

## Adding Effectively to the National Resource on Art, Craft and Design: A View from a Museum Library

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The National Art Library is a public reference library based at the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington. The funding for the library is part of the V&A's general funding. It currently occupies a gallery overlooking the interior garden of the museum, and has 84 seats for readers. Most of its stock is stored on site (for the time being), though archival collections (the museum's archive and also archive materials collected – rescued would be a more appropriate a better term - for research) are held in Blythe House near Olympia, where there is also a reading room that sits next to other museum facilities. We have 28,000 visits a year, 48-50,000 registered readers, and a staff of 68 all told.

You will see that my title already suggests a role for the National Art Library, and implies what we can and what we can't do. Rather than being a self-sufficient resource for the study of art, craft and design, the library provides a dimension to national and international bibliographic resources based on its own strengths and expertise. In a large part, these strengths reflect its own singular history and that of its parent institution. The title „National Art Library” was adopted in the 1860s. By then, the library was part of a government-led educational enterprise to improve industry through design. After the Great Exhibition of 1851, a museum was established in South Kensington for the instruction of „artisans” engaged in manufacturing, and also for the instruction of consumers, whose improved taste would in itself be an encouragement for improved standards of industrial production and consumer goods. The museum then was rich –sour comments from Continental museums complained that everything in the great sales of the time was being bought for South Kensington. As regards books, the Art Library was able to acquire what was published during the boom years of publishing from the 1840s, and there was systematic exchange of official publications on an international level. Works were acquired regardless of place of publication or language, so that perhaps 80% of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century intake was published abroad in

languages other than English – the figure today hovers around 50%. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was retrospective buying as well, but it is worth remarking that of the 4,800 works described in the great Cicognara catalogue of 1821, the most complete account of the literature of art of its day, only some 30%, a random selection, can today be found in the library. (The Cicognara library, of course, is now in the Vatican; microfilms of the books in it are available in the libraries of the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes in London).

The title „National” was earned by that remarkable project, the *Universal catalogue of books on art*, first mooted by Charles Dilke (1789-1864) – editor of the Athenaeum - in the 1850s and published as a series of proofs in the 1870s. It made up a complete bibliography of the subject assembled from the catalogues of the British Museum Library, The Bodleian Library, the Royal Institute of British Architects library, Trinity College Dublin, and a host of others. Libraries and individual scholars throughout Europe contributed: the list is long, and we conclude that contribution to the catalogue was felt to establish the *bona fides* of contributors. This collective catalogue provided access to a virtual collection. To assemble all the works included was patently beyond the resources of any one library, and its value was as much as a tool for developing collections as an aid for directing students to relevant documents. This was recognized in the 1880s, when the National Art Library began to publish bibliographies („for students and visitors” – the one group was taken to have the same aims as the other) for the subjects represented by the museum: ceramics, seals, heraldry, furniture, metalwork, gems – the list is heterogeneous but aimed directly at the teaching programme of which the museum was the centre.

The size of the library by 1890 was some 40,000 titles, a selection of the vastly greater number of works in the *Universal catalogue* (with this of course were the prints and drawings that are now in the Department of Prints, Drawings and Paintings set up in 1908). A card catalogue was started in the 1890s, maintained until 1986, since when all cataloguing has been done in US-MARC (MARC21) onto a computer catalogue. In 1998, we received support from the Heritage Lottery Fund to convert all our catalogues and lists onto the computer catalogue. This is due to end in 2003. Much of the basic conversion has been done, allowing us to see that by 1986 the card catalogue recorded 185,000 titles. This number excludes a burgeoning collection of sales catalogues and exhibition catalogues, as it does a mass of „ephemera” (ranging from minor catalogues, pamphlets and off-prints, to newspaper cuttings, advertisements in a number of forms, and manuscripts), much of it passed from the files and cupboards of curatorial staff from the Director downwards but all having the character of research documentation. We expect to have over 700,000 catalogue records when the whole retroconversion enterprise is

complete, a number which will include sales catalogues, periodicals (we take about 2,300 currently), a very large collection of exhibition catalogues, a great deal of trade literature (of a kind often treated as ephemera in other libraries but core to the documentation of subjects studied in the museum) manuscripts (from illuminated codices collected for their ornament to the diaries of Victorian designers), archives, and a very wide range of pamphlets.

These comments about the history of the library provide the setting for the points I want to make. In these times of intensified resource constraints, our task is to reflect on the essential nature of our collections, to identify what makes them distinct from others, and to capitalize on that distinctiveness for the benefit of all. Only then can we see how best to contribute to the collective bibliographical resource that the web begins to deliver to us in our offices and living rooms. I have stressed the size of the National Art Library since it demonstrates its nature as a focused subject library, complementary to others, and not the self-sufficient resource that its title perhaps suggests.

The evolution of the library's collections was an inseparable part of the development of the museum. Bibliographical materials were collected as part of campaigns that involved objects as well. The library supported the museum's insistence on complementing actual objects by reproductions of related works elsewhere. Thus were collected plaster casts of statues, architectural and other ornament, electrotypes of celebrated pieces of metalwork, modern copies of historic artefacts in all media. As regards books, preference was given to works with dense illustration. We have a large number of the Hagué facsimiles of Renaissance bindings done in the 1880s, later confused with originals and derided as forgeries. Reproductions came in a variety of forms: apart from books, there were prints, drawings, watercolours, and also photographs – these last were collected with enthusiasm (35,000 photographs in 1869; 40,000 in 1875; 52,000 in 1879; and over 100,000 by the turn of the century). The curators responsible for this work were also those acquiring books, and the same criteria were used in judging their suitability for the collection. The *Bulletin du Bibliophile* in 1861 lamented that the South Kensington Museum was hoovering up books and objects at sales in France: congratulating the English institution allowed direct criticism of museums and libraries in France: in England, the works could be seen whenever wanted, be photographed, reproduced in every conceivable medium, issued to archaeologists, art historians, designers, makers and industrialists to be studied, described, imitated, copied and sold – „c'est une consolation dans notre malheur”.

There is today, a re-evaluation of the strategic direction that the V&A is to take, which will govern its approach to life-long learning and the means by which its collections and documentation can be made available both in galleries, study

rooms and through the web. The Victorians were very sure of what „art” represented – politicians from Peel to Gladstone, quite apart from art administrators like Henry Cole, Prince Albert’s secretary for the 1851 Great Exhibition and „founder” of the V&A, all knew what art was and they were confident that exposure to it was a civilizing element in society. Today, we would probably agree that defining „Art” is not quite such a straightforward matter. Once one gets away from painting with its supporting literature and institutions, we get into contentious areas and our subject soon evaporates – in a way that it did not for the Victorians. „Art” is, of course, a category that has changed over the centuries. If Kristeller defined a turning point in the 18<sup>th</sup> century („*The modern system of the arts*”, 1951), another turning point comes with the art-education movement that spawned the V&A and other museums in Europe and America where art and industry were linked: here „art” is recognized in furniture design, ceramics and a range of objects that we might categorize today either as „consumer goods” at one level or as „design” at another. Art historians today range from those who study the products of individual creators – the artist conventionally defined – to those who examine the whole range of visual experience of a given community, its visual and material culture, and its competing ideologies as evidenced in objects and images. If we are to satisfy all these lines of approach – and I would say that the intellectual health of our society depends upon our ability to satisfy them – we need both the central archive of the national library, with its inherited collections and encyclopedic ambitions and collecting remit, and libraries that complement this with specialized collections and services. The National Art Library’s resources dictate for it a „fine-tuning” role, one that gives value to its subject area, both for what is held in our stock and elsewhere.

Resource constraints clearly have to govern our thinking; we are teased constantly by glimpses of the sunny uplands that new technologies make clearly visible but which are as yet unattainable. For the specialist subject library, it forces us to consider ever more in depth the real nature of our collection strengths and to see what assets we have for which some kind of long-term future can be assumed.

What are the assets of the NAL? Its unique qualities derive from its position in a museum. Its strengths are in those subjects that are core to the V&A, the applied and decorative arts. Library routines do not, in themselves, necessarily make strong collections. Just as university libraries have a research community that provides direction, so the NAL has the work of a museum and of the subjects it represents as its creative interface: its collection development is informed by the overall mission of the museum. We avidly exploit the experience of those doing research in the V&A (both users, seconded scholars and curators). So fashion, interior design, the materials from which our designed environment is made

(from metals, glass and ceramics to plastics, wood and textiles), are the subjects that take priority. This conviction has grown with the library's contribution to a major project in the museum, the galleries devoted to British Art and Design from 1500 to 1900; these are to be opened in November 2001. Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and costing some £ 31m, this is a project that has given a strategic direction to the museum's work – among the 3,000 objects that are to be displayed, there are over 150 books. Another project that provides a similar impetus has been the Centre for the History of the Interior, a project funded by the AHRB to the tune of £ 850,000. The research team for this project is in the process of being appointed. One of the first outputs will be an exhibition on the history of the interior in the Italian Renaissance, with associated publications, in 2005. The library is represented on the teams that take these projects forward.

In the matter of considering new alliances, I am stressing that to maintain a quality of collecting, to ensure that you are adding effectively to the collective resource, it becomes important to develop ever closer links with the research community, in our case one that is on our doorstep in the form of colleagues and regular users, as much as with other specialist libraries in our area. Those involved in research tend to be more mobile than librarians, and their comments about how other libraries support their subject and about the relative collection strengths of the repositories they use, can be as invaluable as the measuring of collection strengths by more formal means. This is as true of, I think, a subject such as town planning as it is of art.

Thus far, the user has not figured prominently in my comments. Perhaps I have a feeling that the subject library can afford to „lead” its readership, indeed is expected to lead its readership. For specialist and general public alike, our library seeks to develop facilities that provide the kind of „current awareness” that we begin to see in good specialist bookshops: here we expect to see and handle works hot off the press recently reviewed or discussed on the radio or TV. Even for the casual visitor a museum library can be presented as providing „leisure activities” while underlining the intellectual work that lies behind displays in galleries – this can be done by providing facilities for browsing selected periodicals, reference works and monographs, with a coffee machine, sofas and arm-chairs, in the manner of the modern bookshop.

The basic literature on art is available in a number of libraries in a city such as London. There is a very necessary duplication here, given the enormous demand for the subject today – undergraduates in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century will doubtless have to examine today's appetite for art and its use as a medium of debate as something characteristic of late-20<sup>th</sup> century society. To satisfy today's appetite to a level rather beyond what we see as the needs of the majority of our users, we are investigating means to develop open-access reference facilities adjacent to gallery

space. Through this, the user can proceed to a more concentrated level of study in an invigilated reading room: in this environment, we have to be precise about what we offer and how it relates to the holdings of other repositories. And we have to present our holdings, those of our real strengths in the whole orbit of „art”, as part of a seamless web of resources distributed locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. We also have to provide access, in a way that empowers different levels of user to electronic resources, whether in the form of CD-ROM or on the web.

If the National Art Library focuses on its core subject strengths, those that make its collections unique, it must also develop the work it has done as an „intelligent gateway” to the totality of sources for its subject. With the support of the BL Co-operation and Partnership Programme and RLSP, the library, with ARLIS/UK & Ireland, has developed the Union List of Art, Architecture and Design Serials, held on the library’s computer catalogue: thus the holdings of some eighty libraries can be surveyed at a glance. Funded from the same source, the directory of library resources for the study of art, craft and design, compiled by the National Art Library and ARLIS in 1993, has been made the basis of a successor project to record collection strengths and collecting activity in libraries included in the directory. For users of the library, there is thus an easy step from the indexing and abstracting facilities, from resources available on the web, to information about the location of documents. The Union List links to electronic surrogates where these are known, a facility that we naturally wish to add to the computer catalogue generally. Work of this kind is among the specialized services a library such as ours can provide, and it sits naturally beside the development of our website as a gateway that leads users to resources that we have ourselves evaluated.

A library in a museum can be a support for its curatorial work or a facility offered to the public. The National Art Library is very much in the latter category, but it gains its strength from being the bibliographical expression of the museum’s research programme. It challenges us to consider what we mean by access. We have inherited a liberal regime of access from the founders of the museum –as regards opening hours, use of stock, facilities to help take photographs of library materials (after completion of copyright guarantees, of course) - and like all libraries we find that our users need help beyond what our computer catalogue gives them. To use a library catalogue effectively one needs quite a training, and perhaps those working in a field where images are important are used to rapid self-help browsing more than conventional ordering routines. The real challenge is to provide aids beyond our computer catalogue that give access to the subjects represented by library and museum. Access to the intellectual world that library and museum serve involves presenting a host of electronic and audio-visual sources to our users, but also activities from lectures and conferences to pro-

jections of films and „happenings”. The web-based environment allows the users to navigate with ease from one kind of resource to another, from the traditional computer catalogue to subjects guides giving access to areas of study at a broader level. This is the natural development in situation where one enquiry –on Eduardo Paolozzi’s engravings, exhibitions of Rembrandt’s works, arts and crafts ceramics – can overwhelm you with hundreds of undifferentiated bibliographical records. Only the specialist can swim here.

As with any library that was collecting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is an enormous problem in setting priorities for a conservation programme – apart from the perennial problems of self-destructing paper we have, as an art library, those of deteriorating coated papers, heavy papers which themselves tear apart a binding very effectively . Here, a number of matters regarding conservation, storage (ie on-site or at a remote location), the provision of surrogates in digital or analogue form, and even outright de-accessioning coincide. A significant proportion of our stock can be equated with museum objects. Printing machinery and books were categories of object in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Great Exhibitions in Europe and North America. As part of its educational role, the museum from its inception after 1851 set out to document the history of ornament in books and the printing industry; along with a very large collection of fragments (initials, pages, details of ornament) of books and manuscripts, circulated to art schools throughout the century, it acquired large numbers of books and magazines for their design content – illustration, end-papers, binding design. Bindings were acquired with some enthusiasm: die-cutters (ie those who made the dies for the printing of ornament) were trained on a diet (among other things) of flat pattern found on historic bindings. The physical and design qualities of all of our stock are very carefully considered in evaluating their treatment. We are responding here to the specific agenda of the museum. For the British Art and Design galleries we needed to produce 17<sup>th</sup>-century illustrated pamphlets, 17<sup>th</sup>-century school-books in their original paper wrappers, 18<sup>th</sup>-century newspapers, the ordinary books as well as some of the outstanding books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The emphasis for display purposes is on the original format of the work in question, and this quality of any work must inform how it is conserved.

I have gone to some lengths to characterize the nature of the V&A library, since the title „National Art Library” can lead to confusion. Our approach to cataloguing is distinctive, governed by our position in a museum. Since we represent the most publicly accessible aspect of the museum’s documentation, we catalogue in details materials elsewhere consigned to „dumps”:

- exhibition catalogues, where works exhibited are listed (these publications we acquire both from booksellers, through museum colleagues and pro-actively, soliciting catalogues and ephemera from a list of galleries

targeted by ourselves). Three years ago, we came to an agreement with the British Library to take small catalogues that would not normally appear in their catalogue: some 30 works each month join a collection in the National Art Library where they are catalogued onto our computer catalogue.

- trade literature, that is to say catalogues produced by manufacturers and retailers (we have a long list of some 400 producers in whom the museum is interested who supply us with material).

These are pro-active programmes of collecting in an area where there is minimal bibliographical control. The documentation gathered is central to the museum's research interests and most cannot be found in any public collection. In this latter case, we are adding to a significant collection made by our predecessors – documentation on matters such as lighting from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and radio design from the 1920s is extensive.

It is probably fair to say that our catalogue records are fuller than most in specifying, for example, the density of illustration (giving, for example, the number of plates in a monograph) and an indication of the apparatus (the number of pages of bibliography, for example, which allows the users to discern the book's value). It will come as no surprise that attention is paid, where works for which some display potential can be imagined, to the physical characteristics, to the qualities of books as objects and to what we see in them as sources for the history of art, craft and design. Perhaps this kind of cataloguing is one of the major contributions to the matter of art, craft and design made by the National Art Library.