

Friends of York Art Gallery Research Fellowship Report:

The Morrell Print Collection

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During my year at the York Art Gallery I was privileged enough to become involved not only in my own research in the Morrell Print Collection but other projects ongoing throughout the Gallery. In this report, I will first focus on the results of my research on the Morrell Collection, which has been both fruitful and enlightening, and then proceed to comment on the other opportunities and experience my Research at the YAG has offered me. Many of the concepts touched upon in this brief report are a succinct synthesis of ideas elaborated upon further in my MA thesis, which focused on the Morrell Print Collection, its potential in the YAG, and the various problems that displaying prints pose to public art institutions. My dissertation was also too limited to comprehensively detail the entire collection, and as such I included an appendix which detailed all of my research into each individual print with the intention that it be used as a basis for further research into the collection. This table of information may be found at the end of my thesis so that the reader may have a more accurate concept of the Print Collection as a whole, not least its breath of subject matter, scale, creators, nationalities, and printing techniques.

First and foremost, I was tasked with researching the Dutch and Flemish prints within the Morrell Collection. The Collection itself, donated in 1954 by Morrell, is 206 prints strong and while the Dutch and Flemish type makes up the majority of this number it is by no means the entirety. In fact, the Collection is made up of a conglomeration of well-known creators including but not limited to: Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Van Leyden, Jacob van Ruisdael, Jan van der Velde, and Wenceslaus Hollar. With prints, the issue of maker/creator is innately more complicated than in other medias such as paintings, in which the creator and designer are typically the same person. However, more complicated printing processes such as etching and engraving consist of a multi-stage creation process which often need specialised training to execute. This issue is only further complicated by the reproducible nature and purposes of prints, which means that in some cases the original artist of the image might actually have no involvement at all with the production of the print. As much is true for Nicolaes Berghem's *Donkeys and Sheep by a Lake*. While the prints might be attributed to Berghem according to the YAG collections database, further research shows that the print was *after* Berghem, but in fact physically created (etched) by Jean Duplessis-Bertaux and published by Pierre François Basan in 1781, almost a century after Berghem's death in 1683. This encouraged me to question the prevailing scholarly emphasis on the artist that in the past has bordered on hero-worship, and whether it is entirely representative to sort and label prints according to artist/designer in cases such as the aforementioned. In terms of display and encouraging the public to understand and access prints more easily – something which I am extremely keen on encouraging – this issue becomes ever more urgent. After all, what do visitors come to

the YAG to see, beyond merely 'artworks'? Do they come to see an object for its skill of execution, to be examined as close as is safe and to gaze at, open-mouthed, as they wonder 'how did they *do* that?' Or do they wish to bask in the beauty of the image, the line and form, light and shade, that teams together to form something exquisite? And can we afford to pigeon-hole the gallery visitor in such a way? Although there is no simple answer to these questions, and certainly no way to do everything at once, the questions themselves encourage a richer understanding of both viewer experience and prints as an art form created from the most important technological advancement of the modern world.

Aside from the conceptual considerations that prolonged contact with the Morrell Collection encouraged (detailed in more thoroughly in my thesis), one of the most important results of my research was the correction or addition of relatively basic information about each print to the YAG database. The information on the collections database, while useful, was by no means complete – sometimes the only information present was the surname of the artist, a descriptive title and the unhelpful identification of the creation technique as 'print'. Therefore, much of my time was spent attempting to discern rough production dates (complicated by reasons already touched upon), techniques, and states. For this I am grateful for the assistance of Dr. Jeanne Nuechterlein, whose trained eye often supplied an idea of state when mine failed. As a result, I have been able to add further information to the collections database and, more urgently, correct some mistakes and misattributions. This should aid in any further research on the collection as well as form a stable foundation of information when and if the prints are exhibited further in the future.

My contact with the collection allowed me to get a sense of J. B. Morrell as a collector, a facet of his personality that is generally skipped over in most biographical sources. I would by no means term Morrell a 'Collector' in the way that is generally discussed in art historical publications, which frame the Collector one near deranged by their obsession, compulsively consuming the objects of their passion with heady disregard for much else. Morrell's collecting might be more accurately termed a pleasant hobby that, when he became increasingly focused on other matters, was generously donated to the YAG by Morrell himself. This act of generosity is unsurprising since Morrell was on the board of the York Conservation Trust for many years, thus he would be aware of the asset his collection would be to the YAG. Therefore, the collection is not only a wonderfully rich mass of prints from some of the most prestigious makers of their time, but an intimate reflection on a man who shaped the York we know today.

Almost all of the prints in the Morrell Collection are suitable for display subject to some light conservation, mostly to remove the prints from the card backing which they arrived at the Gallery glued onto. Several of the prints feature in the current *Making of a Masterpiece: Bouts and Beyond* exhibition (October 11, 2019 - January 26, 2020); these prints have received conservation and are testament of the benefits that even light conservation could have on the collection, both aesthetically and to protect the prints from damage. Due to my knowledge of the collection, I was involved in the

selection process for which prints will be on display in the *Bouts* exhibition. Being involved with the exhibition has been a highly enriching experience, not only in helping with the print selection but being involved in discussions and meetings about the exhibition. This has given me a unique insight into what it takes to create an exhibition which features artworks from both the YAG's own collection and from other institutions from across the U.K. A particularly interesting meeting was with James Caverhill, a conservator, who took the time to explain to me the powers and limitations of print conservation, the balance between aesthetic and protective considerations, and the ethical responsibility of the conservator vis-a-vis altering artworks. Such learning experiences will be fundamental to my understanding of curation and artwork care.

Beyond the few prints being included in the *Bouts* exhibition, it seems logistically unlikely that the prints will be on display unless the case for a temporary prints exhibition is put forwards. This is partly due to the nature of works on paper, which are so sensitive to light degradation that permanent display is impossible, and logistical issues at the YAG. As part of the research for my thesis I travelled to London to see how several public art institutions displayed their works on paper while also protecting them as best as possible. The most practical solution that seemed most applicable to the YAG would be placing the prints in draws, as done in the Victoria and Albert Museum (although notably not in their Prints and Drawings Gallery, which is used more as a temporary exhibition space and as such was somewhat unimpressive). In this way the prints are protected from unnecessary light exposure, do not require a lot of space in the Gallery, and are positioned in such a way as to encourage detailed contemplation at the viewer's leisure. The addition of magnifying glasses would also be an excellent resource. Although the YAG does employ this type of display already, I have found that the grey cabinets are very easy to miss when circulating the gallery – therefore, if the cabinets are used for print display then they must draw greater attention to themselves more in order to be effective. A very simple method would be to simply signpost the cabinets, inviting visitors to open the draws. It would also be important for non-reflective museum glass be used, especially if the draws were placed in the Burton Gallery where the skylights would cause distracting reflections (this is already an issue in the cabinets used there). However, even with such measures in place to limit light exposure to the prints they would still need to be regularly rotated and closely monitored, meaning that perhaps this might not be possible in the YAG at the current time. In the meantime, small showcases might perhaps be run by volunteers or speakers offering a limited audience the opportunity to closely examine a small selection of prints – this would be an excellent activity for size-controlled groups.

Overall, my experience at the YAG has been enriching and intellectually challenging. My research into the prints collection truly scratches the surface of Morrell, his role as a collector, and the prints themselves. They have immense art historical significance, and thus potential, and I hope that the *Bouts* exhibition is not the last time this potential is tapped into. The most urgent issue would be that of conservation. I would highly recommend the prints collection be addressed by a conservator as some works are at risk of permanent damage from the glue backing. One only need to look at

the Morrell prints on display in Madsen 3 of the *Bouts* exhibition to see what benefits might be reaped from some relatively simple, inexpensive conservation. If not addressed, the glue could seep through onto the printed surfaces further and cause permanent damage – a particularly acute loss since otherwise many of the prints are fine enough impressions to be of value. Beyond my research, the fellowship has given me the opportunity to learn about the inner mechanisms of a Gallery and what considerations go into making an exhibition, to shadow different members of the YAG staff and learn by proximity. I am grateful that the YAG staff have always been unerringly supportive in both my MA studies, my research into the Morrell collection, and offering me the chance to broaden my gallery experience. Both the YAG and the FoYAG have been welcoming and delighted to offer me any assistance I might need. I have particularly enjoyed the talks given to the Friends, which allowed me to discuss my ongoing research and converse with interested, informed individuals. Therefore, I thank the YAG and the FoYAG for their unwavering support and interest in my research, and I invite the reader to peruse my thesis, which details my research with the Morrell Collection, its future in the YAG, and Morrell as a collector in full.