

The career of Sidney Colvin: a transitional moment at the fin-de-siècle

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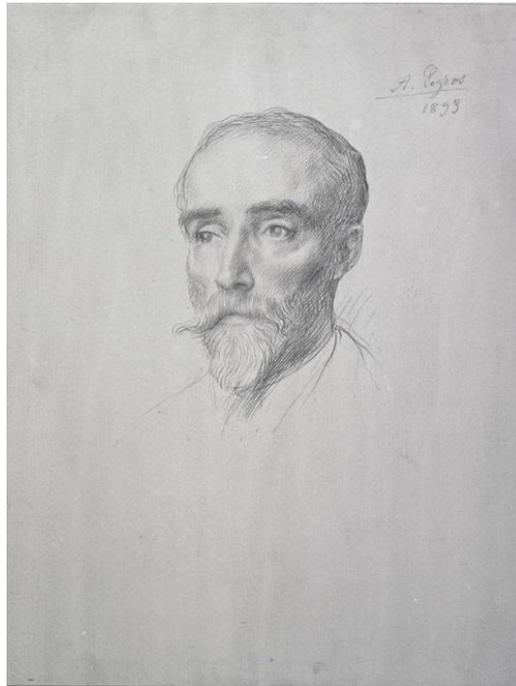


Figure 1 Alphonse Legros, Portrait of Sidney Colvin, 1893, pencil on paper © Trustees of the British Museum

The career of Sidney Colvin (seen here in a delicate pencil drawing by Alphonse Legros, fig. 1) sits at an interesting, if overlooked moment in the history of art gallery and museum curators at the fin-de-siècle. As director of the Fitzwilliam Museum between 1876 and 1883 and keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum between 1883 and 1912, he was operating at least a generation after the pioneering developments of Charles Lock Eastlake in the 1840s and 1850s, whose groundbreaking efforts to revolutionise museum practice and art historical scholarship are discussed elsewhere in this issue.¹ At the same time, Colvin's career comes many years before the new era of academically-trained art gallery curators, following the establishment of art history degrees at the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1932. An additional reason for a scholarly neglect of Colvin's role may be that as

¹ In the nineteenth century, the terms curator and keeper were used interchangeably to refer both to the officer in charge of a museum, art gallery or library; but also for those who cared for their collections. The terms thus both had a passive and an active meaning. At the British Museum in this period, the keepers acted as heads of department, whilst other curators were assistant keepers. Colvin was appointed as keeper in 1883 and remained in that post for the duration of his employment at the museum.

head of prints and drawings at the British Museum, he had curatorial responsibility for an art collection, but one situated within what is now perceived to be a premier museum of antiquities. This may have led to his being overlooked as part of a vibrant network of contemporary art gallery curators who supported one another professionally. As this article demonstrates, Colvin was able both to align himself with the traditional scholarly aspects of connoisseurship (epitomised by Eastlake and others), and also to position himself as a moderniser, pushing the role of curator and curatorial practice firmly into the professional era of the early twentieth century.

Colvin entered the curatorial world at a transitional moment in the emerging 'professional' era, a term which is used here to refer to the varied processes whereby individuals not only recognize and seek to define their shared occupational activities and concerns, but also ultimately, to use this shared knowledge-base to improve their collective authority.² This professionalization was closely linked to the idea of expertise: the body of knowledge or skills that allowed the aspiring professional curator to distinguish themselves from the non-expert, and to link themselves with a wider body of similar individuals. What exactly constituted this expertise became a subject for debate in the early twentieth century, with professionals at the recently established Museums Association discussing whether it was best formed through general education, practical job experience, or the recently mooted specialized training programmes.³ At the fin-de-siècle, the idea of expertise in museums of art was still closely linked to the notion of connoisseurship, an idea based broadly on the development of 'correct judgement and taste' formed amongst a community of individuals. In practice, this connoisseurship was founded on the direct observation of objects, an approach that was derived from the influential German and Italian models of Wilhelm von Bode and Giovanni Morelli. In the 1880s, Colvin's expertise was formed partially through older models of scholarly connoisseurship; but, unlike many curators from a slightly earlier generation, it was acquired not through a background as an artist, but through his work as an art critic.

Early training and expertise

If one of the markers of a move towards professional curatorial practice is expertise, then how should this particular knowledge base or skill-set be described or defined in Colvin's case? In a period before the establishment of art history degree courses, Colvin's expertise was formed through a wide generalist education, which was imparted formally and informally amongst a privileged section of upper middle-

² The term 'professionalization' is much discussed in sociological studies. I have drawn here on the discussion of this subject in Halona Norton-Westbrook, *Between the 'collection museum' and the University: The Rise of the Connoisseur-Scholar and the Evolution of Art Museum Curatorial Practice 1900–1940*, PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2013, 4. See also Lynne Teather, 'The Museum Keepers: The Museums Association and the Growth of Museum Professionalism', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 9, 1990, 25–41.

³ See Norton-Westbrook, 'Between the 'collection museum' and the University', 2013, 13–15. The Museums Association was founded in 1889.

class society who were well connected in literary and artistic circles. The son of an East India merchant, he had the start of this broad literary and artistic education having been privately educated at home, The Grove, Little Bealings, a country estate in East Suffolk. It was growing up in this environment that Colvin read the writings of Walter Scott, William Shakespeare and John Ruskin, the latter being a family friend. Colvin continued this education at Cambridge University, where he took the Classical tripos.⁴ He was later to employ similarly university-educated individuals when he took on the role of keeper at the British Museum in the 1880s.

There was no set route to a curatorial career in the mid and late nineteenth century, although curator-directors such as Eastlake had often trained as artists, a testament to the technical knowledge perceived to be related to the necessary skills of connoisseurship. Others, such as Colvin's predecessor at the British Museum, George William Reid, had worked their way up from the position of attendant. In Colvin's case, neither of these precedents applied. After leaving university, in the late 1860s and 1870s, he seems to have fallen into art criticism, for which the career opportunities had multiplied following the burgeoning of the popular press from the 1850s onwards.⁵ It may have been Ruskin, as a family friend, who encouraged the young Colvin to develop a niche practice as a critic, writing mainly on the fine arts. Colvin cut his critical teeth on a wide range of contemporary journals, writing for the arts pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Portfolio* amongst others, including reviews of the annual Royal Academy exhibitions. By 1871, he was considered important enough as an 'arbiter' of taste to be elected to the Society of Dilettanti. Here was a man developing his critical judgement and taste but not through a traditional route.

It was through this sustained, often in-depth journalism that Colvin gained an extraordinary knowledge of a wide range of art and was also able to align himself with scholarly discourse and expertise. Colvin's taste in art at this period, as revealed in his art criticism, was often remarkably progressive. His article 'English Painters and Painting in 1867' in the *Fortnightly Review* was an important piece in describing the new Aesthetic movement and identifying it with a certain group of artists.⁶ This approach found a parallel in his admiration for the early Impressionist painting on show in London in the early 1870s, when such work would have looked quite radical to a contemporary British audience.⁷ Influenced perhaps by John Ruskin and Walter Pater as art critics, and with similarities to contemporaries such as F.G. Stephens, Colvin's focus in both his writing on contemporary English and French painting was on the formal qualities of the art works whereby he drew attention to the appearance of a work of art over its subject matter. These years as an art critic in London also allowed Colvin an entrée into a

⁴ Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places 1852–1912*, London: Edward Arnold & Co, 1921, 13, 18, 38–40.

⁵ For an in-depth discussion of Colvin's art criticism, see Jessica Feather, 'The Formation of a Modern Taste in Watercolour: Critics, Curators, and Collectors, c.1890–1912', PhD thesis, University of Reading, 2015, 36–49.

⁶ Sidney Colvin, 'English Painters and Painting in 1867', *Fortnightly Review*, 1 October 1867, 464–76.

⁷ Feather, 'The Formation of a Modern Taste in Watercolour', 42–49.

small but established art world and gave him a pre-eminence which saw him elected in 1873 as the Slade Professor of Fine Art in Cambridge, where his stimulating and well informed lectures on a wide variety of art topics were well received.

This critical and academic background plainly informed his later approach to curating. However, there was a broader aspect to Colvin's curatorial practice, which was the idea of learning on the job and taking cues from existing practices and other museum professionals, something he was to replicate for those he employed at the British Museum. This ability to adapt skill sets to the job at hand was in evidence in Colvin's first museum position, as director of the Fitzwilliam Museum. Colvin went from serving on the Syndicate of the Museum (the governing committee, usually consisting of ten senior members of the university), to being elected unanimously as the Museum's first director in 1876. Although Colvin was eased in gradually to this new role by his experience on the Syndicate, when for example, he had become involved in re-arranging some of the pictures in the collection, this was Colvin's first formal position in museum administration. However, Colvin had been heavily involved in lobbying to establish the new position of Museum director, a role designed to put the museum on 'a more complete system of superintendence, registry, and arrangement and in some cases also of exhibition'.⁸ This was also a role that, in its greater degree of authority in relation to the Syndicate, testifies to the professionalization process itself.

Colvin worked with the various members of the Syndicate to re-arrange the picture and sculpture galleries in the Museum, which were in a pretty much constant state of re-arrangement over his seven-year tenure as director.⁹ But when it came to acquisitions, he also looked to other museum's practices, in particular to those of the much more well-established British Museum. In particular, Colvin directed his attention to the Fitzwilliam's print collection, and in addition to requesting funds to buy additional prints, he began to rationalize this collection. Taking his cue from a practice he would have been familiar with through contacts at the British Museum, he continued a process which had already been started of removing certain prints from their albums in order to remount and exhibit them.¹⁰ In a practice also used at the British Museum, Colvin also weeded out and disposed of duplicates, proposing to use the sum of money gained to buy new prints.¹¹ Colvin's relationship with the British Museum was not to end there.

A new role at the British Museum

The opportunity to take up the position of keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum presented itself to Colvin in 1883, on the occasion

⁸ Report from the Syndicate to the Senate, 19 November 1875 (CUR.30.2), quoted in Lucilla Burn, *The Fitzwilliam Museum: A History*, London; New York: Philip Wilson, 2016, 86.

⁹ Burn, *Fitzwilliam Museum*, 97–9.

¹⁰ Fitzwilliam Museum Syndicate Minutes, 13 December 1875 and Annual Review of May 1875.

¹¹ Burn, *Fitzwilliam Museum*, 100.

of the retirement of George Henry Reid. Even before this opportunity arose, Colvin seems to have been finding the strains and stresses of the Fitzwilliam position somewhat arduous. His role still required a great deal of work on the maintenance needs and fabric of the building, but he was no doubt also shaken by an unfortunate incident in May 1878, when a briefcase full of prints was stolen in London whilst in his care.¹² Colvin accepted liability for the loss, paying back the amount in instalments over many years and he did retain the good will of the Syndicate. Nevertheless, the role of keeper at the British Museum represented a welcome change of scene. In this position, Colvin was responsible for the running and strategic direction, not of an entire museum but of a single department, a role which included responsibility for: the prints and drawings students' room (where works were securely kept and shown to visitors); overseeing cataloguing and the publishing of works on the collection; supervising members of staff within the department; the arrangement and exhibition of the collections; and for acquisitions. In contrast to his position at the Fitzwilliam, Colvin was shedding the responsibility for overall running of the Museum; he was also inheriting a well-established department.

In 1883, Colvin was entering a department that had been established formally in 1837 and had experienced six previous keepers, the most successful of whom had been Henry Josi, whose background was as dealer or agent, and who had created a comprehensive inventory of the collections and engineered a series of major acquisitions.¹³ But there were also spectacular difficulties. Colvin's immediate predecessor was George William Reid, who had worked his way up to the position of keeper by 1866. Although Reid had learnt a great deal about prints, and had continued work that had been started in reorganizing the collection, his lack of scholarly training saw him floundering when it came to managing a project to provide proper catalogues of the collection. Although Josi had compiled a comprehensive inventory, the Museum's Trustees, no doubt influenced by the more expanded catalogues beginning to be produced by the National Gallery in the 1840s and 1850s, started to make greater pleas for a proper catalogue of the entire collection. This was not something that could be achieved easily (the 1837 inventory consisted of 9,302 drawings and 45,752 prints) and several volumes of catalogues were mooted, which were to be divided up according to ideas of national school and medium.

With Reid at the helm, and with only one or two curatorial staff, there was no possibility that these catalogues could be produced in-house; instead Reid commissioned four outside authors to produce catalogues, of which only two were ever published. These were the critic and former member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood F.G. Stephen's lengthy—but not in-depth—four volumes of political and personal satires; and W.H. Willshire's catalogue of the early German prints. A

¹² Burn, *Fitzwilliam Museum*, 93–94, 100–102.

¹³ For a brief history of the department, see Anthony Griffiths, 'Introduction: The Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum and the History of Print Collecting in Griffiths ed., *Landmarks in Print Collecting: Connoisseurs and Donors to the British Museum since 1753*, London: British Museum Press, 1996, 9–18.

more serious problem emerged when personal relations broke down between Reid and another author, the collector Richard Fisher, who was evidently a difficult personality to manage. This situation was inherited by Colvin, who patched up relations with Fisher but made the decision that the catalogue was of too poor quality to be published. Taking over this unhappy situation from his predecessors in the 1880s, Colvin recognized the importance of a proper, scholarly cataloguing project to a well-run department, and was to put this endeavour back on the agenda.

The problem with most of these authors, as Colvin saw it, was that they only had limited expertise and scholarship: Fisher was a collector, Willshire a medic by training. One theme which clearly emerges from examining Colvin's career at the British Museum is the importance he placed on curators having a university education and a certain broad skill-set. This was a model which of course reflected Colvin's own background, but was more widely indicative of a trend towards the gradual professionalization of museum curators.¹⁴ Soon after taking up his position in the department, Colvin set about transforming the profile of its workforce. Not only were his recruits for curatorial staff younger university-educated historians or classicists such as Campbell Dodgson and Laurence Binyon, but he gradually increased the number of curatorial staff (from two positions in 1883 to five by 1912), creating a workforce with energy and working capacity as well as expertise.

The implications of what Colvin thought he was getting when he appointed this new type of university-educated curator who was going to be further trained up on the job, are revealed in an internal report written by Colvin in 1902 to the director of the Museum. In this document, Colvin reviewed his current curatorial staff. He contrasted Freeman O'Donoghue, a curator whom he had inherited from the previous keeper, with Campbell Dodgson and Laurence Binyon, two of Colvin's star appointments. O'Donoghue, like the previous keeper, had no university education and had instead worked his way up within the Museum from the age of seventeen. He is described as 'steady, diligent, solid, trustworthy; but not very quick or retentive; is useful from his long acquaintance with the collections, but has neither much natural ability nor the quality that comes from good early training. Thoroughly estimable; but not the equal either in gift or training of the two younger assistants'.¹⁵ Clearly natural gift and abilities were important, but in his description of these two younger assistants (Dodgson and Binyon), Colvin emphasises their qualities of 'scholarship'. What was exactly meant by this term is never precisely described by Colvin, but seems to refer to someone with an academic (that is a University background) as opposed to the tradition of untrained curators at the British Museum who had wholly learnt their craft on the job. Colvin's description of Dodgson is additionally interesting because it shows the esteem in which the German models of art history and museum practice were held at this point. Dodgson is described as: 'An admirable scholar and student, leaning towards the

¹⁴ Another example was the slightly younger Dugald Sutherland MacColl, curator of the Wallace Collection and keeper of the Tate Gallery, who also had a university education.

¹⁵ Reports 1901 to 1904, 30 January 1902, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

German type: a complete master both of the German language and methods of study...thoroughly capable, clear-headed, and efficient all round...a rapid worker except where delay is involved by the need for thoroughness of research'. Binyon, meanwhile, was according to Colvin 'also an excellent scholar, and man of general accomplishment'.¹⁶ What was meant by this capacity for scholarship is revealed by the jobs Colvin set his young protégés, notably work on extensive new collection catalogues.

Model catalogues

One of Colvin's first activities as keeper was to commission an entirely fresh series of catalogues of the collection. Given the debacle over catalogues under the previous keeper, Colvin wanted this work done in-house by people he trusted and could direct. He already had experience of working towards a catalogue, having championed the need for a more detailed publication on the Fitzwilliam's collection of paintings. Colvin spent several years doing the research for this catalogue, which was eventually published in 1902, long after Colvin had left the Fitzwilliam.¹⁷ The challenge with the prints and drawings collection in the British Museum, however, was its great scale as well as relative lack of information about many of its works and artists (by the time Colvin arrived in the department, the only form of full catalogue that existed was the 1837 inventory).

As a medium-term solution, Colvin organized his curators to begin the Index of Artists, a series of large bound volumes which was intended to provide the full names and dates of artists and basic but limited information on each work (including for example, its medium, and in the case of prints, which states were represented). In a move designed to make the duties of curators and other print room staff easier in their retrieval of works of art (all stored on site in the Students' room), each work was provided with a number which referenced its location. This Index, as Colvin later explained in a report to the Trustees, was 'first compiled to serve for the working uses of the department'¹⁸; it was not, at least initially, intended as either a finding aid, or an educational tool for the public who entered the department. Nevertheless, it soon became apparent how useful this basic structure was as a primary stage before embarking on more detailed cataloguing. As Colvin wrote, it rapidly became clear that 'they [the indices] should be carefully revised, amplified, and in due course printed to serve as a skeleton catalogue and the foundation of a...complete catalogue of the contents of the Department.'¹⁹

In the Index of Artists Colvin kept to the established practice of dividing up collections according to national school. This was an approach which prevailed in

¹⁶ Reports 1901 to 1904, 30 January 1902, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

¹⁷ Frank Russell Earp, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Pictures in the Fitzwilliam Museum, compiled largely from materials supplied by Sidney Colvin*, Cambridge: University Press, 1902.

¹⁸ Reports 1901 to 1904, 30 January 1902, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

¹⁹ Reports 1901 to 1904, 30 January 1902, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

both public gallery spaces such as the National Gallery, and could also be seen in these galleries' publications of their collections. Colvin began by instructing the young Lionel Cust to complete the work for the Index on the Dutch, Flemish, German, and French Schools - a decision that reflected the talents and interests of Cust and the relative ease with which these parts of the collection could be described in a basic fashion. When Cust left to become director of the National Portrait Gallery in 1895, Colvin had to suspend the project because as he described it, the work on the English and Italian schools which should have followed next were 'undertakings both voluminous and complicated, the latter involving many questions of research and attribution'.²⁰ In a pragmatic assessment of the realities of the situation, Colvin thought it was best to employ the remaining curators Dodgson and Binyon on discrete catalogues that were, as he put it, 'within their special competence rather than on one requiring so much knowledge and experience as the continuation of the great Index'.²¹ By 1902, Colvin had abandoned the publication of the Index, temporarily at least, and Dodgson and Binyon had been set to work to write catalogues on respectively the German woodcuts and drawings by British artists. It is these catalogues, grounded in the connoisseurial interests of direct observation and intended as scholarly reference points not for the wider public but for a narrower community of scholars, curators and collectors, that were seen as model examples of a new type of catalogue both within and outside the museum.

The model for these British Museum catalogues had in fact been set half a century before, with Ralph Nicholson Wornum and Charles Lock Eastlake's expansive catalogue of the National Gallery's paintings (1847).²² The National Gallery publication had laid the ground for an approach to cataloguing that was detailed and expansive, and based firmly on direct observation of the object. This was an approach that would assist in the 'formation of a correct judgement, which is the basis of a correct taste'.²³ These phrases are important because they underline the extent to which this approach formed the basis of what we understand by connoisseurship in this period. The British Museum publications came after a long gap in the production of scholarly catalogues for art galleries. Following the initial flurry of activity led by Wornum and Eastlake's publication, official institutions had tended to make do with these older publications. It was only in the last years of the century that there was a renewed impetus directed towards the publication of scholarly catalogues, with for example, Dulwich Art Gallery publishing a new catalogue of its pictures in 1880, which for the first time incorporated the Old Master paintings²⁴; and at the Fitzwilliam where the assistant director Frank Russell Earp

²⁰ Reports 1901 to 1904, 30 January 1902, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings

²¹ Reports 1901 to 1904, 30 January 1902, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

²² Ralph Nicholson Wornum, revised by Charles Lock Eastlake, *Descriptive and Historical Catalogue of the Pictures in the National Gallery with Biographical Notices of the Painters*, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1847.

²³ Wornum and Eastlake, *Descriptive and Historical Catalogue*, 1847, 4.

²⁴ Jean Paul Richter and John Charles Lewis Sparkes, *Catalogue of the Pictures in the Dulwich College Gallery*, London: Spottiswoode, 1880.

produced the aforementioned descriptive catalogue of pictures in the Fitzwilliam Museum, published in 1902. Whilst dealing with a different medium, that of works on paper, the British Museum catalogues derived from the same impetus; the cataloguing of the works on paper collection demanded a broadly similar approach to that which had already been taken towards the paintings at the National Gallery.

Binyon's *Catalogue of Drawings by British Artists and Artists of Foreign Origin working in Great Britain* allows us to explore these elements.²⁵ In an introduction to the first volume, Colvin set out the intentions behind the catalogue, which indicated the author's attempt to tell a certain narrative about the historical development of British art. He wrote: '... the student will find in the collection something like a fair proportional representation of nearly all the important names in the annals of British art'.²⁶ In other words, the collection, as represented in the catalogue, was intended to set the canon not just of British drawings in particular, but British art more generally. This strategy continued a precedent set by Wornum and Eastlake's 1847 catalogue for the National Gallery, which in its opening pages had set out to define and qualify some of the key aspects of the different national schools. Binyon's publication largely followed these earlier models. The catalogue text treated each artist to an extensive biography, which was relatively free of anecdote, instead concentrating on the stylistic developments of the artist. Each work was given a detailed description, another practice derived from the National Gallery model but especially necessary in the case of works on paper to distinguish between similar images. Media, size and any relationships to other material were also listed, as well as the work's provenance. Binyon's catalogue was amongst the first publications to treat works on paper to such an expansive, scholarly examination and in this sense represented a new departure for the British Museum²⁷; yet, its approach was clearly rooted in earlier traditions of scholarship and connoisseurship.

Professional and social networks

The first part of this article has considered Colvin's influence on and collaboration with his own curatorial staff in changing the internal workings of the department, and improving its professional standards. The final section of this article will discuss another aspect of Colvin's role in the British Museum: the way he developed professional networks beyond the walls of the Museum itself. At the Fitzwilliam Museum, Colvin looked to the British Museum for examples of best practice. Once ensconced in London, his networks reveal him to be part of a wider body of fellow museum professionals both in Britain and internationally, networks that he could use to aid museum business, such as enhancing the number of acquisitions.

²⁵ Laurence Binyon, *Catalogue of Drawings by British Artists and Artists of Foreign Origin Working in Great Britain, Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, 4 vols, London: British Museum, 1898, 1900, 1902 and 1907.

²⁶ Binyon, *Catalogue of Drawings by British Artists*, 1, 1898, 1–2.

²⁷ Samuel Redgrave's descriptive catalogue of the historical collection of water-colour paintings in the South Kensington Museum (1877) is a far more cursory text.

Some of Colvin's ability to forge good professional contacts must have stemmed from his individual force of personality. Binyon wrote of his former colleague and mentor that 'under a manner that often seems stiff and shy [Colvin]...concealed an emotional and excitable temperament, capable of occasional explosions. He had deep feelings, strong affections and antipathies; but as a museum official he rarely allowed his natural impulsiveness to appear'.²⁸ Roger Fry described Colvin's appeal as his 'unfailing courtesy and genuine enthusiasm for art'.²⁹ Colvin was certainly someone who enjoyed company and who people sought out as their friend. He was part of a wide social network of artists (in the 1860s and 1870s he was often a guest at the home of the painter George Frederick Watts), although by the end of the century his residence at the British Museum seems to have been full of friends relating to his long-standing passion for literature, including celebrated figures in this field such as Henry James and Joseph Conrad.

It was not just sociability that allowed Colvin to forge good professional contacts. There seems to have been a conscious awareness on his part that the establishment of good working relationships, for example with private collectors, would allow him to improve the performance of the department, by building up the collection through gift and bequest at a time when acquisition budgets were relatively limited. Colvin made this point in one of his monthly reports to the trustees, where he wrote that it was 'a chief part of [the] duty of the museum officer to win the regard and confidence of private collectors, to help and stimulate them in their pursuits, putting his knowledge at their disposal but making them feel the while that their prime, their binding duty is to acknowledge such help by destining their collections in the long run to enrich the institution which he serves'.³⁰

Colvin met many of these collectors through his membership of various gentlemen's clubs, the most important of which was probably the Burlington Fine Arts Club, intended as a meeting place for 'amateurs, collectors and others interested in art' and whose prime activity was the putting on of small exhibitions deriving from the collections of its members, which were carefully selected and curated by a selection committee.³¹ It was in this rarefied, socially exclusive environment of the Burlington Fine Arts Club (where Colvin was a member from 1893), that he would have met a myriad of potentially useful contacts, including collectors such as Henry Vaughan, George Salting, and Charles Sayle (whose collections were all later partially gifted to the Museum); art writers and critics such

²⁸ See Edward Verrall Lucas, *The Colvins and their friends*, New York: Charles Scribner, 1928, 182.

²⁹ Roger Fry, 'Sir Sidney Colvin and the Print Room at the British Museum', *The Burlington Magazine*, 21:112, July 1912, 201.

³⁰ Reports 1901 to 1904, 30 January 1902, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

³¹ The history of the Burlington Fine Arts Club dates back to 1856 when members met firstly at Marlborough House and then at the private houses of members. For a brief overview of the Club's history, see Benedict Nicholson, 'The Burlington Fine Arts Club', *The Burlington Magazine*, 94: 589, April 1952, 97-9. For a more recent and analytical discussion, see Stacey Pierson, *Private collecting, exhibitions and the shaping of art history in London: the Burlington Fine Arts Club*, New York: Routledge, 2017.

as Frederick Wedmore, John Lewis Roget and Cosmo Monkhouse; as well as individuals with 'distinguished art appointments' which included various contemporary art gallery curators, primarily from the more prestigious London and university museums.

Colvin encouraged these individuals to visit the spaces of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, where he and his fellow curators were able to impart advice and expertise. Indeed, in Colvin's tenure, he made the students room at the Museum a place which people really wanted to visit and where staff and students freely mingled, whilst discussing drawings.³² The visitor books to the students room for the 1890s reveal that a significant number of these individuals belonged to the professional London art world and were museum directors and curators such as Charles Holroyd, keeper of the Tate Gallery and the art critic and newly appointed keeper of the Wallace Collection, Claude Phillips; and artists, art dealers and last but not least, collectors.³³

The nature of some of these professional contacts and the way they facilitated museum business is revealed additionally by the wealth of correspondence in the departmental archives. Over the period 1884 to 1895 (the first tranche of his tenure), Colvin was in contact with a wide range of curators both in Britain and abroad, including John Deffett Francis, an artist, collector and honorary curator of Swansea Fine Art Department; Charles Laing, the curator of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; as well as Friedrich Lippmann, curator of the Koenigliche Museum in Berlin.

However, by far the most detailed letters from another museum professional are those from George Scharf, who from 1882 had been the first director of the National Portrait Gallery.³⁴ These letters are revealing because they show not just the friendliness of the relationship between the two men (Scharf always addresses the letters to 'my dear Colvin') but also the way in which the two men collaborated in a way that might benefit their respective institutions. This is apparent, for example in correspondence relating to potential acquisitions, where an informal code of best practice seems to have evolved. In May 1892 for example, Scharf wrote to Colvin to 'talk over a number of subjects', including mentioning his hope that the Portrait Gallery's trustees would approve the purchase of John Everett Millais's watercolour of the artist John Leech; although if they did not approve the acquisition, he wrote, he would notify Colvin as 'he wished, next to us, that the British Museum should have it'.³⁵ Ultimately the trustees did approve this purchase and the British Museum did not benefit, but other instances reveal that Colvin's network of professional contacts paid off in this respect.

In 1893, for example, Charles Henry Hart, a Philadelphia lawyer, art historian and print collector wrote to Colvin that he was giving him a number of

³² Visitor numbers to the print room more than doubled during Colvin's tenure, from 4379 in 1882, to 9833 in 1912 (information from visitors book: print room, vols 5 and 26, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings).

³³ Visitors Book; print room, vol. 12, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

³⁴ On George Scharf see articles by Elizabeth Heath and Jacob Simon, in this issue.

³⁵ George Scharf to Sidney Colvin, 12 May 1892, Departmental Letter Book, 1890-92, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

prints for the collection of the British Museum: this in itself was not unremarkable.³⁶ What is interesting however is that Hart mentions that it was 'Mr Scharf who wrote to him to tell him that the museum had no portraits of the Earl of Elgin and that your collection of American prints was very sparse'.³⁷ This is an example of Scharf and Colvin's professional association leading to the cultivation of a wider network, including collectors, and bearing fruit in the shape of new acquisitions for the museum. It is no coincidence that it was during Colvin's tenure as keeper that spectacular gifts and bequests were negotiated for the museum, including the Mitchell collection of German engravings (1895), the Cheylesmore collection of mezzotints (1902), and the prints and drawings in the Salting bequest (1910).³⁸

Conclusion

Sidney Colvin's career in museums, firstly as director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, and latterly as a keeper at the British Museum, provides us with an interesting test case for examining the emergent professional practice of curators in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Colvin's career still bears many resemblances to the models set up by earlier nineteenth-century curators, such as those pioneered by Charles Lock Eastlake at the National Gallery in the 1840s and 1850s; and Colvin's friendship with George Scharf bears testament to the link with this generation. It is as art writer and critic prior to taking up his museum positions that Colvin forms his 'good judgement and taste' (the hallmarks of a connoisseurial practice), and it is these attributes that are emphasized in his overseeing of a rigorous scholarly programme of cataloguing. In other ways too, Colvin's career demonstrates a continuum in an emerging professional practice that involved greater agency given to curators in relation to their superiors, standardisation of procedure and organisation as well as an acknowledged and demonstrable use of a wider network of other museum professionals. Yet, Colvin's career sits on the cusp of wider changes surrounding curatorial practice. It is in the first decade of the twentieth century that a debate ensues around the training of curators, and whether this was best pursued through a generalist education, on the job experience, or specialist training programmes. It would be another generation before the Courtauld Institute was established to offer art history degrees, but with his university education and employment of academically trained protégés, Colvin had already raised standards, suggesting the potential for a new generation of museum curators.

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³⁶ Charles Henry Hart to Sidney Colvin, 17 October 1893, Departmental Letter Book, 1893–95, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

³⁷ Charles Henry Hart to Sidney Colvin, 17 October 1893, Departmental Letter Book, 1893–95, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

³⁸ For more details see Griffiths ed., *Landmarks in Print Collecting*.

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The career of Sidney Colvin: a transitional
moment at the fin-de-siècle

modern taste in watercolour: critics, curators, and collectors, c. 1890-1912' included a consideration of the role of two curators at the British Museum at the fin-de-siècle: Sidney Colvin and Laurence Binyon. She was formerly a curator at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

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