



## **A report to the Business Archives Council**

**10 May 2016**

### **Introduction**

The National Gallery was the recipient of a £3000 Cataloguing Grant for Archives related to the Arts, generously made by the Business Archives Council (BAC). The grant enabled the National Gallery's Research Centre to undertake a project to preserve, sort and provide item-level catalogue descriptions for four files of correspondence from the archive of art dealers Thos. Agnew & Sons Ltd. The project was crucial to the Gallery's ability to provide access to the correspondence. Despite the high-level of interest in the letters, they remained inaccessible to researchers. Many of the letters are fragile and were poorly housed, often prohibiting researchers from 'leafing-through' the papers in search of something of relevance. The subject-matter of the letters, which date from c.1827 to 1931, is wide-ranging and varied, meaning that there was no easy point for access. Item-level descriptions are an essential finding aid for a collection of documents in which a single letter might contain a crucial piece of information for those studying, for example, the provenance of a painting. Item-level cataloguing is particularly valuable for enquirers located abroad. It allows them to identify relevant documents in a manner that would be impossible without detailed descriptions. This then enables digital imagery to be ordered or for a member of Research Centre staff to be directed to a document from which information can be extracted. Agnew's sold works of art to clients around the world. Furthermore, the letters cover a period which witnessed the rise of wealthy American collectors. In this respect, the Agnew's archive is of international interest and it is not uncommon for the Gallery to receive enquiries about it from overseas.

### **Background**

The family firm of Thos. Agnew & Sons were one of the foremost art-dealerships of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The firm traces its origins to Manchester and a partnership, in 1817, between Vittore Zanetti and Thomas Agnew. In 1835, Zanetti retired and Thomas Agnew became sole proprietor of the business, he was the first of six generations of the family to work in the firm.

The business expanded and a London branch was opened in 1860. In 1877, the firm took up residence in a purpose built gallery on Old Bond Street.



The Agnew's Archive (NGA27)

The Agnew's archive was purchased in 2013 by the National Gallery Trust and generously donated to the Gallery. The addition of the archive to the National Gallery Research Centre is significant as it marks the first time that the Gallery has acquired a major business archive, albeit one that has often engaged with the Gallery during its history. The archive complements the National Gallery's own institutional archives. The sales of a number of important works, now in the Gallery's collection, were handled by the firm, notably that of Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* in 1906. However, the archive has far wider significance not only for provenance research but also to scholars working in the fields of the history of museums and the history of collecting – both of which have witnessed dramatically increasing academic interest over the last twenty years.

The archive consists of stockbooks, daybooks, diaries and account ledgers which, combined, give a remarkable insight into the firm's activities. Unfortunately, a large amount of the dealership's correspondence is no longer extant and is known to have been destroyed during periodic efforts to create filing space. This means that those letters that have survived are of increased significance. The letters contain information on a wide range of topics, including the valuation, purchase, sale and shipping of works of art; documentation concerning the (sometimes contested) provenance and attribution of works; and the internal management of the firm. They also reveal the complex

network of associates and contacts developed by members of the Agnew family firm, from politicians, the aristocracy and royalty, to artists, clients and long-standing friends.

## Recruitment

Having secured the funding, the Gallery set about recruiting for an Archive Assistant to complete the project. Whilst our priority was to appoint the individual most able to undertake the work, we also hoped that the project might provide a valuable experience for somebody at the beginning of their career in archives. We were, therefore, delighted to be able to appoint Ruth de Wynter, a part-time student studying for a MA degree in archives and records management at University College London. Ruth impressed the selection panel with her thoughtful comments on how to approach a fixed-term cataloguing project. A short palaeography test, using letters from the Agnew's Archive, allowed Ruth to demonstrate her excellent palaeography skills. Ruth was appointed to work on a part-time basis, for three days per week, from 4 January to 24 March 2016. The line-manager for Ruth's post was Rachael Merrison, the Gallery's Assistant Archivist responsible for cataloguing the wider Agnew's archive (supported by the John Murray Trust and the National Cataloguing Grants Programme for Archives).



A selection of letters from the Agnew's archive

## The Project

The Gallery uses CALM as its archive cataloguing software. Ruth arrived at the Gallery with some experience of using CALM but was given initial guidance regarding house-style and expected

content. In order to keep track of the large number of correspondents, Ruth quickly set up an Excel spreadsheet to record names and subjects. The Gallery does not maintain authority files of the sort that might have been added to as part of the cataloguing project. Therefore, the spreadsheet helped to ensure consistency and acted as a quick and easy reference tool whilst cataloguing was in progress.

Ruth's palaeography skills were as good as expected and her descriptions are consistent and informative. At the beginning of the project, Ruth was set cataloguing targets but was allowed to find her way into the collection. Repackaging was undertaken as necessary with unsorted and fragile letters being carefully removed from their original containers, numbered and placed in acid-free folders. A review meeting was held mid-way through the project in order to check progress and to set targets to ensure the cataloguing would be completed on time. Ruth was able to use her developing knowledge of the collection to make some adjustments to the level of cataloguing detail being entered onto CALM. For example, the correspondence includes some records regarding the shipping of artworks. Cataloguing these documents was troublesome and time-consuming early in the project. As Ruth began to understand the nature of the archive, it was agreed that descriptions of these documents should be minimal with Ruth able to quickly identify the key information. This ensured that the focus of the project could be given to the more detailed letters. Towards the end of the project, Ruth set herself daily targets to monitor progress and ensure the work would be finished on schedule.

Ruth faced a number of challenges in completing the project. Judging the correct level of description was one; however, the most prominent challenge was the palaeography of the letters. The scrawl of some Victorian-era correspondents' handwriting can be notoriously tricky to read. Unfortunately, in many cases, there did not survive a good run of letters in the same hand with which Ruth could 'get her eye in'. In these cases, a second opinion from the Gallery's archive staff often helped as too did cross referencing a possible name with an address given on headed paper. In all cases, Ruth went to considerable effort to identify the writer of a letter as this was felt to be crucial information for the catalogue record.

Happily, both the National Gallery and Ruth benefited from the project, made possible by the BAC grant. The Gallery now has a detailed and comprehensive catalogue of a key series of records whilst Ruth was able to continue her professional development as an archivist.

*I think I've gained a huge amount from the project – not only did I thoroughly enjoy it (particularly as I'd studied art history and had a real interest in the period covered) and felt really supported, but it really gave me a chance to improve my palaeographic skills in an intensive way.*

Ruth de Wynter, Archives Assistant, Agnew's Cataloguing Project

## Key Outcomes and Next Steps

- All of the correspondence was sorted, catalogued and repackaged.
- A total of 809 item-level descriptions were created using CALM.

The project has unearthed many interesting letters. To name but a few, these include:

- NGA27/32/2/123: A letter from Edward Tennyson-Reed to Sir William Agnew. Written after a social visit, Tennyson-Reed woefully bemoans his habit of frequently leaving parties with the wrong top-hat. The letter gives a wonderful snapshot of nineteenth century humour. Tennyson-Reed was a cartoonist for *Punch* and the letter is accompanied by a sketch of the artist wearing Agnew's much-too-large hat. Playfulness aside, this type of letter is valuable evidence for the development of social connections that were so important to the success of an art-dealership.
- Whilst the firm had a habit of only retaining a couple of examples of correspondence from each recipient, the cataloguing project has identified the occasional run of correspondence. The letters to Sir William Agnew from the artist Briton Rivière are particularly important (NGA27/32/3). Rivière has not been the subject of a recent study and his letters may yet provide good research opportunities as a result of their identification as part of the cataloguing project. Rivière writes on a number of subjects from Liberal politics to the question of Irish Home Rule. His letters also touch upon the hardships artists faced in difficult economic times. In this way, the correspondence demonstrates the relationship Agnew's had with contemporary artists.
- A puzzling group of letters were those relating to an A. Bremont (NGA27/32/5/5). Various searches could not identify this individual until a chance internet search revealed it was a pseudonym. The letters concern Bremont's representation of Agnew's in various transactions and highlight the secretive and competitive nature of top-level sales of artworks. The letters have already proven of interest to a visiting academic researching a paper on Bremont and would not have been known about without Ruth's cataloguing.

The end of the correspondence cataloguing project coincided with the completion of the cataloguing of the wider Agnew's archive. To celebrate the completion of the project the Gallery hosted a two day conference (*Negotiating Art: Dealers and Museums, 1855-2015*). As part of the conference, delegates were given a tour of the Research Centre and shown items from the Agnew's archives. Without fail, from each tour group, the question of whether the letters had been catalogued in detail and how the catalogue could be searched was asked.

Whilst working on the project, Ruth was able to engage with the Gallery's collaborative doctoral award students, one of whom found the correspondence to be important to her research. Ruth

highlighted previously unidentified letters, these have contributed to our student's understanding of Agnew's working methods and the research findings are being disseminated to academic audiences.

During the project the Gallery promoted Ruth's work and the letters that were being catalogued. For example, we utilised the Gallery's Twitter feed. A report of the project has also been published in the Archives and Records Association's *ARC Magazine*.

**Rachael Merrison**, Assistant Archivist, Agnew's Cataloguing Project

**Ruth de Wynter**, Archives Assistant, Agnew's Cataloguing Project

**Richard Wragg**, Archivist, The National Gallery

### Appendix 1: Budget

<b>Income</b>	
BAC Cataloguing Grant	£3000
Total	£3000
<b>Expenditure</b>	
Archive Assistant Salary	£2925
Archival Packaging Materials	£75
Total	£3000

### Appendix 2: Arrangement

The catalogue descriptions can be accessed via the National Gallery's online catalogue (<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/archive/search>). The letters were catalogued in the following arrangement within the catalogue of the Thos. Agnew & Sons Ltd Archive:

NGA27/11/1

319 item-level descriptions

Archive reference number	NGA27/11/1
Title	<b>Letterbook 1 (Private)</b>
Date	1902-1928
Description	A volume containing copy records of correspondence and documentation relating to valuation, purchase, sale and shipping of works of art by the firm of Thomas Agnew & Sons and the employment of individuals by the firm in London, Paris and New York. Also included is some personal correspondence of members of the Agnew family and partners

	in the firm relating to art purchase and sales and tax dealings. (06 Mar 1902-12 Oct 1928) For more general information refer to the "Letter Books" description at NGA27/11.
Record type	File

## NGA27/32/1

289 item-level descriptions

Archive reference number	NGA27/32/1
Title	<b>Correspondence between members of the firm of Agnew's and staff, clients, art dealers and organisations and documentation regarding provenance and attribution of artworks</b>
Date	c 1827-1931
Description	<p>A series of letters and documentation, with subject matter and recipients including:</p> <p>Miscellaneous correspondence, notes and documentation concerning provenance and attribution of artworks purchased and sold by the firm of Agnew's.</p> <p>Assorted letters and memoranda between members of the firm of Agnew's in the New York, London, Paris and Manchester offices of the firm of Agnew's regarding business dealings, wages, expenses and management.</p> <p>Letters between Lloyds Bank, Agnew's and Lescher, Stephens &amp; Co regarding the overdraft held by the firm of Agnew's.</p> <p>Letters between Charles Morland Agnew, William Lockett Agnew, D.H. Ogden, other members of the firm of Agnew's and letters from clients and business organisations to William Lockett Agnew.</p> <p>Letters to and from clients of the firm of Agnew's regarding the attribution, valuation and sale of paintings.</p>
Record type	File

## NGA27/32/2

134 item-level descriptions

Archive reference number	NGA27/32/2
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Title	<b>Sir William Agnew, Charles Morland Agnew and George William Agnew correspondence</b>
Date	c 1882-1900
Description	<p>Assorted letters from a number of artists, politicians, royalty, aristocracy, clients and friends to Charles Morland Agnew, Sir William Agnew and George William Agnew.</p> <p>Subject matter includes: artists' commissions, valuation, sale, purchase and exhibiting of paintings, the annual Artists' General Benevolent Institution dinner, Punch magazine, the deaths of Sir William Agnew's daughters, Sir William Agnew's seeking of political and judicial appointments for his son George William Agnew, Liberal politics and Sir William Agnew's gains and losses of Parliamentary seats.</p> <p>The series also includes two unsigned sketches.</p> <p>An envelope marked "Artists letters to C. Morland Agnew" and "Artists Letters C" is included before NGA27/32/2/1 and appears to indicate that NGA27/32/2/1 - NGA27/32/2/19 are to Charles Morland Agnew (the bulk of items are addressed to "Mr Agnew" only).</p> <p>A note marked "Various letters in the 70s 80s and 90s to WA GA and MA (ACL) + 2 sketches" is included before NGA27/32/2/21 indicating that NGA27/32/2/21 - NGA27/32/2/133 are addressed (in various instances) to Sir William Agnew, George William Agnew or Charles Morland Agnew.</p>
Record type	File

### NGA27/32/3

#### 67 item-level descriptions

Archive reference number	NGA27/32/3
Title	<b>Correspondence to members of the firm of Agnew's from surnames beginning with R</b>
Date	1873-1901
Description	<p>Assorted letters from members of the Rothschild family, artist Briton Rivière, the 5th Earl of Rosebery and his wife Hannah Primrose (nee Rothschild) addressed (in various instances) to Sir William Agnew or Charles Morland Agnew, with many addressed to "Mr Agnew" only.</p> <p>One additional letter marked as removed from a letterbook is included at NGA27/32/3/63 A note marked "Various letters to William, George or Morland Agnew in the 80's and 90's including a series from Lord Rosebery, Briton Riviere, the Rothschilds" is included.</p> <p>Subject matter includes: sales by the firm of Agnew's to the Rothschild family and to Lord Rosebery, Briton Riviere's thoughts on commissions, the production of paintings, their valuation, sale, purchase and exhibition, the state of the art market, the deaths of Sir</p>

	William Agnew's daughters, Liberal politics, Sir William Agnew's political activities, his friendship with Sir William and his family and Lord Rosebery's thoughts on Liberal politics and his appointments, his financial situation, the commission, sale and purchase of paintings and his friendship with Sir William Agnew.
Record type	File

### Examples of Item-Level Descriptions

Archive reference number	NGA27/11/1/157
Title	<b>Letter from Charles Gerald Agnew to the Right Honourable Lord Ashton of Hyde</b>
Date	28 Nov 1924
Description	<p>Copy record of a letter from Charles Gerald Agnew to Thomas Gair Ashton, 1st Baron Ashton of Hyde regarding the potential sale of Lord Ashton's copy of Salisbury Cathedral by John Constable. Lord Ashton has stated a desired price for the work that Agnew feels cannot be achieved. Agnew states that the work is Constable's most important work and should be in the National Gallery.</p> <p>The letter is a duplicate of NGA27/11/1/156</p> <p>Named persons featured:</p> <p>Agnew, Charles Gerald 1882-1954  Ashton, Thomas Gair, 1st Baron Ashton of Hyde 1855– 1933  Reni, Guido, 1575-1642  Constable, John 1776–1837</p>
Record type	Item

Archive reference number	NGA27/32/1/64
Title	<b>Copy of a letter from C.J. Holmes to Sir Herbert Cook</b>
Date	8 Jul 1920
Description	<p>Typed copy of a letter from C.J. Holmes, Director of the National Gallery, to Sir Herbert Cook, with his opinions on a work by el Greco that he has viewed at the firm of Agnew's, "said to come from Titulcia" and referred to in 'El Greco' by Manuel B Cossío.</p> <p>"Original given to W. Shaw" is written in pencil.</p> <p>Named persons featured:</p>

	Holmes, Charles John, Sir 1868-1936 Cook, Sir Herbert Frederick, 3rd Baronet 1868-1939 Theotokopoulos, Domenikos, El Greco 1541-1614 Cossío, Manuel B., 1858-1935
Record type	Item

Archive reference number	NGA27/32/2/9
Title	<b>Letter from Edward Burne-Jones to Mr Agnew</b>
Date	[1880-1898]
Description	Letter from Edward Burne-Jones to Mr Agnew regarding engraving proofs for 'Ancilla Domini'. Burne-Jones also expresses sympathy for an apparently life-threatening illness suffered by Agnew's sister.  Named persons featured:  Burne-Jones, Sir Edward Coley 1833–1898
Record type	Item

Archive reference number	NGA27/32/2/40
Title	<b>Letter from George du Maurier to Sir William Agnew</b>
Date	2 Apr 1884
Description	Letter (2 Apr 1884) from George du Maurier to Sir William Agnew regretting that "your little DM" was unable to dine the previous evening and requesting that Agnew and his wife join du Maurier for lunch to see his new picture. Two pen and ink cartoons are included: one at the top of the letter showing a smiling head and torso with champagne glasses and bottles and one with skull and crossbones at the bottom, the skull with glasses and beard.  Named persons featured:  Du Maurier, George Louis Palmella Busson, 1834-1896 Agnew, Sir William, 1st Baronet 1825-1910
Record type	Item

Archive reference	NGA27/32/3/2
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number	
Title	<b>Letter from Ferdinand de Rothschild to Mr Agnew</b>
Date	8 May 1886
Description	<p>Letter (8 May 1886) from Ferdinand de Rothschild to Mr Agnew stating that he will not be purchasing an unnamed picture as it cannot be placed suitably in any room at Waddesdon. He states that he has some other opportunities of "increasing my little collection of English pictures."</p> <p>Named persons featured:</p> <p>Rothschild, Baron Ferdinand de 1839–1898</p>
Record type	Item