All Change in the Print Room

From Bizada to Barcodes
Three turning points in the documentation of the prints collection.

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1930

BIZADA OR NOT?

An index to the prints and photographs was recorded on cards which were filed in pigeon holes. The index was subdivided into Scottish; English/Irish/American; foreign, and then into artists and engravers.

Prints were numbered by nationality of sitter (divided as above), then by period (century) and then with a sitter number and a sequential number. For example, the first portrait print of Robert Burns was given the number SP IV 29.1, where SP stood for Scottish Print, IV for the 18th century and 29 for Burns. Subsequent prints depicting Burns were given the suffixes 2 – 73.

Cursiter, clearly the perfectionist, pursued the development of an improved indexing system - a memo of the time commented that ‘The index… is incomplete, cumbrous and inefficient.’ Unlike our present devolved Governance, the then financial management of the Gallery in the 1930s was controlled remotely from the Treasury Department in London and any expenditure was required to be rubber-stamped by London Civil Servants. What ensued was a series of convoluted and protracted letters between the Board of Trustees and the Treasury in London resulting in increasing desperation on the part of the Portrait Gallery staff, who had decided that a Bizada system would best meet the needs of the reference section. This was a ‘visible indexing’ system similar to those used even today in hospitals, with strips along the edges of the index cards which are always visible and are used for identification such as a person’s name.

The "Bizada" VISIBLE CARD INDEX SYSTEM

Recognised as the most efficient method of keeping records which require to be consulted frequently.

ADMITTEDLY THE FASTEST INDEX IN THE WORLD
Its many features include: Security against lost records-New names and records inserted instantly -Will last a lifetime - Is British-made throughout-Will save its cost in a few months-Can be used on desk or wall -200 names visible at a glance-No fumbling through hidden cards-Safe, simple, economical and easily adaptable to any requirement-Security and speed, a combination rarely met with, go together in the "BIZADA" System.

IN IRELAND: J.W. Sestir, AND 68 DAME STREET, DUBLIN

Advertisement from a medical journal

The Treasury, however, were horrified at the expense involved in buying a Bizada system:

'The request of the National Galleries of Scotland for the Bizada indexing apparatus… has shocked our Office Machinery experts horribly… Visible Systems are
rarely if ever installed in the Public Service owing to their prohibitive cost and the enormous accommodation required to house them.’

The ‘experts’ suggested using a loose leaf binder system, which was meekly accepted after all by the Board of Trustees. This seems to have been an improvement on the existing index. During the 1930s Haswell Miller, at the time the Deputy Director of the National Galleries of Scotland, gave a talk which went into great detail about the ‘complete index system under weigh’ at that time. This was a sitter index which listed all works depicting each sitter under the headings of different types of work – paintings, sculpture, engraving etc. It seems obvious to us today that they needed a computer system to capture the complexity of their index, but it was to be nearly 60 years before computers were introduced into the National Galleries.

Subsequent decades saw an increase in the number of prints, drawings and photographs acquired by the SNPG and the expansion forced a rethink on the on the available storage for these works. In the early 1970s, the decision was taken to dismantle the wall display cases within the Print Room and introduce an increased number of wooden storage cabinets. This coincided with a programme of conservation of the drawings and photographs within the collection, the aim being to window mount the artworks in the highest quality Museum Board and to store in handmade Solander Boxes.

*High quality Solander Boxes containing conserved vintage photographs*

The consequence of conserving a large number of artworks and the introduction of capacious Solander Boxes was an inevitable rapid filling of all available cabinets within the Print Room, forcing the collection to be dispersed throughout the Gallery in many areas from the basement to the attic.
In 1990 a computerised documentation project was set up by the government to record all National Galleries of Scotland object data. The software in use at the time was QUIXIS, a text based system which looks out of date today but which was surprisingly flexible and enabled the recording of locations as well as basic object information.

The three incarnations of the collections database

There was initial resistance to the use of computers. The most effective weapons in the struggle to get the collections database accepted were:

- the maintenance of good standards of quality
- the cross-galleries coverage which helped people to see beyond their own collections
- the implementation of a location tracking system in 1993.

Some objects have moved up to 65 times since then, and the database itself has been upgraded twice.

The Portrait Gallery prints and photography collections were the last to be catalogued on computer, mainly because of the scale of the collections, which by this time had grown to around 50,000, but also because of their perceived lack of importance relative to paintings, sculptures and other unique works.

In 1996, part of the prints collection went online as part of the re-development of the NGS website. The site is far from being a ‘Virtual Print Room’, since the prints do not
National Galleries of Scotland

have their own special section of the site but are merged into the general collection area, although they can be retrieved in an advanced search.

From the documentation point of view the box numbering was over-complicated. It was based on the supposed contents of the boxes. For instance a box that was supposed to contain prints with numbers ranging from SP I 53.1 to SP I 65.4 was labelled with the range of print numbers. However the contents of the boxes had not been verified for some time. The system was further complicated by the fact that
prints which were re-classified as ‘large’ and moved into one the ‘large’ range of boxes, changed their numbering accordingly. So for instance Robert Burns’s sitter number in the standard size prints was SP IV 29, but in the large range it became SPL 16.

In 2009, the entire contents of the building were decanted following a successful Heritage Lottery bid to completely refurbish the SNPG. Temporary homes were found for thousands of paintings and sculpture within the city and the collection of works of art on paper were stored within a redundant art store within the National Gallery close by. Before moving, the entire collection of Solander boxes were temporarily re-numbered using a sequential system.

An extra task during this time was to conserve and catalogue 6,000 previously unaccessioned prints which had been stored in the Portrait Gallery attic.

In their temporary home a full audit was carried out. The documentation team found many instances of numbers being recorded incorrectly, prints being in the ‘wrong’ boxes, extra prints appearing which they hadn’t known about before, and missing prints which should have been there but weren’t. It was vital to establish accurate lists and locations before moving on to the next phase in collections management.
2011
THE ARRIVAL OF AN AUTOMATED RETRIEVAL SYSTEM

The redesigned Portrait Gallery will provide considerably more wall space for the display of the national collection; however no more space was given over to the storage of the works of art on paper. This presented us with a problem and it became clear that the only way was up! The ceiling of the Print Room is high: around 7 metres, which allowed us to consider the vertical options.

After much research and deliberation, an automated retrieval system manufactured by Kardex has been chosen. This innovative new storage system will accommodate the entire collection of prints, drawings and photographs for the first time in living memory. The system will have implications for the way the artworks are recorded and the way conservators and curators interact with the objects.

Three large Kardex vertical shuttle units are being installed in the area previously occupied by the Print Room. These are industrial scale vertical storage machines. The stored Solander Boxes are placed on trays in the units and a retrieval mechanism moves up and down a central column, fetching trays to order.

The operation of the vertical shuttle is controlled by a freestanding computer linked to the shuttle units. The software to be used is PowerPick 400, a proprietary system. Object and box data will be imported to PowerPick from the collections database in csv format, and held in the system. This means the control unit(s) will have access to a list of all the items in all the boxes.
Users will log into the Kardex system and request the item they want, which will then be retrieved mechanically and delivered to the user. An audit trail will be maintained in the system, and updates to locations will be exported from PowerPick in csv or xls format, either on demand or at regular intervals, depending on frequency of usage of the shuttles. These updates will then be fed by the Documentation team back into the location records in the main collections database, Mimsy XG.

BARCODES

Because it is essential to keep a tight control on the locations of all the works, the following procedures have been agreed:

- Every item that goes into the Kardex units must be identified and numbered and have a box location in the collections database
- A barcode for each object will be generated but it is unlikely the objects themselves will be barcoded
- A list of objects with their barcodes will be held either in each box or centrally.
- Barcodes will be scanned every time something is removed from the Kardex system or replaced in it.

The barcoded lists will be generated from the collections database and placed in the boxes once the full audit of the relevant collections is complete.

The boxes will also be labelled on top with box number, box title (preserving the previous box labelling system) and a box barcode. This label will be visible to anyone retrieving a tray of boxes from the Kardex unit. Having box barcodes available means that when the initial load of the Kardex units takes place, there is less chance of human error creeping into the process.

We are currently hovering with some anxiety on the brink of this new phase in collections management. We have planned as much as we can in advance: the cataloguing and conservation of the prints will be complete by the time we move the boxes into the new units; there will be diagrams showing the initial arrangement of the boxes within the trays; the boxes will be labelled with barcodes and we will know exactly where each individual object is.

In June of this year we will know whether our preparations have been adequate!