

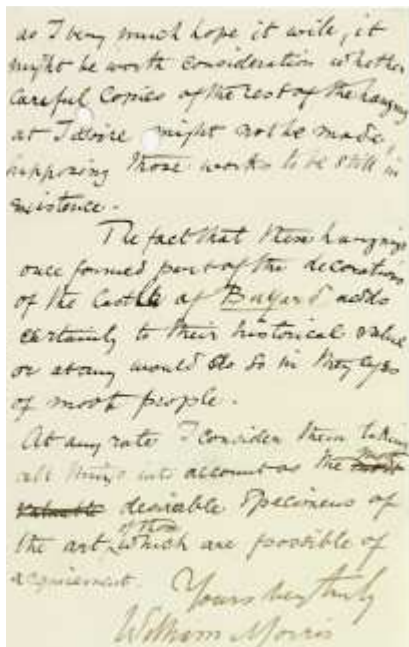
# Researching museum objects using the V&A Archive



More than a million objects form the V&A's collections and appear in the Search the Collections database: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/>. To research the acquisition and provenance of particular objects in more detail, enquirers may need to contact both the relevant curatorial department and consult the records of the V&A Archive. *Please note that the V&A Archive does not hold any Museum objects. For access to these, you will need to need to contact the appropriate curatorial department.*

## Acquisition files

The V&A holds over a million objects but there aren't equivalent numbers of files documenting their acquisition, loan or disposal. A single 'Nominal' file may refer to one object or, in the case of large gifts or bequests, several hundred objects. These were created when it was the practice to group together registered papers and files by name of individual or institution. The V&A Archive holds approximately 60,000 Nominal files in the MA/1 series.



The contents of Nominal files may vary considerably in respect of the number and significance of documents that have been retained. A file may hold only a deed of gift or a single letter, or the documentation may be extensive and may include object reports, correspondence, internal memoranda, inventories of objects, press cuttings, photographs and, very occasionally, research notes relating to the object.

A separate sequence of so called 'Art Referee Reports' records many major acquisitions between 1884 and 1886, and include observations on the nature, condition and quality and price of the object, together with occasional sketches, sale catalogues, press cuttings and other documentation.

*Extract of a letter by William Morris recommending the purchase of a tapestry. V&A Archive, MA/1/D1995*

## Photographic guardbooks

The V&A Archive holds over 900 guardbooks, which contain photographs of Museum objects acquired between 1853 and 1996. The index to these volumes is held by V&A Images, whom you should approach in the first instance to enquire if they can check their indexes for any negative numbers relating to your object <[vanda.images@vam.ac.uk](mailto:vanda.images@vam.ac.uk)>. With these negative numbers, it should be possible for Archive staff to identify and make accessible the relevant guardbook(s).

## Museum numbers

Each museum object has a unique number, known as the Museum Number. This is generally written as a serial number followed by a hyphen and the year the number was assigned, e.g. 56-1887. From 1909 onwards, departmental prefixes were added. Commonly used prefixes include:

Prefix	Collection	Prefix	Collection
A	Sculpture	IS	Asia
AAD	Archive of Art and Design	L	National Art Library
B	Bethnal Green Museum	M	Metalwork
C	Ceramics	MISC	Bethnal Green Museum
CIRC	Circulation	OPH	Osterley Park
D	Prints and Drawings	P	Prints and Drawings
E	Prints and Drawings	PH	Prints and Drawings
FA	Sheepshanks gift	S	Theatre Museum
FE	Asia	SCHR	Schreiber Collection
HH	Ham House	T	Textiles
IM	Asia	W	Furniture



*For example, M.51A-1962 refers to an object from the Metalwork collection - one of a pair of bracelet clasps, about 1770, given by Dame Joan Evans.*

## Three ways to find a Museum object number

1. If the object is on display, the number will be printed on the object label (you may also see it on the object itself)

2. If the object is part of the Museum's reserve collections (i.e. is not on general display), you should contact the curatorial department under whose responsibility the object is likely to fall; a list of departmental contacts is available at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/contact>

3. If you found the object on the Search the Collections database (<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/>), the museum object number is one of the pieces of information listed alongside the image  
Contact the V&A Archive with this information and staff will check if there are any records relating to the object in question. *Please be aware that objects acquired prior to 1865 may not have any surviving acquisition papers.*

### Other ways of identifying object acquisition records

1. *Source of an acquisition – name of the donor, lender or vendor:* V&A Archive staff can check index cards and electronic databases for relevant information.

2. *Registered Paper (RP) number:* this is written as a year followed by a serial number – RP/1960/2763. Often the year is shortened to the final two digits, e.g. 60/2763.

3. *Museum Archive reference number:* this comprises the prefix MA followed by a sequence of numbers separated by oblique strokes and an initial letter, e.g. MA/1/R1381 (Auguste Rodin Nominal file).

*The gift form for Rodin's sculptures showing the donor's name and Registered Paper number RP/1914/4678M. V&A Archive, MA/1/R1381*

### Access to the V&A Archive

Archival records will be made available for researchers in the Blythe House Reading Room, which serves the Archive of Art and Design, the V&A Archive, the V&A Theatre and Performance Collections and the Beatrix Potter Collections, and is open Tuesdays to Fridays, from 10.00 to 16.30, by appointment only.

Further details of how to make enquiries and access the archives can be found on our homepage at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/a/archives/>. Please note that there is no automatic right of access to recent acquisition records, which may contain sensitive or confidential information. Requests for information less than thirty years old will normally take several days to process.

**Contact details**

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Contact us online at <http://vam.altarama.com/reftooo.aspx>