

The MA student funded in part by the Friends reflects on her work at the Gallery

PROVENANCE RESEARCH: PREPARING FOR AN EXHIBITION

The Evelyn Collection is an important collection of topographical prints, drawings, watercolours, and other materials assembled by Dr William Arthur Evelyn, a medical practitioner who arrived in York in 1891 and became Treasurer and then Secretary of the Yorkshire Architectural and York Archaeological Society (YAYAS), in which roles he became a major benefactor of the City. Here Genevieve Stegner-Freitag, holder of this year's MA studentship at the University of York, which the Friends sponsor and support financially, writes about her work on some of the prints in the collection as she prepares for an exhibition once the Gallery re-opens.

Before joining York Art Gallery as the FYAG-funded MA Student, I worked in collections management roles for six years at various museums and galleries, including the Smithsonian Institute's Natural History and Hirshhorn Museums. Each of my jobs involved various duties, but provenance research was the great connector. My project at YAG, on prints of York held in the Evelyn Collection, is no different. On museum collections databases, Adlib at YAG, there are a few lines of text describing each work. This might not seem much, but it is a standard format for

museum catalogues. Such information is known to anyone working in a museum or familiar with museum practice: an artist (if identified); the title of the work; its medium and dimensions; sometimes a short ekphrastic passage; and provenance information. But, as in any museum, sometimes not every artwork has the full catalogue information, often owing to past transfers from handwritten to electronic cataloguing.

When I began my work on the prints in the Evelyn Collection (made between 1790 and 1820), I noticed a pattern with the data-entries: the provenance records were lacking. This discovery left many questions about these works and how to interpret them unanswered. Since this discovery in October, I have taken two different directions in my efforts to build the provenance records: to find explicit information, or to research contextualising details on prints produced in England during this time-span. Finding written records of individual prints occurred on occasion; in the YAG archives, notes and communications speak to the history of some prints or artists found in the Evelyn Collection. Using my inchoate palaeography skills, I discovered the histories of some prints from the time when they entered the gallery collection in 1931. On other occasions I found information on the reverse of the prints: old accession numbers and

short annotations or comments (such as an artists' name from a previous attribution). These snippets of information served as clues leading to more sources of information. For instance, sometimes the artist's name, while spelt correctly in Adlib, was misspelt on the back of a print, which on occasion led to separate artist folders in the YAG Archives.

More often than not, however, I could not find any records for a particular print. This usually occurred when there was no identified artist or publisher on the work itself or in the archives. Indeed the (attributed) titles of many of the prints did not help determine any provenance, as many titles are merely descriptive of their subject (York) rather than specific titles, which would be easier to find in various sources. This problem led me to undertake research about prints produced in England at this time, on picturesque and topographical genres as well as on print artists working in Northern England during the period. The lack of specific provenance records, however, also allowed me to engage more with the details of the works themselves: what motifs were featured, how the medium directed the way I read the work, and so forth.

Provenance-research and other relevant knowledge from my job background helped me with my project on the Evelyn Collection: to build an exhibition about prints of York between 1790 and 1820. Exploring provenance contributed to the framework of my exhibition, with two research pathways: to represent these prints as both fossils of a time past (aided by specific provenance records) and, paradoxically, also as living objects that influence the contemporary viewer.

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