

## **A user's guide to researching portraits in the Gallery's Collection**

### **Historical background**

At their first meeting on 9 February 1857, the Gallery's Trustees presented three rules for the creation of a public collection without precedent. The first was 'to look to the celebrity of the person represented rather than to the merit of the artist'; the third was that no gift be accepted unless approved of by at least three-quarters of the Trustees.

It was the second or 'Ten Year' rule that did most to shape the collection in its first century. It stated that 'no portrait of any person still living, or deceased less than 10 years', with the exception of the reigning monarch and her/his consort, should be accepted without the approval of every Trustee. Occasionally portraits of the recently deceased did enter the Primary [or main] Collection, but in reality this rule proved a brake on the acquisition process.

This changed in 1969. During the directorship of Sir Roy Strong the Trustees redrafted the founding rules. The Ten Year rule was not abolished but relaxed; it now stated: 'In exceptional circumstances the Trustees may consider the admission of portraits of persons of eminence, whether living, or deceased within the previous ten years'. This cleared the way to acquiring and commissioning portraits of personalities in their prime; the updated rule also encouraged more nuanced responses to issues of sitter eligibility. See <https://www.npg.org.uk/research/archive/archive-journeys/digital-60s-digitising-a-decade-of-defining-history-at-the-national-portrait-gallery/the-10-year-rule>.

At the same time, Strong addressed the issue of photographs in the Primary Collection. Remarkably, and as late as 1972, there was but one photographic item in the main collection. Strong advocated the transfer of select photographs from the Reference Collection to the Primary Collection. He initiated the purchase of historical and contemporary photographs and the commissioning of portraits and film.

In 1968, a portrait of Handel was the first Primary Collection work acquired by public appeal, and from the 1970s, the Gallery developed a more proactive style of fundraising for the Primary Collection, approaching institutions (e.g. Art Fund), foundations and private benefactors. Another initiative was the establishment in 2006 of the Portrait Fund to help acquire items of an exceptional nature.

### **How Portraits enter the Collection**

Portraits are donated, offered for sale, bequeathed, purchased and very occasionally accepted on long-term loan. Acquisition is a process of checks and balances, beginning with research by the relevant period curator into the worth of the particular subject/portrait on offer, and assessment of his/her portraiture within and outside the collection; an Offer File is opened. The item under consideration is then discussed at a curatorial meeting. If provisionally approved, and the object not too large or fragile, it is brought in for inspection by the curators and conservators. If this test is also passed the portrait, with the curator's advocacy, goes before the Trustees who must approve all acquisitions to the Primary Collection.

Once acquired the item is registered and given an accession number. Prefixes to the accession numbers indicate whether the item has been accepted for the Primary or the Reference collections.

### *The Primary Collection*

Objects in this part of the Collection are historically significant, often valuable but not necessarily – an amateur sketch or rare snapshot of, say, a famous recluse might make it into the Primary Collection. Generally, the portraits must be of biographical/historical or artistic importance and be taken from life; they are often unique or irreplaceable pieces and include paintings, drawings and miniatures; they may also be serial items such as sculptures, prints and photographs. The Primary Collection contains more than 11,000 portraits. Of these about 4,000 are paintings, sculptures and miniatures and almost 7,000 light-sensitive works on paper.

Example of a Primary Collection accession number: **NPG 1**: William Shakespeare, oil on canvas

### *The Reference Collection*

The Reference Collection is much larger than the Primary Collection and – taken with the Photographs Collection - forms the bedrock of the Gallery's research facilities. It holds material such as sketches and drawing books, but principally a vast collection of prints (portraits, caricatures, newsprint cuttings) loose and in albums, and associated reproductive material; altogether over 80,000 works. Whilst many of the items might not be intrinsically valuable, cumulatively they form an unrivalled resource for portrait or artist research, with digital images of these portraits constantly added online.

Example of a Reference Collection accession number: **NPG D1**: Sir Thomas More and his Family, pen and ink drawing

### *The Photographs Collection*

The Photographs collection consists of more than 250,000 original photographic images. This includes a Primary Collection of photographs, and a fast growing collection of non-Primary photographic material. The latter is a unique accumulation of original portrait photographs and glass and celluloid negatives, from earliest years of the process to the present; it also includes stock from photographic studios of all periods, albums, copy prints, etc.

Example of a Primary Collection photograph accession number: **NPG P1**: Frederick William Robertson (C.19 clergyman), daguerreotype

Example of a non-Primary Collection photograph accession number: **NPG x1**: Edwin Austen Abbey, cabinet card. [items in non-Primary photographic albums bear the prefix **NPG Ax**]

### **Online Tools for Researching Portraits in the Collection**

If you are interested in researching portraits in the Gallery's own Collection, the best place to start is the website. Access the collections catalogue using the website's 'People & Portraits' feature. This allows users to search over 215,000 works, 150,000 of which are illustrated, from the 16th Century to the present day. Search for people and portraits using keywords such as names of artists or sitters, or by portrait number: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/advanced-search.php>

Advanced search options enable users to place further restrictions on a search for a person or portrait. To perform an advanced search visit <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/advanced-search.php>

Website catalogue entries will include much useful information about portraits in the Collections, such as acquisition number, name of sitter/artist, media, creation date, measurements, date of acquisition, its

location if on display, a digital image of the portrait if available, and may include links to additional information and media such as linked publications or related works.

Beyond the information available online via the 'People & Portraits' feature, the Gallery's Archive and Library holds a number of record sequences and publications which can be useful for researching Primary Collection portraits in depth. Descriptions of these are viewable online via the relevant collections catalogues.

Archive Catalogue: <http://archivecatalogue.npg.org.uk/CalmView/>

Library Catalogue: <https://librarycatalogue.npg.org.uk/N10317UK/OPAC/Index.aspx>

The next section of this guide includes details of key onsite resources that may be of particular interest to researchers hoping to find out more about portraits in the Primary Collection.

## **In the Archive**

### **NPG1 Signed Minutes of the Board of Trustees Meetings (1857 – ongoing)**

39 bound volumes

The Trustees oversee all Gallery business and determine policies for the whole organisation, including signing off Primary Collection purchases and commissions; the minutes of their quarterly meetings are among the Gallery's most valuable records.

See also **NPG2** for the Draft Minutes and Papers of the Board of Trustees Meetings (1857 – ongoing).

NB: For more recent acquisitions (2004 – ongoing) the Trustees' minutes can be viewed online:

[www.npg.org.uk/about/corporate/trustees-and-trustees-meetings](http://www.npg.org.uk/about/corporate/trustees-and-trustees-meetings).

### **NPG7/1/2 Managing the Collection (1857-1895)**

31 volumes, 26 files, 10 items

For 19<sup>th</sup> Century acquisitions, this record series includes records accumulated by the Gallery's first director Sir George Scharf, relating to the acquisition, cataloguing and care of portraits in the Collection between 1857 and 1895.

### **NPG47 Minutes of Curatorial Meetings (1973 – ongoing)**

4 boxes

Curatorial meetings are the forums at which staff discuss potential offers and acquisitions and the progress of commissioned works; the series holds minuted information on the meetings from 1973 to the present.

### **NPG46 Registered Packets**

c. 5,500 files

One of the Archive's key collections the Gallery's Registered Packets ('RP's) operate as 'object files': they document the history of a Primary Collection portrait within its context at the Gallery. Contents vary in scope but generally cover acquisition, conservation and exhibition histories, and may include records such as good title; copies of will; provenance; commissions contract; copyright agreement; details of cost or funding, including details of any grant aid, private or public donations received.

See **NPG60**, c. 500 files, for Registered Packets relating specifically to the Primary Collection of Photographs, established in 1972.

See **NPG55**, c. 100 files, for Registered Packets relating to portraits on long term loan to the Gallery.

### **NPG42 Accession Registers (1856 – ongoing)**

8 volumes

One of the Gallery's most significant record series, the Accession Registers provide a formal record of change of status, from offer to acceptance into the Primary Collection. There is a separate register for Primary Collection Photographs. Another separate register was required for the Contemporary Portraits Collection (CPC), contemporary works acquired between 1972 and 1993; see **NPG42/3**.

### **In the Public Study Room**

The Heinz Archive and Library's Public Study Room holds image files for both sitters and artists. Further resources to consult, assembled since earliest days (and covering portraits beyond the Collection) are found in the Library collections. These include biographical and art reference books and a set of published NPG Annual Reports dating from 1858 to the present. The Annual Reports include lists of donations and portraits acquired by the Gallery. There is also a comprehensive index of British portrait records ('slips'). The Library also holds more in-depth publications including period catalogues and guides to the Collection. Some of the Gallery's original documents and records may be viewed on microfilm in the Public Study Room.

For more information see: <https://www.npg.org.uk/research/archive>

### **Accessing the Archive & Library**

The Archive & Library's Public Study Room is open Tuesday to Thursday from 10:00 to 17:00 by appointment only. Researchers need to request in advance the archive material they would like to consult and there is a limit of five files or items being retrieved per visit. Appointments can be made by email ([archive@npg.org.uk](mailto:archive@npg.org.uk)) or telephone (020 7321 6617). Further information on using the public study room can be found here: <https://www.npg.org.uk/research/archive>

The Gallery's records are public records. Although they are generally available for public consultation, some information in them, such as personal data or information supplied to the Gallery in confidence, may be restricted under the terms of the General Data Protection Act 2018 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

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