

Big data and deep histories at Melbourne University's, Visual Cultures Resource Centre



Jane Brown, Director of the Visual Cultures Resource Centre

First of all, the stats: 250,000 slides and photographs of artworks; 89,000 digital records; 27,000 high resolution digital images some scanned from some of those aforementioned quarter of a million slides and photographs; 15,000 books and periodicals; 1700 films — and so it goes. Each copied artwork is catalogued from the level of its country of origin down to the level of its individual iconography within the Harvard University Fogg Art Museum Classification System.

But not only is there a 'big data' scale to the collection of the University of Melbourne's Visual Cultures Resource Centre, there's also a deep historical depth. The University of Melbourne Fine Arts Department, the first of its kind and the template for others in Australia, was set up by Joseph Burke, an urbane Englishman, who as his private secretary had sat next to Prime Minister Clement Atlee across from Joseph Stalin at the Potsdam Conference. Sir Daryl Lindsay, director of the National Gallery of Victoria, was closely associated with the inauguration of the University Fine Arts Department and the appointment of Burke, and both men saw art reproductions as

crucial to the development of Australian culture. Lectures on their European art patrimony could be given to the ordinary people of Melbourne as well as art history students at university.

The Centre still holds a wonderfully large collection of printed art reproductions — gelatin silver copy photographs, photogravures and lithographs mounted on card and produced in sets by the Courtauld Institute of Art and the Carnegie Corporation — which must have been passed from hand to hand in art history classes in the 1940s. But from the beginning Lindsay and Burke also saw the advantage of lantern slides which could be seen by an entire public audience or university class all at once.

Before he had even arrived in Melbourne Burke was discussing lantern slides with Lindsay. The NGV had no slides, '[s]o go ahead and get all the slides you can as there is a dearth of this sort of thing here', Lindsay informed Burke. The Courtauld Institute in London suggested a 'standard set of 500-1000' slides 'to start off with', which Burke hoped to expand into 5000-6000 slides covering a standard British curriculum for art history teaching. The University ended up authorizing their

inaugural Professor of Fine Arts to spend an initial £400 (almost \$30,000 in today's money) on lantern slides.¹

Burke not only used the medium of art reproductions to bring European culture to Melbourne, but he also used art reproductions to embed the Australian painters who palled up with him (it was the usual crew) into proper international ‘art history’. This two-way process came at a time when there was increased interest in ‘visual aids’ in education, for both the general public and students, and by 1950s the University had its own Visual Aids Department. When the ethnologist Leonhard Adam took a group of students to central Australia, David Corke from the Visual Aids Department went with them, producing a set of coloured glass lantern slides which is now in the Ian Potter Museum of Art. These ‘visual aids’ of the 1950s evolved into 35mm slides, digital images and even today’s VR experiences.



One of the teaching slides of a painting by Constance Stokes from the Daryl Lindsay collection.

Jane Brown and Martyn Jolly looked at some of the several hundred original glass slides which remain at the Centre. They include a box of meticulously catalogued slides of Australian painters including Conrad Martens, Ton Roberts and Constance Stokes, some from Daryl Lindsay's own collection, a box of Australian Architecture, and most significantly a box of slides of European prehistoric art which had belonged to the German ethnologist Leonhard Adam who came to Australia on the *Dunera* in 1940 and lectured at Melbourne University from the 1940s into the 1950s.

Jane Brown, the director of the Centre, is a photographer herself, and is well aware of the material nuances of the various forms of record she manages, just as she is of the importance of collection as an integral whole. While other more shortsighted art history departments were sending their 35mm slides to the tip, Melbourne University was consolidating and expanding its collection, with for instance 15,000 slides from Monash University, 10,000 slides from the Women's Art Register, and donations from individual artists and historians.

¹ Benjamin Thomas, 'Caught on Film: The story of Melbourne's original visual archive', *emaj*, issue 3 2008, 3, 5. Accessed at: https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1736277/thomas-caught-on-film.pdf.

Jane and Martyn noticed that all of the lantern slides were in monochrome, although someone, perhaps Adam himself, had noted the pigment colour on the binding tape of the prehistoric art from Europe slides. Burke had appointed the European trained art historians Ursula Hoff and Franz Philipp shortly after his arrival, and their iconological approach, for which colour is less essential, is the very DNA of the archive. Melbourne's commercial magic lantern slide manufacturers would cheerfully colour your magic lantern slides for you, but the glass slides at Melbourne University's Fine Arts Department remained austere monochrome, hand applied colour from a commercial palette was clearly not to be trusted.

Increasingly, projects such as 'PhotoTech' being undertaken by Digital Art History at the Getty Research Institute,² and Oxford's Institute of Archaeology,³ are recognizing the value of a well-catalogued database of art reproductions with a documented historical depth. Like these archives, the Visual Cultures Resource Centre is now beginning to activate its art reproduction resources. The data lying dormant in these collections can, for instance, tell us much about the ownership histories, conservation makeovers, re-framings and re-hangings that have happened to art works over time. The Centre is using its collection to re-interpret the inaugural exhibition of the University Art Gallery mounted in the overpass lounge of the new John Medley Building in 1972.

But the sets of slides, projectors and lecture notes can also tell us a lot about past experiences of art, and past experiences of education. For instance, the Centre holds some of the lantern slides for a lecture on *The Etchings of Charles Meryon*, which was once given by the English print collector and philanthropist Harold Wright, who donated a large collection of Renaissance prints to the University's Baillieu Library in the 1950s. The text of the lecture and the rest of the lantern slides are held in the University of Melbourne archives. At a recent symposium 'Prints, Printmaking and Philanthropy', the artist John Wolseley re-presented Harold Wright's lecture at the Baillieu Library using Wright's original script and scans of his original lantern slides from the Centre and Archives, which were projected using some of the historic equipment, a projector from the 1950s, also held in the Centre's collection.

² See: http://www.getty.edu/research/scholars/research_projects/phototech.html)

³ See our 'Spotlight on the Collection' at:

https://soad.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/spotlight/2018-07/HEIR_Vital%20Data%20for%20the%20future.pdf)