

IN THE ARCHIVE

## The value of archives

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I write from three perspectives: those of a designer with a thirst for truth and authenticity; a researcher with a zeal for the type of brown box files found in archives and an educator who wants to facilitate good practice among design students and instil the importance of primary research into practice. In each of these areas of my professional and pedagogic life, the value of archives cannot be underestimated and underpins and validates all that I do.

In our postgraduate design programmes at University for the Creative Arts (UCA) in Epsom, Surrey, we use archival research as an important introduction to exploratory practice, part of the initial Research and Methods units. Archival research is essential in reinforcing the relevance of primary and secondary research techniques to students, encouraging integrity and understanding to facilitate good practice. Having first-hand experience of archival collections can also act as a trigger for further investigation and lead on to richer and more informed creative impetuses for design projects. Nothing can replicate the experience of being able to actually handle unique items of historical significance; and there are few better inspirational starting points for design students than the opportunity to contextualize, discover and construct personal viewpoints and narratives.

At UCA we are fortunate in having many significant archives spread throughout our campuses in Farnham, Epsom, Rochester and Canterbury and we are currently in the process of acquiring more. Our resources and images cover areas such as animation, animals and art, architecture, art education, crafts, disability, fashion and textiles, gender studies, graphic explanation, photography, politics, protests, race, typography and wartime art (Figures 1–5). Our archives are well used by students and maintained by specialist archival and special collections staff. UCA archives are accessed through an online archive catalogue that contains descriptions of all our collections. Collection descriptions are available to search on the Archives Hub, but they are also available to visit.

UCA's archival aim is to catalogue, preserve and promote our collections for learning and teaching in the creative arts. Archival collections include the work of Oscar winning animator Bob Godfrey (who taught at UCA), Tandem Studios director Daniel Greaves, the digital image collections of animators Halas and Batchelor, FoundryTypes (one of the original independent type foundries started in 1989–90, by David Quay and Freda Sack), the Typographic Circle (posters), Diagram Visual Information Limited (containing methods of graphic explanation and book artwork showing the design process), David Birch illustrations, Textile sketchbooks (showing work in progress and textile samples from City and Guilds Embroidery



Figure 1. Range of prospectuses for Epsom School of Art.



Figure 2. Photograph of members of the Fashion Department, Epsom School of Art, on an outing to Ascot (1962).

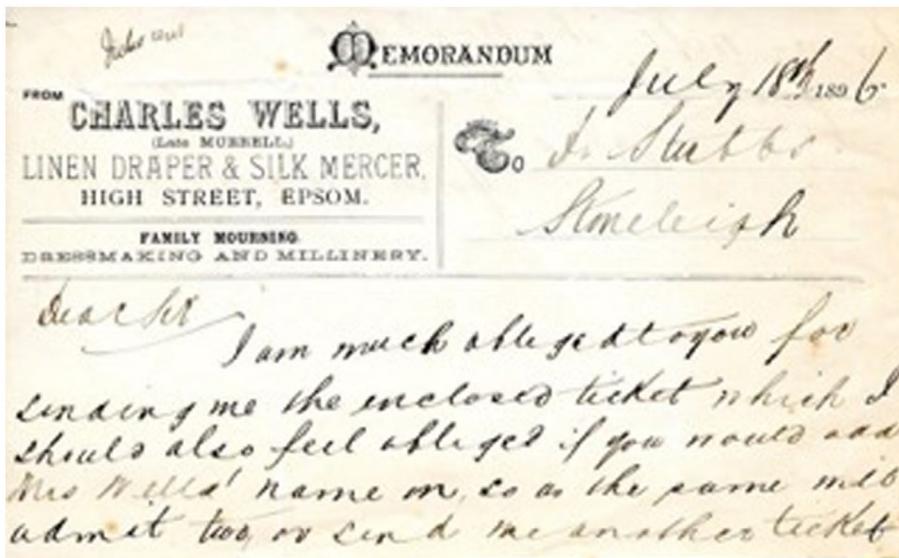


Figure 3. Letter from the Epsom Art School Archive (1886).



Figure 4. Letters from 1896, including acceptance postcards to the opening of the Epsom School of Art.

Studies), the Materials Library, the Tessa Boffin Archive (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual and other photography projects), Working Press (working class artist books), the University Institutional Archives, and many artist books and rare books. One of our most recent acquisitions is the archive of Nijhof and Lee Booksellers from Amsterdam (1988–2011) consisting of 3500 items that predominantly date from the 1920s to present day. The archive includes type specimens, magazines, books and catalogues.



**Figure 5.** Spines, *The Magazine of Art – Illustrated* (c.1890s).

My own research degree made extensive use of archives at University of Reading, The Natural History Museum, London, University of Brighton, Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, and the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm. Being able to experience the feel of handwritten documents and original artwork and artefacts gave me a unique insight into the lives and everyday work of the designers involved, and gave me an understanding of the real stories and influences behind significant events in design history. By piecing together archival material and connecting correspondence (sometimes between international archives) I have been able to unearth little known back stories and surprising factors which have provided me with a new insights into design history – which may to some extent have satisfied the investigator in me, but more importantly has both informed my design practice, deepened my curiosity and integrity as a researcher, and from a pedagogical point of view allowed me to encourage my students to understand the importance of the archival experience in their exploratory practice and primary research.

From the perspective of my own practice as a designer who mainly specializes in the design and interpretation of museums and educational exhibits, the importance of understanding both the main design concept, and the nuances and subtleties of the subject is essential for bringing the exhibit to life. I have spent many fascinating hours working with museum curators exploring the artefacts in their collections gaining intimate insights into their significance and contextual value.

Archival collections from various universities such as University of the Arts London (which houses material from Stanley Kubrick, Tom Eckersley, and Walter Crane among several other notable designers) are increasingly available online and visits can be arranged. The National Archives holds three million designs from 1839–1991 and The British Design Collection in the National Archives is an online resource that is available to provide sources of inspiration for designers, and enrich their practice by learning from the past.

The value of archives at UCA can be measured by the wealth of richly informed major projects completed by our students, where the starting point can be traced back to light bulb moments, discoveries and connections made while reflecting on the context of archival

material. Personally, I will never forget (while researching material for my PhD in the Natural History Museum Archives) finding a memo dating back to the early 1970s which provided absolute evidence that the principles of Isotype (originally devised in Vienna in the 1920s) were being used to design a new way of looking at audience-focused exhibitions in London in the 1970s – a revelation indeed, and absolute evidence that helped to validate a whole chapter of my thesis (and subsequent published essay). In a similar way, these connections and experiences allow students to see history from different, and often highly personal perspectives, which in turn make for original, thought-provoking design solutions. Archives contain the details and minutiae often lost to general histories, but are there to be reconsidered by new audiences.

### **Notes on contributor**

*Sue Perks* is a designer, educator and researcher. Her doctoral thesis explored the legacy of the principles of Isotype. She has been a partner in Perks Willis Design since 1989 and her area of expertise is in the design of educational exhibits within museums, and the organization and management of graphic information. Significant projects include the graphic interpretation of Tudor House Museum in Southampton, travelling exhibitions for for Aik Saath, permanent and temporary exhibitions in the Natural History Museum (and a recent published essay on their 1970s New Exhibition Scheme) along with design commissions for clients such as the British Academy, the BBC, and English Heritage.

### **IMAGE CREDIT**

Images from UCA Archives  
Photographs by Tiffany Gregory