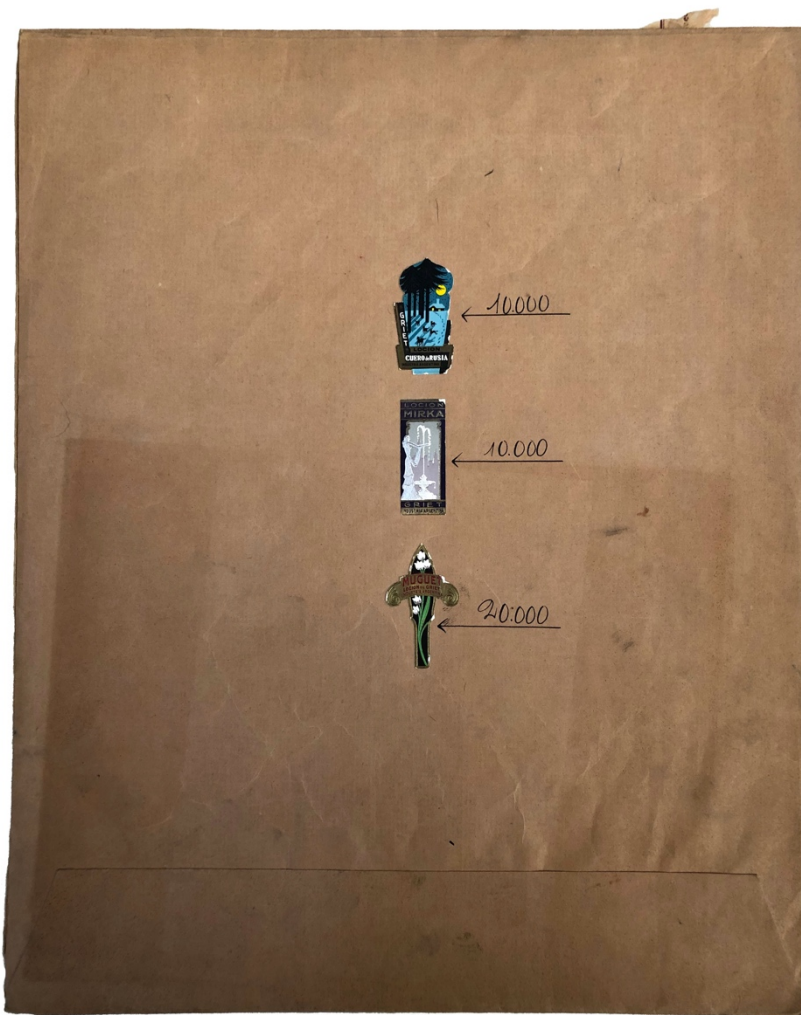


Figure 3: Profumo & Br. production order (back), with three samples of labels for cosmetic bottles, 1938, golden ink and relief on paper. Client Perfumerías Griet. 8.5 x 11 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc29_01. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

order of the pieces, and, furthermore, it is not open to the public or for consultation by researchers, confronting us with its fragile materiality, preservation, and access.

The graphic artifacts that make up this archive, by their use and consumption in the past, their aesthetic and material qualities and their iconographic representations, articulate the research perspectives of the history of visual culture, graphic arts, design, production technologies, and social history.

Since the 19th century and with greater intensity in the 20th century, large urban centers, such as Buenos Aires, have been flooded by ephemeral graphic

imagery on a previously unknown scale. These paper-based prints, usually reproduced with industrial techniques, were linked to the daily administrative, economic, and pedagogical dimensions of urban life and the consumer society of industrial capitalism. Often destined to be discarded after a specific use, many of them remained in public or private collections and were preserved for their symbolic, aesthetic, or emotional value. In this vast territory of objects and categories coexist, among others, illustrated magazines, labels, advertisements, commercial papers, leaflets, menus, posters, brochures, invitations, postcards, and cigarette wrappers.

The objects and images that make up the category of graphic ephemera, despite their aesthetic vocation, did not enter the recognized canon of fine arts, nor

the narratives of art history,⁴ since their processes implied artistic and manual, but also industrial procedures, and in many cases, they constituted objects of everyday, popular, and mass consumption. These artifacts without an author, produced quickly on a mass scale, on humble supports, with sometimes rudimentary prints, were generally not adequately preserved, due to their utilitarian and contingent functions. In addition, many of them, due to the fragility and low quality of the papers used, present inconveniences for their proper storage and conservation. However, these graphic objects generated significant experiences, visual and cultural meanings for wide audiences, and have been re-signified in recent years by the so-called visual culture studies.⁵



Figure 4: Author unknown, original drawing for printed reproduction, 1954, tempera paint on cardboard, 7.8 x 6 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc30. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

In Argentina, the vast majority of these kinds of print have been lost, or found in fragmented collections, rarely known, or scattered in sets grouped by their use or subject. They have been rejected by high culture and neglected by academic research, including design studies, as traditional Argentine historiographies of design disregard popular graphics prior to the consolidation of the profession in the mid-20th century. However, ephemera, as part of the common graphic heritage, shaped the visual and material culture of the past, and formed a treasure of experiences and collective social memory. In this sense, the Profumo archive represents a singular case, since it constitutes the only known set of this type of material that has remained relatively complete in Argentina, and is unique in its features and scope. It consists of approximately 5,000 documents, donated to the

⁴ Bertrand Tillier, "L'éphémère imprimé & illustré: un objet à la lisière de l'histoire de l'art du XIX e siècle," *Fabula / Les colloques: Les éphémères, un patrimoine à construire* (2015), <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document2921.php>.

⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Mostrando el ver: Una crítica de la cultura visual" ("Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture"), *Estudios Visuales*, no. 1, (2003): 17-40; Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Una introducción a la cultura visual (An Introduction to Visual Culture)*, trans Paula García Segura (Barcelona Paidós, 2003); J. L. Brea, "Estética, Historia del Arte, Estudios Visuales" ("Aesthetics, Art History, Visual Studies"), *Estudios Visuales*, no. 3 (2006): 8-25.

Buenos Aires Museo shortly after the workshop closed its doors in the early 1980s, by a person linked to the printing company, whose name was lost in the bureaucracy. While collectors of ephemera generally focus on special pieces valuable for their visual, material, or emotive features, this archive includes not only the final prints like perfume labels, company leaflets, or clothing advertisements, but also related production documents, like original drawings and production orders.

It is precisely this coexistence in the archive, of the final printed pieces together with the work orders that document the manufacturing processes, which makes the Profumo archive unique. In Argentina, there are, although scarce, some private or institutional collections, with ephemera pieces such as cigarette packs, postcards, greeting cards, or children's game cards, among other typologies. However, it is uncommon to find production archives of graphic companies like Profumo's that preserve materials documenting the industrial production process along with the final printed pieces. These documents provide significant information about particular technologies applied, the number of prints delivered, and commercial data, such as the name of the firm behind popular consumer articles. They also reflect an appreciation for the manufacturing process, on the part of those responsible for keeping them, and later donating the collection to the museum.

For various reasons, lack of resources or qualified personnel, low interest or appreciation, the archive was not processed or cataloged for many years. After the attention of a research group focused on the study of graphic culture in Argentina, the collection gained special interest and became the object of a series of projects that are currently studying it.⁶ In a sense, this renewed interest can be read as part of the so-called "archival turn,"⁷ which since the late 1990s, proposed new ways of valuing the

⁶ Some of these current projects are: Proyecto Mecenazgo cultural, Ministerio de Cultura de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (Cultural Patronage Project, Ministry of Culture of the City of Buenos Aires, 2020 and 2022):

a. Sandra Szir and Andrea Gergich, "La persistencia de lo efímero en la memoria gráfica. Clasificación, digitalización y exhibición virtual del Archivo Profumo, patrimonio del Museo de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires" ("The persistence of the ephemeral in graphic memory: Classification, digitalization and virtual exhibition of the Profumo Archive, heritage of the Museum of the City of Buenos Aires").

b. Andrea Gergich and Sandra Szir, "La persistencia de lo efímero en la memoria gráfica (segunda etapa). Ordenamiento, exposición y catálogo del Archivo Profumo, patrimonio de Buenos Aires Museo" ("The persistence of the ephemeral in the graphic memory (second stage). Arrangement, exhibition and catalog of the Profumo Archive, patrimony of the Buenos Aires Museum"). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the authors.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Mal de archivo. Una impresión freudiana* (*Archival Disease. A Freudian Impression*). (Madrid: Ed. Trotta, 1997); Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* no. 110 (2004): 3-22, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>; Lila Caimari, "El momento archivos" ("The Archives Moment"), *Población & Sociedad*, 27, no. 2 (2020): 222-233, <http://dx.doi.org/10.19137/pys-2020-270210>; G. Swiderski, "La Archivología nacional y los modelos explicativos de la disciplina" ("National

material heritage of institutional collections, which were then the focus of transdisciplinary approaches beyond the traditional perspective of historical studies. The archival turn highlighted that archives are tools for understanding both past and present, including the power strategies that determine what should be preserved and what should not. This insight appeared salient to our investigation of the Profumo archive, in both its internal composition and in the history of the archive itself, which remained neglected for a long time before these new interests arose.

Our interest in the management and cultural-historical study of this archive implies both constructive and interdisciplinary work with archival professionals for the tasks of order and description, as well as a theoretical and methodological approach. The different types of documents that were identified in the archive—work orders, samples, sketches, final art, originals, payment vouchers—constitute the material basis



Figure 5: Author unknown, *Agua colonia Lilas* (Lilac Eau de Cologne) labels for cosmetic bottles, 1929, golden ink and relief on textured paper. Left 1.7 x 3.3 in. Right 1.3 x 2.5 in. and 3.3 x 0.6 in., sample labels stuck on the back of production order, with the number of prints requested written in pencil (detail). Client Perfumerías Griet. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc01_47. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

Archival Scholarship and Explanatory Models of the Discipline”), *CHUY, Revista de Estudios Literarios Latinoamericanos*, Dossier Archivos latinoamericanos, no. 14 (2023): 4-29, https://www.academia.edu/105381489/La_Archivologia_nacional_y_los_modelos_explicativos_de_la_disciplina; M. Nazar, “Archivos, memoria y derechos: reflexiones en torno al caso argentino” (“Archives, Memory and Rights: Reflections on the Argentine Case”), *Comma, International Journal on Archives*, no. 2 (2010): 145-158.



Figure 6: Author unknown, original drawing of raspberries for printed reproduction, ca. 1940, tempera paint on cardboard, 7.4 x 7 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc31. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

for questions about the production procedures, since these graphic devices represent the traces of those processes, while their iconographic aspects become sources of their cultural meanings, their consumption, and appropriation practices.

The company's core product was the quality label. These labels were printed to identify a variety of everyday products, meeting the demands of important clients from sectors such as cosmetics, medicine, fashion and clothing, beverages, and food. The cosmetics and beverage brands stand out, showing the

company's high printing quality and eloquent design models. This is notable because these products were intended for popular consumption, resulting in massive circulation, and eventual obsolescence (fig. 5)

These materials reveal details, such as the skill and care of the draftsmen and graphic technicians involved in creating these pieces. This is clear in some original drawings that depict the products and related scenes or elements in a highly naturalistic style, as can be seen for example in an illustration of raspberries showing a very precise mastery of the tempera technique, especially in the glow and shadows of the volume of each individual berry depicted (fig. 6).

For these reasons, this archive is particularly interesting for studying graphic culture, a realm that includes the objects, techniques, practices, concepts, people, and organizations involved in print production. The technical elements of the production process included in this archive, such as sketches, originals, and printing proofs, offer significant data for understanding historical techniques and methods applied in the manufacture of the various graphic products, all generated by the same printing workshop.

The documents concerning the production of the labels *Loción maderas de Oriente* (Orient Wood Lotion) (fig. 7) for instance, present a final print of each label, stuck on the back of the production order (left), as well as the original handmade ink



Figure 7: Author unknown, left: *Loción Maderas de Oriente* (Orient Wood Lotion) labels for cosmetic bottles, 1942, letterpress printing on paper, special inks and relief, 1.2 x 2.4 in. and 0.6 x 1.4 in. Right: original drawing for printed reproduction, ink on paper with details in pencil, 7 x 7.6 in. The paper is glued to a hardboard, and protected by a tracing sheet. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc30. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

drawing used for print reproduction (right). The document on the left shows the printed samples of the labels, together with the number of labels to be printed, written by hand. The document on the right shows some details of the technical process, as the hand-drawn crosses provide a visual guide to the technician, who would reduce the drawing by half or more of its original size using photographic techniques. The pencil-drawn texts at the bottom of the labels show where they should add the phrase, "INDUSTRIA ARGENTINA."

These documents reveal information of the print production processes not visible in the final printed piece. For example, the size in which the original drawing was done, triple the size of the final printed label, tells us about the use of photographic reduction techniques to minimize errors from tracing the hand-drawn images. The comparison with the final piece also allows us to identify what aspects of the drawing correspond to the color parts of the label, and which to the subtle relief lines that depict arabesque ornaments. This tells us, at the same time, the way all these details in the label were defined from the very beginning by the illustrator of the original drawing.



Figure 8: Author unknown, original drawings for *Agua de colonia Ophelia* (Ophelia Eau de Cologne) label, ca. 1930, ink on cardboard, with details in pencil, 6.4 x 7.8. The paper is glued to a hardboard, and protected by a tracing sheet. Client Harrods-Gath & Chaves. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc31. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

In this way, the originals provide visual and material information on the methods used to produce the images and texts that define the design of the pieces, revealing the step-by-step process of Profumo's graphic production.

Another clear example is the series of originals

for the *Agua de Colonia Ophelia* label (Ophelia Eau de Cologne), which allows us to analyze the way the image is constructed based on the separation of colors necessary for the final printing (fig. 8). As printing is done in layers, these documents show how the area corresponding to each color of ink is indicated in different plates, accompanied by the indications written by hand on the tracing sheet that covers the drawings. In the sequence, we can see different plates corresponding to each specific ink to be printed. In the first place on the left, the original complete drawing of the label is depicted. Secondly, we can appreciate how the different parts of the image are selected according to the color of ink chosen for it, and consequently separated into different drawings. One plate highlights small areas corresponding to little flowers in the drawing, plus the logotype of the product "Ophelia," marked with the color *rojo* (red); another highlights the dress of the woman depicted and the name of the brand "Gath y Chaves," marked with the color *azul* (blue); another that only marks some details in the dress, the arm and hair of the woman, is marked with *violeta* (violet), and so on. Other traces of production such as the pencil drawing lines that set the final size of the label (59 mm), and the crosses that indicate the limits of the label's outline, testify to the practices of Profumo's graphic technicians.

The separated originals give us valuable information to interpret the final print regarding the number of colors used in reproduction. Whereas the standard image reproduction uses only four ink colors (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, CMYK), labels usually demand a higher number of inks in order to expand the color spectrum. This



Figure 9: Author unknown, "Revelation," *Agua de colonia al neroli* ("Revelation," Neroli Eau de Cologne) label for cosmetic bottle, 1929, golden ink and relief on paper, 1.9 x 2.5 in. Client Harrods-Gath & Chaves. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc02_96. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

presents a difficulty for the analysis of the printed piece, as it is very hard to identify how many inks have been used to depict each color. By having these originals, we can know with certainty which inks and colors were used to print the label, and therefore understand how the different inks combine to obtain the final result. These findings help us to deepen our understanding of Profumo's technical processes, allowing new questions to arise from the materiality of the archive.

Documents such as work orders, on the other hand, provide information about the technical specifications of each job, such as the quantities of prints requested by the client, the machines indicated for each job, the type of paper used, and the surface finishing applied to the pieces, among other details. This information is clear, for example, in the work order for Trineo fruit tablets wrappers (fig. 2), where one can read the printing system to be used: offset printing, the number of colors: five inks, the paper used: first class work paper, and surface finishing: varnished, as well as the number of prints requested by the client: 500,000 copies.

The content of the Profumo archive helps us understand the manufacturing, distribution, and consumption of print productions, along with the

meanings these ephemeral, mass-circulation items convey. In this sense, these prints showcase a variety of iconographies and visual narratives, and they offer valuable study objects for exploring visual culture from multiple disciplines. Among others, these objects highlight issues posed from the field of gender studies that allows us to critically approach stereotypes of the feminine and masculine that stand out clearly in labels for cosmetic products. A clear example are the labels made for *Perfumerías Griet* and other cosmetic brands for Gath & Chaves, an important Argentine department store founded in 1883, with its headquarters in Buenos Aires and branches in the largest cities of the country.⁸ In them, idealized feminine faces or bodies, with

⁸ Gath & Chaves played an important role in the circulation of consumer products for Argentina's wealthy class in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, developing several lines of their own brand products, mainly in the cosmetics sector. In 1922, it merged with the Argentine branch of Harrods, the only branch

references to classical culture and associated with elements of nature, flowers or other vegetal figures, offer the consumer models that allude to an idea of beauty (fig. 9).

In effect, these printed artifacts composed and sustained an imagery in which, together with the design, typography, and page layout, we can observe scenes and



Figure 10: Author unknown, advertisement for *Lana Mimosa* (Mimosa –cuddly– Wool), ca. 1950, offset printing on paper, 10.6 x 14.2 in. The phrase depicted says: “To knit well... Mimosa wool”. Client Cordova Hnos. & Cia. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc42. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

situations that refer to social constructions. In this sense, these images demand further analysis regarding childhood, social roles and hegemonic aesthetic models. A relevant example is the case of the advertising of Mimosa Wool where the subject depicted, and target audience, is a woman in a domestic environment (fig. 10), an image illustrative of the sexual division of labor that for much of the 20th century assigned women to domestic tasks and men to work outside the home. Embroidery, knitting, and weaving, particularly inscribed in institutions and school curriculums, were present in advertisements and commercial design, and evoked home and family. But from the depicted scene, we can imagine in this case a home located in a privileged situation – represented by the luxurious couch, the woman’s garments, and her makeup and hair – so that gender and class are intertwined. In this way, the confinement to domesticated labor that characterized the stereotype of femininity for the first half of the 20th century is softened in

a way, presenting a smiling woman in a comfortable and safe home environment.

In addition, the labels for Trébol and Extrafina stockings, as well as Griet toilet soap wrapper materialize the ideal of beauty in young female figures with long slender legs, and elegant blond hair (figs. 11 and 12).

of the firm outside England. Perfumerías Griet offered various lines of products such as perfumes, lotions, soaps, and make-up powders, and was very popular in the first decades of the 20th century in Buenos Aires.

The Profumo archive is the only one of its kind in Argentina, where no other production record of the printing industry has been preserved almost integrally. In this sense, this collection of printed ephemera operates against the expiration of the objects and the loss of the social memory connected to them. These objects, which were conceived for a specific use and a short useful life, are collected and recovered from oblivion by researchers of the visual and graphic culture of the past. The archive thus opens a rich path of inquiry into the design, imagery, production processes, and visual strategies of collections of ephemera that represent “a submerged continent that we are just beginning to discover, but which, better known, will mean a remapping of our understanding of the role of the visual in that



Figure 11: Author unknown, Trébol and Extrafina (Clover and Ultraslim) labels for stockings ca. 1940, offset printing on paper, 2 x 5.6 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc30. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.



Figure 12: Author unknown, Chela toilet soap wrapper, ca. 1928, golden ink on paper, 6.9 x 4.8 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc44. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

period.”⁹ The record offered by this archive is an invaluable resource that crosses disciplinary boundaries, between the history of art, design, and visual and material cultures, allowing a perspective that interweaves production processes and technologies with consumption and everyday life. As researchers, it is up to us to preserve and study these traces of culture, even with the fragile support of printed and illustrated paper, and to lead the social rediscovery of these materials.

⁹ Patricia Mainardi, “Introduction: Another World,” in *Another World: Nineteenth-Century Illustrated Print Culture* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2017), 2.

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