

The colourful career of Sir John Charles Robinson: collecting and curating at the early South Kensington Museum

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Figure 1 John James Napier, *Sir. John Charles Robinson*, date unknown. Oil on canvas (71 x 56 cm). London: National Portrait Gallery. © National Portrait Gallery, London

‘it is to my having assumed personal responsibility [...] and to having risked my own pecuniary resources on occasions that the Nation owes a large proportion of the great monuments of art which form the pride and glory of the Museum. [...] the building of the South Kensington collection has been mainly my work.’¹

John Charles Robinson (1824-1913) [fig.1], though apparently not a humble man, was indeed a vital protagonist in the story of the early South Kensington Museum. In 1853 he became the Museum’s first curator, gathering together the foundations of an internationally renowned permanent collection and publishing an important series of scholarly catalogues on the Museum’s decorative arts holdings. As part of

¹ John Charles Robinson, letter to Earl Spenser, Jan 1882, Robinson Papers, London, NAL, in Jacqueline Yallop, *Magpies, Squirrels and Thieves*, London: Atlantic, 2011, 109.

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his curatorial role during the 1850s and 1860s he spent extensive periods on the Continent hunting up objects for the Museum. Being an erudite and enthusiastic student of art, Robinson made a name for himself throughout Britain and Europe as a respected connoisseur and collector, advising a wide variety of high-profile collector friends ranging from royalty, to politicians, artists, scholars and wealthy businessmen.²

Robinson's long and diverse career, throughout which he worked in art practice, architectural practice, collecting, curating, connoisseurship, design teaching, art dealing, art criticism and many other related occupations, was intimately entwined with the 'motley medley chaos'³ of the emerging South Kensington Museum in the mid-nineteenth century. The aims of the Museum to raise the status of the decorative arts and educate the visitor in correct taste suited Robinson's expertise and interests. The various roles he performed as curator often collided in spectacular fashion, particularly if they confused the divide between public and private collecting. His diverse responsibilities at South Kensington arguably paved the way for modern museum practice, consolidating activities in the private sphere (such as art dealing and criticism) with his public roles as curator, conservator, researcher, archivist and manager at a government-funded museum. From his carefully thought out acquisitions policies, to his complex educational display schemes and scholarly promotional catalogues, Robinson's work at South Kensington made him a key contributor to the professionalization of museum practice. This article analyses Robinson's display schemes at the Museum, considering the private Parisian collections that inspired them, his attempt to teach good taste to the visitor and his influence on British collecting habits. It also highlights Robinson as a prominent figure at the centre of a vast network of important artistic names, whose infamous contribution to professional museum practice in Britain blurred the boundaries of the role of the private collector and public curator in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

Early influences: the Paris collections

Robinson's colourful career began in his hometown of Nottingham, where he trained as an architect in the early 1840s. In the middle of the decade he moved to Paris where he studied painting at the atelier of Michel-Martin Drölling, a professor at the École des Beaux Arts.⁴ It was here that the young Robinson developed a taste for collecting, spending his free time visiting public art collections and frequenting the dealers' shops of the Latin Quarter. The collections that Robinson encountered in Paris had a profound effect upon his later curatorial choices at the South

² For much of the biographical information on Robinson I am indebted to the work of Helen Davies, who provides the only comprehensive text on the life of the curator. See Helen Davies, 'The Life and Works of Sir John Charles Robinson, 1824-1913,' PhD. diss., University of Oxford, 1992.

³ Robinson, 'Our Public Art Museums: A Retrospect,' *The Nineteenth Century*, 42: 250, Dec 1897, 955.

⁴ See Yallop, *Magpies, Squirrels and Thieves*, 52.

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Kensington Museum. At the dealers' shops of Monsieur Delange, Mister Evans and Monsieur Couvreur, Robinson could handle and inspect objects closely and even began forming his own private collection.⁵ At the Louvre (unlike any British museum at that date) he was able to wander through a comprehensive history of the arts thanks to the rigidly taxonomic, chronological arrangement of the collections. But a more intimate encounter with the art object could be experienced by appointment in the private homes of wealthy Parisian collectors, particularly those of Alexandre du Sommerard at Cluny and Charles Sauvageot at 56 rue de Faubourg-Poissonnière. It was these collections that confused the boundaries between public and private collecting, amongst others in both France and Britain no doubt, that would truly inform Robinson's future curatorial choices.

Charles Sauvageot (1781-1860) was a violinist with the Paris Opera and his private apartments were filled with an extensive collection of decorative art objects that occupied every vertical and horizontal space. The fact that Robinson was invited to Sauvageot's in the 1840s suggests that, even as an art student, he was already well connected within the Parisian art world: the collector only allowed recommended visitors to make an appointment. Once admitted, however, having 'knocked loudly twice to show that he was a friend,'⁶ the privileged guest could inspect the many objects that adorned Sauvageot's private domestic interior. Everything could be easily accessed, including Sauvageot's extensive knowledge of the objects, and the collector seems to have been more than willing to share his expertise and to allow close inspections of individual works. One can imagine that such an intimate encounter with the objects in Sauvageot's private rooms, alongside the privilege felt by being deemed worthy of admittance, appealed to the young Robinson.

In addition to being able to interact closely with the collection, Robinson would have seen how the works functioned as decorative objects in the modern Parisian home. An 1858 description of Sauvageot's apartments in *L'Illustration* demonstrated how striking the aesthetics of Sauvageot's décor must have been: 'Everything in his apartment was calculated to achieve harmony: he followed a law of gradation which, by imperceptible nuances of colour and inconspicuous variations of form, led the viewer's attention from quite simple objects to the most delicate or brilliant marvels.'⁷ The careful juxtaposition of objects within the small rooms allowed an aesthetic dialogue to take place between the collected objects that led viewers back and forth between them, encouraging them to make comparisons, pinpoint the more valuable or significant objects, and assess the place of each object within the grand scheme of the room and its overall chromatic effect. Robinson would surely have noticed how the decorative objects in Sauvageot's collection worked together in groups within the space, their prismatic arrangement offering up aesthetic, stylistic, geographical and historical comparisons that could not be

⁵ Yallop, *Magpies, Squirrels and Thieves*, 60.

⁶ Anthony Burton, *Vision and Accident: The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V&A Publications, 1999, 60.

⁷ Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 59.

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made in the spacious, chronologically arranged galleries of the Louvre but that he would later translate to the South Kensington collections.

In the same period Robinson visited the very popular Hôtel de Cluny owned by the famed Parisian collector, Alexandre du Sommerard. In 1833, du Sommerard (1779–1842), who worked for the Audit Office, purchased the medieval town house at Cluny as his own private residence and filled it with his extensive collection of medieval and renaissance French art objects. Unlike Sauvageot, du Sommerard opened his home to the general public every Sunday, when he would be in attendance to share his expert knowledge of a collection that ‘was said to draw crowds as big as the Louvre.’⁸ The medieval style of the building provided the perfect backdrop for du Sommerard’s collection and, within these historic walls, he constructed historicizing displays, providing a romantic view of the past for his own personal living space, as well as for his Sunday visitors. As a devout Catholic and sentimental nationalist, du Sommerard longed to return to pre-Revolutionary France. At Cluny, he could immerse himself and his visitors in a historic France that celebrated the former art wealth of the nation and provided an escape from modern life. On visiting du Sommerard’s collection, Robinson would have encountered a series of rooms that, to varying extents, emulated (or, at least, fantasized) the domestic interiors of past ages. Unlike Sauvageot’s collection, at Cluny the original decorative functions of the collected medieval objects were reclaimed, integrating them with each other, the space in which they were exhibited, and the historic architecture that housed them to create a ‘period room’ effect. The Musée de Cluny, in its role as a public museum, sat on the fence between the accessible ‘populist’ public museum collection that reconstructed European history for the visitor (the Louvre) and the more elitist world of private collecting and the display of objects within the home. This middle ground would be the influence for Robinson’s own displays at South Kensington where collecting and displaying objects for the public museum and the private domestic interior collided.

Curating the Museum of Ornamental Art at Marlborough House, 1853-1857

On his return to Britain in 1847, Robinson was employed as Headmaster of the Hanley School of Design in the Potteries where he remained until 1852. At Hanley he held a prominent position within the National Art Training School system that had been set up in the previous decade to support students of design and improve the quality of British manufacture. Robinson was a tireless self-promoter and made himself known to the director of the schools and superintendent of the government Department of Practical Art, Sir. Henry Cole, who invited the ambitious young man to London to oversee the training of teachers at the central School of Art. However, upon his arrival in London in 1852 it soon became clear to Robinson that the organization of collections in the Museum of Ornamental Art adjoining the London

⁸ Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 59.

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school was in need of his particular expertise and he turned his attention towards a career as a curator.⁹

When it first opened to the public in 1852, the Museum (and school) consisted of a number of rooms at Marlborough House, a royal residence that Prince Albert had loaned out to the Department. At the outset, Cole's aims for the Museum were strictly educational – to improve British design by example and to teach, as actively as possible the principles behind good and bad design. The collection comprised a vast array of casts, drawings and original objects of various description including textiles, furniture, pottery, glassware and metal work – anything, in short, that came under the broad banner of Ornamental Art and would provide a useful example to the design student. In the spirit of straightforward pragmatism Cole wanted the displays to follow a fairly rigid structure and to group objects according to their material or industry. Thus, an embroidered silk scarf of Tunisian origin, an embroidered French shawl, a contemporary Axminster carpet and a piece of Renaissance Venetian embroidery all co-existed in the same space underneath the heading "Woven Fabrics," demonstrating the very different effects of various types of weaving or needlework applied to different threads (embroidery, lacemaking, machine vs. handmade carpet weaving, in silk, wool, cotton etc.). Alongside these exemplary exhibits, Cole created a controversial display of objects that were considered to be of poor quality manufacture in an attempt to contrast items of good and bad design. However, his good intentions somewhat backfired as this so-called False Principles exhibit, or 'Chamber of Horrors' as it was nicknamed, became the most popular display of all, allowing the discerning visitor to compare their own possessions with those at the Museum. An account of its public reception was elegantly satirized in an article for *Household Words*, in which a fictional character, Mr. Crumpet, after visiting the Museum and being instructed on correct taste, descends into an ever-increasing state of 'mental apoplexy' at the poor quality objects that adorn his everyday life:

I was ashamed of the pattern of my own trowsers [sic], for I saw a piece of them hung up [at the Museum] as a horror. I dared not pull out my pocket-handkerchief while anyone was by, lest I should be seen dabbing the perspiration from my forehead with a wreath of coral. I saw it all; when I went home I found that I had been living among horrors up to that hour. The paper in my parlour contains four kinds of birds of paradise, besides bridges and pagodas.¹⁰

The reaction to Cole's False Principles exhibit was not a positive one and those manufacturers represented within the 'Chamber of Horrors' were furious, demanding that the exhibit be dismantled. At the beginning of September in 1853 Robinson entered the museum as its first curator. In a retrospective account of his work at the Museum from 1880, we can see how he too opposed Cole's exhibit:

⁹ Robinson's role, which today we would recognize as that of a curator, was then described as Superintendent of the Art Collections.

¹⁰ 'A House full of Horrors,' *Household Words*, 6:141, Dec 1852, 266.

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‘setting aside the angry reclamations of indignant manufacturers whose productions were thus gibbeted, the British public showed a most conservative leaning towards the old accustomed “horrors,” or at best treated the experiment as a somewhat incomprehensible joke.’¹¹ Such a direct comparison of good and bad design, which he felt served only to ruin the reputations of the manufacturers represented therein, was not welcome in Robinson’s new display scheme. He wanted only objects of the highest quality to be represented and for the displays to speak for themselves as far as possible, suggesting in his 1854 introductory lecture that ‘active teaching is impracticable’¹² and posing the question: ‘what is there to trust but the silent refining influence of the monuments of art themselves?’¹³ His first task was to immediately dismantle Cole’s exhibit and to set about forming a methodic system for the acquisition and arrangement of the Museum displays that focused solely on high quality objects, no doubt with the Paris collections in mind.

The Museum at Marlborough House had the aesthetic, historical and geographical variety of Sauvageot’s collection, but the moral responsibility, like Cluny, of being an educational, popular institution, albeit with very different pedagogic motives. It was also housed in a historic building, designed by Sir. Christopher Wren in 1711, but the early-eighteenth-century interiors did not correspond directly with the Museum collection as a whole in the way that the medieval Hôtel de Cluny had provided the perfect backdrop for its medieval collection. The modest interiors of the first floor of Marlborough House (in comparison to the grander, elaborately decorated state rooms downstairs) instead provided a relatively blank and timeless canvas for the construction of equally timeless domestic displays. Having entered his curatorial role with the initial task of completely reorganizing and refitting the rooms, Robinson would make the display his own from the beginning, combining elements from Sauvageot’s modern, domestic eclecticism and du Sommerard’s romantic historicism to create a coherent and educational display.

Unlike Cole’s categorization of object by material, Robinson’s curatorial approach embraced both the eclecticism of the collections and the intimacy of the space, exhibiting different materials, styles and periods together as aesthetic groups. It might at first seem that such an approach, taken out of the context of the private, inhabited interior might turn this public display into a cabinet of curiosities with no real educational value, something that Cole desperately wanted to avoid.¹⁴ However, this apparent jumble of objects could still provide the practical education that the Museum desired if Robinson re-contextualized the various decorative objects with their domestic use in mind. In each of the rooms loaned to the Museum,

¹¹ Robinson, ‘Our National Art Collections and Provincial Art Museums,’ *The Nineteenth Century*, 7:40, June 1880, 987.

¹² Robinson, *An Introductory Lecture on the Museum of Ornamental Art of the Department* (1854), 9. General Collection, 607.AA.0099. London, NAL.

¹³ Robinson, *Introductory Lecture*, 1854, 9.

¹⁴ It is clear that Robinson did not want this to be the fate of the Museum either, as he remarked in his lecture of 1854 that he did not want to create ‘a merely curious exhibition,’ or ‘another lion in the metropolis.’ Robinson, *Introductory Lecture*, 1854, 9.

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then, Robinson could create a decorated space that, like the Paris collections, would showcase the decorative and domestic uses and highlight the aesthetic merit of the objects on display. This would placate Cole's express desire to emphasize the practical, decorative utility of manufactured objects whilst also allowing Robinson to encourage a more connoisseurial, aesthetic appreciation of the decorative arts within the visitor.

There are few visual records of Robinson's arrangements at Marlborough House, save for a series of watercolours made in 1856 and 1857 [figs.2-5]. From these images it appears that Robinson's displays did, by this time, combine the traditional structures of a museum (glass cases, for example) whilst also emulating the heterogeneous decoration of a private domestic interior. Whilst certain sub-categories of objects (Italian maiolica, Sèvres etc.) were grouped together for comparison within cases or on shelves, maintaining some sense of Cole's initial materials-based system, Robinson set up various displays within each room that juxtaposed objects of different materials and styles according to their decorative function, integrating them within the ready-made domestic interior of Marlborough House. Indeed, the original architectural features of the building itself – chimney-breasts, niches, fireplaces, windows and coloured wallpaper – were included in the display scheme. Wallpaper samples were hung in their proper place on the walls, showing how different designs could offset the objects placed directly in front of them (especially pictures).¹⁵ Stained glass covered the existing windows to give an impression of their brilliancy *in situ*, as had been the case at Sauvageot's. Pictures were hung from the picture rails, though perhaps more sparingly than they had been in Paris. Original chandeliers were replaced with those in the collection and textiles were draped across furniture, or hung like curtains. Furthermore, whilst there were plates and vases out of reach behind glass, others appear to have been left unprotected on furniture to give an idea of their decorative potential *in situ* and to bring them closer to viewers and to the other objects in the room (the antique tables on which they were placed, for example). In one room [fig.2] we can see how a traditional decorative, domestic scheme, much like those that describe the Victorian parlour, was constructed by placing a temporary shelf (supported by brackets) on the chimney-breast to form a mantelpiece.¹⁶ Above this was positioned a Chippendale mirror posing as a traditional, if not rather ornate, chimney-glass. Various ornaments were arranged along the mantelpiece in height order, in harmony with the unusual shape of the mirror and protected by glass domes (as mantel ornaments would be in the home).¹⁷ A coal-scuttle on the hearth finished off

¹⁵ '[On the staircase] considerable space has been given to papers suitable for the display of pictures, some of which were manufactured and the colours arranged especially for the purpose, pictures of different kinds being hung upon them to show the effect.' Robinson, *First Report of the Department of Science and Art* (1854), 226. General Collection, HC 1852-3. 1615. LIV.1, London, NAL.

¹⁶ The chimney-piece itself corresponds exactly to an existing one at Marlborough House but does not appear to have its own mantelpiece.

¹⁷ For more on the traditional decorative scheme of the chimney-breast in the Victorian parlour, see Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 115-21.

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the decorative, domestic ensemble. This chimney-breast was not just wall and shelf space within a public museum, then, but showed how the objects in the collection could be put together as an aesthetic group, despite their stylistic differences, to create a domestic fireplace with the potential for both beauty and use in the private home.



Figure 2 John Sparkes, *Marlborough House: Fourth Room*, 1856. Watercolour (31 x 32 cm). London: Victoria and Albert Museum. © Victoria and Albert Museum



Figure 3 William Linnaeus Casey, *Marlborough House: Second Room*, 1857. Watercolour (22 x 33 cm). London: Victoria and Albert Museum. © Victoria and Albert Museum



Figure 4 Charles Armytage, *Marlborough House: Sixth Room*, 1857. Watercolour (30 x 40 cm). London: Victoria and Albert Museum. © Victoria and Albert Museum



Figure 5 William Linnaeus Casey, *Marlborough House: First Room*, 1856. Watercolour (27 x 34 cm). London: Victoria and Albert Museum. © Victoria and Albert Museum

But why construct this kind of display? How, exactly, did it foster aesthetic judgment and taste? Michael Conforti's essay on the history of Museum considered the domestic-style arrangement as a reflection of Robinson's 'broadly conceived'

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approach to art education, suggesting that ‘during Robinson’s tenure, the educational function of the displays remained, but their interpretive direction and appearance moved from Cole’s perspectives favoring training and rules, to Robinson’s primary aim of fostering aesthetic judgment.’¹⁸ Christopher Whitehead’s essay on the place of sculpture within the Museum has since furthered this idea, suggesting that ‘objects were arranged not only in order to permit their careful examination by the connoisseur, but also to foster a taste for observing art works in domestic juxtaposition.’¹⁹ As far as Robinson was concerned, the display could be eclectic, emulate the domestic interior and still be educational. It was the sort of harmonious, aesthetic grouping of objects and architectural features described above that Robinson believed every student, manufacturer, and consumer should be taught to appreciate in order to improve the state of modern British design. Whitehead has also suggested that ‘the South Kensington interiors were not without didactic purpose – the focus of the display lay not only in the objects as single entities, but in the atmosphere they created in sets, allowing the cultivation of a specific form of aesthetic appreciation on the part of the visitor.’²⁰ Robinson’s displays therefore seem to have tried to encourage visitors to consider the objects in aesthetic (rather than material) groups, juxtaposed as an overall decorative scheme, in order to directly and actively teach the art of comparative study and, subsequently, aesthetic appreciation and good taste. Robinson wanted the Museum to turn visitors, whoever they may be, into connoisseurs, believing that a connoisseurial understanding of decorative art would improve the taste of the nation. In his 1854 lecture at the Museum, Robinson emphasized the importance of this type of teaching, stating that: ‘the judicious arrangement and juxtaposition of specimens for comparison [will] facilitate the deduction of those abstract laws and principles, a proper acquaintance with which is the foundation of all true knowledge.’²¹

Rather than present the visitor with examples of good and bad design, Robinson desired to teach them how to make such comparisons themselves based on ‘those abstract laws and principles’ that led to an understanding of good taste. So, whilst different examples of various design or production techniques were arranged side-by-side for the more straightforward comparative study of students,²² an overall sense of harmony amongst the exhibited items, borrowing the kind of domestic, aesthetic groupings Robinson had seen in Paris, quite literally brought home to the visitor in this intimate, domestic setting a more connoisseurial, aesthetic form of comparative study. Visitors were to learn how to appreciate and compare beautiful objects, and beautiful sets of objects, a skill that was not merely aimed at

¹⁸ Michael Conforti, ‘The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts,’ in Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson, eds., *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V&A Publications with The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1997, 31.

¹⁹ Christopher Whitehead, ‘Enjoyment for the Thousands,’ in Cinzia Sicca and Alison Yarrington, eds., *The Lustrous Trade*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2001, 227.

²⁰ Whitehead, ‘Enjoyment for the Thousands,’ 225.

²¹ Robinson, *Introductory Lecture*, 23.

²² Robinson, *Introductory Lecture*, 23.

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consumers who might wish to recreate such tasteful displays within their own homes but one that Robinson felt was also particularly important for the manufacturer, not to mention the student of art, to appreciate: 'the manufacturer should appreciate art and have a certain amount of artistic taste and not merely be interested in pecuniary gain.'²³ Whitehead has also suggested that 'the domestic tradition was transmuted at South Kensington' in order to address many 'forms of art appreciation.'²⁴ The collector would be encouraged by the 'attractive domestic-style displays,' the working classes were provided with a civilizing glimpse of the 'leisure privileges' of the wealthy, and the design student was provided with historical models that functioned both aesthetically and practically within a domestic scheme.²⁵

Relocation: The South Kensington Museum, 1857-1868

It soon became obvious that the growing collections would quickly overwhelm the modest space at Marlborough House and, in 1857, the Department of Practical Art, its School and Museum, moved to a larger site at Kensington Gore, becoming part of a new institution; the South Kensington Museum. At first, it might have seemed that the move to the South Kensington site in 1857 threatened to upset Robinson's intimate, domestic display schemes that had been so easily accommodated within the ready-made domestic interior at Marlborough House. The acquisition of very large objects, such as the eighteen-foot tall cast of the *David* gifted by Queen Victoria, also threatened to disturb the intimate domestic arrangement of the ornamental art collections.

Indeed, the new South Kensington Museum, housed in a cavernous glass and iron structure, nicknamed 'The Brompton Boilers' and described as a 'huge lugubrious hospital for decayed railway carriages'²⁶ by a reviewer from the *Civil Engineer*, provided a truly varied and confusing educational experience for visitors, incorporating a diverse range of scientific and artistic exhibits. Judging by his 1897 retrospective description of the early Museum, Robinson clearly saw the institution as incoherent and insufficient for the effectual display of the Museum of Ornamental Art's collection, referring to it as a 'motley medley chaos.'²⁷ The Museum was split into several contrasting sections. Exhibits ranged from a collection of patented machinery at one end of the Boilers, through a display of Gothic architectural casts and raw materials, to an educational array of nutritional foodstuffs and an important collection of British fine art paintings. A two-storey, brick extension was built on to the Boilers to house and protect these paintings, as the Boilers themselves were not sufficiently fireproof or waterproof. The paintings were installed on the first floor of the new building, whilst part of Robinson's Museum of Ornamental Art was housed in four small rooms downstairs, allowing

²³ Robinson, *Introductory Lecture*, 25.

²⁴ Whitehead, 'Enjoyment for the Thousands,' 223.

²⁵ Whitehead, 'Enjoyment for the Thousands,' 223-4.

²⁶ Anon, *Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal* 19, 1856, 187 in Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 48.

²⁷ Robinson, 'Our Public Art Museums,' 955.

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him to maintain some sense of the intimate domestic space that he had achieved at Marlborough House.²⁸ Whilst it is impossible to know exactly how these rooms appeared, one can speculate that Robinson would have maintained his domestic displays as far as possible, given the similar size and layout of the rooms to those at Marlborough House. But the Museum of Ornamental Art was not just confined to the new, brick building – Robinson would somehow have to accommodate his display scheme within the Boilers themselves.

Unlike the relatively open-plan exhibition halls associated with the international exhibitions of the period, the South Kensington Museum's diverse collections were split into closed compartments separated by temporary walls allowing Robinson to maintain a sense of intimacy within a smaller space. In the centre was the 'Art Museum,' a court occupied by loans, large items of furniture and sculpture that was crowned by the plaster cast of Michelangelo's *David*. This compartment arguably acted as a grand, central 'showroom' of large, impressive objects from Robinson's collections. A photograph of the 'Art Museum' taken by the Museum's photographer, Charles Thurston Thompson, in c.1857 shows the eclecticism of the display: it contained everything from Italian Renaissance wall decoration to German Baroque carved furniture and modern British ceramics [fig.6].



Figure 6 Charles Thurston Thompson, *Interior of the Art Museum*, c.1857-9. Albumen print from glass negative (dimensions unknown). London: Victoria and Albert Museum Archive. © Victoria and Albert Museum

Although the portion of the room seen in the photograph may, at first glance, appear to contain a chaotic jumble of objects, they are, in fact, grouped together in

²⁸ '[...] the effect must have been not unlike that of Marlborough House.' Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 53.

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specific historicized, aesthetic and, ultimately, educational ways. But the eclectic scheme is a complex one. Robinson organized the domestic-style display in a way that maintained his ideas about the educational emphasis of the Marlborough House rooms, the 'silent refining influence' of the objects themselves that provided an aesthetic, comparative exercise for visitors (rather than a direct, authoritative display of good and bad design or the dry facts of material comparison). At the same time, of course, he had to focus on elevating the status of the decorative arts represented therein, maintaining the material, geographic, stylistic, historical and practical integrity (the notion of the object *in situ*) of each object. This might seem like a tall order for any curatorial display but Robinson's careful juxtaposition of objects, their place in small groups and within the display as a whole, reflected a successful and complicated interweaving of all these apparent considerations.

The photograph shows only a small section of the whole compartment before it was opened to the public and, whilst there is a certain amount of doubt concerning, for example, the unusual placement of the central jardinière (would it have been left so exposed to damage or is it purposefully placed to create a greater sense of unity between the walls and the central arrangement within the room?) it seems as though the rest of the collections have been carefully and definitively placed for public inspection. In front of the central *David*, one can make out a small glazed case where the Gherardini collection of Italian Renaissance sculptors' models was displayed.²⁹ Flanking the *David* are two Italian Baroque busts, which had previously been arranged at Marlborough House to elicit technical comparison with other metal objects.³⁰ Now, however, in the shadow of the *David*, they became not only examples of Italian sculpture of a certain style and material, but also formed an aesthetic and decorative role within the domestic scheme created in the Art Museum. In the foreground of the photograph (left), also central within the room, is a large, brightly-coloured Minton majolica jardinière (1855, Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent).³¹ The painting on the far wall, *St John the Baptist* (sixteenth-century, V&A, London), is by a follower of Raphael but was attributed to the great Italian artist at the time of the photograph. Alongside copies of the colourful arabesques designed by Raphael for the Vatican that decorate the walls of the compartment, the oil painting represents Raphael's two-fold position as an artist-craftsman who applied his work to isolated examples of fine art as well as fresco decoration. To the right of the picture we can recognize two pieces from the Marlborough House watercolours: the ornate Chippendale mirror and a wood-carved Flemish Renaissance altarpiece. Above this is a Swiss Renaissance carved-limewood panel depicting *The Adoration of the Magi* by Augustin Henckel (c.1500-20, V&A, London). Below the Chippendale mirror is an eighteenth-century German secretary³² and a

²⁹ For more information on the arrangement of the collections see Charlotte Drew, 'Displaying Italian Sculpture: Exploring Hierarchies at the South Kensington Museum,' PhD diss., University of York, 2014, 131-98.

³⁰ Drew, 'Displaying Italian Sculpture,' 67.

³¹ The jardinière was gifted to the Potteries Museum by the V&A in 1934.

³² Conforti, 'The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts,' 31.

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medieval, brass German chandelier (c.1480-1520, V&A, London) hangs from the ceiling.

One can begin to see how the aesthetic groupings of these various objects would have led visitors' gazes from one to the next: the visitor could notice similarities and differences within stylistic groups and be able to compare them within the eclectic collection as a whole. This is very much in keeping with the earlier description of Sauvageot's display, which 'led the viewer's attention from quite simple objects to the most delicate or brilliant marvels.'³³ The eye was encouraged to roam, as it had been at Marlborough House, Sauvageot's and Cluny, to take in the objects as groups and to analyze not only their place within the domestic-style space as a whole, and to pinpoint the most significant exhibits, but also to compare them within their different historical and geographical groupings.

This arrangement alone would have performed a variety of functions. Firstly, it provided an overall aesthetic effect, bringing grand domestic interiors to mind and demonstrating how stylistically, historically and geographically different, decorative yet functional objects could be placed together in symmetrical, aesthetic harmony. Secondly, it revealed those differences in style, design, technique, size, colouring etc. of Northern Renaissance and Baroque furniture and devotional objects in (predominantly) wood and metal and juxtaposed them for comparison. Thirdly, it placed the heavily carved, ornate, dark wood and glittering metals of the Northern examples within the confines of a selection of bright, colourful painted frescoes of the Italian High Renaissance – both Italian Renaissance painted decoration and Northern Baroque sculpted furniture were re-contextualized and united *in situ* within a new, shared architectural space. More Italian examples of different styles and periods that aesthetically and stylistically complemented the Raphael frescoes, of course, could then be found in the centre of the room where the white 'marble' and bright colours of Southern Europe stood in aesthetic contrast to their dark, heavy Northern counterparts along the wall. Scattered amongst them were modern, British manufactures – standing shoulder-to-shoulder with these harmonious, historical styles that had influenced their production. The visual dialogue between objects old and new, their associations and comparisons, is therefore exercised in all directions – along the walls, across the walkway, and from floor to ceiling. Robinson's educational displays were more complex than a mere emulation of a domestic interior. They were a visual polylogue - a meeting of styles, materials, histories, geographies, sculpture, painting, architecture, ornament – that visitors could appreciate and students of the School of Art (or, maybe, curators of other museums) could learn from.

Public and private collecting: a step too far?

One particular visitor that Robinson was keen to inspire was the private collector. The encouragement of the collector, however, was somewhat of a contentious issue. Robinson made a point of encouraging this particular class of visitor, stating the importance of 'the collector: whose pursuit it is [...] clearly a national duty to

³³ Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 9.

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countenance and encourage.³⁴ Addressing the world of collectors, that elite group of wealthy individuals who already had a stake within other metropolitan museums, might seem antithetical to the aims of such a popular state museum as that at South Kensington. Involving private collectors, however, would in turn be beneficial for the Museum, whose collections were vastly dependent on private loans and estate sales. Robinson was frustrated by the many sanctions put in place that limited his purchases for the Museum: the public purse strings were tightened in the early years of the Museum, thanks to the conflict in the Crimea, and it had always been the Museum's policy to exhibit objects on loan before committing to buy them. In letters to Cole, the Board of Trade, and even directly to the Chancellor, William Gladstone, Robinson consistently appealed for more ready money for Museum acquisitions, as well as for a rise in his own salary, which maintained not only his living costs but his private collecting habits. The money was often not forthcoming. As Robinson's reputation grew and he was employed as an agent for various private collectors, including Matthew Uzielli, a partner in the merchant banking firm Devaux & Co. of London, he would sometimes use both their money, and his own, to purchase objects for the Museum, which he would later reimburse with government funds at cost price: a dangerous game to play for a public servant with the reputation of a government Department to preserve. As Yallop has suggested:

the spheres of private and public collecting were intimately entangled during the Victorian period, more so than ever before or since: the collection being developed at South Kensington was so much a part of Robinson's character and had his identity so clearly written into it that it was difficult to see any distinction between his personal choices and those he was making on behalf of the nation.³⁵

But Robinson often defended his actions, taking advantage of the benefits of free trade and impressing the importance of the free movement of objects into Britain in any manner possible, as soon as they became available, by private or public means. It was down to Robinson's complete disregard for the rules that many of the subsequent Italian sculpture acquisitions were swiftly purchased for the Museum and not lost to other, foreign collections.

To further broaden his social connections within the art world, Robinson founded the Fine Arts Club in 1856, which connected eighty-two eminent and wealthy private collectors, connoisseurs, curators and art enthusiasts directly with the Museum.³⁶ The club included names such as Gladstone, John Ruskin, Charles Eastlake, the director of the National Gallery, and the sculptor, Baron Carlo Marochetti. At first, Cole supported Robinson's club, and even attended as a

³⁴ Robinson, *Catalogue of a Collection of Works of Decorative Art: Being a Selection from the Museum at Marlborough House, Circulated for Exhibition in Provincial Schools of Art*, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1855, 3.

³⁵ Yallop, *Magpies, Squirrels and Thieves*, 81.

³⁶ This number quickly rose and the club had to limit its membership to 200.

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member, clearly seeing the benefits such connections would have for the Museum. Indeed, the club would provide the Museum with the exhibits for one of the most successful exhibitions in its early history, Robinson's *Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediæval and Renaissance Periods* of 1862. From this point onwards, however, the club began to move further and further away from the public forum of the museum, meeting instead at members' homes and, some might argue, Robinson's populist sensibilities went with it, contributing to his estrangement with Cole and his demotion to art referee in 1863.

However, Robinson's connections in the collecting world did prove to be beneficial. His displays at the Museum and their allusion to the private domestic interior often provided a benchmark for the private collector that would influence fashions for collecting certain objects. For example, as Peter Trippi and Timothy Stevens have pointed out, a taste for collecting Italian maiolica, Palissy ware and della Robbia ware became increasingly popular over the course of the nineteenth century, having previously been neglected.³⁷ This was no surprise, considering the dazzling display of these colourful ceramics, brought in with the well-publicized and highly popular Soulages collection in 1856 [fig.3].³⁸ Furthermore, following the loans exhibition of 1862 a taste for collecting medieval and renaissance objects also took off in Britain, fuelling the appreciation for the decorative arts of these periods.

Despite his demotion, throughout the 1860s Robinson continued to hound the authorities for more money and more autonomy to improve the collections, making scathing remarks about Cole's abilities as director when he was refused. He became such a nuisance that he was slowly managed out of the role completely, eventually leaving the Museum in 1868. But when Cole died in 1882 Robinson began loaning objects to the Museum from his now extensive private collection. It was through this connection that, for a short time, he re-entered into the role he had once enjoyed. Now that Cole was not around to argue with him, the latter part of Robinson's life was spent publicly congratulating himself for almost single-handedly creating one of the world's most important public collections, as the opening quotation to this article suggests.

Robinson's contribution to public collecting and curating at the early South Kensington Museum, to art history and criticism in his published scholarly catalogues, and to the increasing taste for private collecting in ever-widening circles, should not be forgotten or belittled. His collections and displays at South Kensington did foster various new tastes for certain types of *objets d'art* and he is responsible for selecting and acquiring the foundations of what is now a world-class institution. The many-faceted position that he took as public curator, private collector, critic, art historian, connoisseur, dealer, and artist, is key to understanding the indistinct nature of these roles in the mid-nineteenth century. Robinson was largely successful in consolidating these responsibilities, taking a diverse approach

³⁷ Timothy Stevens and Peter Trippi, 'An Encyclopedia of Treasures: The Idea of the Great Collection,' in Baker and Richardson, *A Grand Design*, 155.

³⁸ A collection of Italian maiolica could also be found at the British Museum, somewhat controversially in the eyes of the authorities at the Museum of Ornamental Art. The Soulages collection followed a similarly large acquisition in 1855 from the Bernal collections.

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to the formation of the collections at South Kensington; their acquisition, display and scholarly promotion for the benefit and education of the public at large. This makes him a vital contributor to the professionalization of museum practice in the nineteenth century and highlights the impact that one man with many talents had on the formation of nineteenth-century museum collections and Victorian taste.

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