

Chinese works of art in the British Library Visual Arts collections

Reference: 2019-11-ROY

Supervisor(s)	Malini Roy, (Head of Visual Art), Cam Sharp Jones, (Visual Arts Curator)
Department, Location	Visual Arts - St Pancras, London
Start date/timeframe	The start date is fairly flexible, although our preference would be for the placement to take place between September and December 2019
Duration	3 months (or part-time equivalent). For a part-time placement, the student would be required to spend a minimum of 3 days/week on site at the Library.
Remote-working	If required, the student could be based off site for 2 days a week.
Context for placement	
<p>The Visual Arts section of the British Library is responsible for developing, curating and promoting the Library's collection of prints, drawings, photographs and associated ephemera from the Asian region. This rich and diverse collection documents the interests of the East India Company and the British Government during the 16th-20th centuries in South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal and Bhutan), and neighbouring countries and areas such as Iran, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and China.</p> <p>This collection includes over 4,000 works of art related to China and Chinese daily life dating from the 18th century onwards. Amongst this collection sits more than 500 paintings of Chinese origin that would benefit greatly from further research. This number includes 300 botanical drawings of Chinese plants created circa 1800 by Chinese artists. The collection came to the British Library from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the 1970s and little is known about their origin and content. These works of art fall into the broader category of natural history drawings and typically depict flowering shoots, sometimes with fruits and usually with dissections of parts of the plant shown to the side. Many of the drawings have Chinese characters inscribed in ink or the Chinese name for the plant transliterated in English in pencil. The remaining images that would benefit further research focus on subjects such as depictions of Chinese interiors and furniture and of prisoners and modes of imprisonment.</p> <p>Only skeletal catalogue entries for this collection currently exist on the British Library databases. As such this collection requires additional research, including cross referencing the inscriptions, in order to provide greater understanding of the subjects depicted. It would be ideal to enhance the individual catalogue entries for each drawing with descriptive metadata into IAMS, the Library's Archives and Manuscript cataloguing system.</p> <p>This placement project will provide a PhD student with an opportunity to explore and research Chinese botanical and export drawings in relation to the wider production of botanical illustrations and export paintings during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In producing detailed descriptions of these works of art, the placement student will support and stimulate a wider understanding of Chinese visual holdings in the British Library collections and allow researchers from across the world to access these materials. The placement will also provide the opportunity for the student to participate in and enhance public engagement initiatives to promote and publicise these collections to broader audiences.</p>	
Expected tasks and outcomes	
<p>The placement will be based in the Visual Arts section. However, the placement student will be introduced to curators and reference specialists from across the Library's collections in order to identify related objects and research tools.</p> <p>The principal focus of the project will be to produce detailed catalogue records and descriptive metadata for those artworks identified as being most in need of further research (or for as many of them as is feasible within the timeframe and context of the placement) – a provisional 'target' will be agreed at the start of the placement and reviewed as the project progresses. The student will also be asked to write a Collections Guide for the British Library website about the wider Chinese collections held in the Visual Arts section.</p>	

Alongside this activity, the student will have the opportunity to deliver a staff talk on the outcomes of their research as well as to write content for the [Asian and African Studies](#) blog on the collection material they work on and the wider Chinese collections held by the Visual Arts department. There is also scope for the student to shape this part of the project in line with their own research interests.

Other potential activities, depending on timings, staff capacity and the interests of the student, would include working with the Library's marketing and social media teams to publicise images from the collection to a broader public audience through the Library's Twitter and Instagram accounts.

Training and experience expected to be gained by student through the placement

At the onset, the student will be given practical training and continued support on the cataloguing standards expected by the British Library and in using IAMS, the British Library's Archives and Manuscripts database.

Additional sessions on the handling and preservation of collection items will be arranged with either the Preservation or Visual Arts staff. Introductions and (subject to capacity and availability) potentially job shadowing sessions will also be arranged with colleagues in the Chinese Collections section of the Asian and African Collections curatorial team, in order to provide a wider understanding of the Chinese collections held by the British Library. There will also be opportunities to meet relevant colleagues from other curatorial teams that hold Chinese material, such as Western Prints and Drawings. This will allow the student to establish contacts and build networks with experts across the Library and gain a broad 'behind-the-scenes' insight into the day-to-day curatorial work of the organisation.

During the placement, the student will have access to the Library's in-house training and events, such as 'Digital Scholarship Training Programme' and '21st Century Curators' series of talks. There will also be opportunities to network with other placement students, research fellows and collaborative doctoral students.

The placement would be an excellent introduction for any PhD student with an interest in pursuing a curatorial career or further academic research into Chinese or Asian art, botanical illustration or world history. It is an excellent opportunity to put knowledge of European and Chinese engagement and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history to practical application and to make a direct contribution to the work of a national research library.

The placement will also give an insight into the working practices of a large research institution, its collection practices and how specific departments work within the wider objectives of a cultural institution. As such the student will be included in departmental meetings and visits to provide a wider understanding of how their project fits within the aims of the department.

Posts on the Asian and African Studies blog command an international and predominantly non-academic readership; contributing to this will enable the student to publicise their work to thousands of readers and will hone their skills in writing for popular audiences. Depending on their interests, there is also potential for the student to write an academic article based on their findings from the placement and to submit this for consideration by the peer-reviewed British Library [Journal](#) (or another academic publication).

Required knowledge and skills

To undertake this placement it will be necessary to be able to read Chinese script. The project would particularly suit someone with research interests in areas such as World History, Chinese History of Art or Botany and an understanding or experience of research using archival materials and sources.

This is a training and development opportunity open to current PhD students only. It is not intended to lead to a permanent post at the Library. Please note that the Library is unable to provide a stipend for PhD research placements. Applicants must obtain the support of their PhD supervisor in advance and, as part of their process, consult their HEI to ascertain what funding is available to support them.

Application deadline: 5pm on Monday, **18 February 2019**. Information on how to apply is available on our website: <https://www.bl.uk/news/2019/january/phd-research-placements-2019>