

---

# Academic uses of archives and special collections: thrill of the real

Sarah Mahurter  
*Manager*  
*University Archives and*  
*Special Collections Centre*  
*University of the Arts London*  
*s.mahurter@arts.ac.uk*

---

University of the Arts London has an extraordinary range of archives, special collections and museum collections, including an accredited museum, that reflect the traditions and specialisms of the six constituent colleges.<sup>1</sup> They provide a rich resource for teaching, learning and research, and attracted 2,600 visitors in 2012, 80% of whom are from within the university community.

These archives and special collections represent a significant cornerstone of the university's research infrastructure and a crucial teaching resource, and are used in a variety of ways by external visitors, who range from international scholars and arts practitioners to local schools and community groups. They are a resource for arts, design and communication that both inform and inspire research and creativity.

The aim of this article is to showcase selected academic uses of archives and special collections at University of the Arts London and to celebrate the wide range of good practice in this area that both enhances the university's reputation and provides significant academic value. It draws on case studies that demonstrate how students who engage with collections are directly helped to achieve their learning outcomes. These case studies also demonstrate effective collaborations between library and archival staff and academic colleagues.

## **DISPLAYS AND EXHIBITIONS**

Visitors to the university are exposed to the collections through their public presence in a variety of settings, including its galleries and museum, libraries, boardrooms and corridors. These dis-

plays are seminal in defining the culture of University of the Arts London in terms of its legacy, contemporary practice and future direction. They are a physical manifestation of the values of the academy and scholarship and a living representation of the university's contribution to the creative arts.



*Gallery window at CSM, showing work from In Exchange*

*Credit: Judy Willcocks. Student work from In Exchange on display at Central Saint Martins*

Themed exhibitions demonstrate the range of special collections material being used on courses, and how access to them inspires the creation and display of new work. For example, books created by students in BA (Hons) Graphic Design Communication at Chelsea College of Arts have been ingested into the Artists' Books collection. Exhibitions curated by staff and students regularly feature in many of our libraries, and a series of shows at Camberwell Chelsea and Wimbledon have been documented in a recent library publication.<sup>2</sup> The MA course in Culture, Criticism and Curation includes a five-session workshop on archiving, and develops into a curatorial project which is brought to realisation in the Lethaby Gallery at Central Saint Martins (CSM) and the library window in London College of Communication (LCC). Students work in two groups with archives from CSM's Museum and Study Collection and the Stanley Kubrick Archive. This is a 'live' project, in which the students' work contributes to the ongoing cataloguing, archiving and

public programming work of the museum and the archive.

Curators from other universities, museums and galleries have included materials borrowed from collections across the university in major and international exhibitions, from the Barbican in London to the Museum of Image and Sound in Sao Paulo. An exhibition based on the university's Stanley Kubrick Archive has been attracting huge visitor numbers since it started touring internationally in 2004; it will continue to tour for the foreseeable future, thus raising the profile of the university worldwide. Public engagement is a vital and well-established practice in bringing collections to a wider audience, and consequently continues to be an important aspect of the work of our archivists and special collections librarians.

#### **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

The excitement and inspirational value of interacting at first hand with primary resource materials cannot be underestimated. This is achieved through object-based learning, a method of teaching that is both preferred by students and of great value to academic staff wishing to innovate, engage and enhance the student experience.<sup>3</sup> It contributes to the development of key skills in observation, communication and teamwork and is inspirational as well as informative when used within a pedagogic context by staff who manage collections. There is also great value in the opportunity to touch and learn from the object directly. Object-based learning elicits powerful responses from all who engage with the physical artefacts. Two of our internationally renowned alumni echo these sentiments:

The collections are a rich opportunity to see and hold first-hand the real thing; the experience cannot be underestimated in the development of our understanding of the objects we create. The rich and varied Printing Historical Collection opened a world of possibilities to me when I was a student at the London College of Printing. I felt immediately I had found a place I could inhabit. The collection formed the foundation of my understanding of the printed word and gave me a route to develop my own language; it is a truly wonderful resource – long may it grow.

*(Les Bicknell, book artist and alumnus of London College of Communication)*

Whilst fashion designer Stella McCartney, alumna of Central Saint Martins and Honorary Professor, stated:

The libraries have fantastic research collections which I loved using. I always felt privileged to have these amazing resources at my disposal.

A series of case studies shows students engaging with collections at University of the Arts London as part of their undergraduate studies.

At London College of Fashion, Jane Holt, Senior Research Fellow, Archives, worked with the Course Leader of BA (Hons) Bespoke Tailoring and the Programme Director of Cultural and Contextual Studies, to introduce the LCF archives to first-year students to support projects such as the Trouser Project, which was part of the research, design and tailoring unit of the course.

Jane displayed examples of tailored suits from the menswear collection so students could handle the garments to examine their design, cut and construction. They began to learn how to identify the different tailoring techniques used by individual tailors and apply this to their own garment construction. The archive session was practice-based, focusing on how the knowledge gained from close examination and analysis of an existing garment could be transferred and translated into their own work. Detailed investigation of the cutting and sewing techniques used, for example, in pockets, trouser widths and seams informed how the students could construct their own tailored garments.

A student from the Bespoke Tailoring course commented:

I have been really inspired...being able to see the clothes and look at them closely is great, I can see how the fly on these trousers was altered.

Gustavo Grandal Montero, Academic Support Librarian, worked with the Senior Lecturer in Interior and Spatial Design to develop formal learning outcomes for first- and second-year students using the special collection of Artists' Books in the Library of Chelsea College of Arts. First-year students were asked to use a selection of artists' books to explore their sense of home. The course cohort comprises international students from China and Asia, so books were specifically chosen to create a platform to discuss non-west-

ern ideologies. Discourse around the home was accessed through the typefaces, images, paper and print as these were all elements that the artist had chosen to convey political messages and content. The seminar was a huge success. International students, who were often quiet in classroom sessions, were empowered to talk and engage through their interaction with artists' books that embodied familiarity for them. They grew in confidence and contributed to the learning of their fellow students, which was particularly strong in the areas of analysis, communication and presentation.

The Museum and Study Collection at Central Saint Martins was used to support Hidden Treasures, a project in which the Head of Museum, Judy Willcocks, and the Professor of Typography developed a brief that asks students to create three posters using different techniques, to promote items within the Museum and Study Collection. The professor chose rare, early printed books from the Museum and incorporated them into his teaching to bring hidden collections back to the forefront of learning. Students were asked to research and photograph a book or object of their choice, and create posters using images taken by their peers. This project stretched the students by challenging their research processes and the way they created work.

Through these encounters with museum objects within collections, the students developed skills that enabled them to see and create things in different and responsive ways; these are essential skills that the students will be able to transfer to their professional practice when they are required to respond to client briefs.

Judy says of their collaboration:

Obviously Phil knows a lot more about typography than I do so I was keen to let him loose in the collection to see what he would identify as being of interest his students.

For the professor, the collaboration is very much about exchanging specialist knowledge to choose objects for a graphic and typography course unit and, in his words:

[to] show students things that they wouldn't ordinarily see and appreciate physical objects firsthand rather than second hand as images reproduced in books or on the internet.

The Stanley Kubrick Archive is used each autumn term by students on an elective course, *Inspired by Kubrick*. Students from many disciplines at London College of Communication are given the opportunity to explore, be inspired by and respond to the archive of one of the greatest film-makers and directors of our time. They work in small inter-disciplinary groups to propose a creative response to the archive, which is presented to the group and to invited guests at an external venue at the end of the nine-week course. The interdisciplinary nature of the course has resulted in presentations on subjects as diverse as sound art, marketing, film-making, oral history and photography. The elective course challenged not only new ways of seeing, thinking and researching, but also new ways for the students to create and communicate their responses. Several examples of the work created by students are kept alongside the archive to provide future inspiration.



*Kubrick book*

*Credit:*

*Julie Reynolds. Student work from the Stanley Kubrick Archive elective course, 2011.*

Some of our PhD students and staff engaged in research make direct use of the archives and special collections to inform their work. Although collection management and academic staff consider that the availability of archives and special collections is essential to the work of a researcher, there is currently less work at this level and more at undergraduate level. To encourage further research, the university is looking to pair up professors with collections of particular interest to them. The aim is to create a group of 'collection champions' who, through one-to-one advice and workshops, may further encourage academic staff, early career researchers and PhD students to use the collections alongside collection managers and archivists, who play an important role in developing research skills in these key groups.

Some examples of the academic value of collections at research level include the use of the EMAP Archive (*Drapers record and Shoe and leather news*) at London College of Fashion, which has been used to find evidence for terminology relating to handbags (this will be included in a published book), and for the labels and cataloguing in the new Simone Handbag Museum in Korea. It has also been used to access articles and advertising on men's underwear for book chapters and conference papers. The Thorold Dickinson archive was used by a PhD student at London College of Communication for primary research material. His research was based on a script of the film *Blue vanguard* (1957), produced by the United Nations about the Suez Crisis of 1956, and was supported by a screening at the college of the rarely seen film.

Collections often inspire public lectures and symposia in the national and international arena. For example, the Jocelyn Herbert Archive is at Wimbledon College of Arts. The annual Jocelyn Herbert Lecture, set up by the university and supported by the Rootstein Hopkins Foundation, takes place at the National Theatre. The lecture stimulates debate about the often under-celebrated profession of stage design, and honours Jocelyn Herbert for her part in revolutionising the look of post-war British theatre. The university held a successful symposium 'Into the archive: reviewing Kubrick' at Los Angeles County Museum of Art on 9 February 2013, to celebrate the Stanley Kubrick travelling exhibition at this venue. Academic and curatorial staff from the university and the V&A Museum presented papers based on their engagement with the archive in relation to their own practice, in stage design, documentary film-making and oral history.

The wide range of archives and special collections held by the university provide opportunities to enhance and increase subject-specific knowledge and core skills in support of academic work and creative practice. These skills include listening, oral communication, discussion, presentation, organisation and team work, time management and independent thinking. The case studies referenced here form the basis of a report that will be used as a celebration of what we currently do and as a prompt for discussion about future developments and new activities that will draw upon our archive, museum and special collections.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes using special collections are seen as an activity for the élite, but this article showcases some of the ways we have sought to highlight

the value of these unique resources that actually benefit a wide range of teaching and learning activities as well as research endeavours, thus demonstrating their central importance to the mission of the university and higher education.

For further details of collections at the university, please see <http://www.arts.ac.uk/study-at-ual/library-services/collections-and-archives/>

#### NOTES

- 1 Established in 2004, UAL brings together six esteemed arts, design, fashion and media colleges, which were founded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Camberwell College of Arts; Central Saint Martins; Chelsea College of Arts; London College of Communication; London College of Fashion; and Wimbledon College of Arts.
- 2 Grandal Montero, G. ed. (2011) *The show must go on: exhibitions in Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Libraries*
- 3 Prown, J. (1994) 'Mind in matter: an introduction to material culture, theory and method' in S. Pearce, ed. *Interpreting objects and collections*, Routledge: London 1994
- 4 Mahurter, S ed. (2013) 'Academic uses of archives, museum and special collections 2009-2013'. University of the Arts London