

A view from the British Museum

Antony Griffiths

When I was asked to write a piece for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Harold Wright and Sarah and William Holmes Scholarships, it came as a surprise to me that these had started as recently as 1969. I joined the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum as a 25 year old in 1976, and, in the way of every new arrival in any organisation, assumed that everything around me had been going on for centuries. Of course that could not be the case, as Wright was a man of the 20th century, but I imagined that the scholarships had started in the 1950s at the latest.

In 1969 the keeper of prints and drawings was Edward Croft-Murray, so the negotiations must have been conducted under his aegis, though, given Croft-Murray's marked lack of talent as an administrator, I guess that the real work had been done by John Gere, who acted as his deputy in most practical matters. In the central office of the British Museum, the person involved must have been Bentley Bridgewater, who was an administrator of genius, running the museum more or less single-handedly for decades, and doing the work that is now done by teams of bureaucrats. He was famous for arriving at his desk at some point in the afternoon, working through to midnight, and then going on to cruise the gay bars and clubs of Soho.

Between them they made an arrangement with the University of Melbourne that was so simple and easy to operate that it has lasted to the present unchanged. Needless to say, we would never be allowed today to set it up in the same way. Melbourne took care of all the management of the bequest and the appointment of the scholars. Every year we would receive from the secretary a letter (no email in those days) telling us the name of the new appointee and his or her expected date of arrival in London. Our department secretary sent them in advance the form needed to get the security

clearance to issue them with a staff pass (they counted as 'volunteers'), which was ready when they arrived. The scholars did all the work in finding somewhere to live, and looked after themselves domestically.

When they turned up on the appointed day, I hope they were made to feel welcome. They were shown around the Print Room, and an attempt was made to explain the workings of a collection whose arrangement was almost incomprehensible (it took a decade for me to master it), and given a key that opened the cupboards. From then on they were on their own. They could look at whatever they liked, they could sit themselves anywhere that was free at the time, and no-one in the department made it their business to act as their chaperone.

I sometimes worried that this neglect that we saw as benign might look to the scholars more like indifference or even negligence. But that was not the case. The department was always busy, and there was always far more work to be done than there were staff to do it. Acting as mentor or director of studies to a visiting academic was simply not something that anyone could take on. And in many cases the subjects that our visitors were pursuing were not ones that anyone in the museum was competent to help them with. If asked, I always recommended to scholars that they should forget about any planned course of study, and simply look at as much of the collection as they could in the time available. To have the time to work one's way through box after box of great prints and drawings was a luxury that the members of staff never had, and many of us secretly envied the unhurried leisure of the scholars that might make this possible. There was no other scholarship available in the department to bring students in simply to look, and our friends and colleagues from the Antipodes quickly realised their luck when they arrived.



What did the Department of Prints and Drawings get from this influx of short-term supplementary members of staff from the other side of the world? In the first place, they injected new characters, personalities and ideas into an environment that could quickly become stuffy. They made life more interesting, and gave us fresh perspectives to look at what we possessed. Different scholars reacted in different ways. Some buried themselves so deeply in their projects that we saw little of them. A very few only showed up on occasion—they needed to spend more time on the Continent than in Britain. Most threw themselves into the life of the department, and quickly made friends with all the staff. Those who were experienced printmakers always knew far more than any of us about the cuisine of printmaking, and we learned a lot from listening to them. And some knew a lot more than we did about their special area of study. This was a great achievement when the collections they knew were so much weaker than ours, but not so surprising when they came from a collection like the National Gallery of Australia's which, thanks to James

Mollison and Pat Gilmour, had built up vastly better collections of modern American printmaking than we possessed.

Inevitably the scholars we remember best today are those we saw the most of at the time and whom we continue to see regularly on their visits to London, such as Irena Zdanowicz and Gerard Hayes. Stephen Coppel is the only one who later became a member of staff in the British Museum, but I remember others such as Dena Kahan, who stayed on as a volunteer after the official ending of her term and gave me a lot of valuable help. The scholarships continue and I hope they will outlast us all. For a minimum of expenditure of time, effort and money, they have done a huge amount of good. I imagine that by now most people in the world of prints and drawings in Australia and New Zealand have passed through our doors, and long may this continue.

Antony Griffiths was an assistant keeper in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum 1976–81, deputy keeper 1981–91, and keeper 1991–2011. He was Slade Professor of Fine Art at the University of Oxford 2014–15. In 2000 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.