Royal College of Art
Postgraduate Art & Design

Special Collections
Collection Development Policy

1. About this document

Repository: Royal College of Art, Kensington Gore, London, SW7 2EU, UK
Author: Neil Parkinson, Archives & Collections Manager
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2. Mission statement

The RCA's special collections are acquired, maintained and developed to support the College's strategic objectives and archival obligations along with learning, teaching and research across all academic programmes and research centres. 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. The College recognises its obligations to preserve, care for, and make available all its unique and distinctive permanent collections for public benefit and access by current and future generations.

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, expert, 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 and/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 Libraries and Academic Enhancement within the Education and Student Success 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 Engagement, Brand & Marketing, Advancement & Alumni, 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, photographic prints, paintings and objects. 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, or significant quantities of textile-based material, as we do not have facilities to store and view these adequately.

Although we 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. Paintings and prints are regularly added to the College Art Collection in relatively small numbers, owing to budgetary limitations, the current (2026) lack of public display space and long-term storage implications.

Alongside the formally accessioned collections managed by Special Collections staff, there remain small pockets of locally managed unique materials across the College. These include the archives

of the Curating Contemporary Art programme, the Richard Doust archives room of (duplicate) Graphic Design materials, the Jewellery and Metal collection of objects, and various publications and objects of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design. The Special Collections team works closely with staff responsible for these items to offer expert guidance in their management and to ensure their long-term development in ways that reflect established practice.

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. The RCA Archive also 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, the Graphic Design and Illustration Archive, and the Textiles pattern books. 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, John Wood and Tim Coward.

We do not usually collect

- Transient financial and other records
- Three-dimensional objects (unless unlikely to have implications for storage, preservation, display and transport)
- Documentation of alumni careers before or 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 to the collection on a non-exclusive basis in perpetuity. In 2019, in line with recommendations of a working party, the project to document each individual student's work 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 from each show. 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, managed by staff in the main Library.

4.3. College Art Collection

Contents

The College Art Collection (historically known as the 'College Collection') contains around 1,800 artworks by students, staff and friends of the College, including important figures such as David Hockney, Henry Moore, Lucian Freud and Tracey Emin. It is predominantly composed of paintings but also contains prints, drawings and sculpture. Historically, works were selected by Painting staff and/or donated by Painting alumni each year but this became unsustainable and selective purchase was established in 2009. Any decisions relating to the development of the College Art Collection, including acquisitions and loan requests, are taken by its three Custodians. The current Custodians include the Head of Painting, Head of Print, and Archives & Collections Manager.

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 4.4).
- 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, which can extend to paintings.
- Unsolicited donations of artworks, unless under exceptional circumstances.
- Artwork that replicates 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 have been collected to varying degrees.

Collecting priorities

- All publications and an annual accrual of samples of student work through voluntary donation.
- 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 replicates 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 replicates 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 Engagement, Brand & 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 routinely crawled by the Internet Archive but Special Collections staff can crawl specific sections in depth as and when required.
- 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, initially formed by two RCA alumni. 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 the status of being the definitive and comprehensive resource on the subject. Atypically, multiple editions of key works, including earlier, superseded editions, are often of value and may still be acquired 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 or damaged 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.
- 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. The connection to the RCA is tenuous and it is likely they formed part of a donation to the original RCA Library on its formation in 1954.

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

4.10 Textiles pattern books

Contents

A collection of large-format textile pattern books of original, commercial samples from a range of companies, estimated to span the period 1850s-1960s. The collection also includes scrap books of indeterminate origin containing research material and samples from different eras. The majority of these were a gift from the Deryck Healey Studio to the Textiles programme (c.1980s) to provide an in-house source of inspiration to students. Over the years, these were dispersed and a core set of 77 of the most significant, most notably a collection of 19th-century books from calico printers Swaisland & Co., were transferred to, and accessioned by, Special Collections in 2012. Others were placed on long loan to external institutions, initially the V&A Museum and, subsequently, Joshua Ellis & Co.. All those on long loan were returned to the RCA in 2026. At the same time, a further 60 volumes were uncovered in a locked cupboard in the Textiles offices. These two additional series have not been accessioned by Special Collections.

Collecting priorities

The books have no connection to the RCA's history and the collection is not being added to.

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 Libraries and Academic Enhancement, with additional views sought from, for example, members of the Research, Knowledge Exchange & Innovation 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. When in doubt, external advice will be sought from appropriate peers at institutions with comparable holdings or other specialists with expertise in the relevant subjects and formats under offer.

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, in particular: the history of the Royal College of Art; colour; design research; artists' books;
- Relevance to the research, methodology and interests 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 GDPR regulations. Material where there are fewer impediments to copying and distribution, including online, are preferred, in order to maximise public access to the materials;
- 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 (unless unlikely to have implications for storage, preservation, display and transport)

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 and as GDPR regulations and confidentiality issues allow. 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 generally 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 retained and accessioned if they meet the criteria of the collecting policy. If they do not, they

will be de-accessioned if necessary, 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 and collections 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 in-person 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, largely 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. Deaccessioning and disposals

There is a strong presumption against the disposal or sale of materials accepted into the collections and the RCA will not undertake financially motivated disposal of any items in Special Collections, other than under the exceptional circumstances detailed below. Deaccessioning rarely takes place and it is more likely that collections will be weeded at point of transfer, prior to formal accessioning. However, curatorially motivated reviews, rationalisation and disposal, in line

with current sectoral practices and ethics, may occasionally take place where certain criteria apply to individual items. These include:

- irreparable damage or poor condition
- little or no intrinsic and extrinsic value
- little or no relevance to the RCA and its history
- inferior quality
- inability of the RCA to meet standards of care or storage requirements (eg film-based media, textile collections) or to provide access
- questionable authenticity, attribution or provenance
- duplication
- political and legal concerns

The RCA recognises the legal and ethical framework under which it holds its collections, including the protocols governing acquisition and disposal of items. Any decisions will be taken within the parameters of its own internal policies and the relevant external frameworks, codes of practice and toolkits, which include any or all of the UK Museums Association and its Code of Ethics, the Collections Trust, Arts Council England, the Archives and Records Association, the National Archives, and Cilip's Rare Books and Special Collections Group, depending on the format of materials under review. Certain principles apply regardless of the nature of the items involved, and these include:

- Confirmation will be sought that the RCA has full title to the item and is legally free to dispose of it.
- Expert advice will be obtained from internal and external stakeholders and specialists in the subject and format under consideration for disposal.
- Any items to be deaccessioned will be offered to public collections in the first instance, by transfer, with the aim to keep items within the public domain, for future access. If a new home cannot be found, items will be advertised on relevant mailing lists and/or the Museums Association's Find an Object database for a minimum of two months.
- If appropriate, the item will be offered back to the original donor/creator.
- If acquired with external funds, the item will be offered to its original funder. If sold (see below), the original grant will be repaid with an additional contribution from the proceeds (a percentage of the sale), if appropriate.
- Items may only be offered for sale or destroyed as a last resort, after all other reasonable efforts to find a new home have been exhausted.
- If an item is sold, any monies received from the disposal will be applied solely and directly for the benefit of the remaining collections, including measures to help meet or exceed Accreditation standards.

- An item would only ever be destroyed as a last resort, eg because it is badly damaged, has deteriorated beyond use or has negligible intrinsic significance.
- All decisions and processes will be fully documented and made public. Disposal decisions will never be taken unilaterally by a single member of collections staff.

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.

October 2026