The international exhibitions, expositions and world fairs that dominated the cultural scene in the second half of the 19th century provided nations with opportunities to demonstrate their artistic, technical and scientific ingenuity. These exhibitions supported a broader civilising mission through their juxtaposition of world cultures, their encouragement of trade relations, and their promotion of advances in manufacturing and industry.

The V&A Archive is the repository for the Museum’s institutional records. These records are a rich resource for the study of the nineteenth-century international exhibitions in which it participated and include exhibition files, press cuttings, photographs, official correspondence and minutes, and annual reports of the Department of Science and Art.

Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations 1851

The records of the Great Exhibition are still held by the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 at Imperial College London. The Archive can be contacted at: royalcom1851@ic.ac.uk. Search the online catalogue of the Archive of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851.

The V&A’s National Art Library holds an extensive collection of printed material relating to the Great Exhibition. This is the principal source for the study of the Great Exhibition at the V&A. Information on objects acquired at the Exhibition can be found on Search the Collections.

The V&A Archive holds very few records relating to the Great Exhibition. These include:

- Collection of mounted photographs illustrating the Great Exhibition (archive ref. A0004)
- Annotated lists of publications in the National Art Library connected with the Great Exhibition (A0025)
London International Exhibition 1862

The V&A Archive holds the following materials for the London International Exhibition 1862:

- Commissioners for the International Exhibition 1862 in-letters: guardbook containing letters mainly addressed to Captain Francis Fowke, regarding the design and construction of the Exhibition building
  ED 84/16

- Pressed copies of letters out, mainly from Francis Fowke, concerning the design and construction of the Exhibition building
  ED 84/17

- Precis of the Board minutes of the Science and Art Department. Vol. I, 1852–63
  ED 84/35

- 340 photographs, mainly object photographs some of which are sculptures, negative numbers 2875-3214
  MA/32/14-16

- Photographs of construction of the exhibition buildings, negative numbers Y553-614, 640-644
  MA/32/377

- General correspondence; list of students employed on works exhibited; authorisation to purchase articles in the International exhibition
  MA/35/88

- 1862 Exhibition press cuttings (6 volumes), 1858–65
  MA/49/1/23-28

Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediaeval, Renaissance, & More Recent Periods 1862

This loan exhibition was intended to counterbalance the displays of contemporary manufactures at the London International Exhibition. It was held at the South Kensington Museum. Records in the V&A Archive document this landmark exhibition:
• Precis of the Board minutes of the Science and Art Department. Vol. I, 1852–63
  ED 84/35

• Minutes, etc., concerning the Art Museum Exhibition, 1862
  ED 84/41

• Art loan exhibition, 1862
  MA/28/1

• Art referees’ reports, 1863–64
  MA/3/2-4

• Photographic guardbooks - 340 photographs, mainly object photographs some of which are
  sculptures, negative numbers 2875–3214
  MA/32/14-16

• Press cuttings, 1862–63
  MA/49/2/7-8

• Catalogue of Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediaeval, Renaissance, & More Recent
  Periods, Jun - Nov 1862
  A0581

• Tenth Report of the Science and Art Department. London: Printed by George E. Eyre and William
  Spottiswood for HMSO, 1863

Paris Universal Exhibition 1867

• Guard book containing records of the involvement of Henry Cole (Secretary of the Royal
  Commission for the Paris Exhibition) and of the Science and Art Department, in arrangements for
  British representation at the Paris Exhibition
  ED 84/18

• Pressed copies of letters out from the Royal Commission for the Paris Universal Exhibition, mainly
  addressed to the Imperial Commissioner M Le Play, and signed by Henry Cole, R.G. Wylde or Philip
  Cunliffe Owen
  ED 84/19

• Report of the Select Committee on the Paris Exhibition, 1868
  ED 84/20

• Press cuttings
  MA/49/43-49

• J. C. Robinson’s report on his visit to Paris as Art Referee
  MA/3/25, RP/1867/27389

• J. C. Robinson submits further statements to his duties as art referee (i.e. the Museum’s principal
  shopper) at the Paris Exhibition
  MA/3/26, RP/1868/295
• Photographs, negatives Z588 to Z590
  MA/32/384

• FRANCE, Paris: Universal exhibition, 1 Apr – 3 Nov 1867: General correspondence, catalogue of acquisitions (to the SKM by gift, loan or purchase, 1868)
  MA/35/22/1

• FRANCE, Paris: Universal exhibition, 1 Apr – 3 Nov 1867, 1866-1869: Budget papers, report of jurors, miscellaneous papers
  MA/35/22/2

• Precis of correspondence with Imperial Commission for Paris Universal exhibition, 1867
  A0463

Sources for other international exhibitions

The majority of records concerning international exhibitions are in the archive series MA/35: International Exhibitions, 1869-1957, which comprises 158 files, just under half of which concern nineteenth-century exhibitions. Files may include: general correspondence, acquisition papers, press cuttings, display photographs, budget papers, report of jurors, and object lists. V&A Archive staff will be happy to provide further information on these files. The V&A Archive also holds press cuttings albums for:

• Dublin exhibition 1865
  MA/49/1/5
• Exhibitions, industrial &c., 1869–70
  MA/49/1/31

• Paris exhibition 1855
  MA/49/1/42

• London International Exhibition 1871
  MA/49/1/34

• Paris International Exhibition of Agriculture, Industry, and Fine Arts 1878
  MA/49/1/50

In addition to exhibition files, further materials for the following exhibitions await cataloguing but are currently under the accession number A0463:

• Philadelphia Centennial international exhibition, 1876: minute book and printed forms

• Paris Universal exhibition & retrospective exhibition of means of transport in the world (1889)

• London International Health Exhibition 1884

• London International inventions exhibition 1885

• London Colonial & Indian exhibition 1886

There is additional information in the printed annual reports of the Department of Science and Art, available in the V&A Archive.

The ED 84 series of files concerning the early history and administration of the Museum and its buildings contains some relevant materials:

• Precis of the minutes of the Department of Science and Art, 1852–93
  ED 84/36-40

• Arrangements and regulations for exhibitions, comprising correspondence regarding regulations for exhibitions and British involvement in international exhibitions and the lending of objects to foreign museums, 1892–1937 (ED 84/316). Official catalogues of many international exhibitions are held in the National Art Library: https://nal-vam.on.worldcat.org/discovery

Further reading


Search

Search the V&A Archive

Access

The V&A Archive is located at Blythe House, near Olympia in West London and can be consulted by appointment only.

Find out how to access the V&A Archive

Contact

V&A Archive
Blythe House
23 Blythe Road
London
Images:

