



Royal College of Art

Postgraduate Art & Design

Royal College of Art Special Collections Collection Development Policy

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1. About this document

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Publication history: This policy supersedes the special collections elements of the Library acquisitions policy (2008) in the light of the service area's growing remit and size, and inclusion of new formats. These include artworks (consolidated under Special Collections in 2013), and digital materials.

2. Mission statement

The RCA's special collections are acquired, maintained and developed to support the College's strategic objectives and archival obligations. As the College's institutional memory and place of record, the collections additionally support current RCA operations across numerous functions, providing evidence of, and context to, past achievements, developments and decisions.

Special Collections contributes to the College's strategic goals through the following actions:

- Selecting, organising, cataloguing, digitising and providing access to relevant material in all forms to support learning, teaching, research and innovation.
- Engaging stakeholders in the College to ensure an informed and inclusive approach to the management of collections and delivery of services.
- Providing a responsive, helpful and flexible service to all users, including staff, students, alumni and external researchers.

- Providing a welcoming and inclusive environment in which to conduct research.

3. Background

Special Collections is an umbrella service area that provides centralised management of, and access to, the College's archives, art collections, rare books (including the Colour Reference Library and artists' books collection) and other unique materials. These are stored and managed separately from main Library stock, owing to their unique or fragile nature, and their intrinsic or extrinsic value. Access is controlled through invigilated appointments in secure areas. The service area is run by specialist staff with experience in the management of artworks, archives and rare books, and reports to the Head of Library Services within the IT, Library & Technical Services directorate. Collections are used to support staff and student research, including students' research project and studio practice, and internal functions, such as the operations of our Communications & Marketing, Development, Buildings & Estates, and Registry teams. Various programmes embed the collections in their taught courses. The collections are also widely used by external researchers of many types, including historians, curators, genealogists, practising artists and designers, and the media.

4. Collections

The RCA acquires, preserves and makes available archives of significant research value that document the activities of the College (est. 1896) and, in some cases, the work of notable staff members and students. Special Collections does not have formal record-keeping or records management responsibilities within the RCA.

Most of the material acquired is in physical form, including paper and photographic prints. Limited born-digital material where acquired is managed through a digital assets management system (DAMS). We do not collect large quantities of printed material or duplicate documents. We do not collect film-based materials as we do not have facilities to store and view these adequately.

Although certain collections, in particular the College art collection, resemble the holdings of a museum, RCA Special Collections is not a museum or art gallery and has no display space. Although we may acquire individual artworks from time to time, we do not typically collect design objects, unless they have particular evidential and research value and can be acquired without significant implications for our resources.

Unique circumstances for individual collections are described below.

4.1 RCA archive and other manuscript collections

Contents

The RCA archive collects, organises and preserves documents related to the history and activities of the College. These are catalogued and made available to support research into the life and work of the RCA and its students and to function as the College's institutional memory and place of record. It supports the College in its marketing, alumni relations and fundraising endeavours. The archive particularly represents the period of College history from its incorporation as the Royal College of Art in 1896 and contains published College documents and grey literature, including prospectuses, annual reports, exhibition catalogues, accounts and Convocation lists, together with collections of photographs, press cuttings, realia and memorabilia. The RCA archive also includes runs of College publications. More recently, College outputs have become increasingly digital, as represented by online documents, such as reports, and websites. Other collections specifically recording the work of students are managed differently owing to their format: these include the Record of Student Work, the College (art) collection, the Printmaking archive, and the Graphic Design and Illustration archive. These are addressed below.

In addition to the RCA archive, Special Collections holds a number of discrete archives, usually reflecting the work of RCA-related individuals or organisations. Examples include the Bruce Archer archive, the Henry Wilson archive, and the Madge Garland papers.

Collecting priorities

- The College's formal historical record, including minutes of Council and Senate meetings, significant committees, annual reports, published accounts, photographs, maps and plans, grey literature, published course information, student magazines and other equivalent material, whether historical or current. Current materials are usually acquired by direct internal transfer.
- Papers of significant individuals with a strong connection to the College, eg long-serving staff with national or international reputations whose papers reflect significant attachment to the College.
- Design research-related material that originated from the RCA (eg its Department of Design Research) to complement existing holdings of material relating to Bruce Archer, Kenneth Agnew and Tim Coward.

We do not usually collect

- Transient financial and other records
- Three-dimensional objects
- Documentation of alumni careers beyond the RCA
- Documentation of staff careers outside the RCA
- Staff and student files (managed separately by Human Resources and Registry)
- Locally managed day-to-day records of individual schools or programmes, although these may be transferred and subsequently edited when a course closes or transforms.
- Collections of published material, including samples of commercial work by alumni and staff, thematic book collections, or press cuttings.

4.2. Record of Student Work

Contents

The Record of Student Work contains over 100,000 photographs and began in 1979 when the RCA started to photograph graduate work in its annual shows comprehensively. Prior to this, individual programmes recorded work to varying degrees, and these photographs and slides, dating back to the late 1950s, were retrospectively acquired and added to the collection. The project moved to born-digital images from 2003. The photographs attempted to record the work of every MA student on the practice-based programmes through overall shots and details. On occasion, where work was missed, students were invited to submit their own images to add on a non-exclusive basis in perpetuity. In 2019, in line with recommendations of a working party, the project to document each student's work individually ceased, owing to increasing scale and constraints on resources. Instead, Special Collections agreed to receive and preserve a smaller and more selective set of College-commissioned 'promotional' photographs. In 2020, in response to the Covid pandemic, the College additionally launched a digital online showcase of student work, which Special Collections also undertakes to preserve (see 4.6).

We do not collect

- Images of Humanities- or Research-based *written* work. These are represented in the collections through the institutional repository and submitted theses.

4.3. College (art) collection

Contents

The College collection contains around 1,500 artworks by students, staff and friends of the College, including important figures such as David Hockney, Henry Moore and Tracey Emin. It is predominantly composed of paintings but also contains prints, drawings and sculpture. Historically, works were selected and donated by Painting alumni each year but this became unsustainable and selective purchase was established in 2009.

Collecting priorities

- Student work across fine art programmes, typically selected from the final show, and judged to be of exceptional merit.

We do not collect

- Significant numbers of prints from the Print programme (acquired separately for the Printmaking archive; see 6.4).
- Fragile, three-dimensional or other materials likely to have implications for any or all of the following: preservation, handling, display, storage and transport; this includes excessively large works.
- Unsolicited donations of artworks, unless under exceptional circumstances.
- Artwork that duplicates existing holdings where students are already represented in the collection, unless under exceptional circumstances.
- Work created by alumni of the College that does not directly represent their RCA experience and practice, unless under exceptional circumstances.
- Work by purchase other than those funded by the small acquisitions fund.
- Work with no connection to the RCA.

4.4. Printmaking archive

Contents

The Printmaking 'archive' is a collection of around 10,000 individual prints by graduating students collected since the 1920s. Additionally, the archive contains a complete set of the publications series of box sets of prints by staff, students and guest artists on a theme, beginning with the *Coronation* series of 1953. Other formats of work, including artists' books and a small amount of three-dimensional work has been collected to varying degrees.

Collecting priorities

- All publications and an annual accrual of samples of student work.
- Artists' books, which is an established strength among the special collections.

We do not collect

- Fragile, three-dimensional or other materials likely to have implications for any or all of the following: preservation, handling, display, storage and transport; this includes excessively large works.
- Unsolicited donations of artworks, unless under exceptional circumstances.
- Artwork that duplicates existing holdings where students are already represented in the collection, unless under exceptional circumstances.
- Work created by alumni of the College that does not directly represent their RCA experience and practice, unless under exceptional circumstances.
- Work by purchase.
- Work with no connection to the RCA.

4.5. Graphic Design & Illustration archive

Contents

The Graphic Design and Illustration archive contains an estimated 2,000 prints, posters and other flat examples of student work (1950s-present), together with books, magazines and other materials. It was collected as an in-house record and teaching collection and managed within the School of Communication but was transferred to Special Collections in 2015.

Collecting priorities

- Examples of student work that are congruent with the collection, eg posters, ephemera and publications. At present there is no system in place for routinely acquiring examples of student work and transferring them to Special Collections, although some works may still be retained within the programme.

We do not collect

- Fragile or other materials likely to have implications for any or all of the following: preservation, handling, display, storage and transport; this includes excessively large works
- Unsolicited donations of work, unless under exceptional circumstances
- Work that duplicates existing holdings where students are already represented in the collection, unless under exceptional circumstances
- Work created by alumni of the College that does not directly represent their RCA experience and practice, unless under exceptional circumstances
- Work by purchase

4.6. Websites

Contents

The College has had a public-facing website since the late 1990s and, more recently, has produced a proliferation of microsites to promote individual programmes and projects. Since 2008, the British Library's UK Web Archive (UKWA) has produced snapshots of the main RCA website. In 2018, Special Collections began work with the UKWA to submit URLs for archiving more systematically. In 2020, the RCA partnered with the Internet Archive to begin to archive sites itself, using the IA's web-crawling tools. Special Collections annually archives microsites and the Show platforms, in consultation with IT Services and Communications & Marketing. Not all RCA-produced sites are archived, and not all aspects of sites can be preserved, owing to technical limitations but Special Collections makes best efforts to capture sites as accurately as possible.

Collecting priorities

- The main RCA site is the most significant web presence of the College and its regular capture and preservation is essential. This is undertaken twice-yearly by the UKWA.
- The majority of microsites created with an rca.ac.uk domain. These are 'official' projects and analogous to print publications that would be routinely kept by the archive.

We do not collect

- Password-protected sites
- Intranet pages
- Microsites of limited or ephemeral content

4.7. Colour Reference Library

Contents

The Colour Reference Library (CRL) is one of the largest collections of printed material on the subject of colour in the world. Its contents range from classic works on colour theory to ephemeral proprietary colour swatches. Around 10 to 20 new publications on colour are added each year and the collection aspires to being definitive and comprehensive on the subject. Atypically, multiple editions of key works are often of value if they demonstrate evolution of colour science, colour theory, or printing techniques.

Collecting priorities

- Most new English-language publications on colour
- Replacement of a small number of missing items

- Significant (historical) works never previously acquired, where these can be acquired through donation or underspends

We do not collect

- Children's books on colour where the content and presentation is especially simplistic
- Ephemeral samples, eg paint charts, unless of historical significance
- Publications in languages other than English, except where of particular historical, technical or aesthetic value

4.8. Artists books

Contents

Special Collections holds a collection of several hundred artists' books comprising items produced by RCA staff, students and alumni, and a larger and broader collection of publications by international artists. Books are received through donation and purchase.

Collecting priorities

- Works by RCA students and staff that reflect the activities of the College and complement the College archive and Printmaking archive.
- Works by publishers with a proven record in this area, especially Book Works.

We do not collect

- Books that individually cost more than £100.
- Illustrated books.
- Portfolios of fine art prints.

4.9. Rare books

Contents

A number of books have entered Special Collections as a result of their rarity, fragility, complexity of format or extrinsic value. The subject matter is often apparently arbitrary, although there are strengths in areas such as architecture and botany. Many have been moved to deep storage and most titles are freely available in digital form on resources such as Archive.org.

Collecting priorities

The collection is not routinely added to, as most of the holdings are legacy acquisitions. However, material is occasionally transferred from the main Library, and the criteria for inclusion are as follows:

- Monographs dated 1860 or before, and some dated after 1860 which are not sufficiently protected by their 'Reference' designation
- Limited editions
- Items with portfolio-style presentations, detachable components, paper engineering or other formats where the integrity of the artefact could be compromised if a portion is lost or damaged
- Items of intrinsic value (eg hand-coloured plates, fine bindings)
- Items of extrinsic value, with a high market/insurance value that makes them difficult or impossible to replace

5. Procedure for consideration of potential acquisitions

Offers of material should be made in writing to the Archives & Collections Manager, Royal College of Art. Donations are preferred to deposits on loan. Decisions are not taken unilaterally and all potential offers will be considered in consultation with the relevant stakeholders, depending on the collection. Offers of archival or book-based material will be considered in consultation with, at minimum, the Head of Library Services, with additional views sought from, for example, members of the Research Office or academic staff with particular expertise, if required. Offers of donations of artwork will be considered by the Custodians of the College Art Collection.

6. General factors in collecting decisions

Any potential acquisition must be assessed in the light of implications for storage, materials and staff time, which must be weighed against the material's significance, and relevance to the College. Different criteria will come into play for each decision and there is no blanket approach. Factors taken into consideration include the following:

- Congruence with existing holdings and specialisms, specifically: the history of the Royal College of Art; colour; design research; artists' books;
- Relevance to the research and methodology of staff and students;
- Potential application to research and teaching, outreach and promotional activities
- Financial implication, including any requirement for external funding for processing
- Condition (we will not usually take material in unstable formats or in poor condition)
- Language (most Special Collections materials are in English)

- Legal issues, including copyright and data protection. Material where there are few impediments to copying and distribution are preferred;
- Size. The larger a collection (or object), the more complex the issues and the greater the consideration required. We do not usually collect three-dimensional objects, or items with complex handling and preservation issues;
- Donation. Special Collections will not normally pay to acquire anything other than new or rare books (for the CRL or artists' books collection). Equally, Special Collections will normally only accept material gifted outright to the RCA; long-loan and deposit arrangements are discouraged;
- Ownership. Special Collections will only accept material to which the donor has legal title. This will usually be transferred to the College in the process using a standard 'Transfer of Title' form.

As a rule, significant donations of any considerable size will not be accepted without a clear plan to provide and fund adequate storage, environmental controls, packaging and staff time for processing. This may involve a need to secure internal or external funding before any items can be transferred to the RCA. The RCA cannot accept sizable and significant donations where it cannot guarantee to provide the sector-level resources required for safeguarding and development of such acquisitions.

Material not collected

- Press cuttings
- Examples of the professional work of staff and alumni (unless of exceptional intrinsic and/or extrinsic value)
- Three-dimensional objects

7. Conditions

All material must be the property of the depositor, who must have the legal authority to deposit it with the RCA. The donor will be required to complete an Object Entry form, which also constitutes a Transfer of Title document and describes the minimum terms of acceptance. Upon completion, title in any donation shall be transferred to the RCA. There should be no unnecessary restrictions on access to the material or its availability for research. In the case of artworks and objects, the RCA is unable to guarantee to place the item(s) on display, or to display the item(s) in particular locations or for particular periods. In the case of archives, the RCA is unable to guarantee that any cataloguing or digitisation can be undertaken within a particular time frame, except in the case of externally funded projects. It is understood that intellectual property rights in the donation's content may not lie solely with the depositor and that multiple

copyrights may apply. Where the depositor holds copyright, it is a condition of deposit that the RCA may digitise the donation and make such digitised material available in perpetuity for the purposes of non-commercial research and teaching with appropriate credit. Basic finding aids may be required with deposits where bulk is likely to render the documents otherwise inaccessible until processed.

8. Co-operation with other institutions

RCA Special Collections does not seek to compete for papers or artworks with other repositories. When advising potential depositors, Special Collections will draw attention to the existence of other repositories with similar interests, to ensure that material is offered to the most appropriate institution(s).

9. Unsolicited donations

There is no obligation on the College to retain and preserve unsolicited donations, which will only be added to the collections if they meet the criteria of the collecting policy. If they do not, they will be de-accessioned, either by Special Collections or via the main Library, depending on the material.

10. Pro-active collecting

With a proliferation of production at the College, where many outputs may be lost, it is necessary to seek out acquisitions and invite donations of appropriate material on occasion. These include posters, prints, student magazines and regular College publications, such as annual reports.

11. Promotion/resource discovery

Discrete archives will typically be arranged, re-packaged and listed to an appropriate level within available resources. More detailed cataloguing takes place in line with user demand, rather than on acquisition. As visits are invigilated, and research enquiries on a one-to-one basis, collections are not closed by default until all cataloguing is complete. Predominantly visual collections will typically be digitised and any scans catalogued and added to the College's online image resource and shared with partners where appropriate. Printed books are typically catalogued in accordance with the main Library book stock. Archived websites are available through the RCA's directory within the Internet Archive.

12. Diversifying the collections

The RCA's Special Collections are open to all and the service is committed to supporting the discoverability and interpretation of relevant materials by all users. Unlike standard library resources such as printed, secondary materials, the documents within the RCA archives are not routinely subject to selection and

editing and instead reflect the activities of the College and its diverse student population over time. Comprehensive series such as student files and photographs or samples of student work, therefore, can be examined through multiple lenses. Although the Colour Reference Library, as a printed, historical collection, reflects the biases of the western history of science, the broad collection policy allows for the acquisition of international works in other languages to reflect the status of colour as a global cultural phenomenon. For more details, see our [Access](#) policy

13. Disposals

There is a strong presumption against the disposal or sale of materials accepted into the collections. Deaccessioning rarely takes place and it is more likely that collections will be weeded at point of transfer, prior to formal accessioning.

Weeding of institutional records will take place in consultation with the staff/department from which it came. As part of the cataloguing process, material is sometimes removed, for example where multiple copies exist, or where materials are of an exceptionally personal nature, or where items are not considered to be of long-term research value.

Where material is deaccessioned, the following procedure will apply:

- The material will be offered back to the donor.
- If the material is refused, the RCA will endeavour to find an alternative home, in consultation with the donor.
- Where no appropriate home can be found, permission will be sought from the donor to destroy the material.

14. Review of this edition

This policy will be reviewed in the event of a significant change to the development activities around any individual collection, or at intervals of no more than five years in the event that there are no such significant changes. It will be revised to reflect changes in collections and collecting priorities, and any changes in strategic or operational circumstances.

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