

Gallery of Craft and Design theme panels

Collecting

Collecting is a passionate pastime. The thrill of the hunt to find a particular object or seek out the best example of its kind can send the collector on a never-ending quest.

By its very nature collecting is highly personal and people collect for many different reasons. Some may be inspired by a particular type of object, or even a specific subject they are interested in. Others may wish to preserve a part of history and a few are driven by a desire to educate. Collecting is sometimes seen as an investment, but often the act of collecting is enough to satisfy.

Collectors can be both hoarders and sharers. The sharers include the many individuals who have given their collections to the Gallery. The Gallery itself is also a collector, acquiring historical and contemporary craft and design for the benefit of present and future generations.

The Thomas Horsfall Collection

Horsfall was a man with a mission.

He wanted to educate the working classes and develop in them a love of nature and art.

He wanted people to expect better living conditions and feel encouraged to improve their surroundings.

In 1886 he opened the Ancoats Art Museum in one of the worst slum areas of Manchester.

The collection was varied and diverse, ranging from ceramics, textiles and furniture to paintings, prints and natural history.

The displays emphasised the idea of good design, in the hope of encouraging working class people to furnish their homes with beautiful objects.

In 1918 the Museum was handed over to the Gallery and part of that collection is displayed here.

The objects are shown according to country of origin, illustrating Horsfall's interest in the transfer of ideas between different countries and cultures, and the influences on design in the late 1800s.

The Mary Greg Collection

Mary Greg appeared to be a compulsive collector who could not resist the curious and bizarre. She collected thousands of diverse objects: basketware, keys, thimbles and even stuffed frogs!

However, there was a serious purpose to her collection. Like her husband Thomas Greg, the ceramics collector, she was interested in pre-industrial hand-made objects. Collecting during the late 1800s and early 1900s, she tried to preserve examples of traditional skills, which were fast-disappearing or even already lost.

In many ways, Mary Greg was a pioneer. She acquired many everyday domestic objects which were not valued by other collectors at the time and consequently are now regarded as rare. She wanted her collection to have an educational role, and gave generously to museums during her life-time. Unusually for her time, she bought items for children in order for museums to establish childrens' corners.

The Thomas Greg Collection

The Greg Collection of English Pottery was given to the Gallery in 1904 by collector and amateur historian Thomas Greg.

One of the great collections of English pottery, it was formed at a time when little was known about the history of ceramics in this country. Over forty years Greg systematically acquired some of the best examples of the potter's art, tracing its development over a thousand years.

His collection tells the story of English pottery: of experiment and invention, triumph and downfall, from the unknown medieval craftsman to the world domination of Josiah Wedgwood. In many ways, it is a history of England itself. Greg was driven by a fascination with the past and a desire to contribute to scholarly knowledge. He gave his collection to the Gallery in the hope of inspiring a similar sense of wonder in others.

The Mr and Mrs Edgar Assheton Bennett Collection

Edgar Assheton Bennett was a connoisseur of silver. A rich stockbroker, he amassed a valuable collection which is now one of the finest in the country.

The collection was formed in the early 20th century when the contents of many large houses were sold. Although Bennett bought some very rare early pieces, he focused on the elegant English domestic silver made in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. He chose work by the best silversmiths of the day, including many influential French religious refugees. A silver scholar was employed to write a catalogue, published and circulated privately in 1931.

But the Bennetts were not precious about their silver, making tea in the teapots, eating with gilt cutlery and serving sandwiches from the silver plates. Domestic silver was made to be used and enjoyed!

The Harold Raby Collection

Harold Raby was charmed by English enamels finding them 'dainty and pretty, quaint and curious'. As a boy, he inherited a tiny, battered enamel box which inspired him to collect over 400 more items during the first half of the 20th century.

These enamels were mainly made in Staffordshire and were fashionable from about 1750 to 1820. For Raby, they evoked a lost age of elegance and gave an insight into outmoded social customs.

A local bank manager, Raby only had moderate means but he tried to buy examples of every type of object produced by the short-lived English enamel industry. He acquired boxes for face patches, snuff and tobacco, candlesticks, perfume bottles, tea caddies..... He even risked air raids to attend sales in London. Eventually, boxes outnumbered every other item and gave his collection an obsessive quality.

The Industrial Art Collection

In the early 1930s Manchester Art Gallery decided to form a collection of modern design. The Industrial Art Collection was intended to show how artistic qualities could be found in the most humble of everyday objects, from kitchen tableware to bedroom curtains.

The collection enabled the Gallery to take part in a growing debate on standards in British design. It was an opportunity to encourage manufacturers to improve the quality of their products, and to show Gallery visitors that good design could and should be available to everyone.

With this in mind, curator Lawrence Haward visited trade fairs and department stores, acquiring textiles, ceramics, glass and furniture. His choices are typical of 1930s 'good taste' and many have since become design classics.

The Special Collection Scheme

This stage showcases some recent purchases which bring the Gallery's collection up to date. Since 1998, we have been participating in the Contemporary Art Society's National Scheme, helping fifteen public museums and galleries to purchase contemporary art, craft and design.

We have chosen to buy furniture and lighting, which not many galleries can afford to collect as they are expensive and bulky to store. With the help of two special advisors, both furniture designers themselves, we have been looking for the best British talent alongside the stars of international design to create a unique resource for our visitors.

In the future the collection will provide a snapshot of design ideas from the turn of the 21st century. These objects, like the others in 'Collecting' reflect the tastes of the people who chose them, and may eventually be seen as a sign of their time.

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