

Emily Peppers  
Cultural Collections Audit Officer  
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## **A Hidden History: The University of Edinburgh's Cultural Collections Audit**

### **Introduction and Project Aims**

The University of Edinburgh is blessed with a number of formally curated collections, including the Fine Art Collection, the Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments, the Anatomy Museum, the Chemistry Museum and the Natural History Museum. Numerous other objects and collections exist across the University in meeting rooms, labs, and offices, but without an in-depth survey of these holdings, details of their scope, location, and condition were not known to the University. The need to assess the University of Edinburgh's cultural assets was identified by the University Museums and Galleries, and a Cultural Collections Audit project was recommended to the University Collections Advisory Committee. The Cultural Audit project began at the University of Edinburgh in 2004, with a remit of identifying hidden treasures in its non-formal 'distributed heritage collections' across the University.

The Audit was intended as an initial survey of locations, conditions, and basic connections to University history. The objects and collections recorded in the Audit range widely from fine art and furniture, to historical scientific and teaching equipment, photographs, architecture and commemorative items. Single objects were catalogued separately, while groups of objects over 10 items were done on a collection basis. This information was gathered in order to: create a central database of information, identify objects in vulnerable or dangerous situations, identify concerns held by stewards of these collections, identify items that require conservation, and for insurance purposes. It was not the intent to catalogue every last object in a collection, but rather to provide detailed information on the types and sizes of collections within the University.

The Audit remit included only objects and collections belonging to the University of Edinburgh. A small number of items were included in the Audit where the ownership was either known to be outside the University, unknown, or questionable. These items were included solely on the basis that their care was the responsibility of the University, and ownership or suspected ownership outside the University of Edinburgh was expressly documented in the database.

It was not the aim of the Audit to remove objects from the departments in which they reside, except in very exceptional circumstances. At present the University Collections Division does not have the resources to store cultural heritage items outwith formal University collections. In addition, the majority of the objects and collections surveyed by the Audit have a historical connection to the University, and are best understood within their academic context. This would be lost if they were removed from the surroundings of their discipline. This paper explores issues faced by the Audit, and gives examples of positive solutions that enable preservation while promoting pride in academic excellence and innovation.

## **Methodology**

From the outset, concerns focused on the difficulty in arranging visits with 200 busy members of staff within a relatively short period of 12 months. Initial contacts were made through the head of each College, School, and Department. Visits were normally arranged several weeks in advance, keeping the schedule of visits as flexible as possible. Contact emails were normally passed to an administrative member of staff or a colleague with an interest in departmental history. In several instances retired Professor Emeriti were the most knowledgeable on department collections, and were very willing to take time to discuss these items.

Information was entered into a database on a daily basis, which was in turn replicated to a University server. Images were taken as records for works of art, furniture, photographs, and visually intriguing objects. These are also kept on a University server, which enables the Audit webpage to be automatically updated with database information and images. Sensitive information regarding location of items has not been included on the webpage, such as location, contacts, or serious environmental or condition issues.

## **Response of University Colleagues**

The response of colleagues in all areas of the University has been overwhelmingly positive. Colleagues have gone out of their way to assist in the Audit, understanding that their knowledge contributes to the creation of a multifaceted and continually expanding record of innovation and achievement at the University of Edinburgh. The Audit has proved successful in raising awareness of collections and collections issues both within the University and with the national media, instilling a sense of pride among non-museums University staff who have tirelessly safeguarded these heritage collections despite ongoing pressure to downsize.

It was surmised that there might be some resistance to the Audit project, but very quickly it became clear that University staff were incredibly interested in the history of the University of Edinburgh, and understood how objects possess and can communicate this history. Many staff members have been conscientious in preserving objects and collections pertaining to the history of their discipline, and welcomed a project intent on safeguarding these items for future generations. Across the University staff are concerned with preservation of cultural and historic items in their departments, and many factors, often out of their control, weigh upon the continued care and preservation of these items.

### **Audit Findings**

- **1,100+ Objects**
  - Over 50%: Furniture and Fine Art (paintings, sculpture, and prints)
  - 10%: Photographs
  - 5%: Scientific instruments, commemorative objects
- **170+ Collections** ranging in size from 10 to 200,000 objects
  - Collections of 500-2,000 objects most common
  - 20-25%: Photography and archives
  - 10-15%: Scientific instruments, teaching equipment, medicine and anatomy, University history, slide collections

Most objects and collections are considered to be in 'fair' or 'good' condition, with less than 3% considered to be in 'poor' condition.

### **Issues Raised During the Audit Process**

The Audit highlighted a number of issues in the University's non-formal collections including environmental conditions, departmental relocations, object conditions, security, insurance, storage and long-term preservation. With the positive support and specialist knowledge of established contacts in every department of the University, the Audit worked to bring these collections issues to light by identifying vulnerable items and challenge areas, acting as a resource for information, and by celebrating the University's rich object history through an online website dedicated to the Audit.

### **Environment**

The quality of the storage environment is difficult to control, especially in shared buildings. Storage areas are often damp or dirty basement areas, or are exposed to extreme heat due to nearby heating pipes. Most staff are aware of these undesirable conditions, but do not have other options.

There are, however, many situations where objects or collections could easily be moved to improve the immediate environmental conditions. Examples of reversible detrimental situations include:

- Paintings hung directly above tea kettles or coffee machines
- Prints and early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs hung in areas with strong direct sunlight
- Objects placed too near high-traffic areas
- Objects stacked or stored haphazardly, with heavy items placed on top
- Micro-climates created by air-tight frames, over-zealous use of wrapping materials

### **Condition**

Most objects and collections viewed are in good/fair condition. The main concern of University staff regarding condition is the continued preservation of objects and collections without resources to do so. Condition concerns for poor/fair items include:

- Furniture is in varying states, often with surface damage to varnish or has structural damage
- Oxidation to metal objects
- Paintings in poor environmental conditions
- Audio / visual recordings (including wax cylinders) deteriorating, material acidic or moulding
- Poor storage conditions
- Archives, prints, and photographs are yellowing due to adhesives, mounts, matting, frames and other acidic materials

### **Security**

Security is an issue for a small number of departments, who have items of cultural or historic importance in common / accessible areas. Security concerns split objects into two categories: items that are currently on display or in areas of common access, and items which are not on display, due to a perceived or real security risk.

## **Insurance**

The information gathered by the Cultural Collections Audit has been used to inform general and specific insurance valuations. In addition, colleagues wanted to know what University insurance covers in relation to their collections.

## **Storage**

Lack of storage or poor storage is a major concern across the University. Space is limited for the storage of cultural and historic items, but most departments have managed to dedicate a secure separate storage space for their items. Storage areas might be considered to be anything from cardboard boxes, filing cabinet drawers, and top shelves, to storage cupboards, 'archive' rooms, and safes, as well as the rarer museum-quality environmentally-controlled storage rooms.

Major concerns regarding storage relate to other issues:

- Environmental instability – temperature, humidity fluctuations and burst pipes are the main culprits of deterioration and destruction
- Security issues
- Inappropriate storage methods – heavy items stacked haphazardly, or rapidly deteriorating materials used

## **Departmental Moves**

Approximately 80% of Schools, Departments, and Divisions visited during the course of the Audit were either in the process of moving, or had plans to move in the coming months and years. Many colleagues expressed concern over the uncertain future of their departmental collections.

## **Audit Webpage and Publicity**

A Cultural Audit webpage was considered an excellent opportunity to make the findings of the Audit accessible to the public, at every stage of the project. A central Audit page was created to welcome viewers and to invite them to view the growing Cultural Audit collection, in the form of the Object and Collection Record catalogues. The webpage has also served as a platform to inform University staff and the public about the Cultural Audit project itself – its purpose, methods, and future objectives. The webpage has served as a positive ambassador

for the Cultural Audit project. Since its creation, the Audit website has received over 30,000 hits by new and repeat visitors.

The Cultural Audit webpage was also intended as a showcase, highlighting and making accessible collections and objects within the University, which would otherwise be unknown to the greater University and public. It was hoped that the focus of the webpage, on physical items that attest to the University's traditions of academic excellence and innovation, would create a sense of pride and achievement in the University, which could foster and improve upon communication and cooperation between the Collections Division and the greater University of Edinburgh.

An 'Object of the Month' feature has been incredibly popular, showcasing objects and collections within the University which might otherwise be unknown to the greater University and public. Recent plans have expanded the Object of the Month to a virtual online exhibition, bringing objects and collections together in an accessible web format. The current exhibition is *From the Vaults*, featuring treasures and objects of curiosity from the University of Edinburgh's vault in Old College. The next exhibition planned for autumn 2007 is *Behind the Collections*, based on interviews with colleagues who work with dispersed University heritage collections.

## **Phase II**

The main objectives behind project work plans for Phase II were advocacy, positive action, and promotion. Phase II focused on turning the information gathered in Phase I into a resource to benefit University of Edinburgh Schools, Departments and Divisions, University Museums and Galleries, as well as increasing cultural resources for the public at large.

The decision to continue funding the Audit project for a second, third and now fourth year was evidence of the significance of the project to the University and enthusiasm with which it was received within the University community.

### ***Highlights from the Cultural Collections Audit***

A temporary exhibition, 'Highlights from the Cultural Collections Audit', opened on 24 February 2006 running for six weeks in the Main Library. The exhibition was held to introduce the Audit and communicate its aims, objectives and successes to a wider University and semi-public audience. Ten objects and collections were featured, including items from the

School of Literatures, Languages, and Cultures, the Institute of Atmospheric and Environmental Sciences, the Moray House School of Education, and the University Old College Vault. Placed in an area of the library dedicated to IT training, seminars, and meetings, visitors to the temporary exhibition included staff, students, and outside visitors to the library.

### **Handy Preservation Tips**

During Phase I colleagues identified a number of preservation concerns and questions. As a thank you for the warm welcomes and vital assistance on the Audit project, a friendly informal information guide was created to make basic preservation information accessible to colleagues across the University. The guide:

- Outlines basic preservation standards for items of different materials
- Gives Collections Support Team contacts for further information / support
- Advises on University protocol regarding object / collection disposal

The 'Handy Preservation tips' guide is currently a feature on the main Cultural Audit webpage, and has been included in the first phase of the Audit Records Sharing plan (see below).

### **Collections Guardians Recognition Scheme**

The Collections Guardians Recognition Scheme is a Collections-initiated programme focused on identifying, gratefully acknowledging and supporting University colleagues across the three Colleges and University Support Services who have gone out of their way to protect and preserve the University's unique heritage collections. The Scheme was launched at a Museums and Galleries Month event on 4 May, 2007, at which over 15 Collections Guardians were present. It was an excellent networking opportunity for academic and support staff to meet museums and collections-based colleagues, discuss their collections, and make professional connections.

The Scheme is currently being developed in consultation with the Guardians. As part of the scheme, the Guardians will be provided with in-depth advice from the Collections Support Team, a networking platform on which to voice concerns about the preservation of collections they represent, and tailored opportunities to receive special training on preservation and object handling, should they wish.

## **Audit Records Sharing**

An important part of Phase II has been to make relevant Audit information available to University colleagues and Departments, as well as outside organisations, where appropriate. Goals of Audit records sharing include:

- To provide University Departments, Schools and Support Services with records and images of items found under their responsibility
- To answer enquiries from University and outside sources
- To assist in Sotheby's insurance valuations
- To assist in the updating of University Fine Art Collection records

The most recent Records Sharing exercise has involved providing twelve different Departments, Schools, and Support Services in the University with detailed records and images from Phase I of the Audit, in order to provide them with the means for more organised management of their cultural items. The twelve were chosen for their relatively large holdings of cultural items, some numbering over one-hundred catalogued individual items. These University areas included:

- Accommodation
- Architecture
- Art History
- Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies
- English literature
- Management and Economics
- Music
- New College (School of Divinity)
- Old College
- School of Education
- School of Scottish Studies
- Social Anthropology

The information was distributed via CD in the form of an Excel file and jpeg files, and the 'Handy Preservation tips' guide was also included as a further resource. The next round of Records Sharing will include University Furniture (Estates and Buildings), Physics, Mathematics, Engineering, and the Law School, among others.



## Current and Future Challenges

There are a number of challenges and considerations that face the year-to-year maintenance of the Audit project. These can be divided into the following categories:

### Year-to-year maintenance of Audit project

- New items – New objects are coming to light each year as colleagues come across them in the far recesses of their offices or departmental storage areas. Gifts to the University occasionally need to be accessioned, and the existence of / information about these gifts need to be communicated to the Audit Officer
- Location information – Staying on top of departmental location changes, which affects location records in the Audit database
- Updating / developing Audit website – Online features to change on a regular basis, and reflect larger University or Collections agendas
- Maintaining correct contact information – Contacts in over 200 departments have, and will continue to change as jobs are changed, roles altered, staff retire, and departmental locations change

### Vulnerable object issues

Very little has been done to correct the situation of vulnerable items identified during Phase I of the Audit. While limited or singular objects have been uplifted, this has been on an emergency 'one-off' basis. There has not been a strategic decision made regarding vulnerable objects, primarily due to resource issues - a requirement for removal in many cases (involving need for transport, staff, funds) and a lack of Collections storage space.

The 'Handy Preservation tips' guide has been an attempt to offset some of the reversible vulnerable situations, through education and support for collections stewards, but it is yet unknown whether this document, made available online and sent out with the Records Sharing programme, has been used to any extent by University colleagues.

### Disaster Planning Issues

While the University Collections have focused a large amount of energy in recent years on disaster planning, it has been noted that no Audit objects or collections are included in the current Collections Disaster Response & Recovery Plan. Many items identified in the Audit are of significant cultural, historic, or financial value, and should be included in building salvage plans, and on salvage maps. A list of iconic items should be created, to cover all University campuses.

### Sustainability

The future of the Audit project, with a dedicated Audit Officer, remains uncertain from year-to-year, as extensions to the contract of the Audit Officer are agreed upon in 12-month durations. The current contract has been extended until December 2008. The Audit Officer will create a contingency plan in early 2008 to provide for the successful ongoing maintenance of the Audit, with or without project funding. Certain aspects of the Audit will take precedence over others in this planning, including servicing the newly created Collections Guardians Recognition Scheme and maintaining the database – which is only valuable and useful if the information it contains is kept up-to-date.

The most pressing and essential issues to consider will include:

- Updating object / collection locations and other relevant database information when appropriate
- Developing a system for contacting School Administrators to find out about departmental moves
- Maintaining / creating contacts within the University
- Continuing an outwards-facing web presence, which may require the most research and preparation time from the Collections Support Team if it is to be updated 3-4 times per year
- Providing continued support for Collections Guardians, expanding upon scheme
- Answering enquiries
- New accessions from gifts to the University

For further information, please visit the Cultural Audit website,

<http://tweed.lib.ed.ac.uk/audit/Web/UCA.html>, or email Emily Peppers at

[e.peppers@ed.ac.uk](mailto:e.peppers@ed.ac.uk).