

V&A Archive Research Guide

19th century international exhibitions

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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 and the catalogue is [online](#).

The V&A's National Art Library holds an extensive collection of printed material relating to the Great Exhibition, an overview of which is [available](#). 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 [Explore the Collections](#). Further information about the Great Exhibition can be found on the V&A [website](#). 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)

- Thirty-two images of the Great Exhibition (A0371)
- Henry Cole: diaries: typed transcripts, 1822–82

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 28753214
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

- Auerbach, Jeffrey A. *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. National Art Library pressmark: NC.99.2678
- Edwards, Anthony David. *The Role of International Exhibitions in Britain, 1850-1910: Perceptions of Economic Decline and the Technical Education Issue*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008
- Findling John E., and Kimberly D. Pelle, eds. *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990. National Art Library pressmark: 707.4 HIS
- Geppert, Alexander C.T., Jean Coffey and Tammy Lau. *International Exhibitions, Expositions Universelles and World's Fairs, 1851-1951: A Bibliography*. In: Wolkenkuckucksheim: Internationale Zeitschrift für Theorie und Wissenschaft der Architektur (Special Issue, 2000).
- Greenhalgh, Paul. *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851-1939*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988. National Art Library pressmark: 511.D.90
- Harry, Alison M. *Representations of Women at International Exhibitions 1893–1908*. RCA/V&A thesis, c1994. National Art Library pressmark: THE.94.03
- Heller, Alfred. *World's Fairs and the End of Progress: an Insider's View*. Corte Madera, CA: World's Fair, Inc., c1999. National Art Library pressmark: NB.99.1688

- Hollingshead, John. *A Concise History of the International Exhibition of 1862: its rise and progress, its building and features and a summary of all former exhibitions*. London: Printed for her Majesty's Commissioners, 1862. National Art Library pressmark: A.6.19
- Jackson, Anna. *Expo: International Expositions 1851-2010*. London: V&A Publications, 2008. National Art Library pressmark: 602.AJ.0338
- James, Elizabeth. *The Victoria & Albert Museum: A Bibliography and Exhibition Chronology, 1852-1996*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998. National Art Library pressmark: 708.21 VIC/VIC
- Leapman, Michael. *The World for a Shilling: How the Great Exhibition of 1851 Shaped a Nation*. London: Headline Books, 2001. National Art Library pressmark: 602.AB.1502
- Rydell, Robert, W. *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Exhibitions, 1876-1916*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984
- Stoklund, Bjarne. 'The Role of the International Exhibitions in the Construction of National Cultures in the 19th Century.' *Ethnologia Europaea* 24 (1994): 35-44

Access to the V&A Archive

You can search the catalogue of the V&A Archive [online](#).

Access to the V&A Archive is available by appointment on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 11.00–16.30 in the National Art Library at the V&A. We recommend providing a minimum of two weeks' notice when booking your appointment.

If you have any questions about the V&A Archive or would like to make an appointment to see material in the archive, please [contact us](#).

Images

William Simpson, Souvenir of the Great Exhibition, The Transept from the Grand Entrance, 1851. Museum no. 19627. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

International Exhibition, London, 1862. Collection of illustrations taken from various sources and pasted in one volume. National Art Library pressmark: 805.AB.0004. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

'An English family at the Paris Exhibition' repro. in *The Illustrated Times*, 1867. National Art Library pressmark: PP.6.C. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London