

A REFERENCE COLLECTION IN CONTEXT:

THE REFERENCE COLLECTION OF RAMSAY TRAQUAIR'S ORNAMENT AND DECORATION COURSES AS CLASSIFIED IN THE 1926 BLACKADER LIBRARY CATALOGUE

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the structure of knowledge of a reference collection supporting the four Ornament and Decoration courses that were taught at McGill University's School of Architecture by Professor Ramsay Traquair (1874-1952) in the 1920s. The collection is considered as a reflection of Traquair's epistemological vision of the field of art and architecture.

The research project was conducted under the supervision of Professor Peter McNally and Liaison Librarian Jennifer Garland as part of two consecutive GLIS 689 Selected Topics courses.

OBJECTIVES

- Analysing the structure of knowledge embedded in the 1926 catalogue's classification.
- Defining the "nature and significance" of the reference collection (McNally, Brown and Savard, 2007).

METHODS

- The reference collection was identified by matching each of Ornament and Decoration courses with the corresponding headings found in the 1926 catalogue. The four courses were entitled: Decorative Heraldry, Ornament in Form, Metal Work and Colour Decoration.
- The associations are based on the information found in the courses' description provided in the *1925-1926 McGill Calendar*. Similar titles and common wordings were considered as clear links between the curriculum and the library classification.

9, 10, 11 and 12. ORNAMENT AND DECORATION (48 lectures and 48 drafting periods extending through two years).

9. DECORATIVE HERALDRY. The place of heraldry in the arts; the laws of heraldry, heraldic art of different periods; modern practice and tendencies; symbolism and significant ornament.—Prof. Traquair.

Text-book:—Decorative Heraldry, Eve. *Reference:*—The Art of Heraldry, Fox Davies.

10. ORNAMENT IN FORM. The design of plaster work, terra cotta, stone carving, architectural sculpture, wood carving and furniture is dealt with as the evolution of form in distinctive materials, influenced incidentally by the prevailing taste of different periods.—Prof. Traquair.

Reference Books:—Plastering, Plain and Decorative, Millar; The Art of the Plasterer, Bankart; Medieval Figure Sculpture in England, Prior.

11. METAL WORK. The design of wrought and cast iron, bronze, copper, brass, pewter, silver, gold and jewellery is dealt with historically and as the result of the methods of workmanship.—Prof. Traquair.

Reference Books:—English and Scottish Wrought Iron Work, Murphy; Ironwork, Starkie Gardner; Leadwork, Lethaby.

12. COLOR DECORATION. Stained glass, mosaic of various kinds, inlays, the use of colored materials in external and internal design, mural decoration, and the analysis and construction of pattern.—Prof. Traquair.

Reference Books:—Vitruvius, Merson; Windows, Day.

Courses 9 and 10 and 11 and 12 will be taken in alternate years.

FIG. 1 Ornament and Decoration courses' descriptions as presented in the *1925-1926 McGill Calendar* (McGill University, 1925, p.237-238).

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 artist that shaped the Scottish Arts and Craft movement, which subsequently became very influential in Canada.

Indeed, Stewart Henbest Capper (1859-1925) 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 prepared the «arrangement of the books under general headings [...] with the need of their students in mind».

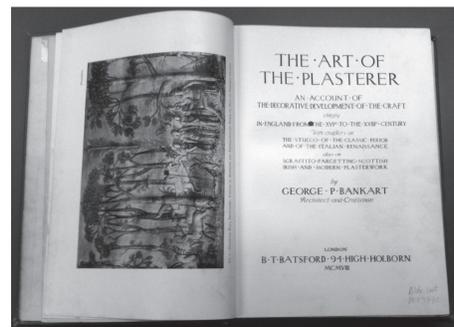


FIG. 2 *The art of the plasterers; an account of the decorative development of the craft* par G.P. Bankart, published in London by B.T. Batsford in 1908 (Blackader-Lauterman Collection of Art and Architecture, McGill University).

THE 1926 CATALOGUE: STRUCTURE AND PURPOSES

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).

The 1926 catalogue otherwise served two major purposes. It was 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 architectural education process.

THE REFERENCE COLLECTION: NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE

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 instil into the students' minds a certain definition of aesthetics. Indeed, the concept of "decoration" is often associated to the concept of "taste". In the same manner, the courses also aimed to develop what Traquair considered as design "best practices". For example, the books supporting the Colour Decoration courses were mostly about mosaic, stained glass and decorative patterns, which suggests that "good design" implied the integration of such elements.

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.8).

FIG. 3 Table of content of the 1926 catalogue which embodies Ramsay Traquair's epistemological structure of the field of art and architecture (Gordon Home Blackader Library, 1926).

Courses	Corresponding classification headings in the 1926 catalogue	Number of titles	%
Colour Decoration	Decorative Design	54	14,5%
	House Decoration	33	8,9%
	Forms Used in Design: Artificial Form, Animal Form, Plant Form	27	7,3%
	Colour	18	4,8%
	Glass	18	4,8%
	Mosaic	6	1,6%
Ornament in form	Sculpture General	65	17,5%
	Furniture and Woodwork	51	13,7%
	Plasterwork	4	1,1%
Metal Work	Metal work: Iron, Bronze, Brass and Lead; Precious Metals	63	16,9%
Decorative Heraldry	Heraldry	33	8,9%
Total		372	100,0%

Table 1 Distribution of the 1926 catalogue titles per courses and classification headings.

Cutter classification class-marks	Number of titles	%
WS = Decorative and Industrial Arts. Ornament and decoration. Design. Folk art.	83	22,3%
WJ = Sculpture	47	12,6%
WW = Furniture including clocks.	31	8,3%
FV = Heraldry	30	8,1%
WK = Carving and turning	24	6,5%
WX = Jewelry. Plate. Silver and goldsmithing. Hall marks.	22	5,9%
WJ = Kinds of buildings	20	5,4%
WY = Metal work. Iron. Pewter.	15	4,0%
WF = Architecture	12	3,2%
WP = Painting	9	2,4%
WG = Religious buildings	8	2,2%
Cutter class-marks with less than 8 titles (less than 2%)	71	19,1%
Total	372	100,0%

Table 2 Distribution per Cutter classification class-marks.

REFERENCE LIST

Bland, John. (1987). "Ramsay Traquair: Bibliography" in Blackader-Lauterman Library of Architecture and Art, Canadian Architecture Collection, Murray, L. (1987). *Ramsay Traquair and his successors: Guide to the archives*. Montreal: Blackader-Lauterman Library of Architecture and Art, McGill University.

Gordon Home Blackader Library. (1926). *A catalogue of books on art and architecture in McGill University Library and the Gordon Home Blackader Library of Architecture*. Montreal: McGill University Library.

McNally, P. F., Brown, G., & Savard, N. (2007). Sir William Osler, the Bibliotheca Osleriana and the Creation of a History of Medicine Collection. *Library History*, 23(2), 97-114. doi:http://dx.doi.org/proxy.library.mcgill.ca/10.1179/174581607X205635

McGill University. (1925). *McGill University Calendar, 1925-1926*. Montreal: McGill University Library.