

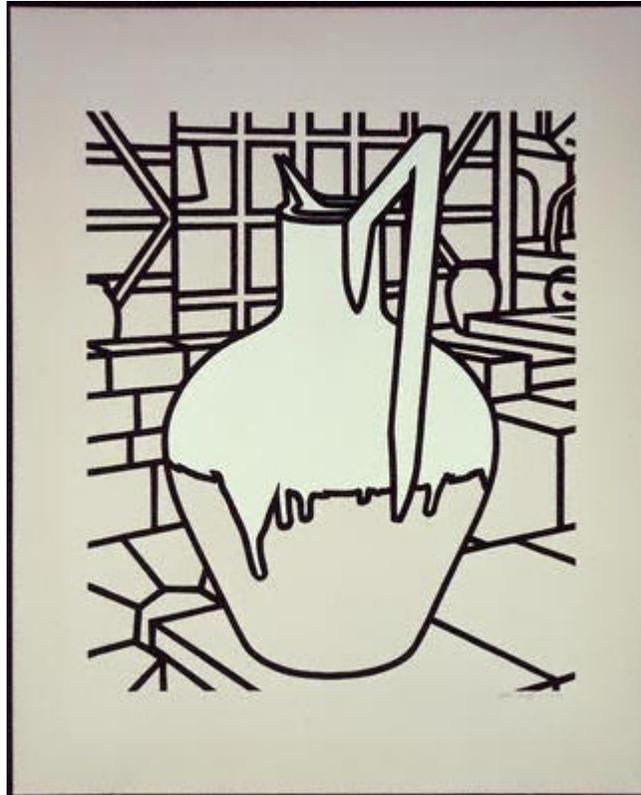


The National Fine Art Education Digital Collection Speech given at the Launch of fineart.ac.uk by Andrew Graham-Dixon

Fineart.ac.uk starts to unveil the secret art collections of Great Britain. Up until now we didn't realise what we had.

The CNAA collection is unusual. It is owned by a ghost, a body which no longer exists, and it is housed mostly in the building which formerly housed that body: the Open University building at the top of the Gray's Inn Road.

Visionary origins. Stewart Mason had the idea of acquiring a body of work that would reflect the immense amount of creative energy that was shaping and transforming not just British art schools but British art – and British culture as a whole – in the late 60s and early 70s. I don't know for sure but I think he saw this collection of works as an alternative – or antidote, even – to the type of annual report that is the usual record of a government institution's activities. He saw that in the case of art, irritating, difficult, invigorating art, a report couldn't possibly tell the whole story. So he had this rather visionary idea of trying to tell the story as he saw it of how artist-practitioners and their students, in the art schools of the time, were transforming the nature of our visual culture – and telling that story not through words, through the phone book of a report, but through a collection of tangible objects, the things and images that had been made. He bought a number of wonderful things, works by too many artists to list here but who included Patrick Caulfield, Richard Hamilton, Bridget Riley and many others. And he got them pretty cheap, from what I can tell. £10,000 for the lot, I'm told.



Jug by Patrick Caulfield, 1974

Subsequently, the problem has been one of what to do with that legacy. For a while, the collection seems to have been a bit in the doldrums. Stroud Cornock, the Curator of the CNAAT Trust, tells me that when he took over responsibility for the collection he was rather mystified by the sight of a lot of metal rods that were being used as plant stakes for various pot plants around the office. They didn't look as if they'd been designed for the purpose. He subsequently realised that they were in fact bits and pieces of a sculpture by Nigel Hall that was part of the collection. Apparently a group of engineers using the rooms as their meeting place had taken to hanging their coats on the sculpture, bits of which had naturally enough fallen off – engineers have heavy anoraks – and had then been appropriated as improvised pot plant stakes. I'm glad to say the sculpture in question has now, thanks to Stroud's initiative, been renovated.



Vertical Excavation by Nigel Hall, 1971

And I think it's fair to say that what we're celebrating here this evening – and we should be celebrating it – is a kind of renovation too, or at least a great refreshing of the original inspiration behind the establishment of the CNAA collection. An enlarging of that idea, too – the idea being that a collection of works of art might be the best way to tell the fascinating story of the development of art through education in this country.

Now obviously the scope of the original CNAA collection was fairly narrow, because it was meant to reflect a particular moment in history – a very interesting moment, namely the period roughly of 1968-74. But now that the CNAA collection has been made into the basis or nucleus of a much wider – to quote – “web-based collection of work by staff, students and other alumni of UK higher education institutions”, I think something very interesting and important has been recognised. Namely, that the vast amount of work created by the staff and students of our fine art institutions, and subsequently collected by those institutions – whether the Slade or the Royal College of Art, the London Institute, the University of Ulster or the Norwich School of Art and Design, the University of Central England, Glasgow School of Art, or Duncan of Jordanstone in Dundee – can be said to amount to a single fascinating national resource. A treasure, even.

Because all those various collections are so split up, they have never really been perceived as a single entity. And of course in one sense they never will be a

single entity – but on the web, in the form of a so-called virtual collection, they can become available as never before, and I can easily imagine that this new initiative might well lead to all kinds of other things. For example the possibility of loan exhibitions, or themed exhibitions, drawn from this wealth of works of art, may now become apparent – patterns may emerge, particular pockets of strength in the virtual collection may become clear - whereas before there was simply a black hole of ignorance about what all the various institutions involved happened, exactly, to own... Other uses too are easily imagined, uses for teachers, for writers, for students.

So on behalf of everyone who's going so obviously to benefit from this, I'd like to thank some of the people who've put in the work to make it possible, viz the Visual Arts Data Service, who organised the database and did the actual work of setting it up. And none of it would have been possible without funding from JISC, Join Information Systems Committee, if I haven't got my acronyms in a twist. The CNAA collection offered the germ of the idea but without VADS and JISC it simply wouldn't have happened.

What I find most interesting of all about this is that the very fact that it alerts us to the existence of an extraordinary art collection in this country – a real but hidden art collection – one which on a much larger scale perhaps than any envisaged by Stewart Mason, when he set out to buy the CNAA collection, tells the fascinating story of how artists and those trying to teach artists have fought and scrapped and worked their way – sometimes together, sometimes at loggerheads – to forge the British art tradition.

If the virtual art collection expands as I think everyone hopes it will, to go beyond the current 10 institutions plus the CNAA whose works are currently on the database, we could well find that we have a collection that in its own idiosyncratic way tells the story of British art and British art education from the days of Hogarth and his St Martin's Lane Academy to Reynolds and the Royal Academy of Arts, through to the twentieth century, from Henry Tonks' Slade to the Slade of William Coldstream, to the Royal College of Art in the glory days of Hockney and Hodgkin, to the years when Central St Martin's sculpture became dominant, through to the 80s and the apparent – only apparent - hegemony of Goldsmiths', and beyond. I hope very much that other universities and institutions will be persuaded to join in – Newcastle for example with its wonderful holdings, including Kurt Schwitters Merzbau, heroically rescued by Richard Hamilton when he taught at the university there in the 70s – and that the sapling which has grown out of the acorn first planted by Stewart Mason will eventually become a great spreading – and very British- oak. In the meanwhile, here's to the collection that we many of us didn't even know we had – and long may it prosper.

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