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Researching Irish art in its educational context

John Turpin

Documentary sources for Irish art are widely scattered and vulnerable. The art library of the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts was destroyed by bombardment during the Rising of 1916 against British rule. The absence of degree courses in art history delayed the development of art libraries until the 1960s when art history degrees were established at University College Dublin, and Trinity College Dublin. In the 1970s the state founded the Regional Technical Colleges all over Ireland with their art and design courses. Modern approaches to art education had transformed the education of artists and designers with a new emphasis on concept rather than skill acquisition. This led to theoretical teaching and the growth of art sections in the college libraries. Well qualified graduates and staff led the way in the universities and colleges to a greater emphasis on research. Archive centres of documentation on Irish art opened at the National Gallery of Ireland, Trinity College and the Irish Architectural Archive. At NCAD the National Irish Visual Arts Archive (NIVAL) became the main depository for documentation on 20th century Irish art and design. Many other libraries exist with holdings of relevance to the history of Irish art, notably the National Library of Ireland, the Royal Irish Academy, the Royal Dublin Society, the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and the National Archives.

Historical context

I would like to begin by referring to the destruction of what was probably Ireland's best art library of the 19th century -- the art library of the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts (RHA). The collection of books, engravings, catalogues, photographs and an archive of artists' letters was housed in Academy House, Lower Abbey Street, Dublin. Its holdings were important sources for Walter Strickland when he was preparing his seminal publication, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists* (1913) which became the foundation of Irish art historical studies. The library was burnt out in the Easter Rising of 1916 during the shelling of the area by British government forces. So much of the detail of 19th-century Irish art can never be known following the loss of this great archival resource. I have been acutely aware of this as I have in recent years been researching the history of the RHA which was the main Irish exhibition body and fine art school of the period. (Research on the history of the Academy is due for publication in 2018). The destruction of the RHA library and archives in 1916, like the burning of the Irish Public Record Office in 1922 during the Irish Civil War, demonstrate the fragility of primary historical sources. Their loss has impoverished research into Irish art.

My own beginnings in researching Irish art, were in the National Library in Kildare Street in 1960 when I was examining the architectural development of the Victorian coastal suburb of south Dublin. Then anybody could read in the National Library without entry barriers and in those more relaxed days all sorts of readers apart from scholars were attracted to the library. The two series of massively bound guard catalogues -- of subject and of author -- were the door ways to knowledge. These still have their value and should not be ignored even in the presence of electronic databases. The library has greatly up-dated its facilities but still remains my favourite place to read in its friendly and hallowed atmosphere. The staff have always been helpful to enquirers, especially to the Irish-American visitors in search of their roots. One great advantage at the library was that books could be ordered at any time and arrive on your desk within minutes. That level of service has never been equalled. I have returned to the

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https://doi.org/10.1017/alj.2018.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

National Library again and again in my researches on Irish art for books, newspapers, images and manuscripts. I have welcomed the advent of computerisation but happily the original atmosphere has still been preserved.

United Kingdom sources

My introduction to post-graduate research was as a student in the superb art library of the Courtauld Institute of Art, London University, then in Portman Square. It was a delightful research space in the Adam-designed first floor reception rooms, with books, journals, catalogues, and a most useful periodical articles card index, all on open access. That library revealed to me the full possibilities of art library use, including inter-library loan of theses.

However, it was the old British Museum Reading Room in Bloomsbury with its two great circles of catalogue volumes that introduced me to the full panoply of a universal library. It was there that I began to research Irish art in depth. In the case of Irish artists who made their careers in Britain, this library was a prime resource and I was researching the life and work of Daniel Maclise. More useful from an art historical perspective was the National Art Library in the Victoria and Albert Museum with its open shelves with reference works and fewer readers. Orders could be handed in at any time and delivery was prompt. Seating and study facilities were exemplary. I found Cambridge University Library was the most comfortable for research of Victorian art periodicals and other publications because it was a copyright library and there was so little pressure by other researchers in the humanities. Undergraduates had many other libraries in the university departments and its colleges for course work. University copyright libraries like Cambridge and Oxford, which I also used, were more user-friendly than the British Museum as the book holdings could be as extensive, but the demand was much less. The level of user demand is a critical one in the ease of library use. In subsequent years I used the National Archives, Kew, where state papers relating to Ireland in the 19th century shed valuable light on the role of the state in relation to the arts.

Irish art library landscape: an overview

With these experiences of some of the best art libraries in Europe, what was my experience when in 1975 I took up my position as the first professor of the history of art at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), then located between the National Library and Dail Eireann, off Kildare Street, Dublin? The only scholarly advantage of the location was that I could slip into the National Library next door and the Trinity College Dublin (TCD) library was a short stroll away. The college library was but a single room with books on two walls amounting to about 2,000 volumes. Edward Murphy, appointed librarian of NCAD was to transform the college library in the course of his career, including the very great achievement of the establishment of the National Irish Visual Art Library (NIVAL) which is the archive section. Building up of the college's library was an essential complement to the degree courses in art and design that were developed in the college. In my own area of responsibility for the courses in history of art and design, an aspect of all degrees, I argued strongly that these depended for their success on the availability of reference material over a wide area. This was acutely the case for final year undergraduates preparing a thesis as part of their degree. These theses were then placed in the library as a resource for others. The role of the library increased in importance as masters and doctoral degrees were offered. Effectively the NCAD library is now the principal library in the state for art and design since the beginning of the 20th century.

Why was art library provision so very sub-standard in 1975, not only at NCAD, but in the many other Irish art schools and departments of art and the universities? (Belfast College of Art was an exception at that time as it was part of the British system of art education which had already been overhauled). NCAD had only just emerged from years of turmoil when students had revolted against the traditional academic system of life classes and had smashed the plaster casts. The government closed the college on a number of occasions. Debates in the press and in parliament highlighted the crisis and the inadequate library. There was also a cry for reform and development in design teaching as an economic

https://doi.org/10.1017/alj.2018.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

imperative. I have researched and published this story in *A School of Art in Dublin Since the Eighteenth Century, a History of the NCAD* (1995).

There was, however, a deeper theoretical reason for this poor state of affairs. Art education in Ireland up to the 1960s was seen by the Department of Education as technical skills training in drawing, modelling, painting and commercial art. This tradesman-like attitude lay behind the government system of Technical Schools Examinations in Art. Historical and theoretical studies were not part of the programme. Art education was officially about reproductive skill mastery, not concept development. The modern movement had not yet dislodged the Victorian ideology of the former Department of Science and Art, South Kensington, still influential in Ireland. Alone of the art colleges in the state, the NCAD did have diplomas in painting, sculpture and design (commercial art), but in these skill-based qualifications there was no obligatory theoretical dimension. Thus there was no intellectual stimulus for art library development at the NCAD or elsewhere in the art schools and universities in the state.

The dramatic transformation and modernisation of the NCAD and the other art colleges and departments would not have taken place had there not been a revolution in art education itself. The transformation in Irish art schools and the consequent growth in art libraries was the indirect result in Ireland of changes in art education in the UK led by the report on art education by Sir William Coldstream. In the art and design centres in the UK, and later in Ireland, broad areas of study, like fine art, graphics or fashion, now replaced the multitude of narrow subject specialisms. This stimulated research and publication, often by graduates of these new degrees, and led to art library growth.

Education is the major driver behind the creation and development of an academic library. Ireland lacked degrees in history of art. In Dublin the part-time Purser-Griffith Diploma course in the History of European Painting had been established in the 1930s covering European painting from c.1300 to c.1900, but it was not a degree course and lacked status in TCD and University College Dublin (UCD) where it was offered. Consequently it did not result in a special focus on the acquisition of art books, catalogues and periodicals in those university libraries. TCD as a copyright library accumulated British and Irish publications on art, but was not entitled to American books which were becoming increasingly important in the field of art and architectural history.

The coming of university degrees in the history of art at UCD and at TCD in the mid 1960s and in University College Cork in the 1990s was the catalyst for a new focus on collecting art publications as complementary to the teaching programme. The degrees also led to a new emphasis on archive resources for research into art, mainly Irish art. The Irish Art Research Centre at Trinity College is an example of this, as is the Centre for the Study of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland, and the archives in NIVAL at NCAD. In the case of NIVAL I encouraged inheritors of the estates of deceased artists to deposit papers and organised this for the relatives of the sculptors Oliver Sheppard and Peter Grant. I donated many boxes of my own research papers and photographs. I also facilitated the donation of the records of the Friends of the National Collections of Ireland of which I was once president. The Irish Architectural Archive was to some extent a projection of the architectural history initiatives at TCD. These depositories have provided a locus where artists' and architects' papers, letters, photographs and ephemera can be deposited as a source for future research. The papers of an artist, architect or an art society can so easily be lost following the deaths of the individuals involved. NIVAL can prevent this happening by being alert and welcoming to donors.

There was an even greater impact on art library development following the government's decision to establish the Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) across Ireland on a standard model in the 1970s. This innovative educational policy transformed Irish higher education in the regions where the most important towns and cities were to benefit. Many of these RTCs (later retitled institutes) incorporated art and design departments founded in the 19th century as schools for technical training. The National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) was set up to validate courses and awards in the RTCs. These important changes raised the institutions far above the local technical colleges from which most had been transformed. Particularly important was the massive development of libraries including art and design sections to support the new diplomas and degrees. As an examiner for the NCEA, I always emphasised library support for degree applications. In time some of these colleges have constructed fine library

https://doi.org/10.1017/alj.2018.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

buildings in the regions to house their collections. The art and design sections of the libraries were particularly important at the Dublin Institute of Technology, and the Institutes in Cork and Limerick which were the most important art colleges in the state after the NCAD.

The position of art libraries in publicly-funded art galleries and museums in the capital and in the regions is worth considering in relation to art scholarship. The scholar and all seriously interested persons, have a democratic right of access to book collections and archives in public galleries. Currently the National Gallery is exemplary in the library and archive access it provides. However this was not always so. In the early 1960s there was no library access and no proper storage or reading space. It opened in the gallery extension at the end of the 1960s, but during the 1980s the library was closed because of an internal Gallery personnel dispute and the incoming volumes piled up in unopened packages. The Dublin City Hugh Lane Gallery has a library with archives, and consultation can be arranged on application. The Chester Beatty Library and Gallery of Oriental Art has long provided access to scholars. The RHA's collection of books and archives, accumulated since 1916, has only recently become available to scholars. For years, for lack of a permanent building, access has been impossible but an honorary member has compiled a catalogue and now facilitates access. It is part of the responsibility of a state subsidised art gallery to provide library access to scholars and indeed to all who can make a serious case for access.

Resources for research into aspects of Irish art are widely spread in Irish library and archive collections not specifically devoted to the visual arts. The Royal Dublin Society library has a long series of printed proceedings which record its support for art education, prizes and exhibitions. The Royal Irish Academy has collections of pamphlets and the Larcom papers which shed light on government dealings with the arts. The Catholic Central Library has the records of the Academy of Christian Art and other art holdings. The library of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, besides its archaeological holdings has photographic and other art related material. The Irish National Archives has valuable documentation of the dealings of government departments with the visual arts. The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland has manuscript material on Irish art.

However, in the case of the Irish Arts Council, which has had a major impact on all the arts since the 1950s, its archives are not on open access. Following a request some papers may be provided for inspection if the Council sees fit. It is not legally required to transfer its records to the National Archives. This deprives scholars of the opportunity of examining the deliberations and decisions of an organisation which has seldom been far from controversy in the highly contentious world of the arts and their practitioners. Its archives should be easily accessible to the public in the National Archives.

The study of primary material in archives is the bedrock of scholarship and essential if Irish art is to be comprehensively studied. I have found that taken collectively, there is in the libraries of Ireland, both specialised and general, a vast resource for the scholarship of Irish art. With digitisation, access to information becomes easier. One of my own aspirations is that a digital research project on Irish newspapers and magazines, be conducted by a research group to extract all the art, architecture and design references. It would be a massively beneficial service to scholarship and the greater understanding of the art life of Irish society.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/alj.2018.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press