In the Archives

**Back to the classroom: the Central Saint Martins Museum & Study   
Collection and Central Lettering Record (CLR)**

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The particular focus of this archive essay is a collection known as The Central Lettering Record (CLR), which forms part of the Central Saint Martins Museum & Study Collection. Distinct in both remit and through its current location within the Graphic Communication Design teaching programme, the CLR does though follow in a tradition of teaching collections at the college, which is worth contextualizing by way of introduction.

Central Saint Martins (a constituent college of the University of the Arts London) was formed in 1989 through the amalgamation of St Martins School of Art (founded 1856) and The Central School of Arts & Crafts (founded 1896) and its Museum collections reflect the very different ‘personalities’ of the two schools.

In 1896 the Technical Education Board of the London County Council gave W R Lethaby the task of building up a collection of ‘teaching examples’ for use by students of their art schools. From a graphic design perspective this early collection is important in that it contains manuscripts, incunabula and early printed books. Lethaby was the founding Principal of the Central, and when its new building on Southampton Row was completed in 1908, the collection moved there.

The Central Lettering Record very much follows on in this very ‘Central School’ tradition of collecting materials for the enhancement of teaching and learning. The CLR was originated by then tutor Nicholas Biddulph in 1963 with two main aims – to broaden understanding of letters as forms, and to better delineate the practice of lettering from that of typography. At that time the UK was still firmly under the aesthetic spell of one very particular articulation of the Roman capital letterform, the Trajan Roman, which had come to dominate debate and practice. The CLR was Biddulph’s counterpoint, through the collecting of images, ‘to show the quality and variety of the Roman achievement.’ 1 A set of photographs by typographic writer and historian James Mosley from a recent trip to Rome was the start, with a parallel set of images also housed at the University of Reading.

The revival in lettering and calligraphy so inspired by Edward Johnston’s classes at the Central School had by the 1950s and early 1960s begun to give way to the concerns of the Continental modern movement in typography. However, as former CLR Research Fellow Eric Kindel sets out, there were others, ‘For whom lettering and calligraphy remained an equally relevant foundation for teaching’ and who, ‘harboured concerns that in the trend towards typographic dominance in the art schools, lettering and its traditions would be dissipated and forgotten.’ 2

In 1965 the letterer and historian Nicolete Gray (1911–97) was invited to bring her very individual teaching sensibilities to the Central School and along with them came an expanded agenda for the scope of the CLR. Similarly frustrated by the sterility of Trajan monoculture in lettering practice and the aesthetic high-mindedness, which too often endorsed it, her contribution to diversification in terms of useful models for study came through an enthusiasm for the vernacular. Having written about vernacular letterforms in the context of public lettering and architectural practice for the Architectural Review since the 1950s she was keen to document lettering on buildings and especially that under threat of demolition). Her interest in the vernacular also extended to the typographic with work towards the 1976 re-publishing of her seminal 1938 book *Nineteenth Century Ornamented types and title-pages* in 1976 adding a significant amount of material from the much over-looked trade catalogues to the CLR. Gray’s other significant contribution to the CLR came through her consideration of lettering as art. She advocated the expressive potential in letterforms both historical and contemporary, recognizing and championing the unorthodoxy of work from practitioners such as Ralph Beyer, who as a German émigré engaged on a significant commission for Coventry Cathedral was, at first, far from warmly received. 3

In terms of its goals the CLR was certainly ambitious. Education was key, a primary objective being, ‘to provide students in the Graphic Design Department, and those interested from any other department in the School, with material for study and inspiration, and the staff with visual teaching aids.’ 4 More particularly, Biddulph and Gray were keen to promote scholarly engagement with the field of lettering, to improve standards and accessibility in research. Of particular concern within this ‘context of art education’ was ‘bringing scholarly standards to a non-academic situation, presenting accurate information in an accessible form.’ 5 In addition to their qualitative concerns, they saw the potential in the CLR as a research space able to engage scholars across the traditionally delimited academic disciplines where the epigrapher, the paleographer, the art historian and the numismatist might collectively participate in the generation and dissemination of knowledge concerning letterforms. As such it was originally intended that the CLR should eventually gain recognition as a resource and collection of national status and autonomy. 6

The educational concerns of the CLR extended though beyond the academy, the collections, intended as much, or more, for the working designer as for the scholar. The agenda here was one of reinvigoration, as former Research Assistant Leonora Pearse makes clear,

‘We live in an age of experiment in technology and materials, but this potential is, in the field of letter design, rather neglected. We lack standards and often turn to inferior models, thoughtlessly reproducing letters of the past in situations for which they were not intended. We tend to suffer from brash revivals, but an informed study of the past can provide inspiration for the present. There is a multiplicity of forms open to the contemporary designer, both to stimulate his imagination and to provide aesthetic standards for his own work. The CLR aims to broaden this vocabulary of letter design.’ 7

**Now**

The CLR has since expanded from the original set of photographs to include actual examples including type specimens, books and reference materials, material to illustrate different type technologies such as hot-metal matrix cases and tools, actual lettering samples and signs. Material from the London Transport Museum is on permanent loan to us in order to better represent the achievements of Edward Johnston, who drew the original London Transport alphabet in 1916 and whose ﬁrst teaching position was at The Central School from 1899. The CLR has also benefitted from generous if unusual gifts. Type designers such as Miles Newlyn and Jeremy Tankard, alumni of the graphics programmes have given developmental drawings and materials. Unable herself to take receipt of the full-scale reproduction of a UK motorway sign made for the Communicate exhibition at the Barbican (2004–5) the designer Margaret Calvert contacted the CLR. The sign is now on permanent display in communal areas of the Central Saint Martins site along with many other examples of fascia lettering and boards that have been collected. 8 A rare lettering commission by designer and writer Peter Burnhill, who taught typography at the influential Staffordshire College was donated by Timothy Donaldson. Though perhaps the most significant recent addition to the collections has been the gifting by the lettering historian Alan Bartram (1932–2013), who donated his own extensive public lettering image collections.

The majority of the material is housed within the Graphic Communication studios at CSM, allowing for easy access so we can continue to teach as Lethaby intended with actual examples. Lethaby’s own teaching materials are also now the focus of design projects within the current curriculum with artefacts brought up to the studios from the main college Museum allowing students the benefit of direct engagement with the manuscripts, incunabula and other communication materials collected.

The CLR continues to be a focus for research. Conceived as a photographic collection and organized but with no catalogue, the collections have provided a focus for a digital archival research. An AHRC-funded research project *Creative uses of interface design in typographic research* (1994–98) itself generated a publication project *Typeform dialogues* (1995–2001) traces of which still exist online though the final outcome was never realized owing in large part to the eclipse of CD-Rom technology. 9

Smaller research projects have arguably faired more successfully. In 2000, tutor Phil Baines was funded to document the public lettering projects of two Catalan sculptors Joan Brossa and Subirachs in Barcelona with the visual records now kept in the CLR.10 And in 2003, the designer Robin Fior used the CLR photographs of Lisbon lettering from the 1960s as a starting point for a research project to promote the preservation of extant examples in the city. Copies of the visual outcomes of the project are held in the CLR. 11

The outward facing vision of the original CLR is clearly then still in place with the collections continuing to offer a resource for practitioners outside of formal education. Lettering designers and type designers alike have visited in search of quite particular letterform inspiration with the recent celebratory exhibition, Lettering: objects, examples, practice (2014), curated by Phil Baines and the college’s Museum & Study Collection, opening access of the collections to still new practice audiences.

**Future**

Yet, the benefits of such access bring complications. The rationale informing the original remit of the collections still holds. While the image-plundering capabilities of the Internet offer designers a daily diet of visual ‘inspiration’ there remains an acute lack of awareness of the breadth of lettering achievement in context. A collection such as the CLR offers that overview – the opportunity to make visual connections across materials, locations and times. A distinction between the practices of typography and lettering is perhaps less understood now than then. The academic studies of epigraphy, paleographer, art history and numismatics operate as silos of knowledge as much as they ever did. The documentation of overlooked vernacular forms under threat within the field of public lettering is certainly as valuable as it ever was. Further an emphasis on materiality in teaching and learning within contemporary communication design contexts seems vital as educational agendas shift towards an emphasis on design thinking and process over outcomes and workmanship.

However, the challenge within modern HE contexts is how to maintain access to such a resource, both physical and digital. The obvious constraint is financial though the more frustrating one is time, with increased demand on tutor time in teaching and learning delivery, allowing for less and less support for the CLR.

Strategic use here is key. Demonstrating the way that the collections improve the quality of visual communication, as well as enhancing the discussions about visual communication enhances the case for maintaining access to the CLR and fulfilling the remarkably prescient thinking of its initiators.

**Notes**

1) Biddulph, ‘The Central Lettering Record’, 7

2) Kindel, ‘The Central Lettering Record’, 21

3) Gray, ‘Lettering in Coventry Cathedral’, 33–41

4) Nicholas Biddulph et al.‘The Central Lettering Record’, folded-handout, n.d.

5) Pearse, ‘The Central Lettering Record’, 13

6) It should be noted that originally this national collection was to be built up in collaboration with the University of Reading.

7) Pearse, ‘The Central Lettering Record’, 14

8) Baines and Dixon, ‘Letters of reference’, 50–3.

9) Kindel, *Typeform dialogues*, 3–48

10) Baines, ‘Sculptured letters and public poetry’, 38–49

11) Baines and Dixon, ‘Letter rich Lisbon’, 52–61

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**Image captions**

1. James Mosley, The Forum, Rome. Photographed *c*.1965

2. The Central School of Arts & Crafts had a strong tradition of using ‘teaching examples’ in the curriculum. The CLR is used together with the College’s Museum and Study Collection for that same purpose today.

3. Punched newscaster control strip for a multi-light text sign, the fore-runner of today’s LED displays.

4. A selection of Alan Bartram’s photographs from both the UK and Europe.

5. The idea to record examples of vernacular lettering in danger of demolition was picked up in a project in collaboration with the Museu da Cidade in Lisbon in 2003. The sites of Nicolete Gray’s photographs of lettering in the city from the 1960s were revisited to highlight the precariousness of its lettering riches.

**Notes on Contributors**

Dr Catherine Dixon is a designer, writer and teacher. As a writer she has a particular interest in type design and the forms of letters more generally, co-authoring with Phil Baines the book ‘Signs: lettering in the environment’. She is a Senior Lecturer on the Graphic Communication Design Programme at Central Saint Martins in London. From 2011 to 2102 she was a Visiting Professor at the University of São Paulo in Brazil.

Professor Phil Baines is a graphic designer whose work has included identity & branding, publication design, type & lettering design. As an author his books have included ‘Signs: lettering in the environment’ with Catherine Dixon, and ‘Penguin by design: a cover story 1935–2005’. He also teaches at Central Saint Martins on the Graphic Communication Design programme.