A Referent Collection in Context: The Reference Collection of Ramsay Traquair’s Ornament and Decoration Courses as classified in the 1926 Blackader Library Catalogue

Historical Background

The 1926 Catalogue: Structure and Purposes

Historical Background

The arts and craft movement and the teaching of architecture at McGill

Ramsay Traquair believed that beauty could only be found in craftsmanship, and that all arts (major and minor) were equally important. During his studies in Edinburgh, Traquair also became involved in a network of architects and artists that shaped the Scottish Arts and Craft movement, which subsequently became very influential in Canada.

Indeed, Stewart Henri Capper (1889-1925) and Percy Erskine Nobbs (1875-1924), the two predecessors of Traquair at the head of McGill School of Architecture built its curriculum based on the movement premises. Traquair naturally followed the theoretical footsteps of his colleagues when he became director in 1913.

Professor Traquair’s involvement in the development and classification of the Blackader Library

The Blackader Library was founded in 1917, under Traquair’s tenure. During the 1920s, Professor Traquair and his colleague Professor Carless worked in conjunction with the McGill Library staff to prepare the Blackader Library classification. The result of their work was published in 1922 and in a revised and enlarged version in 1926 under the title Catalogue of Books on Art and Architecture in McGill University Library and the Gordon Home Blackader Library of Architecture.

In his preface of the catalogue, University Librarian G.R. Lomer writes that Traquair and Carless arranged the contents of the books under general headings [...] with the need of their students in minds.

The 1926 catalogue: structure and purposes

From the overall analysis of the reference collection, we can first infer that Ramsay Traquair’s Ornament and Decoration courses were mostly based on the study European decorative arts.

Second, we can also infer that Traquair aimed to instill into the students’ minds a certain definition of aesthetics. Indeed, clear links can be drawn between the catalogue’s classification and the students’ curriculum. It acts as a proxy of his own epistemological structure of the field of art and architecture. Therefore, they were forming a coherent reference frame for the educational curriculum process.

The Referent Collection: Nature and Significance

It is obviously a library catalogue as it gave a complete list of the Blackader Library books. However, the catalogue was also a pedagogical guide which purpose was to help student browse into the library resources. Indeed, both the curriculum and the catalogue’s structure were based on Ramsay Traquair’s vision of the field of art and architecture. Therefore, they were forming a coherent reference frame for the educational curriculum process.

Reference List


Murray, I. (1987). “Clarence Nobbs (1875-1924), the two predecessors of Traquair at the head of the Blackader Library books. However, the catalogue was also a pedagogical guide which purpose was to help student browse into the library resources. Indeed, both the curriculum and the catalogue’s structure were based on Ramsay Traquair’s vision of the field of art and architecture. Therefore, they were forming a coherent reference frame for the educational curriculum process.

Index

- The overall structure of the catalogue is unique as it was tailor-made by Traquair to match the School of Architecture’s curriculum. It acts as a proxy of his own epistemological vision of the fields of arts and architecture. In this classification, major and minor arts are considered at the same level, all the crafts (such as Furniture and Woodwork and Plaster Work) being identified by the same kind of classification heading as the major arts (painting, sculpture and architecture).

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- Finally, we can infer that Traquair aimed to develop an understanding of major and minor arts from an historical perspective. Professor John Bland wrote to that end: “Like everything else Traquair believed art grows from the past and expression depends upon a general familiarity with accumulated experience. Thus tradition must become part of an artist’s material” (Bland, 1987, p.6).

- McNally writes that Traquair and Carless prepared the “arrangement of such elements. Thus tradition must become part of an artist’s material” (Bland, 1987, p.8).