

Celebrating Harold Wright's legacy to the Antipodes

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One of the most rewarding committees on which I have served during my career is one that I led for 20 years (1997–2017) while I was Herald Chair of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne: the Harold Wright and Sarah and William Holmes Scholarships Committee.¹ Its purpose is to elect two young print scholars each year to spend time in the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum in London.² The bequest was and



remains a unique act of philanthropy, unparalleled in the world of prints and drawings. In 2019 we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Harold Wright and Sarah and William Holmes Scholarships.

The first Herald Chair, Sir Joseph Burke, had a passion for works on paper, especially those by Hogarth.³ He knew Harold (pictured here) and Isobel Wright, and was involved in setting up the scholarships, at the same time encouraging donors to bequeath or give important prints and drawings to the extraordinary print collection that is now housed in the university's Baillieu Library. Burke saw the scholarships and the collection as closely interrelated.

The Deed of Trust, dated 2 April 1967, states that Mrs Wright (d. 1965) left a legacy of £20,000, including the net proceeds of the sale of certain pictures (which came to £3,900). It was a princely sum for the time, and was intended to fund two scholarships, each for a year, one in memory of her husband, print dealer Harold James Lean Wright (1881–1961), the other in memory of her parents, Sarah and William Holmes. Among the executors were two prominent figures in the London art world: James Byam Shaw and Derek Phillips, directors of the firm of Colnaghi, Wright's longtime employer.

There were conventional requirements, as well as a few unusual terms. The general brief was unexceptional in stating that 'The Scholarships are available to undergraduates or graduates of Australian or New Zealand Universities, or to other persons deemed by the Selection Committee to be of sufficient scholarly standard'. Furthermore, 'It is expected that the successful candidate would be a person with a background involving a serious study of the print and that the study of the British Museum would be useful for the furtherance of their career'.⁴ What was unusual, given the distinguished career of Harold Wright in the London art market,⁵ was the deed's statement that the scholarship:

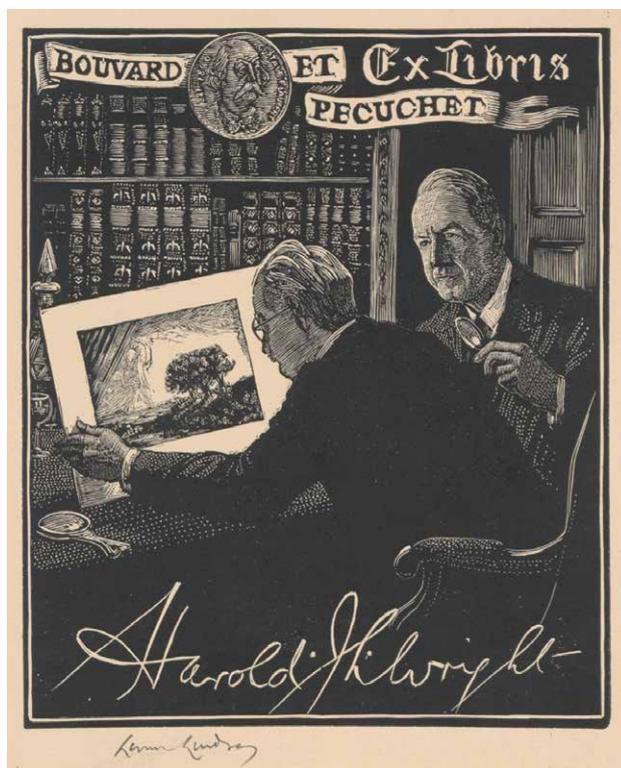
Previous page: H. Andrew Freeth, *Harold Wright Esquire*, 1951, counterproof, etching, 22.3 × 16.9 cm (plate). 0000.0471, University of Melbourne Art Collection. © Martin, Tony and Richard Freeth.

Below: Lionel Lindsay, Bookplate for Harold Wright, 1944, wood engraving, 10.2 × 9.1 cm. 1964.2400, bequeathed by Lionel Lindsay 1961, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne. © National Library of Australia.

will not be awarded to any person who shall at the time of the award be employed by any commercial art gallery or other art gallery run for profit nor to persons who shall at the time of the award be engaged in art dealing on their own account or in partnership but may be awarded to persons employed by any public or private art gallery which is not run with a view to profit.⁶

Wright had begun his career at the age of 18 with the eminent firm of Obach and Co., famous for its patronage of contemporary artists, including van Gogh during the two years he was in London, and Whistler. In 1911 Obach merged with P. & D. Colnaghi & Co. in Bond Street. There Wright remained for the rest of his career, and sold many works on paper to Australian and New Zealand museums, as well as promoting Australian artists in England, notably Lionel Lindsay. Lindsay made a bookplate for Harold Wright (pictured right), and Isobel Wright donated rare prints by Lindsay to the University of Melbourne's print collection (see example opposite), a testimony to their friendship.⁷ Wright could not have been associated with finer museums anywhere in the world, nor with more distinguished artists. It could be said that he was a global print phenomenon, who generously gave works to collections, as well as selling them.

A rather delightful and wise statute for the scholarships stated that 'It is not intended that the scholarship should be linked to a specific project, specialized research or even a publication'. Mrs Wright had in mind a completely free year, in which the holder would be able to work as widely in one of the greatest collections of prints in the world as her husband had done for many years. In the 21st century, when we are over-managed and over-strategised, this is a perplexing and wonderful condition, which allows young scholars to discover new subject

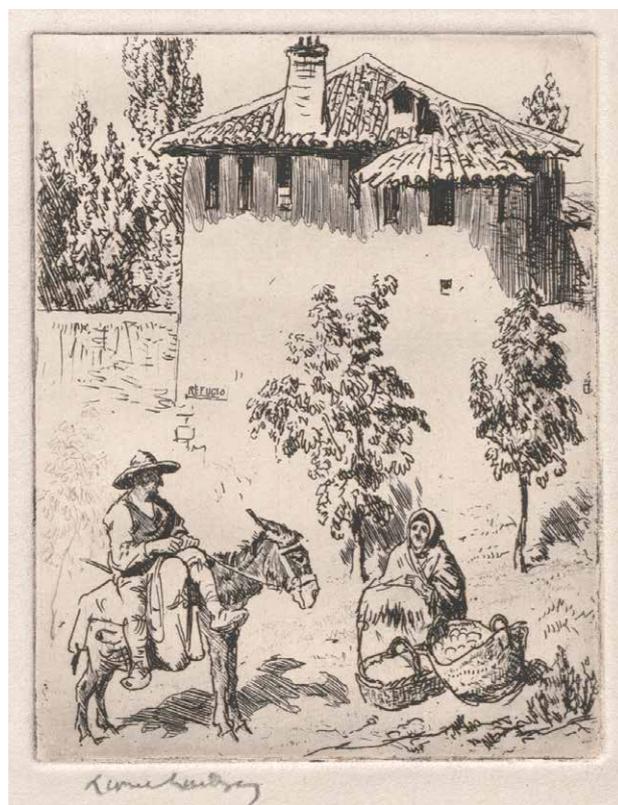


areas that could not have been predicted from knowledge gained in Australian print rooms. In this sense recipients have described the scholarship as the 'key to paradise'.

It would be wrong to think of Wright merely as a print seller. He was a connoisseur of the highest calibre, possessing a remarkable knowledge of the history of printmaking and of those who collected prints, from the Renaissance until the 20th century, from any part of the world. University of Melbourne Archives contains delightful manuscripts of short stories written by Wright about print collectors, and texts of rather impressive

lectures on these subjects.⁸ A lengthy typescript, 'Famous print-collectors', for a lecture delivered on 23 November 1937 to the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers, presents a remarkable overview of the subject, based on data gleaned from a lifetime of looking at individual prints and observing people. It contains anecdotes not to be found elsewhere about the great scholars of prints Adam Bartsch and Arthur M. Hind, and a brief account of how the British Museum Print Room began. Wright believed strongly that British people should become collectors of prints, and wrote popular journalism on the subject, such as his BBC lecture 'On collecting prints and engravings', published in *The Listener* on 27 February 1958. Even more sympathetic was an article for *House and Garden*, 'Etchings and engravings: For collectors with limited means', published in September 1952.

Once the scholarships were well established, the reports of recipients express their delight in unpredictable discoveries. Beneficiaries include some of the finest curators in museums in Australia and New Zealand over the last 50 years. To select a few from the long list: Nicholas Draffin (1971), Irena Zdanowicz (1978), Ted Gott (1987), Anne Gray (1991), Cathy Leahy (1989), Jane Messenger (2004), Kirsty Grant (2005), Jaklyn Babington (2007), Lucy Harper (2008), Elspeth Pitt (2009) and Petra Kayser (2011). The scholarship is open to New Zealanders as well as Australians, as exemplified by Victoria Robson (1989), David Maskill (2003) and Matthew Norman (2010). Two Wright scholars were appointed to the staff of the British Museum: Stephen Coppel (1987), now curator of modern prints and drawings, and Mark McDonald (1991), who later moved to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Some outstanding art historians were chosen, including Luke Morgan (2003), now head of art history at Monash



University, and Hugh Hudson (2007), now an associate professor at the National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei.

The committee administering the Harold Wright Scholarship usually consisted of the Herald Chair of Fine Arts, the curator of prints and drawings at the National Gallery of Victoria, and others with a knowledge of printmaking and print scholarship. Decisions were made jointly between the academy and the museum, often a curator and an art historian being chosen from



Albrecht Dürer, The bath house, c. 1496, woodcut, 39.3 × 28.2 cm (sheet trimmed to image). 1959.2141, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

both constituencies. The money for the scholarship was overseen by a firm of solicitors in England, Messrs E.F. and A. George, who administered Mrs Wright's estate and had very wide powers of investment. Nevertheless, the funds failed to appreciate and many recipients had to limit their time in England to four months due to the high cost of living, unless their institution had the means to supplement their stipend, which was somewhat different from Mrs Wright's intention of a year's scholarship. Indeed, the sum available failed to keep pace with inflation over 40 or more years. Eventually the solicitors relocated from London to High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, and the assets were subsequently transferred to the University of Melbourne to administer.

Scholarship holders frequently reported that their period in London was the experience of a lifetime. The initial encounter with the British Museum collection may have been overwhelming, but this was soon overcome, especially with the assistance of the curators, whose scholarly works the visitors had read as students, far away in Australia. Seeing exhibitions in the Print Room in London fed into their later curatorship in Australia. The opportunity to spend days poring over rare prints and editions of Renaissance material, with every important secondary source to hand, was unforgettable, as were regular lectures in the museum and in London universities. The scholars' experiences brought long-term benefits to their curatorial and art-historical work in many different contexts.

A further benefit was the opportunity to gain knowledge and experience in the preservation of works on paper in the museum's conservation department. Scholars witnessed demonstrations of methods of mounting, stamping of registration information on mounts, and making of archival-quality storage portfolios and boxes.

They would return to Australia to apply these principles to the collections they were to curate, with a knowledge of the latest techniques and best practice. Most of all, London provided opportunities to study other collections, meet colleagues from other museums with print rooms—such as the Victoria and Albert Museum—and create future partnerships for exhibitions and research.

The extraordinary quantity and quality of *drawings* from the Renaissance and earlier periods in the British Museum were always a revelation to students. Australian print rooms possess only very small collections of European drawings, while travelling exhibitions of drawings are not encouraged by Australian museum directors, who generally believe they do not attract large visitations. This is difficult to understand, as Patrick McCaughey at the National Gallery of Victoria arranged in 1995 an exhibition from the Uffizi for which crowds queued along St Kilda Road.⁹ This Melbourne institution has Australia's largest and most distinguished collection of prints and drawings, but the galleries originally dedicated to showing these works are now used for perpetual blockbusters of contemporary art. By contrast, at the University of Melbourne, under the directorship of former librarian Philip Kent, and thanks to a generous bequest from alumna Dr Jessie Noel Shaw (née Henderson, 1916–2012), in 2014 the Baillieu Library opened the Noel Shaw Gallery, a dedicated exhibition space on the first floor, complemented by a series of showcases on the ground floor. This was a brilliant solution to the lack of a professional gallery space to showcase the library's valuable collections of prints, rare books, archives and other irreplaceable holdings, enabling it to develop a quality exhibition program in partnership with academic champions and anchored in themes relevant to the university's curricula and research strengths. It is a suitable venue for displaying the Baillieu

Library Print Collection, revealing these holdings' unique nature among Australian university libraries, and their strength as a resource for teaching, research and collaboration with the academy.

Most effectively of all, in surprising corners of the library were created smaller cabinets, where changing exhibitions might be seen, presenting library users with novel and topical themes about books and prints, and showing how they interact and contrast with a modern digital library such as the Baillieu. These display spaces were devised by Lyons Architects, a Melbourne firm that has had remarkable success in devising unconventional spaces for students, such as the RMIT University street project and the Grattan project for the University of Melbourne. Because prints are rarely seen by the Australian public, these display cases have a compelling effect on the consciousness of young Melburnians and other library users.

The donor of the core of the Baillieu Library Print Collection (in 1959), was Dr J. Orde Poynton (1906–2001), a British surgeon who had come to Australia after being held in a Japanese prison camp during World War II. His gift of some 3,700 prints was of considerable quality, having been mostly put together in London from dealers and small print shops on the Charing Cross Road by his father, Dr Frederic John Poynton (1869–1943), who was friendly with some of the legendary figures in British print scholarship, such as Arthur M. Hind and Lawrence Binyon at the British Museum.¹⁰ It is a remarkable resource for teaching and research, but when I took up the Herald Chair in 1997, I realised that the study of old master prints had disappeared from the university's art history syllabus, although previously it had been taught by the collection's first curator, Geoff Down.¹¹ Perhaps this was why there were fewer applications for the scholarships than one might have

expected. Then across my desk came a call to develop digital courses of any kind, with university support via Talmat grants. At that stage the print collection had not been photographed to any great extent, let alone with high-resolution digital imagery—and there was not a single image online. The grant funded high-quality digital photography of a relatively little known print collection. (In recent years the majority of the collection has been photographed, and can now be viewed online.¹²)

For the Talmat grant, I worked with a team of technicians to devise a system of photography at the highest resolution possible at that time, and to examine works by zooming into connoisseurial detail (then revolutionary, though now commonplace), to present a course both online and in the seminar room. Much of the teaching was about developing a concept for an exhibition, with students forming curatorial groups to devise an exhibition, which in the penultimate week of a 12-week term they would present to a panel of museum experts. That seminar was transformative, giving students an exciting new curatorial experience. The experts were curators and directors from the National Gallery of Victoria, the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the Baillieu Library, and academics who taught the course. We called the course 'The Virtual Print Room', a descriptor then unknown on the internet, but now ubiquitous. The subject made the outstanding collection of Renaissance and Baroque prints accessible for teaching online for the first time. Although the course took the study of printmaking away from the white-gloved world of the conventional print room and into the realm of digital technology and discovery, some of the students' exhibitions were actually mounted in real exhibition spaces.¹³

Students created an exhibition and catalogue online, learned about the techniques and media of printmaking, acquired curatorial experience that strengthened their

Unknown artist, Calvary, c. 1460, woodcut, 26.7 × 18.7 cm (sheet trimmed to image). 1959.4277, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



prospects of museum employment, became conversant with various digital technologies and the scientific photography of prints, and worked collaboratively to solve problems as a group. The final seminar provided the opportunity to compare the digital exhibition with the real print exhibition in a gallery space for the seminar, intended as a good preparation for museum experience.

Conventionally, exhibitions of old master prints display the works of an individual printmaker, such as Jacques Callot, Albrecht Dürer, William Hogarth, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Marcantonio Raimondi or Rembrandt. For all these artists—and indeed others—who are represented in the Baillieu Library Print Collection, such monographic exhibitions would have been possible, and were occasionally tried, Hogarth being a favourite. The collection contains also prints of great rarity, such as the moving, expressionist 15th-century German woodcut of the Crucifixion (left), which may be a unique impression. A certain favourite was Dürer's Bath house (see page 10), which emerged in many exhibition proposals. But most students preferred to explore more radical, conceptual themes and contemporary ideas, such as an exhibition created in 2002 by a group of eight students led by Ben Thomas (now the Rusden Curator of cultural collections at Trinity College, University of Melbourne). Responding to the experience of 9/11, their exhibition was entitled *Voyeurism, terror and violence*. Callot's prints about war featured prominently, especially that most horrible form of torture, the strappade (see page 14). The students examined printmakers who were unable to turn away from representations of terror and torture, principally Callot and some German Renaissance artists.

Together with the team who had invented the software for the Virtual Print Room, we published several articles on changes to learning arising from the techniques we had invented for the teaching of exhibition curating.¹⁴ The first time we taught the course, in 2000, half the class walked out, frightened by the new technology. That soon changed, as the zoomify technique became more and more common in the online catalogues of major museums, and students were to become better versed in technology.

Jacques Callot, *L'estrapade* (The strappade), 1633, plate 9
from *Les grandes misères de la guerre*, etching, first state,
8.3 × 19.4 cm (plate), published by Israël Henriet, Paris.
1959.2123, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, Baillieu Library
Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

In 2002 another grant was obtained, and we created the subject A Virtual Print Room II: A Condition Report for the Conservation of Old Master Prints. Students studying for an MA in curatorship would examine a print online and make a proposal for conservation. This would not have been possible with real objects, for if so many students examined the same print it would inevitably be damaged. We also used an online component of the examination of a print for the first-year survey course. So a print component was available to all students if they wished, in almost all aspects of art history at Melbourne.

In recent years a number of students have written master's and doctoral dissertations on prints and print culture, such as Kathleen Kiernan on Dutch landscape prints,¹⁵ Louise Voll Box on the provenance, materiality and arrangement of albums of prints in the 18th century,¹⁶ and Kim Clayton-Greene on the cult of Queen Victoria in the colony of Victoria.¹⁷ Prints from the Baillieu

are regularly sought for exhibitions and publications, collaborations with fellow institutions including State Library Victoria have proven fruitful,¹⁸ and since 2007 the present journal has regularly featured articles by students and staff on prints and drawings from the collection.¹⁹ Another scholarship was created by the legacy of Dr Ursula Hoff, to foster the study of prints in the collections of the university and the National Gallery of Victoria.²⁰ So that which Harold Wright and Joseph Burke began continues to flourish in many different ways. At the first reunion of scholarship recipients, held in 2005, those who were still involved in studying works on paper presented research on topics of great and varied interest. A further symposium in 2011 was published as *Print matters at the Baillieu*,²¹ some authors being former Wright scholars. In 2019 the tradition continues, with the celebration of 50 years of the Harold Wright and Sarah and William Holmes Scholarships.



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The University of Melbourne Library is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Harold Wright and Sarah and William Holmes Scholarships with an exhibition titled *Horizon lines: The ambitions of a print collection*, to be held in the Noel Shaw Gallery of the Baillieu Library from 31 July to 8 December 2019; a symposium on *Prints, Printmaking and Philanthropy* (30 September to 2 October 2019); and publication of a book of essays by selected scholarship holders, *Horizon lines: Marking 50 years of print scholarship*. The British Museum will hold a commemorative exhibition from November 2019 to January 2020.

- 1 This account is based on my own memories as chair of the committee and on records held in University of Melbourne Archives.
- 2 The committee is now chaired by Associate Professor Christopher Marshall.
- 3 See Angelo Lo Conte, 'How one global collection of old master prints was created: Nine albums by the Sadeler family in the Baillieu Library of the University of Melbourne', *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. 30, no. 2, July 2018, pp. 339–50; Angelo Lo Conte, 'Joseph Burke and the development of the University of Melbourne's print collection', forthcoming.
- 4 Papers of Harold James Lean Wright, 1979.0028 and 1983.0116, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 5 David Maskill, 'Impressions of a print dealer: Harold Wright and the etching boom', *Print Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 3, September 2018, pp. 270–9.
- 6 Papers of Harold James Lean Wright, University of Melbourne; *Harold Wright Scholarship and Sarah & William Holmes Scholarship*, <https://scholarships.unimelb.edu.au/awards/the-harold-wright-scholarship-and-the-sarah-and-william-holmes-scholarship>.
- 7 See Kim Clayton-Greene, 'Yours faithfully: Harold Wright and Lionel Lindsay, a long friendship', in Kerriane Stone and Stephanie Jaehrling (eds), *Print matters at the Baillieu*, University of Melbourne, 2011, pp. 33–46.
- 8 Papers of Harold James Lean Wright.
- 9 *Renaissance drawings from the Uffizi* toured to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Victoria in August–December 1995.
- 10 On the history of the collection, see Jaynie Anderson, 'Orde Poynton and the Baillieu Library', in Stone and Jaehrling (eds), *Print matters at the Baillieu*, pp. 7–32.
- 11 Alison Inglis and Meaghan Wilson-Anastasios, 'Prints at the Baillieu Library: Teaching and learning from the collection', in Stone and Jaehrling (eds), *Print matters at the Baillieu*, pp. 103–15.
- 12 University of Melbourne Library, *Print Collection*, <https://library.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special-collections/print-collection>.
- 13 For instance, *Journeys and places: Landscape etchings by Jan van de Velde II*, curated by Kathleen Kiernan and displayed at the university's Ian Potter Museum of Art in 2009–10.
- 14 Som Naidu, Jaynie Anderson and Mathew Riddle, 'The virtual print exhibition: A case of learning by designing', paper presented at ED-MEDIA 2001: World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications, Tampere, Finland, 25–30 June 2001, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED466202>.
- 15 Kathleen Kiernan, 'Dutch art in the English landscape: Seventeenth-century Dutch landscape prints in the London art market 1740–1800', PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2016.
- 16 In progress.
- 17 In progress.
- 18 For instance, the exhibition *Rome: Piranesi's vision*, curated by Dr Colin Holden and held at State Library Victoria in 2014, with accompanying book *Piranesi's grandest tour: From Europe to Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth Books); and the touring exhibition *Radicals, slayers and villains: Prints from the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne*, curated by Kerriane Stone and touring Victoria in 2014–15, with a substantial catalogue of the same title.
- 19 See for instance University of Melbourne Library, *Research and Publications: Print Collection, Baillieu Library*, https://museumsandcollections.unimelb.edu.au/research_and_publications/research/print_collection_baillieu_library; and *University of Melbourne Collections* (magazine published twice yearly since November 2007), https://museumsandcollections.unimelb.edu.au/research_and_publications/university_of_melbourne_collections_magazine.
- 20 For further details, see *Ursula Hoff Fellowship 2018*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/collection/ursula-hoff-fellowship-2018 (viewed 26 February 2019).
- 21 Stone and Jaehrling (eds), *Print matters at the Baillieu*.