

Into the Archive: The National Gallery [C1]

In occasione del bicentenario della National Gallery, l'archivista Nick Smith ci guida alla scoperta dei misteri e delle storie nascoste nei suoi archivi.

As the National Gallery's archive dates back to 1824, it's easy to imagine that, as well as the actual paintings, it houses a vast archive of documents relating to the various works. These documents include trustee [minute books](#), acquisition files, exhibition files and [press cuttings](#), but also posters, other kinds of promotional materials and historical photographs showing the interiors of the gallery and its development over time. Thousands of people access the archive each year for research purposes, and somebody has [to sort](#) and catalogue all the material and put it into historical context so as to turn it into a useful and navigable tool. But if that brings to mind the image of some kind of librarian working in a [dusty basement](#), then think again. Nick Smith joined the National Gallery in April 2019 as gallery archivist. As he explains, an important part of his job is to host group visits to the archive and occasionally accompany paintings [on loan](#) to external exhibitions. **Nick Smith (English accent):**Our primary user groups are academic researchers, students of art history or curation, people working within the art trade, [auctioneers](#), [art dealers](#), et cetera. Or people just investigating the history of paintings they have hanging in their homes. And we participate with an educational programme. This is aimed at high-school students, between the ages of fifteen to eighteen. And they use art as a way of increasing' critical thinking and verbal skills. Quite a nice way of introducing people to the value and benefits of art historical research and interpretation.

THE DUCHESS

The job also involves quite a lot of detective work, which Smith says can be very [rewarding](#). Among his many fascinating anecdotes, Smith describes one centred on when the National Gallery acquired the company records of Thomas Agnew and Son, a preeminent dealer in old master paintings in the

19th and 20th century. The story involves Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who was made famous by the 2008 film *The Duchess*. **Nick Smith:** The most unusual item in that archive are [strips](#) of [canvas](#) cut away from Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of society beauty Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, painted in 1785. The story is quite bizarre really, it's the stuff of a movie. In 1876, Agnew had purchased this portrait at Christie's for a record price of ten thousand guineas, and they displayed it in their London showroom, and within three weeks the painting had been stolen and it wasn't seen for another twenty-five years. And this was a kind of [cause célèbre](#) at the time. The [papers](#) were full of [alleged sightings](#) of the painting. And the thief wrote to the firm offering to ransom the painting, and as kind of proof of life, sent these [strips](#) of [canvas](#) which he'd cut away from the painting. But nothing came of it, so it wasn't seen for twenty-five years, until the thief thought he was about to be shot by an associate, and approached the American Pinkerton's detective agency and the painting's return was negotiated for twenty-five thousand dollars, and it was transported back from America to London and [swiftly](#) sold on to an American financier named J. P. Morgan. So it was quickly on a [steamship](#) back to New York. So it's a very well-travelled painting.

THE THIEF

The [culprit](#) was an infamous character at the time, who [unwittingly](#) inspired other forms of art. **Nick Smith:** The thief was Adam Worth. He was the inspiration, supposedly, for Arthur Conan Doyle's arch-villain Professor Moriarty in the Sherlock Holmes novels. And he was, I suppose, at the centre of an organised crime network; a very successful bank robber, diamond thief, old master painting thief, as well. And he would travel round with the painting [rolled up](#) in a false space to his suitcase. When he wasn't moving, it was under his [mattress](#). So an intriguing story and the wonderful thing about the Agnew archive is that they were so interested and concerned to document and record their history, that they've left [a wealth of](#) of documentary materials about these different episodes which happened in the course of their hundred and fifty, hundred and seventy-five year history.

THE CELEBRATION

The National Gallery's bicentenary is being celebrated [in grand style](#) all around the country; we asked Smith why he thinks this particular museum is so important. **Nick Smith:** Well, it's the National Gallery, so it's the nation's collection of art works. Therefore fundamental is the sharing of the experience of wonderful art with as many people as possible, both within the UK and beyond. And great efforts are made to present these both physically but also digitally to maximise the [reach](#) and pleasure of these paintings, and to make them travel, whether through loan exhibitions or particular events. For instance, when we acquired an Artemisia Gentileschi painting a few years ago, this went on tour throughout the UK, visiting unconventional venues such as a [GP surgery's](#) reception, a women's prison, a school... venues like that where you wouldn't expect to find an old master painting hanging, but which evoked responses you might not otherwise have had. And it certainly brought the painting to audiences who might not previously have considered looking at an old master painting.

Glossary

- **minute books** = libri dei verbali
- **rewarding** = gratificante
- **cause célèbre** = caso famoso
- **sightings** = avvistamenti
- **rolled up** = arrotolare
- **mattress** = materasso
- **culprit** = colpevole
- **unwittingly** = involontariamente
- **a wealth of** = un sacco di
- **to sort** = ordinare
- **dusty** = polveroso
- **on loan** = in prestito
- **in grand style** = in maniera grandiosa
- **alleged** = presunti
- **press cuttings** = rassegne stampa
- **basement** = sotterraneo
- **auctioneers** = banditori d'asta
- **art dealers** = mercanti d'arte
- **strips** = strisce
- **canvas** = tela
- **papers** = giornali
- **swiftly** = rapidamente
- **steamship** = nave a vapore
- **reach** = diffusione
- **GP surgery's** = medico di base ('general practitioner')