

20:20 Hindsight. Retrofitting research relevance to the University Art Collections at Trinity College, Dublin

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Abstract

This paper considers the role of university art collections as meaningful contributors to the achievement of institutional goals relating to excellence in research, teaching and outreach. The discussion takes as its focus The University of Dublin, Trinity College, established in 1592, providing undergraduate and postgraduate courses in a wide range of disciplines. As practical fine art courses are not part of the teaching agenda, the university's art collections have evolved mainly as a historical narrative of the significant figures and achievements of its parent institution, parallel to the core business of research and teaching. While the other academic collections at the university, from anatomy to zoology, were generated by object based learning, it was only from 1959 onwards that the art collections were actively developed and exploited as a catalyst for informal learning and interdisciplinary engagement, driven by the actions of one man in particular, the late George W. P. Dawson, genetics professor. 20:20 hindsight – or the clearer perception of the significance of events after they have occurred – has been used as a guiding principle for the present renaissance of the utility of the art collections. The author, as curator of the Art Collections, has taken inspiration from the actions of George Dawson to prepare to retrofit formal systems of meaningful associations between the art collections and research and teaching. In an era that requires clear correlations between demands on funding and fulfilling campus-wide strategic objectives, university art collections such as at Trinity College Dublin are becoming more formally integrated into academic programmes as the useful educational and interpretive tools that many have been on standby to be for centuries.

Introduction

According to James Hamilton, “ceremonial, commemorative, decorative, and didactic” (HAMILTON 1995) are the four most common roles performed by university collections. However, while strictly academic collections have developed mainly for didactic purposes boasting close links with related academic departments, often art collections held by older universities display no clear point of origin or development path beyond the commemoration of poignant figures connected with the institution's history, usually amassed in an ad hoc manner by the occasional addition of portraits and receipt of donations. The initial stimulus to collect has not been driven by research and teaching, however with the increasing appearance of departments for the history of art and architecture from the 1960s onwards, this pattern began to change. In those institutions without faculties dedicated to practical visual arts practice, art collections perform the ceremonial, commemorative, and decorative roles, but tend to lack meaningful links to the university's core business of research and teaching. So, should, and can, this ‘didactic’ function be retrospectively applied to existing centuries-old university art collections?

Many commentators have argued that appreciation or pleasure should be the fundamental purpose of university art collections to which other roles are added – including Herbert Read's 1931 lecture on *The place of art in a university* published in his book *Education through art* of 1943, the Great Britain Standing Commission 1968 report on the relationship between universities and museums, and Sue-Anne Wallace's article on university museums in Australia published in 2000. Hamilton believes, however, that it is the added didactic purpose that differentiates university collections from the public sector and remarks that both processes help collections to be relevant and cared for. He states that,

for curators, “there may only be an inch between the ‘decorative’ and the ‘didactic’, but it is in that inch that we all live” (HAMILTON 1995).

Case study: The University of Dublin, Trinity College



Fig. 1 - The Senior Common Room, Trinity College, Dublin © The Board of Trinity College, Dublin

This paper focuses on a particular type of long-established university possessing art collections almost as old as the institution itself. The field of interest is restricted to universities offering courses in a variety of disciplines but where fine art practice is not on the curriculum, apart from the study of its historical development. In the case of Trinity College Dublin, the university was established in 1592 and its art collections date back to portraits and pictures commissioned or painted not long afterwards. There is no tradition of teaching fine art practice; however, in

1966 the Department of the History of Art and Architecture was founded, inspired by the pioneering cultural interests of the professor of genetics of the time, George Dawson. Indeed, he was also the founder of the modern art collection in 1959 by way of introducing a campus picture hire scheme that generated the active collection of art for the college beyond portrait commissions and passive receipt of donations. He could be considered as the first curator of the art collections or, perhaps a better description is ‘creator, collector, and catalyst’ of art and artistic activities at Trinity College – a phrase used as the title of a recent symposium at Princeton University (TILGHMAN 2006). However, the formal post of curator of the College Art Collections was only established in 2007, three years after George’s death. This is the first time the care of the art collections had been centralised and professionalised, previously cared for in an honorary capacity by various distinguished members of the academic and administrative staff. Five years before the inauguration of the curatorship, the College Art Collections Advisory Group to the Provost was set up, representing many disciplinary interests, and with which the curator now works.

While there had never been any formal integration of the art collections into the core business of research and teaching, George Dawson pioneered the active engagement of the campus, both students and staff, and the country beyond it, with the excitements and challenges of the evolution of modern and contemporary art. Having helped to found the university’s Department of Genetics in 1958, and inspired by George’s own experience of hiring artworks in Clare College, Cambridge, as a student of botany, he set up a similar system at Trinity College, Dublin. In fact, with George at the helm, the art collections grew rapidly as did the interest in the scheme. At a national level, he was involved in staging major exhibitions of international art, such as the *Rosc* exhibitions, and was on the board of the Arts Council, the Graphic Studio, and the Douglas Hyde Gallery. Furthermore, he encouraged many emerging artists to continue on their creative path by inspiring exhibitions of their work in different locations around the city and encouraging the purchase of their works.

For Trinity’s art hire scheme, known locally as *The College Gallery*, he persuaded the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to purchase and lend twenty-four artworks as the main body of the lending collection, and they later funded an exhibition space in the new Berkeley Library designed by Paul

Koralek and ABK architects of London. The Trinity College Dublin Association and Trust, supported by contributions from alumni, donated the first IR£ 100 that bought 27 pictures, mostly reproductions, which were also hired out each term. George wrote that “this reflected the serious educational intention of the scheme. Students, by having to change pictures each term, frequently had to explain their choices to their friends” (DAWSON 1980). He wanted to inspire interest in, and debate about, contemporary art at a time when there were very few Irish art galleries promoting it, this was thirty years before the Irish Museum of Modern Art would be established in 1991. He believed that by having to make a list of preferred artworks from the scheme, this compelled students to “look at paintings carefully, to discriminate and so to train their own taste and judgment” (IRISH TIMES 1961). The hire fees were fed back into the purchase of more works. George bought many artworks himself and lent a good deal to the College Gallery scheme, most of which were bequeathed to the college after he passed away in 2004.

One might wonder why Dawson donated so much of his time, money and artworks to college. He was a man who was generous of spirit and with his knowledge, believing that by offering opportunities to participate in visual culture beyond the boundaries of academic life, students in particular might expand their points of reference, meet peers outside their own disciplines and participate in the development of visual arts practice in Ireland. One such student who rented a painting early on in the scheme is now a senior lecturer in law and curator of the Art Collections at Athlone Institute of Technology, having established the collection himself in 1975, catalysed by George Dawson’s democratic art hire scheme (Catherine Giltrap, unpubl. data). Another law graduate who had been heavily involved in the student ‘College Gallery’ committee early on has described George’s welcoming character, during informal discussions with the curator, and how the students were encouraged to be involved in all aspects of the collections including visits to art exhibitions and purchasing artworks. He spoke of buying art on behalf of George for the collections, and how he had inspired him to purchase a series of William Scott prints with his twenty-first birthday money, stirring a lifelong interest in art. This alumnus also recalled meeting Sir Roland Penrose in the Provost’s house with George – Penrose being a great friend and biographer of Picasso and an artist himself, the link for the Picasso exhibition staged at the university in the 1960s.



Fig. 2 - The Smurfit Institute of Genetics, Trinity College Dublin, featuring artworks by Arnaldo Pomodoro © The Board of Trinity College, Dublin

From 1959 until 1967, there was no physical ‘College Gallery’ per se at Trinity, yet George enrolled this cross disciplinary committee of students to administer the hire scheme, acquire artworks, and set up exhibitions both on and off campus under his guidance. Students trained to stage exhibitions, develop a critical eye, and profited from an environment which encouraged experimentation and interaction. From 1967 onward, the newly built Berkeley Library incorporating a temporary exhibition hall, lobbied for by Dawson among others, played host to ten years of noteworthy exhibitions including a retrospective of Henry Moore’s sculpture with the assistance of the Arts Council of Ireland, and a major show of Pablo Picasso’s work while the artist was still living, organised by George and the student committee. Ireland, let alone, the campus audience, had never been afforded such opportunities. This practice of university galleries functioning like a laboratory or a work in progress promotes the much guarded uni-

versity principles of academic freedom and experimentation. In many instances, experimental or challenging art exhibitions have been hosted at universities decades before they were staged in the public sector museums. Examples include the A. E. Gallatin Gallery of Living Art, pre-dating New York's Museum of Modern Art, and hosted by New York University between 1927 and 1943 at a time when public museums were not interested in showing "fresh and individual works" (KELM 2004) by contemporary artists. At present, The Frame Gallery at the Carnegie Mellon University of Pittsburgh provides a locus for student art exhibitions and is run by students as a kind of training zone. In Ireland it seems that during the 1960s, '70s and even the up until the '90s, the university context, was a more welcoming location for what were still very challenging statements for Irish art institutions. Articles published during the 1960s in The Irish Times daily newspaper note the national significance of Dawson's promotion of contemporary Irish art in particular and that, increasingly, it was to this university that those interested in viewing significant Irish and international contemporary art should come.

In fact, George was set on changing the availability and accessibility of contemporary international art in Ireland, and, indirectly, to inspire a whole new generation of Irish art by pushing for the establishment of The Douglas Hyde Gallery at the university in 1978 – a more formal collaboration between the university and the Arts Council of Ireland. Until the early-1980s this was the epitome of a college gallery, prioritising student involvement and training, creating a programme that spoke both to the campus audience and the wider community. The outcome was the validation of student projects and a programme that enabled interaction with life beyond the campus and vice versa, a two-way bridge where campus and community engaged (MILLER 2008). However, unsustainable funding and governance issues generated the need for the Arts Council of Ireland to fully manage the gallery with Board input from George and the university, resulting in a significant contemporary Irish and international exhibition programme without which Irish visual arts practice would be much the poorer. The campus is now the sole focus of display for the college art collections. What may be perceived as a difficulty, is a great challenge, stimulating new ways to integrate art into the formal and informal learning systems and physical environment of the university.

20:20 Hindsight

The title of this paper refers to 20:20 hindsight, the act of looking back and learning from historical events or debates with the benefit of time and experience. As the first full-time curator of the amalgamated university art collections, while preparing to formally align the art collections with the university's strategic goals 20:20 hindsight allows me to recognise the incredible vision of a man easily described as an 'uomo universale', a Renaissance man, who moved in academic, political and international circles, having also established charities to benefit the Third World. George helped to encourage interdisciplinarity at Trinity College long before the term became familiar. While he may not have created a formal programme to highlight the utility of the art collections on campus, he went beyond this by inspiring interest in those who had no previous knowledge or involvement with art and, what is more, no faculty pressure to be involved.

The utility of the university art collections in Dublin have not yet been realised in relation to existing academic courses. However, the first two years of the curatorial post have been a preparation phase, creating an infrastructure that will form a foundation embedded deep into the academic and physical make-up of the college, above which a sound but retrospectively applied formal programme will be established relating the art collections to the teaching and research practices of a wide range of disciplines. The "ceremonial, commemorative, [and] decorative" (HAMILTON 1995) functions of the art collections at Trinity College, Dublin have long been recognised, but in an era when every university

sector that requires funding must justify its existence, it is time to demonstrate clearly the utility of the university art collections to the core mission of Trinity College Dublin.

Many commentators have highlighted paths to improving the relevance of university collections to the whole campus audience, one is to separate out the governance of the collections from academic faculty in order not to compete with academic funding and faculty politics. Secondly, it is advised that the purpose and value of the collections as resources for research and teaching should be incorporated into the institution's strategic plan. At Trinity College, the curator post is based within the Office for the Secretary to the College, enabling a truly pan-campus approach and affording access to advice and support from senior management. In 2008, the Vice Provost and Chief Academic Officer set about re-drafting the university's strategic plan. With the benefit of 20:20 hindsight having taken on board the advice of Tirrell and Ladkin given in 2001 and 2008, as curator I realised the urgency of integrating the significance of the art collections as a valuable resource for education and outreach, and was given the opportunity for involvement. In order that the collections be represented at the most fundamental level, that is as part of the core business of research and teaching, I became a member of the Strategic Planning Group considering the university's 'mission, values and vision'. The artistic and academic collections now feature in Trinity College's strategic plan 2009–14, their significant potential mentioned directly for the first time in the university's history. Furthermore, at a more focused level, the planned objectives for the art collections now reflect directly the core concerns of the parent institution.

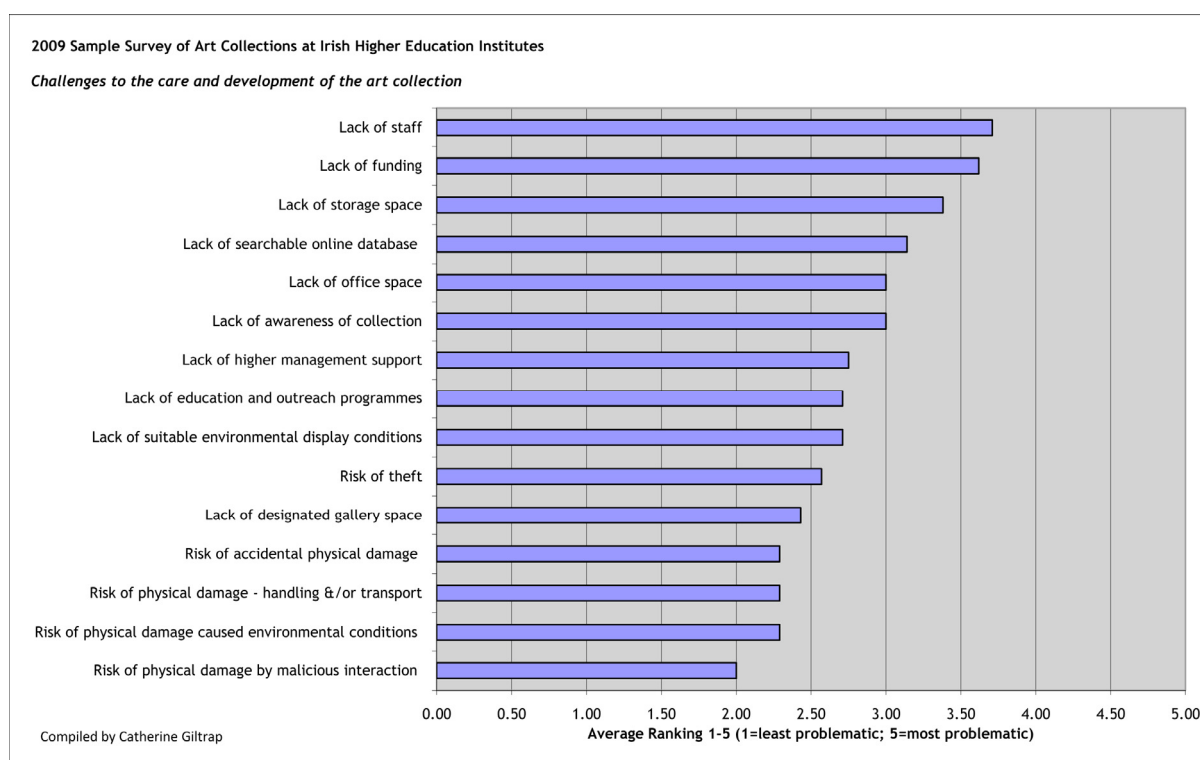


Fig. 3 - Challenges to the development of art collections at Irish Higher Education Institutes © Catherine Giltrap, 2009

During a recent piece of research into the role of university collections, I carried out a survey of eight university art collections in Ireland. The questions were based on previous studies by Kate Arnold-Forster (1993) and Melanie Kelly (1999), and the results revealed findings similar to the 1980s "triple crisis" referred to by Warhurst as "identity and purpose, recognition and resources" (WARHURST 1986). Lack of staff, funding, and space were identified as the main impediments to progress, and host

insitutions were perceived by curators to favour fundraising as a priority duty, while curators themselves ideally prioritised 'providing information', but in practice are afforded little time to conduct research to this end. As a practical step to improving the Irish situation, I have initiated discussions with experienced museum and heritage professionals in order to inaugurate an Irish equivalent of UMAC, which will initially focus solely on art collections but hopes eventually to promote the preservation and development of all Irish university collections.

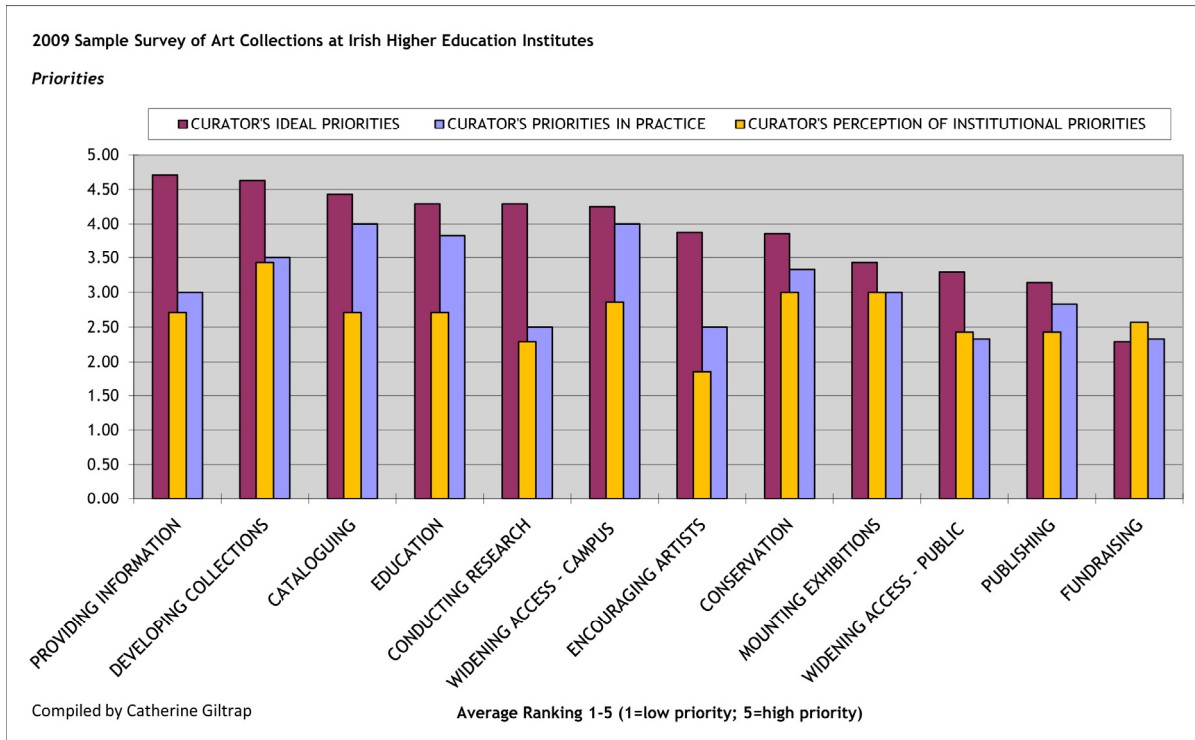


Fig. 4 - Priority issues relating to art collections at Irish Higher Education Institutes © Catherine Giltrap, 2009

Conclusion: Tangible progress

The academic year 2009 / 2010 is the fiftieth anniversary of the 'College Gallery' scheme at Trinity and offers an opportunity to formally commemorate the rich cultural contributions of the pioneering genetics professor, George William Percy Dawson and to demonstrate the potential of the university art collections. In 2008, Kati Heinämies wrote about the important human resources to which universities have access in terms of expertise, experience, and enthusiasm for learning. This breadth of experience and richness of abilities will be tapped into by inviting alumni, former and current staff, and students along with members of the general public to participate together to create celebratory exhibitions, a major publication, and related events, further strengthening the bond between formal academic programmes and community outreach. Following these anniversary events, the first programmes formally integrating the art collections as resources for research and teaching will roll out. In preparation for this increased access to the collections, the first online database is being compiled. Archival files are being centralised and catalogued, images are being digitised, and oral history about the collection and the artworks is slowly being recorded. Four summer internships funded by the Trinity College Dublin Trust and Association – the alumni generated fund that gave the first sum of money for acquisitions – have contributed to this program to enable the use of the art collections as educational and interpretive tools for academic program. Access has also been augmented physically, by increasing and rotating the artworks on display, and improvements are planned for the system of labelling and the provision of detailed artist biographies or sitter histories for

the portraits. The aim is to enhance the knowledge of those who study and work in locations where the artworks form part of the environment, to instill a connection with the artworks and the artists and the reason they were collected. Behind this is also a policy of preventive conservation, complementing that of access. By respecting the need for intellectual enquiry of a 15,000-strong campus and some 3,000 staff base, it is hoped that the college audience will in turn act locally to care for the collections displayed throughout a large campus forming the heart of Dublin, Ireland's capital city.

University art collections have the scope to reflect institutional values as well as the diverse character of academic communities. They can symbolise the university as patron, protector and collector of art, and can act as a didactic resource enhancing institutional prestige. Ideally, appreciation and scholarship should be brought together to generate creative programs and projects that may also produce new artworks, thereby expanding the collections. With the benefit of 20:20 hindsight, I look back to George Dawson – to emulate and build on his initiatives and enthusiasm, his involvement of a campus and a community beyond in experiencing and contributing to contemporary visual arts practice. Now, what had been informal, will be promoted as additional but complementary formal methods of engagement with the university art collections. Infrastructure is slowly being retrofitted both physically, virtually, and perceptually, and at the level of university governance and strategy to enable researchers and educators to employ the art collections as a gateway to higher education and a communicative interface – as the useful and inspirational educational and interpretive tools that they have been on standby to be for centuries.

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