

SEEDS
of
A COLLECTION

THE NGC LIBRARY
100 YEARS AGO

NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

12 SEPTEMBER – 21 DECEMBER 2012

EXHIBITION NO. 42

The National Gallery of Canada's Library has now been collecting books and other materials on art for about 100 years. Back in January 1911, the Gallery's Advisory Council approved an annual budget of \$100 "for the formation of an art library of periodicals and books of reference."

Eric Brown, the Gallery's first director, oversaw the Library in its opening decade. When the Gallery returned to the Victoria Memorial Building in 1921, the Library was transferred to the newly created Prints and Drawings department. This exhibition delves into the records to shed light on how Brown went about building a research collection from scratch, and displays some of his early finds that are now treasured items in the collection.

The Advisory Council presented Eric Brown with a Library shopping list, which included periodicals such as *American Art News*, *Studio* [7], *Gazette des Beaux Arts* and *The Connoisseur*; catalogues of the Royal Academy in London and the Paris Salons; as well as "standard works, to be considered by the Curator." There are three sources of evidence for how he went about meeting this challenge.

The first is the library's original accessions ledger [3]. It includes handwritten entries for approximately 1000 volumes collected in the first decade. The selection of artists does not particularly reflect the Gallery's art collection at that time. The focus seems instead to have been on forming a general collection, revealing Brown's deep interest in the Gallery's educational mission. Many instructional books for artists, such as anatomy handbooks [15], were acquired. Even more numerous were books on ancient Greek and Roman art and sculpture, as well other antique cultures. These were acquired to support Brown's didactic displays of reproductions of masterworks of ancient, medieval and modern sculpture found in the lower galleries of the museum [17].

In one instance, however, there is a clear link between a work of art in the Gallery's collection and a book acquired for the Library. In 1907 the Gallery made its first acquisition of an old master work – Thomas Gainsborough's remarkable portrait of Ignatius Sancho (1768), the black musician and man of letters. The portrait had been the source for an engraved portrait frontispiece in the published *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (London: J. Nichols, C. Dilly, 1783). A copy of the 1783 edition is recorded in the ledger as accession number 718 and is now housed in the Library's Rare Books Collection [9].

More generally, the sorts of publications collected included works of reference and standard monographs on artists. Subscriptions to Christie's and Sotheby's auction catalogues began in 1921 [10]. Other titles that entered the collection covered related topics such



Charles Matlack Price, *Posters*, 1913 [12]

Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, 1783 [9]

Alfred H. Howard, *Bookplate*, 1914 [19]

as conservation and museology. Furthermore, as in so many aspects of Brown's involvement with the National Gallery, his vision for the Library went beyond the conventional activity of collecting published materials. As there were limited published sources on Canadian art and artists, he launched a program to gather unpublished information. From at least 1915 onwards, standard biographical forms were sent out to Canadian artists of the day for them to fill out with details of their origins, education, prizes won, and so forth. The handwritten forms, from such artists as Charles Alexander, Henri Beau and Robert Ford Gagen [18] are invaluable documents and provide primary source material for details about their lives. Today, the Library's documentation section continues Brown's work by sending similar forms to Canadian artists and compiling the data for posterity.

The correspondence file in the Gallery's Archives also sheds light on some of these acquisitions. For example, a letter from Sir Edmund Walker, chairman of the Gallery's Board of Trustees, dated 31 October 1911 [2], offers the first traceable work on Canadian art to be added to the Library: a modest catalogue of reproductions of exhibited works by Canadian artist Carl Ahrens (1862–1936) [1]. Walker had received the catalogue from the owner of the collection being exhibited and it bears the inscription "Compliments of M. S. Mercer." Eric Brown was also corresponding with art dealers and Canadian scholars, such as McGill architectural historian Ramsay Traquair on the subject of books on sculpture. The letters offer intriguing glimpses of contemporary events. In 1916, a New York publisher from whom Brown had purchased a book on poster design [12] wrote: "I have been shocked to read of the fire in your capitol building . . . it occurs to me that your library may have been destroyed." [13] He was referring to the fire of 1916 in the Canadian Parliament Buildings, which in fact left the Library of Parliament unscathed. Yet the blaze did have an indirect effect on the Gallery, which had to evacuate the Victoria Memorial Building to make way for displaced parliamentarians.

Of course, the major event of these years was the First World War. The shadow cast by the War is also apparent in the third source of evidence of Brown's collecting methodology: the books themselves. For example, one early acquisition is titled *Edmund Dulac's Picture-book for the French Red Cross* (London, New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916) [14]. Its cover reads: "All profits on sale given to the Croix rouge française, Comité de Londres." These early acquisitions are readily identifiable by the presence of the Library's own distinctive bookplate. Seeking a suitable design for the bookplate in 1913, Eric Brown turned to Toronto designer A. H. Howard [20]. On 29 December 1913, Brown wrote Howard describing a theme: "If the three arts of painting, drawing and sculpture could be introduced in a strong and distinctive device, and the legend The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, be appended I think it would be well." On 21 April 1914, Howard replied: "I am sending you the proofs of the bookplate . . . it is not a steel plate, but a photo-engraving from a large black and white drawing. . ." The results were satisfactory; the plate was produced in two sizes and in three colours; and Howard was paid \$35.15 for his work [19].

During the century that has elapsed since Eric Brown set about acquiring the books in this exhibition, some of his founding principles have evolved: we no longer collect handbooks on anatomy, for example. However, many others continue to serve the Library well in its mission to support the Gallery's mandate to undertake and promote scholarly research.

Jonathan Franklin
Chief, Library, Archives and Research Fellowships Program

Checklist



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| <p>1 Reproductions of the Pictures of Malcolm S. Mercer from the Original Paintings by Carl Ahrens, on View in the Gallery of the Public Reference Library, October 17-24, 1911. Toronto: Public Reference Library, 1911.</p> <p>2 Letter dated 31 October 1911 from Sir Edmund Walker to Eric Brown.</p> <p>3 Library accessions register, ca. 1918.</p> <p>4 Melvil Dewey. <i>Simplified Library School Rules</i>. Boston: Library Bureau, 1912.</p> <p>5 Georg Gronau. <i>Correggio: des Meisters Gemälde</i>. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1907.</p> <p>6 Paul Lafond. <i>Degas</i>. Paris: Floury, 1918-19.</p> <p>7 <i>Studio: A Magazine of Fine and Applied Art</i>. Volume 1. London: The Studio Ltd., 1893.</p> <p>8 Laurence Binyon. <i>A Catalogue of Japanese and Chinese Woodcuts Preserved in the Sub-department of Oriental Prints and Drawings in the British Museum</i>. London: British Museum, 1916.</p> <p>9 <i>Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African</i>. London: Printed for J. Nichols: C. Dilly, 1783.</p> <p>10 <i>Autograph Letters and Historical Documents with a Few Engravings and Oil Paintings, the Property of George Edward Monckton, esq., M.A., Fineshade Abbey, Stamford, Northants</i>. Sotheby's: London, 1921.</p> <p>11 Benvenuto Cellini. <i>The Treatises of Benvenuto Cellini on Goldsmithing and Sculpture</i>. London: Edward Arnold, 1898.</p> | <p>12 Charles Matlack Price. <i>Posters; A Critical Study of the Development of Poster Design in Continental Europe, England and America</i>. New York: G. W. Bricka, 1913.</p> <p>13 Letter dated 4 February 1916 from George W. Bricka to Eric Brown.</p> <p>14 Edmund Dulac. <i>Edmund Dulac's Picture-book for the French Red Cross</i>. London, New York: Published for the Daily Telegraph by Hodder and Stoughton, 1916.</p> <p>15 Arthur Thomson. <i>A Handbook of Anatomy for Art Students</i>. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915.</p> <p>16 Maurice James Gunn. <i>Print Restoration and Picture Cleaning, an Illustrated Practical Guide to the Restoration of All Kinds of Prints</i>. London: Gill, 1911.</p> <p>17 Arthur Gardner. <i>French Sculpture of the Thirteenth century: Seventy-eight Examples of Masterpieces of Medieval Art Illustrating the Works of Reims and Showing their Place in the History of Sculpture</i>. London: P. L. Warner, 1915.</p> <p>18 Information forms: Charles Alexander (1915), Henri Beau (1915), Robert Ford Gagen (1920).</p> <p>19 Alfred H. Howard. <i>Bookplate of the National Gallery of Canada</i>, 1914.</p> <p>20 Letters dated 29 December 1913 from Eric Brown to Alfred H. Howard and 21 April 1914 from Alfred H. Howard to Eric Brown.</p> |
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