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Changing Practices: Reviewing the Evolution of Treatment Approaches for the Collection of the Board of Trade and Design Registers 1839–1991 at the National Archives, UK

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to share developments in the work of the conservation treatment team at the National Archives (TNA) in London, UK, in relation to a collection of volumes forming the Board of Trade Representations and Registers of Design, commonly referred to as the BT Design Register. The changing approach to conservation of this very popular collection over the years reflects both evolving trends in conservation and the focus and business priorities of the Collection Care Department (CCD) at TNA.

The collection includes challenging objects that present the conservator with an array of problems to address including size, format, usage, and context, not dissimilar to the issues found in the conservation of scrapbooks, photo albums, and other composite volumes. Examples of past and present interventions will be discussed to give a historical perspective of the conservation of the BT Collection, also referring to the data collected by different generations of conservators and kept in the CCD's database. The collection, with its complexity and richness, has proved invaluable to describe a shift in approaching its conservation, while also reflecting on the changing roles of conservators, and hopefully present a working model that can be replicated in other institutions and specifically archives.

THE COLLECTION AND ITS HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

The British Board of Trade Registers Collection contains nearly three million designs that were registered between 1839 and 1991 and is one of TNA's most visually captivating collections, with a stunning array of designs used for textiles, glasswork, metalwork, ceramics, furniture, wallpaper, and other decorative arts and manufactured objects. The registers

include details of each proprietor who submitted a design and a representation in the form of a drawing, photograph, or three-dimensional sample—anything from straw hats (fig. 1) to inflatable corsets can be found hidden among the pages of these volumes. This wealth of information contributes to making this collection a popular resource for researchers, with its objects being regularly requested for access.

The Board of Trade, originally known with the impossibly long title of “The Lords of The Committee of the Privy Council Appointed for the Consideration of all Matters

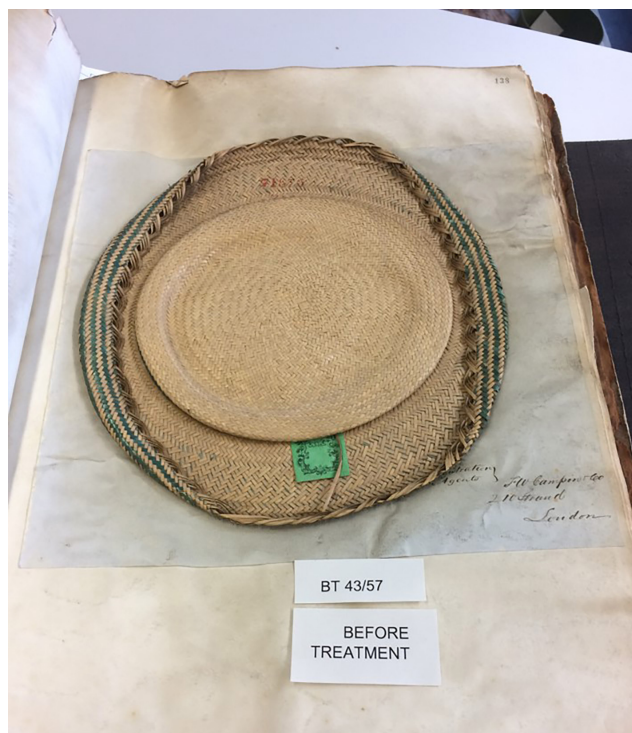


Fig. 1. BT 53/57, a straw hat before conservation. Reproduced with permission from The National Archives. For permission to reuse, please contact The National Archives' Image Library.

Relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations,” was established in the 17th century. The board was meant as a temporary committee to advise on colonial matters and eventually evolved into a government department with considerable power and functions including regulation of domestic and foreign commerce; the development, implementation, and interpretation of the Acts of Trade and Navigation; and the review and acceptance of legislation passed in the colonies.

Until 1839, most areas of the decorative arts, such as glass, metalwork, ceramics, and wallpapers, were not protected by copyright, with the exception of textiles. The situation changed in 1839 when the Designs Registration Act was introduced, providing protection for all “ornamental” designs. At this point, the Design Registry was created for designers to submit their work and apply for copyright. The Design Registry was part of the Board of Trade and moved later under the jurisdiction of the Patent Office. The system used to register designs continued to be modified, although from 1842 it always involved two elements that formed a record: the representation and the registers. Today, designs are registered with the Intellectual Property Office.

Designs were submitted from Britain, mainland Europe and the British Empire, with the aim of protecting the owners of original designs from commercial piracy (note 1).

The collection includes just under three million designs, contained mainly within volumes, in varying formats with some weighting as much as 25 kg (55 lb.). Later registrations, when the convention of pasting designs into volumes had been abandoned, are contained in folders and files grouped in boxes.

There are various series identified by the BT prefix, followed by a number indicating a different class of designs, covering the period from 1839 to 1991.

Often described as a “museum within a book” by TNA record specialists and in internal TNA presentations, the Design Register is a unique resource of public value and an underexplored resource for historical research and design innovation. Over the years, the significance of the resource has been evaluated in various ways, including designing and carrying out value assessment exercises with support from internal and external focus groups. One of the questions to answer was “Who uses the collection?” Using data available through a user’s inquiries and analyzing academic output through literature reviews, conservators established that the BT Design Register has been used mainly by historians, particularly scholars researching textiles and dressmaking history, ceramics, and business history. Their scholarly output confirms that it is an important primary source for understanding economic and social history, as well as commerce and copyright developments. The collection provides textual and material evidence of trade and innovation throughout the world, particularly the role of the UK. Researchers at TNA also initiated consultation events with existing archive

users, including historians, archivists, and curators, and potential users, such as artists and designers. These meetings confirmed the very high research value of the BT Design Registers for established users but also opened a conversation on the potential benefits of widening the reach to underrepresented audiences with better outreach programs.

The collection provides a documentary connection to Britain’s manufacturing past, with strong links to particular towns and their manufacturing and industrial heritage. Material evidence of these past industries exists now only in the BT Volumes.

BACKGROUND

Starting in early 2000, the role and competencies of conservators in the department have seen a shift from a bench-based treatment-focused structure to a framework developed around the “conservation practitioner-researcher” approach (Bell and Eastop 2020, 141–154). Based on a model proposed by Emily Pringle (2018) relating to the role of research within a museum context, the conservation practitioner-researcher in TNA undertakes research-led practice integrating objects with their context and value and makes treatment decisions that consider research outputs on the same level as other more traditional decision-making markers. Following this approach, concepts traditionally utilized to describe the degree of intervention, primarily focused on quantifying a treatment decision, can become inadequate. In fact, when research and practice merge to become integral to the intervention, a new lexicon needs to be adopted to better describe and justify the decision-making process. Later on, this article will explore how value and impact have an equivalent weight in the treatment decision-making process and how this has changed the way conservators interact with the BT Collection.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The scale of the collection is daunting, whether considering the potential cost of digitization or the difficulty of simply locating a design within a volume. Each sample has a unique number linking the registration with the representation. Although *Discovery*, TNA’s public catalog, describes the collection at the item level, users have to request potentially several volumes before finding the right item unless they know the number of the desired representation. In the series BT43 and BT44 for example, the design samples were filed idiosyncratically according to 14 material “classes.” Without knowing both the unique design number and material class, it is time consuming to identify the required volumes, making accessibility a real issue (note 2). In addition, the volumes are large and heavy (fig. 2), and therefore are physically difficult to handle without risking damage to both the item and the user. Some classes of volumes, given the materiality



Fig. 2. BT 50/536, one of the volumes for textiles representations. These volumes are among the most challenging because of their weight and size. Reproduced with permission from The National Archives. For permission to reuse, please contact The National Archives' Image Library.

of the representation, are particularly complex and vulnerable; they might contain drawings, tracings, photographs, textile samples, lace, and/or 3D objects, all contributing to the instability of the binding and the deformed shape that characterize most of the collection. Although TNA recognizes that accessibility is the final goal, one potential disadvantage of increasing public awareness of the Board of Trade series is the risk of greater numbers of people coming into the archives to access the physical representation volumes. Under the current system, without transcribed versions of the registers and image availability of each design, production is very resource intensive, requiring unnecessary handling of the representations. For this reason, there needs to be the right balance between greater public engagement and resource availability.

One of the approaches trialed during the years to provide more accessibility to the collection has been through the exploitation of ad hoc funding opportunities to create pilot projects, to eventually inform further efforts. For instance, one such project was carried out in 2012 with funds made available by the Arts and Humanities Research Fund (AHRC). The project aimed at enhancing the preservation of the BT Design Register while making it more readily accessible, and it was underpinned by research carried out in 2010–2011 with funds from the Clothworkers' Foundation. A key objective was to make it easier to link the written records in the registers in one

of the series (BT44) with the corresponding designs in Series BT43. To achieve this goal, the BT44 registers were transcribed and cataloged, and the resulting records were made available online. This huge task resulted in more than half a million records released in total and facilitated the search of the BT Design record for the period from 1842 to 1884.

One additional challenge that has hindered TNA's ability to develop a coherent strategy for the development of the collection is that some of the designs were registered by companies that still exist and make commercial use of their archives. These companies, when approached about the possibility of digitizing and including their designs as available resources, expressed reservations. Even though legal advice confirmed that TNA would be able to go ahead without being in breach of copyright law, it has remained a controversial issue and one that has not yet been addressed.

As highlighted repeatedly, the Design Registers have significant research potential, but given the scale of the series, the cost of comprehensive conservation (note 3) to prepare the collection for digitization and digitization itself is prohibitive. Estimated to run in the millions, TNA has not been in a position to take this cost on and carry out the project, without any scope to exploit the images and monetize the effort.

In striking that balance, it is crucial to consider the benefits of increased public engagement.



Fig. 3. BT 43/413. This volume received basic stabilization interventions, allowing it to be handled and viewed by readers. Reproduced with permission from The National Archives. For permission to reuse, please contact The National Archives' Image Library.

THE EVOLUTION OF PRESERVATION APPROACHES TO THE BT COLLECTION

One of the by-products of the past failure to implement a plan based on a strategic vision to enhance access to this collection has been a rather patchy approach to their conservation and preservation through their history. A systematic campaign of intervention has never been in the cards, as it would have demanded a financial commitment that at no point was going to be balanced by institutional priorities and desired outcomes. A range of options to improve standards of preservation and access have been explored, but no single, affordable intervention available to conserve this collection has ever been identified. Among the realistic approaches championed in the past, the easiest options supported the reduction of physical handling of the volumes; the mitigation of the risk of significant or complete loss of the collection information through a range of measures, both preservation and conservation; and the investigation of technological opportunities to allow visual search of the collection in ways that are meaningful to new audiences, thus reducing handling and physical change.

As a result, volumes have been conserved “on demand,” generally only undergoing minimal treatment—the basic intervention that would allow a user to safely access the resource (fig. 3). Most of these interventions, especially the early ones, were either never recorded or bulk records were created with only basic information included. Often these bulk records proved unreliable for research and data-gathering purposes, as they contained dates and names relating to the conservator creating the record, sometimes a different person from the one who had actually performed the treatment. The implications of having little access to the treatment history of these volumes means that conservators have to make assumptions based on historical knowledge of treatments common at



Fig. 4. Treatment cards, created before switching to digital record-keeping, are now kept in storage and in the process of being digitized and added to TNA's database. Reproduced with permission from The National Archives. For permission to reuse, please contact The National Archives' Image Library.

different times in archives and, in some lucky cases, rely on memories shared by colleagues (fig. 4).

One positive aspect of the relatively untouched structures of the majority of these items is that they present many opportunities for studying the original context, which in many cases has been left undisturbed. This allows researchers to understand elements of the history of this collection and trace changes in practices throughout their history, including the manner in which these designs were registered.

Besides data on treatments available on analog or digital databases, another hint at the changes in condition and status of the collection is given by surveys conducted in the department at various stages and for different purposes. Condition assessments surveys were often a preliminary condition to funding applications or pilot projects. Extrapolating and interpreting data from these sources can be complex, given the heterogeneous nature of the datasets, but nonetheless conservators at TNA are exploring novel ways to make use of historic data and include it in any future work done on the collection.

Besides the obvious issues these volumes present due to their large, heavy, and fragile state, the most interesting aspect that warrants attention is the multimateriality of the representations. Conserving these objects requires paper and book conservators to move out of their specialty and embrace a multidisciplinary approach to their task. This has created opportunities for dialog and collaborations with professionals from other institutions as well as different interest groups that can inform the decision-making process.

VALUE AND IMPACT: THE CONSERVATOR AS PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER

Starting around a decade ago, the approach to conservation treatment in the CCD shifted, and conservation research came to be more embedded in the decision-making process leading to treatment, preservation, and display of collections. Whereas before this shift treatment conservators were vested with the practical aspects of collection care and were passive receivers of scientific outcomes, research started to move at the center of the conservation intervention, therefore becoming an integral part of the intervention. Conservators, whose professional identity had, up to that point, a strong foundation in practice were able to ask research questions and use emerging skills to find the answers. This new identity was later to find a name and a model when Pringle (2008) proposed her description of practice-led research, practice-based research, and practice as research applied to the art museum context. Practice-led research places emphasis on recognizing that the processes and methods of inquiry can be constructed as forms of research (Pringle 2018). This approach lends itself perfectly to legitimize the practitioner-researcher identity that conservators had been developing and perfecting within TNA and elsewhere in other collection care contexts. Rather than acting as end users of research outcomes, conservators use their practice to generate

research that is more grounded in their daily experiences with collections. The research question is born out of practical issues and therefore maintains a direct relation with the goals of the intervention. This shift benefited from an institutional context that was also changing and that eventually resulted in TNA becoming an Independent Research Organization (IRO), allowing the CCD to pursue an integrated research agenda and set its own research priorities.

This context provided an opportunity to revisit the BT Collection and rethinking its value in relation to conservation research and practice. Once the conservation of the collection was decoupled from service delivery constraints, which were effectively paralyzing any progress, it offered itself to become a foundation for knowledge creation and experimentation. It is possible to extrapolate value based on strategic priorities, and this is what conservators did when they placed the collection at the center of a system that identifies these priorities as follows:

- People
- Possibilities
- Integrity
- Engagement
- Recognition
- Influence

So, for example, conservators can start from a research question and move from that to map it against TNA values and priorities so that they can assign a project's value at the onset. This is in contrast to undertaking conservation simply based on condition status. Current work that the CCD is undertaking includes the creation of practical tools that allow value to be identified and quantified at the project selection stage, using both business priorities and impact outcome measures as the foundations to establish the quality of the intervention and the appropriate resources to employ (fig. 5).

CONCLUSIONS

The work of the conservation team in the CCD has been instrumental in establishing and supporting the understanding of the professional conservator as researcher-practitioner—within TNA and sector-wide. This new concept recognizes the work of the conservation practitioner as research. Within TNA context, it describes the CCD's capacity to carry out research that substantially extends and enhances the national research base, and it demonstrates an independent capability to undertake and lead research programs. The Board of Trade Collection, with its inherent complexity and value, has been instrumental in providing a testing ground to establish new ways of working. Researching and treating the collection has allowed the embedding of impact assessment measures using a value assessment exercise that is now in the process of being finalized and applied to other collections.

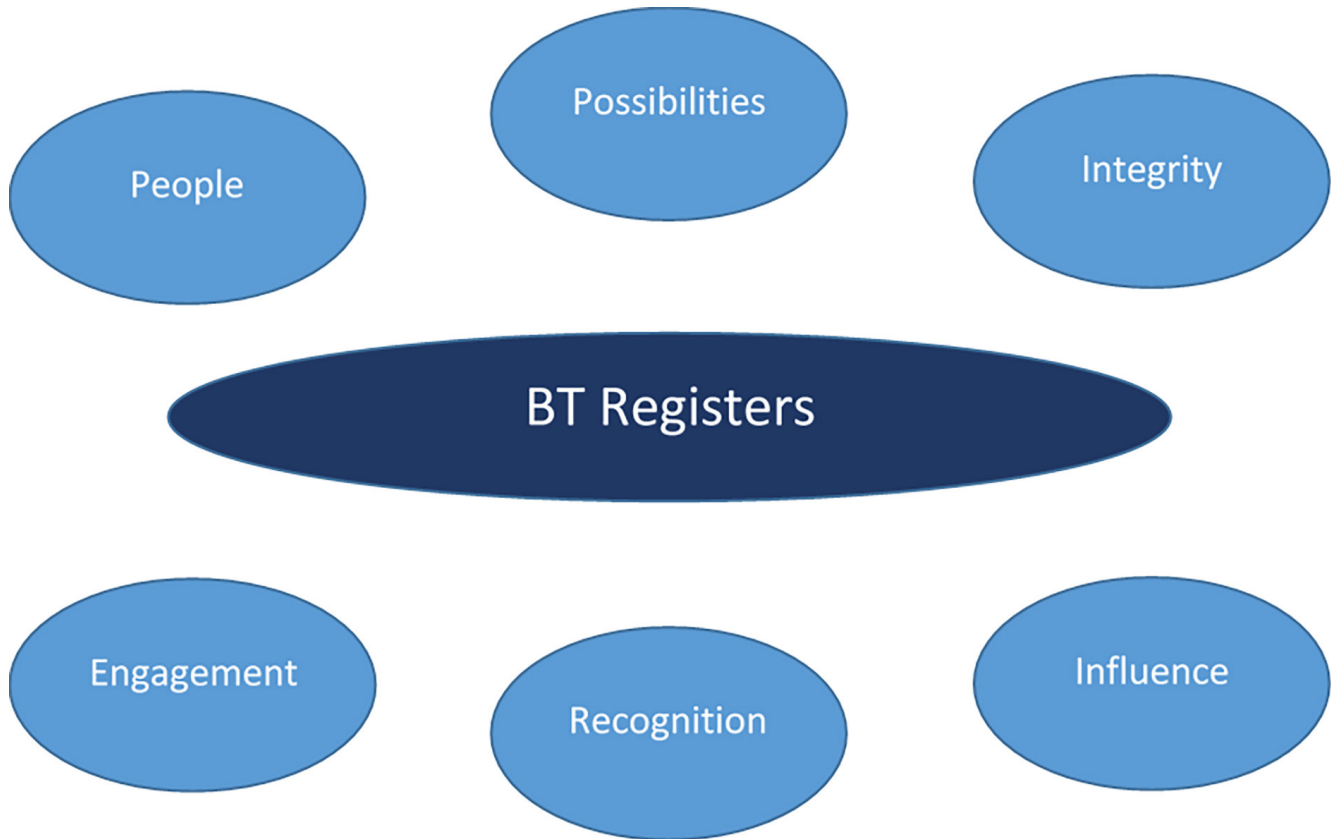


Fig. 5. Values chart showing the values and department priorities.

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NOTES

1. For historical background information on the Board of Trade Collection, see TNA's online catalog: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C38>.
2. For guidance on how to access the designs, see TNA's online research guide: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/registered-designs-1839-1991/>.
3. For an idea of resources employed for ad hoc conservation interventions to support one specific project, see <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/designregisters/btconservation.htm>.

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