The category is fluid by definition but is of particular interest in regard to the Dreyfus Affair due to the extensive and extraordinary efforts made to sway or cater to public opinion on the level of "popular" culture.

Boundaries between this and other categories designed to organize the present collection (e.g. "Broadsides and Posters" and "Decorative Arts") are frequently subtle, sometimes difficult to establish, and dependent on the point of view adopted. The amusing fantasy and creative execution of the "Game of the Dreyfus Affair and of Truth" might equally be considered a work of caricature or as an item of decorative art. (E.3).

Over time, the ephemeral item which makes reference to a significant moment may itself become commemorative and historical. When fabricated, such items were probably considered limited in scope and lacking in "lasting" qualities. On some level, they may even be thought to provide an historical unconscious in the flow of culture. See, for example, the cigarette cards, toys, and novelties in the collection. Materials classed under "ephemera" are frequently on paper support and are often quite delicate. The items which remain, therefore, perhaps ironically, have become rare and are now both demanding and worthy of conservation.

During the period, commercial businesses did not usually make reference to the Affair in their advertising. The collection includes, however, an intriguing example from a manufacturer of toothpaste. (E.10-23). On the other hand, there was a brisk business to be had from the production of ephemeral pull-toys, games, broadsides, and songs. For designers, printers, and publishers such as Léon Hayard the Affair provided the thematic for an extensive catalogue of leisure items. (E.4).

A wide variety of diversions were produced during the period. The aim was to cater to an audience susceptible to distractions with political and topical references. Inevitably a point of view was adopted either for propaganda or in deference to what were imagined to be popular preferences. Here, therefore, there is a vision of the period from within an implicit, in some cases explicit, ideological framework. Thus, not only do items of ephemera exhibit period charm and, on occasion, aesthetic qualities of their own—their form and content retain our interest for the light they may throw onto historical mentalities.