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## The Long and Winding Road (to Recovery): status of Glasgow School of Art's archives, museum and library special collections since the 2014 fire

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### Abstract:

*In May 2014 a fire severely damaged areas of Glasgow School of Art's Mackintosh Building. The School's archive, museum and historical library holdings were housed in this building and were also badly affected by this event.*

*The weeks immediately after the fire saw an intensive period of rescue and stabilisation work for these collections. This was followed by an opportunity to review the status of this material, the functionality of disaster preparedness activities, and to consider how best to undertake a longer-term recovery project. As well as looking at conservation requirements, all areas of collection work were reviewed including acquisitions; cataloguing and digitisation work; packaging and labelling procedures; and user engagement. This was with a view to ensuring the future usability and resilience of these collections and indeed enhancing these attributes.*

*This paper will provide an overview of the impact of the fire on GSA's collections. It will explain how the initial recovery of materials from the building has informed the School's longer-term recovery plans, providing examples of lessons learnt and actions undertaken so far. It will also discuss the current status of collections and visitor services two years on from this event, and it will explain what recovery activities are planned for the next 3 years.*

**Keywords:** Glasgow School of Art, disaster recovery, archives, museums, libraries

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### Background

The Glasgow School of Art (GSA) is a higher educational institution with an incredibly rich heritage. It was established in 1845 as the 'Glasgow Government School of Design' and by the late 1890s, had developed an international reputation for the quality of its students' work, participating in international exhibitions such as those held in Paris (1889) and Venice (1895), and regularly appearing in publications such as *The Studio*.

Between 1897 and 1909, GSA's first purpose built premises, designed by renowned Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, were constructed. This building, now called 'The Mackintosh Building' or 'The Mack' remains at the heart of the GSA campus. At the time of the fire in 2014, the Mackintosh Building was a Grade A listed structure and a major tourist attraction, hailed as Mackintosh's 'Masterwork'. It housed both studio and office spaces, and was also home to the School's historical archives, museum and library collections.

Since its beginnings GSA has continually evolved. Today, the School still teaches art, design and architectural courses although approaches to these disciplines have inevitably changed over time. In recent decades GSA has enjoyed renewed international interest due to the success of alumni such as Steven Campbell (1953-2007), Christine Borland (1965-), Douglas Gordon (1966-), and Jenny Saville (1970-). However, the institution's late-Victorian heritage remains a key factor in why it is cherished by its local community and visited by tourists from across the globe.

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the impact of a major fire which occurred on 23 May 2014 in the School's Mackintosh Building, and which affected its structure and interiors, as well as the archive, museum and library collections housed within. It will commence by providing an overview of these holdings, where they were located within the building and how they were affected by the path of the fire.

The paper will then go on to describe the initial salvage operation and to explore how, on reflection, these activities have enhanced staff's understanding of their working practices and informed longer-term recovery plans to conserve, rebuild and further develop the work of the archives, museum and library services. The paper will conclude by giving an overview of the current status of this recovery work.

## **The Collections**

As noted above, a large part of GSA's historical collections were housed in The Mackintosh Building. The Mackintosh Library was located at the western end of its first floor corridor. Its carved wooden interior housed some 10,000 volumes, approximately a third of which were of historical interest and 16% of which had been identified as unique and therefore of national importance.<sup>1</sup> These historical library collections included art nouveau periodicals such as *Jugend*, *Dekorative Kunst* and *The Studio*; 19<sup>th</sup>-century illustrated books by GSA-related artists such as Jessie M King (1875-1949) and Frederick Cayley Robinson (1862-1927); and a number of instructional manuals or reference texts relating to the School's early curriculum such as *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones. The School's Main Library, containing the lending stock and student computing facilities, is located in a separate building and was therefore unaffected by the fire.

The Mackintosh Building was also home to the School's Archives and Collections Centre: a reading room where researchers could access GSA's museum and archive collections, plus four storage areas for these materials. The reading room and one store were located in the basement of the western half of 'the Mack', two further stores were in the western sub-basement, and the final store was located above the Mackintosh Library.

The Archives and Collections (A&C) holdings comprised c2000 boxes of archive material. This was largely documentation relating to the history of the institution such as Governors minute books, student registers, annual reports, prospectuses, photographs and correspondence files. However, the archives also included a number of collections relating to former staff and students, providing examples of their work such as notebooks, architectural drawings, and textiles samples. The Centre also oversaw some 2500 artworks and museum objects, these ranged from oil paintings and works on paper to textiles (c400 pieces), furniture, ceramics and metalwork and included about 300 items relating to Charles Rennie Mackintosh, (giving the School one of the largest collections of his work in the world). The collections also included c200 plaster casts, (copies of ancient and medieval sculptures which had been acquired for teaching purposes). These casts ranged from full-size figures to smaller architectural fragments and were housed throughout the corridors of the Mackintosh Building.

A note should be made here as to how this material is managed. The Learning Resources department at GSA oversees the Library, Archives and Collections and Learning Technology services. At the time of the fire, two Academic Liaison Librarians managed the historical library collections, while a core team of three staff (Archivist, Curator and Archives & Collections Assistant) worked with the archives and collections alongside one full-time and one part-time project staff. The overall Learning Resources department comprised 23 core staff.

## **The Fire**

The fire started in the western basement of the Mackintosh Building in a studio adjacent to the A&C reading room at about 12.30 on 23 May 2014. Preparations for the final year students' degree show were underway and the fire was caused by gas from an aerosol of self-expanding foam creating an electrical spark when it came into contact with the electrical internals of a projector. The alarm was raised, the building evacuated and the fire brigade were quickly onsite. Thankfully no-one was injured as a result of the fire, however, despite a rapid response from the fire brigade, the fire unfortunately managed to spread rapidly from the basement of the building to the top floors. Although staff were unaware of its exact route, it was clear from the exterior of the building that the Mackintosh Library was alight and the western half of the building was suffering badly. It has since been discovered that the fire travelled through air vents in the walls of the Mackintosh Building that had been part of its original hot-air heating system. This meant that it was able to travel between floors rapidly and unexpectedly.<sup>ii</sup>

Due to the severity of this incident, staff expected a significant period of time to pass before they would be allowed back into the building. However, some staff were able to gain access the following day and salvage operations commenced a few hours later. These operations continued for an intensive two-week period in which any surviving material which could be removed from the building was removed, initial triage was undertaken, and materials were prepared for transit to off-site storage.

As expected, the Mackintosh Library had been severely damaged by the fire. The carved wooden interior of the library, its bookcases and furniture, as well as its collections, had almost all been destroyed. The floor was covered with approximately one metre of debris (from the collapsing balcony and bookcases), and it was clear that there was very little material that could be salvaged from this space. This was also the case for the A&C store

which was directly above the Library. This store had housed the majority of the School's oil paintings, a large proportion of its Mackintosh furniture collection, and a number of smaller objects, including ceramic and metalwork pieces. Some of these smaller objects had survived and were removed from the space along with any fire-damaged fragments that could be found.

Although the path of the fire hadn't travelled through any of the other collections' spaces, the A&C reading room and one of the sub-basement stores, (holding mainly textiles and paper-based materials), were both badly affected by water ingress. The two remaining stores which housed a large number of plan chests and the bulk of the archival collections thankfully remained undamaged by fire or water, as did the eastern half of the building. Staff therefore initially concentrated on removing wet materials and assessing if they should be air-dried or sent for freezing, before removing dry materials which although undamaged, were vulnerable due to high humidity levels. The final areas of the collections staff worked with were the larger plaster casts and furniture items located around the building. These items had not been damaged by the fire but again were vulnerable due to deteriorating environmental conditions. The furniture was moved to offsite storage, however, many of the plaster casts were too large and fragile to easily remove from the building and so were simply relocated from areas close to the fire damage to the unaffected eastern half of the building.

### **Initial Salvage**

The ability of archive, library and museum staff to undertake this work was hugely supported by staff from other GSA departments and by professionals from across the heritage sector who offered their time and expertise. Learning Resources staff had formed strong working relationships with many of these individuals and organisations over time through joint projects and interests. However, there were other key reasons that allowed the team to tap into these networks. For example, as the Mackintosh Building was Grade A listed, Historic Scotland (now Historic Environment Scotland) were onsite to advise almost immediately after the event. They ultimately provided a huge amount of assistance with removing and recording fire damaged fragments and an invaluable amount of manpower in evacuating boxed archives and plan chests from the building.

Museums Galleries Scotland were also very supportive, locating textile and object conservators that could assist with the triage and drying work and providing advice and funds to support longer-term recovery plans. The A&C were also part of a local disaster planning group, the Glasgow Area Disaster Planning Network. This meant conservators from the National Records of Scotland were onsite within the first few days of recovery, bringing with them equipment and supplies such as fans and blotting paper, and archive staff from other organisations were also easy to contact and available to lend support. The School also had a priority subscription with Harwell Document Restoration Services who provided crating and freezing facilities plus conservation assessments for damaged materials. Commercial companies which staff had worked with previously such as Constantines Fine Art Removers and Conservation by Design conservation suppliers also supported the salvage effort by providing services (art removals and off-site storage, and conservation supplies respectively) at short notice.

In order to undertake the salvage work, the GSA campus was closed for a week. The School's Reid Building opposite the Mackintosh was used to dry damp paper and textiles. The textiles in particular required a large amount of floor space and the open plan design of this building

proved very useful in this respect. Dry materials were moved to a council-owned building called McLellan Galleries, one block to the east of the Mackintosh. This former gallery again provided large open rooms for sorting, stacking and labelling archive boxes and plan chest drawers before their removal to off-site storage. The cordoned-off campus area and the McLellan Galleries were each manned by security staff and individuals needed to show identity before entering. Only GSA and Historic Scotland staff worked inside the Mackintosh Building itself, taking daily advice from the fire brigade as to which areas could be accessed safely.

During this period, library staff were also able to identify materials had been lost, and to prioritise which items needed to be replaced. This resulted in a 'wish list' being produced and published online (promoted via social media networks), with an overwhelmingly positive response.<sup>iii</sup> About 30% of the books on this list have since been gifted to GSA and donations continue to be sent. Organisations such as the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland and the National Library of Scotland have donated large numbers of periodicals and rare books respectively, while organisations such as the Friends of the National Libraries have granted money so certain publications can be purchased.

## **Lessons Learnt**

As well as demonstrating the importance of strong networks, the salvage activities outlined above highlighted a number of other important factors that aided or detracted from the success of the operation.

The importance of public engagement and the role of social media in particular was evident from the outset. Once news of the fire had broken, the Learning Resources' twitter account was inundated with messages of support and offers of help. This was quite overwhelming for staff who had to deal with an evolving situation on the ground while also keeping in contact with the wider world. To address this, a member of the Library team was charged with monitoring social media accounts, collating offers of support, and keeping the public up-to-date. The need to respond to social media was stressful but it was also very rewarding, and as already noted, resulted in support and donations that have greatly aided the recovery.

Since the initial salvage work, Learning Resources staff have been conscious of the need to keep the public informed of how the recovery work is progressing. Two years on, a lot of planning and preparation work has been undertaken but there is still much to be done (the Mackintosh Building will re-open in 2019 and the recovery plans for the heritage collections also run until this date). The team have therefore continued to use blogs, Facebook and Twitter accounts to engage and inform users and have also started to use Instagram in order to showcase the collections to more people. In 2014, the A&C launched its first online catalogue, and this has allowed staff to more easily respond to enquiries and disseminate information about collections during a period in which visitor services were disrupted. Staff have also spent time writing papers and delivering talks to others who are interested in learning about GSA's experiences. This in some ways has allowed staff to give something back to the networks and individuals who supported the initial recovery.

The salvage work also emphasised the importance of having well-documented collections. All of the books in the Mackintosh Library were catalogued, with records including location information. This meant that a list of what had been lost was easy to generate for insurance purposes, and it also allowed the Library's 'wish list' to be created at an early stage of the

recovery work when offers of help were particularly strong. The two areas of the A&C's holdings that had suffered losses from the fire, the oil paintings and the Mackintosh Furniture collections, had also been catalogued, and in addition to this, digital photographs existed for all of the oil paintings and a significant number of the furniture items. In contrast, a number of museum items and archive collections were not catalogued or photographed at the time of the fire and this meant identifying them during the triage process and labelling them for transportation was difficult.

The recovery process was also complicated by the fact that some catalogued items had become separated from their reference numbers due to the fact that these numbers were attached to packaging rather than to the items themselves. This packaging had served its purpose by preventing water damage to items, however in the process it had been damaged so badly it needed to be thrown away. Despite efforts to keep reference numbers next to items which were laid out to air dry there were inevitably some cases in which pieces became separated from their reference numbers. All items were recorded before being sent off-site and those without reference numbers were simply described e.g. metal bust, ceramic rabbit etc. This, along with the lack of catalogue information for some items, has since resulted in a lot of additional work, matching documentation to collections.

These experiences have of course informed current working processes and future plans. The A&C service have recently reviewed and updated their acquisitions processes with a view to completing initial documentation (transfer of title form, locations and insurance information, and the creation of an online skeleton catalogue record) and packaging in a more timely and efficient manner. The team are also investigating different methods for attaching references directly to objects as part of their conservation and repackaging work. At the moment, the team are still working through a backlog of material that had acquisition problems prior to the fire in order to resolve these issues. However, new acquisitions are now dealt with much more quickly than was the case using our pre-fire processes.

This documentation backlog has prevented the A&C from actively seeking to rebuild its collections as yet. However, prior to the fire, staff had already undertaken a collections review to identify gaps in the museum holdings. This has since been updated and collection priorities identified. These have in part been informed by fire losses but have also been influenced by current user demands and in-house research interests and teaching activities. As the majority of the A&C's holdings which were destroyed in the fire were unique, the service is unable to replace like for like. The current aim is therefore to build a comprehensive collection, appropriate for GSA's current needs. The next step in this process, to identify potential donations through gift and targeted purchases, forms part of the A&C's longer term recovery plans once conservation, documentation and digitisation work, and plans for the service's return to the Mackintosh Building are further underway.

Library staff have also reviewed their collecting and documentation activities since the fire. As this event sadly resulted in the total destruction of material held in the Mackintosh Library, it has allowed staff to start from scratch and to think about how best the collections can be rebuilt in order to reflect the organisation's history and also to support its current activities and future direction. The Library team are also considering how to catalogue the new donations they have received. Prior to the fire the books held in the Mackintosh Library were catalogued using UDC (Universal Decimal Classification) while the lending collections were catalogued using Dewey Decimal Classification. Staff are considering either extending Dewey to these new donations or looking for a more bespoke system that reflects the

historical collections held in the Mack and which may help users to more easily browse and locate this material.

## Next Steps

The initial two weeks after the fire were probably the most stressful period for all staff concerned. However the recovery work has continued in many different ways since that point. Below are details of some of the main activities that have taken place over the last two years.

During the summer of 2014, A&C staff spent a large amount of time collating the records of everything that had been moved off campus and updating locations information. Staff also contacted all known donors to update them on the status of their collections. The Library team updated their catalogue and GSA entries in union catalogues including SUNCAT, SALSER and ESTC. They also spent time checking for online versions of lost material that users could be directed to via the Library catalogue; the Library's 'Foundation Collection' has now been almost completely virtually recreated through digital sources.<sup>iv</sup> Donations from the Library's 'wish-list' were also received and their initial processing undertaken. As the Main Library had not been affected by the fire, the Library team also needed to prepare for the next academic year and so were required to undertake recovery work while still maintaining and aiming to enhance their regular activities.

In November 2014, the School appointed a team of archaeologists (Kirkdale Archaeology working with AOC Archaeology Group Ltd.) to excavate the debris in the Mackintosh Library. Learning Resources staff worked closely with this team to help to identify which items should be kept (e.g. fragments of light fittings and furniture) and which items could be disposed of (e.g. only the best samples of certain materials such as window glass were retained). 81 library books were discovered as part of this exercise and these were sent for freezing with Harwell Document Restoration Services. These books (and the A&C items which had been sent for freezing) were reviewed in June 2015 and 12 books were selected for retention. This decision was based mainly on economic reasons as for most books it would be less expensive to replace them than to pay for conservation. One item *Sights and Scenes in Fair Japan* remained remarkably untouched by the fire, due to the fact that it had been stored in a box, in a cupboard, which had been largely protected from the blaze due to debris that had fallen on top of it.

In March 2015, three new project staff were appointed to assist with recovery activities. A one-year Assistant Librarian post was created to support the Academic Liaison Librarians' core work, allowing them to devote more time to recovery work. A Project Lead and a Collections Development Officer were also appointed for three years to manage the A&C recovery project and to develop in-house collections work (for example cataloguing and digitisation activities) respectively. It has since been recognised that the length of these posts may not be sufficient for the project's needs and they are under review.

Between March and November 2015 staff costed recovery activities such as conservation, documentation and digitisation work, collection development work, and public engagement activities in order to develop project and budget proposals for sign-off by the School. An initial tranche of money was agreed in June 2016 and a project timetable and phased budget are now in development.

In May 2015 a volunteer scheme was established, partly in response to enquiries about how individuals could support the recovery project and partly from a wish to involve the public in the recovery work. This scheme is now fully operational with 11 volunteers having taken part. Volunteers are usually asked to work for one day per week over a 12-week period in the first instance. However, some volunteers have stayed for over a year. Others have gone on to undertake paid work in the heritage and/or creative sectors.

In October 2015, the A&C service moved into new accommodation. Between May 2014 and this time, the team had been based in a room in the Main Library. This was far from ideal as it lacked storage space and reduced the quiet study space available for students. However, it had provided the team with a base to work from which enabled staff to continue with key projects, including the completion of the A&C's online catalogue. Identifying suitable longer-term accommodation proved to be quite challenging as the requirements for secure, load bearing storage areas alongside public facing office space, ideally within close proximity to the GSA main campus (in the city centre) was a difficult combination to achieve. Moving into this accommodation was also a time consuming process, from ordering furniture and equipment to actually moving and organising the collections. A full visitor service opened in January 2016, four months after the move and 20 months after the fire.

In 2016 the School settled its insurance claims. All of the heritage collections had been insured. Museum objects and the most valuable library books had each been given individual insurance values: if one of these items was lost, GSA could claim that value from the insurer, if an item was damaged, the School could claim up to its value to cover conservation work. The archives were insured to cover conservation work and the remaining library books were covered as part of the School's general building insurance. Staff met with the insurers the week after the fire. However, the insurance claim wasn't settled until 2016. This was because a lot of work was needed to assess damaged material and to provide quotes and explanations for the insurers to support a claim.

Alongside the work of the Library and A&C teams, the School has appointed staff to oversee the restoration of the Mackintosh Building. During the summer of 2014, work was undertaken to make the building safe, followed in the autumn by salvage work such as the Library excavation noted above. In spring 2015 Page\Park were appointed as architects for the project and recently Kier Construction Ltd were appointed as the project's main contractor. The first phase of the restoration work (2016-17) will focus on rebuilding the roof and west gable of the building before moving onto the interiors in phase two. During summer 2016, the A&C team worked with the Restoration team to stabilise and box any plaster casts which remained in the Mackintosh Building so that these will be protected for the duration of the building works. The restoration of the Mackintosh Library is planned for 2018, with the building re-opening in 2019. Learning Resources staff have been working with the Restoration Team and the project's Design Team on plans for the Library and for the A&C's spaces. A huge amount of research has taken place into the layout and the materials used for the original Mackintosh Library. This has heavily used GSA's archives so that the Library can be returned to its former design, including its bespoke light fitting, for which many of the fragments identified in the excavation work will be used. In general, the aim is to return the damaged areas of the building to their original status while also addressing modern requirements for IT and other services.



## **The Current Situation / Conclusion**

Two years on from the fire Learning Resources staff have achieved the following objectives:

- Stabilisation and documentation of materials affected by the fire.
- Provision of detailed information to the School, allowing for the insurance claim in respect of the collections to be settled.
- Re-location and re-opening of the A&C in new facilities.
- Costing of recovery activities such as conservation, documentation and digitisation work, collection development work, and public engagement activities.
- The development of a project plan and budget based around the above work.
- Provision of information to the Restoration and Design Teams to aid the rebuilding of damaged areas in the Mackintosh Building and the planning of collections spaces.

The conciseness of the above list belies the huge amount of work related to each bullet point. Staff optimism and enthusiasm, despite the stressful and tiring nature of this difficult period have pulled the team through, although at times these qualities have perhaps led to unrealistic goals and therefore frustration that activities haven't moved forward as quickly as hoped. The time that the above activities have taken illustrates the attention to detail that this work necessitates. Taking the time to do these activities properly has provided a solid foundation from which the recovery project's activities can move forward.

The conservation, documentation and digitisation work, collection development work, and public engagement activities that will take place over the next three years aim to make GSA's historical collections more accessible and relevant than they were pre the 2014 fire. By 2019 the new working practices staff members have developed in relation to acquisitions and documentation, working with volunteers, engaging with the public, and digitising and disseminating content, should be fully embedded, leading to a more robust Library and A&C service which will have the ability to be flexible in the face of changing demands, (both those envisioned and those that may happen unexpectedly!). In many ways the Mackintosh Building fire was a devastating event. However, it has provided GSA with a unique opportunity to revisit and reimagine its heritage collections.

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<sup>i</sup> The collection was benchmarked against COPAC holdings (<http://copac.jisc.ac.uk/>) as part of a Preservation Assessment Survey in 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> An informative video illustrating the progression of the fire and how it was ultimately extinguished has been created by the Scottish Fire and Rescue service, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8bjOmqIlds>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://gsalibrarytreasures.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/wants-list-updated-14-april-2016.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://capitadiscovery.co.uk/gsa/items?query=author%3A%28Glasgow+School+of+Art.+Library+%3A+Foundation+Collections%29&target=catalogue>