

A History of the Crafts Study Centre Collections & Archive

by Barley Roscoe

'Painfully, slowly and with characteristically English altruism and amateurishness, the idea of a collection of the best work of the 20th century artist-craftsman was born - not just a museum collection, but one that, augmented by craftsmen's records, writings, and papers, could be handled and seriously studied and enjoyed'. ¹

This is how Robin Tanner, the etcher, educationist and founder Trustee of the Crafts Study Centre described its tentative beginnings in a '1st Birthday' lecture on 1 June 1978 which he gave in Bath at the Holburne Museum of Art where the Crafts Study Centre had opened the year before. In 1977 the official opening had actually had to extend over three days so that all the numerous people involved from its inception could be invited. The weaver, Rita Beales spoke for many in a letter of thanks she wrote shortly afterwards 'I am still in a kind of dream, picturing or trying to picture all the "sweat and toil" and love that you have put into the creating of our Crafts Study Centre. How grateful craftsmen should feel, both the old and young ones to come along later on. It is a great achievement and I know it will grow and grow and grow - what an asset for the Craft world'. ²

In fact the first spark of the idea for the Crafts Study Centre goes right back to 1964 and the death of the hand-blockprinter, Phyllis Barron, on 23 November. In her will she left all her life's work together with that of her partner, Dorothy Larcher, to the etcher and educationist Robin Tanner with the words 'I leave all my work to Robin. He will know what to do with it'. ³ She was absolutely right - he did. Between 1965-7 Robin and his wife, Heather, mounted three memorial exhibitions in annual succession. The first was in Painswick, Gloucestershire where Barron and Larcher had lived since 1930; followed by a larger exhibition at the Royal West of England Academy, Bristol, and subsequently another at Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum.

The display of these women's remarkable collection of hand-blockprinted textiles together with associated material prompted many people to urge that a permanent home should be found for their work. This was no easy matter. The Crafts Advisory

Committee (subsequently to become the Crafts Council) had not yet been founded and there was only a handful of museums that showed even a mild interest in British crafts post 1930, let alone contemporary work. A determined group, many of them friends of Robin and Heather Tanner and those who had known Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher well, held their first meeting in London to explore possibilities on 11 November 1967. At the meeting Muriel Rose, a doyenne of twentieth century crafts and later to become a founding Trustee of the Crafts Study Centre,' reminded those present of the origin of the meeting. The exhibitions of the Barron and Larcher textiles had shown the urgency not only of keeping such work together, but also of securing work of similar quality by other craftsmen (themselves possibly exercised as to where to bequeath it) while it was still available. Together each collection would enhance the other, both visually and educationally. Where might such a collection be housed?'⁴

In order to answer this burning question and find a permanent home for the collections, the group recognised that it was essential to clarify ideas into a document that could be widely circulated. A statement of policy and aims was drafted and clearly shows on what lines the concept of a Study Centre for the crafts was developing:

There is in Great Britain no permanent comprehensive collection of the work of outstanding artist-craftsmen of our own century. A group of concerned people, craftsmen and educationists, propose to bring together the best of this in order to conserve it and to make it freely available for enjoyment and study.

The present moment offers unique opportunities to assemble, before it is irretrievably dispersed, examples of the output of those pioneers, such as Bernard Leach, who began work after the First World War, and who found themselves obliged to rediscover, largely by trial and error, many of the techniques which industrial development had obscured or retarded. Their work shows not only a finely judged sense of quality in their choice of material but also a deep understanding of basic simplicities, giving it today a particular value for education at all levels from the young child to the adult. It establishes a criterion of craftsmanship and could be a continuing source of inspiration not only for the ordinary visitor but for student and

professional, through whom could come a strong influence upon industrial design. A body of work of this quality, in pottery, wood, metal, woven and printed textiles, embroidery, is already available as, for example, the substantial collection of block-printed textiles left by Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher and, if it could be properly housed, more would be readily contributed or bequeathed.

It is therefore proposed to raise funds to establish a centre, which must necessarily be attached to an existing institution such as a university or museum, with easy access. To maintain continued liveliness, changing exhibitions, including work from overseas, are also envisaged. There would be library space not only for books but for personal records, notebooks and other manuscripts, and room where reserve collections could be handled at leisure, giving exceptional opportunities for first-hand study.⁵

Numerous venues where the collections might be housed were mooted and over the coming months locations explored in Guildford, West Dean and Farnham as well as Bristol and Bath. Meanwhile progress continued, slow but sure, in formalising the status of the group and on 1 April 1970 the Crafts Study Centre attained charitable status with Ewart Uncles, a potter and educationist, taking the Chair. At the same time the collection was growing apace thanks to promises on all sides, as Robin Tanner recalled in his autobiography:

Our friend Bernard Leach said he would readily lodge a collection of his pots with us if we could find a home. Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie offered the same. Rita Beales - surely the greatest of linen weavers - announced that I was one of her executors, and that the fine collection of her incomparable hand-spun, vegetable-dyed, hand-woven linens was ours as soon as we could house it. Other friends were ready to give calligraphy by Edward Johnston, Graily Hewitt, and Irene Wellington, furniture by Gimson and the Barnsleys, and the residue of weaving done by Ethel Mairet and those associated with her.⁶

Of the various locations being pursued as a possible home for the Crafts Study Centre (CSC) the Trustees favoured The Holburne of Menstrie Museum (now The Holburne Museum of Art), a Georgian building standing in its own grounds at the top of Great Pulteney Street, five minutes from the centre of Bath. First built as the Sydney Hotel it had been acquired by the Trustees of the Holburne in 1913 and converted by Sir Reginald Blomfield to house the fine and decorative art collections of Sir Thomas William Holburne (1793-1874). Links between the Museum and the University of Bath had been forged in the late 1960s. The Holburne Trustees together with the University welcomed the idea of embracing the CSC. At a dinner held on 23 October 1970, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bath was able to give the assurance that 'Senate offered a definite invitation to the Crafts Study Centre, since not only was the University keen to have it but co-operation from representatives of the Holburne and the City Council was evident'.⁷

An outline proposal was put forward to build an extension at the back of the museum which was to include accommodation for the CSC. Needless to say the Crafts Study Centre, as the bride, was expected to bring at least a modest dowry rather than move in penniless; fund-raising had to begin in earnest. However, as Robin Tanner recalled 'the struggle to raise funds to establish a Centre was long and frustrating'.⁸ It was to be another seven years before the partnership was fully forged and the CSC could at last open its doors to the public within the Holburne Museum. Amongst the Trustees:

The Tanners were stalwart fund-raisers, both giving generously themselves and attracting donations and support. Robin gave a talk to the Friends of the Museum which reassured and enthused and it was agreed that an exhibition of the proposed Crafts Study Centre collection should be mounted at the Holburne during July and August 1972. With able assistance... Robin master-minded the mounting of the exhibition and organised publication of the catalogue, which provided a lasting record and served as an excellent aid in encouraging donations.⁹

The following year Ewart Uncles retired and James Noel White, formerly with the Council of Industrial Design and a leading figure in the World Crafts Council, was appointed Chairman of the Crafts Study Centre. In 1981 he was to be succeeded by

Robert Goodden, former Pro-Rector of the Royal College of Art and Chairman of the Crafts Council, followed in 1982 for over 20 years by Christopher Frayling, who was to become Rector of the Royal College of Art and in 2004 Chairman of Arts Council England. James Noel White recognised the urgent need of drawing up a preliminary list and catalogue of all the work promised to the Centre when it opened and a grant was secured from the Ernest Cook Trust to appoint a part-time research assistant to visit prospective donors and catalogue the work that had been proffered.

At the same time it was becoming increasingly apparent that the large grants needed for major building work were not going to be forthcoming and reluctantly, in 1975, it was decided to abandon the plans for an extension to the Holburne. Instead half of the ground floor of the Museum was offered to the Crafts Study Centre. This space had formerly been the resident caretaker's flat but with his retirement and the installation of a new security system, it was now vacant and available. Although this was a much more modest start than originally had been envisaged, the Crafts Study Centre Trustees decided to accept the offer rather than delay an opening any further. The following year, a generous grant from the Crafts Council enabled this space to be skilfully converted by Neville Ward Associates to form an L-shaped permanent exhibition area, separate study room-cum-office and store. High ceilings, neutral colours and light, natural wood fittings created a spacious and uncluttered effect and served to show work from the permanent craft collections to advantage. In 1994, further space on the first floor of the Holburne Museum was converted on similar lines by Fielden and Clegg to provide an archive study room and library in memory of Robin and Heather Tanner. Small temporary exhibitions were sometimes mounted within the CSC's permanent galleries, whilst those on a larger scale could be shown in the more extensive temporary exhibition galleries of the Holburne Museum which were shared with the Centre. From the part-time post of Research Assistant for the Crafts Study Centre, Barley Roscoe, was appointed full-time to run it, and later, was to become the Director of the Holburne Museum and Crafts Study Centre.

Here over more than two decades, the CSC obtained an international reputation as a unique collection and archive of British crafts from 1900 onwards. Strongest in work

of the first half of the twentieth century, more contemporary exhibits were added through gift and purchase on the recommendation of the Acquisitions Committee comprised of leading figures in each area represented in the CSC collections. Major figures in the craft world played a significant role in the growth of the collection and archive through donation and bequest, their generosity often encouraging further gifts. To the profound gratitude of all the Trustees and with particular encouragement from both Muriel Rose together with Henry Hammond, the potter and educationist, Bernard Leach offered to present nearly 100 of his pots to the Centre together with his source collection, and subsequently bequeathed his archive. In addition Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie, one of Leach's first students at St Ives, gave a substantial collection of her pots to the CSC together with fine examples of work by her friends and contemporaries Michael Cardew and Norah Braden. As former Head of Ceramics at the West Surrey College of Art & Design, Farnham (subsequently the Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College), Henry Hammond went on to bequeath his archive to the Centre together with pieces from his collection. Latterly the CSC was very fortunate to receive the coveted Lucie Rie archive which complemented an impressive group of work in the collection by Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, two of the most significant figures in British post-war pottery.

Turning to textiles, the collection of two of the most talented British hand-blockprinters of the 1920s-30s, Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher, which Robin Tanner had been bequeathed and which had inspired the founding of the CSC, included lengths, garments, samples, printing blocks and source material. Subsequently Susan Bosence, who had felt compelled to start blockprinting textiles on first seeing their work in the late 1940s, placed her own collection and archive with the Centre. Marianne Straub, a weaver and founder Trustee of the CSC who had been the executor for Ethel Mairet, herself an important and influential figure in the weaving world from the 1920s onwards, ensured that Ethel Mairet's Workshop was fully represented.

'It was also one of the first collections in the CSC to be the subject of substantial research culminating in a publication and exhibition. Having benefited from a grant from the Worshipful Company of Weavers and support from the Crafts Council,

Margot Coatts was appointed to work on this material which led to the publication of *A Weaver's Life: Ethel Mairet 1872-1952* (the first in a series of joint publications with the Crafts Council), and a touring exhibition which was shown in Bath, Birmingham and London [during 1983-4].¹⁰

Ella McLeod, Head of Textiles at the West Surrey College of Art & Design placed a representative and significant group of weaving by Elizabeth Peacock with the collection, whilst Rita Beales not only donated and bequeathed her collection of finely woven linen and wool textiles but also munificently bequeathed her entire estate to the Centre.

The calligraphy collection of the CSC, which developed from the choice collection of the calligraphy expert and Trustee, Heather Child, was to become the most substantial body of 20th century British calligraphy outside London, much used by teachers and students of lettering as well as scholars, as an indispensable source of reference and research. Work by two of the most important figures in the history of modern calligraphy, Edward Johnston and Irene Wellington, was placed in the Centre thanks to the generosity of the Johnston family and Irene Wellington herself, whilst grants from Leverhulme and the Crafts Council facilitated their research and documentation. A full catalogue of the Edward Johnston collection was made by Justin Howes and published in 1987, while Heather Collins catalogued the Irene Wellington collection and went on to contribute to the publication *More Than Fine Writing* together with Heather Child, Ann Hechle and Donald Jackson (Pelham Books, 1986; British Library, 1998). The first publication coincided with a major retrospective of Irene Wellington's work initiated by the Crafts Study Centre, and helped make the CSC one of the foremost beneficiaries for donations and bequests of 20th century calligraphy and lettering.

The long loan of nearly 100 exhibits from the Crafts Council collection for over a decade made an excellent complement to work in the CSC and enabled the museum to show a full range of work spanning the century. Many of these pieces played an important part in redisplaying work from the Holburne Museum and Crafts Study Centre where exhibits were placed in stimulating juxtaposition to provoke comparisons and contrasts of colour, form, scale, texture and content as well as

date, material and technique. This prompted the inclusion of the Holburne Museum and Crafts Study Centre as a case study in *Contemporary Crafts in Museums* published by Southern Arts (1996). In addition the Crafts Study Centre's collection was well used for research by students, craftspeople and the general public on a day to day basis. Study facilities, available by appointment on weekdays, were frequently used by students and groups from colleges, schools, specialist societies and practising craftspeople. Degree students did studies on various areas of the collection as part of their course work, while art tutors often found it useful to bring classes to the Centre to draw and handle work.¹¹

From the beginning requests for loans from the permanent collections were made for exhibitions of national and international importance. Over the last decade ceramics have been lent for major retrospectives of Lucie Rie and Hans Coper at the Barbican, London, and again to The Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna. Key pieces from Bernard Leach's collection and archive toured Japan in *Bernard Leach, Potter and Artist* with a final showing at the Crafts Council, London in 1998. His biography *Bernard Leach, Life and Work* by Emmanuel Cooper was published by Yale University Press in 2003, the author fully acknowledging how much his research had depended on access to the Leach archive in the Centre. The publication of the book coincided with the end of the tour of an exhibition *Bernard Leach: Concept & Form* at the National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff to which the Centre had made a substantial loan of pots and drawings. In the same way, a large body of woven material from Ethel Mairet's Workshop was lent for a major touring exhibition in Japan entitled *The English Arts and Crafts Movement and Shoji Hamada*. Loans of Barron and Larcher's work together with other printed textiles from the collection were lent for various exhibitions including *Colour into Cloth* mounted as a touring exhibition by the Crafts Council in association with the Centre, *Modern Britain 1929-1939* at the Design Museum, London and the touring exhibition *Pleasures of Peace*, initiated by the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts.

From its inception the CSC maintained an energetic exhibition and events programme including lectures, demonstrations, seminars and study days. As already shown, many of these were initiated by the Centre and drew on the permanent collection, with illustrated catalogues and related publications providing a lasting

record. In addition major touring exhibitions that had originated elsewhere were hosted by the CSC such as, latterly, *Codes and Messages: Lettering Today* (Crafts Council) and *Peter Collingwood - Master Weaver* (firstsite, Colchester).

The move of the CSC to the Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College in spring 2000 developed from a recommendation made during work conducted for the Holburne Museum and Crafts Study Centre by Bonnar Keenlyside Consultants following on from a preliminary study by Simon Olding and Crispin Paine:

Thanks to a grant from the Arts Council of England in 1997 Bonnar Keenlyside originally were appointed to explore the feasibility of building a purpose built extension to the Holburne Museum to accommodate the CSC and provide improved joint facilities. However, having concluded that this was not a viable option Bonnar Keenlyside went on to recommend that the CSC should seek another partner. The two bodies of Trustees recognised that this would be in the interests of both parties as not only would this release much needed space within the existing building for further displays of the Holburne's collections, but also allow the Study Centre to expand and develop its potential to the full. Possibilities for consideration were listed, while editorials in *Crafts* magazine and *The Museums Journal* stimulated a good response. A short list was drawn up, offers invited and exploratory visits made. The field was narrowed and, after much discussion and deliberation including further follow up visits, Trustees agreed that a partnership with the Institute would be in the very best interests of the CSC for the long term future.

Historically, many of the founder members of the Study Centre [such as Henry Hammond, Ella McLeod and Susan Bosence] had close links with the Institute, and this partnership [now] looked to support both organisations' core aims in fostering excellence in the teaching, research and development of modern crafts, whilst also facilitating wider public and academic access of an invaluable resource.¹²

The Institute was firmly committed to building dedicated space for the Centre on campus, and in the interim it was agreed the collections would be accommodated in accessible storage nearby in Farnham. Digitisation of the collection, together with a significant proportion of textual items from part of the archive, was seen as key to

managing the documentation of its collections and archive efficiently, whilst enabling the CSC to raise its profile by making itself accessible worldwide. The CSC swiftly benefited from its new partnership with the Institute for, in May 2000 and within a month of the collections moving to Farnham, an award of £194,000 was made to the Institute through the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) of the British Higher Education Funding Councils. This funding, together with an additional grant from the Headley Trust, meant the CSC was now in a position to proceed with its planned digitisation project. The outcome of this project would be the production of digital resource material, featuring some 3,000 images from the collection and 1,000 documents from the archive, together with a selection of associated teaching and learning materials. It was most encouraging to have such immediate positive evidence of the mutual benefits of the partnership between the CSC and the Institute from its inception and together be able to look forward to a bright future ahead.

The History of the Crafts Study Centre' has drawn closely on 'Robin Tanner and the Crafts Study Centre' by Barley Roscoe, published in *Tributes to Robin Tanner 1904-1988* (Crafts Study Centre, 1990) and 'New Horizons for the Crafts Study Centre and Archive', a paper presented by Barley Roscoe to the OECD/IMHE seminar on University Museums, Paris, September 2000 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001), both of which provide further detail than space allows in this essay.

¹ Robin Tanner, 'Phyllis Barron (1890-1964) and Dorothy Larcher (1884-1952) as I knew them', unpublished lecture given at the Holburne Museum and Crafts Study Centre, Bath, 1 June 1978. Quoted by Barley Roscoe, 'Robin Tanner and the Crafts Study Centre' in *Tributes to Robin Tanner 1904-1988* (Crafts Study Centre, 1990)

² Barley Roscoe, 'Robin Tanner and the Crafts Study Centre' in *Tributes to Robin Tanner 1904-1988* (Crafts Study Centre, 1990)

³ Robin Tanner, *Double Harness* (Impact Books, London, 1987) p168

⁴ Minutes of the first meeting to discuss the proposed permanent collection of the work of Twentieth Century Artist Craftsmen, held at Friends House, London, NW1, 11 November 1968

⁵ Crafts collection statement of Policy and Aims, 1 October 1968

⁶ See 3, p179

⁷ Minutes of the meeting of the Crafts Study Centre Trustees, held at 2 Manchester Square, London W1.21 November 1970

⁸ See 3, p180

⁹ See 2, p17

¹⁰ Barley Roscoe, 'New Horizons for the Crafts Study Centre and Archive', paper presented at OECD/IMHE Seminar on University Museums, Paris, September 2000. Published in *Managing University Museums* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001)

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid