The Center and its Collections

The Yale Center for British Art houses the largest and most comprehensive collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. Presented to the University by Paul Mellon, the collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, rare books, and manuscripts reflects the development of British art and culture from the Elizabethan period onward. The Center offers a year-round schedule of exhibitions and educational programs, including films, concerts, lectures, tours, symposia, and family programs. It also provides numerous opportunities for scholarly research, including residential fellowships. Academic resources of the Center comprise the reference library and photo archive, conservation laboratories, and a study room for examining works on paper from the collection. An affiliated institution in London, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, awards grants and fellowships, publishes academic titles, and sponsors Yale’s first credit-granting undergraduate study abroad program, Yale-in-London.

Paul Mellon, founder

Paul Mellon (1907–1999) was the son of the Pittsburgh industrialist, Andrew Mellon, and his English wife, Nora McMullen. As a child, Paul Mellon spent long periods of time in England, where he began to develop a lifelong love of British culture. He studied at the Choate School in Connecticut, followed by undergraduate studies at Yale University (Class of 1929), and a post-graduate year at Clare College, University of Cambridge. He especially loved English literature and enjoyed rowing for Cambridge.

Mr. Mellon decided early on not to follow in his father’s footsteps as an industrialist and financier. While father and son would never share an interest in business, they found common ground in their love of art and philanthropy. Paul Mellon purchased his first painting, *Pumpkin with a Stable-lad* by eighteenth-century British artist George Stubbs, in 1936. Stubbs remained a favorite artist of Mr. Mellon’s throughout his lifetime. From the 1930s to the 1960s, Mr. Mellon assembled the largest and most comprehensive collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. In 1966 he donated this collection of paintings, drawings, prints, and rare books to his alma mater, Yale University, provided funds for a building to house the works of art, and established an endowment to sustain its operations. Mr. Mellon also funded two residential colleges, entire courses.
of study, lectureships, professorships, and scholarships at Yale. To date Paul Mellon remains one of the University’s most generous benefactors.

The Building
The Yale Center for British Art is designed by the internationally acclaimed American architect Louis I. Kahn. Located across the street from his first major commission, the Yale University Art Gallery (1953), the Center was Kahn’s final work and was completed after his death in 1974. It was the first museum in the United States to incorporate retail shops in its design.

The Center’s exterior of matte steel and reflective glass confers a monumental presence in downtown New Haven. The geometrical, four-floor interior is designed around two courtyards and is comprised of a restrained palette of natural materials including travertine marble, white oak, and Belgian linen. Kahn succeeded in creating intimate galleries where one can view objects in diffused natural light. He wanted to allow in as much daylight as possible, with artificial illumination used only on dark days or in the evening. The building’s design, materials, and sky-lit rooms combine to provide an environment for the works of art that is simple and dignified.

Louis I. Kahn, architect
One of the twentieth century’s leading architects, Louis Isadore Kahn (1901–1974) was born in Estonia and immigrated to the United States at the age of four. A gifted artist, he passed up a merit scholarship to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, determined instead to study architecture at the University of Pennsylvania.

Kahn taught at Yale University from 1947 to 1957. During that time, he was also resident architect at the American Academy in Rome, and from there traveled throughout Italy, Egypt, and Greece, recording historic architecture in drawings and sketches. This was a significant period in Kahn’s life, as he reconciled his belief in modernism with his admiration for enduring buildings of the past.

After his tenure at Yale University, Kahn accepted a position at the University of Pennsylvania, where he became dean of the School of Architecture. From the mid-1950s onward, his reputation was firmly established; his later years were distinguished by honors and awards, plus important national and international commissions including the Salk Institute for Biological Studies (La Jolla, California), the Kimbell Art Museum (Fort Worth, Texas), and the National Assembly Building (Dhaka, Bangladesh). Kahn’s architecture is notable for its simple geometric forms and the complex play between natural light and materials.

Paintings and Sculpture
The Center’s collection of nearly 2,000 paintings and two hundred sculptures vividly narrates the story of British art, life, and culture since the end of the Middle Ages. Particularly strong in the period from the birth of William Hogarth (1697) to the death of J.M.W. Turner (1851), the collection reflects the tastes of its founder, Paul Mellon.
Among the artists best represented are William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, George Stubbs, Joseph Wright of Derby, John Constable, and J. M. W. Turner. The Center’s collection ranges from a late fifteenth-century Nottingham alabaster to the work of such twentieth-century artists as Stanley Spencer, Barbara Hepworth, and Ben Nicholson.

The story of British art is by no means confined to artists born in the British Isles. Major figures from continental Europe and America painted for British patrons or spent periods of their careers in Britain. Among those featured in the collection are Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, Canaletto, Johan Zoffany, John Singleton Copley, Benjamin West, and James McNeill Whistler.

While the Center's large collection of British portraits contains grand full-lengths by Van Dyck, Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds, and Thomas Lawrence, the real character of this collection comes from portraits of a less imposing type, known as “conversation pieces.” Artists like Hogarth, Gainsborough, Zoffany, and Arthur Devis were among the best practitioners of this genre, and the Center’s collection of conversation pieces by these artists is world-renowned.

Equally impressive is the Center’s rich array of British landscape paintings. Of particular note are works by the greatest landscape painters of the eighteenth century, Gainsborough and Richard Wilson, and by their nineteenth-century counterparts, Constable and Turner. Visitors will savor Turner’s *Dort (or Dordrecht): The Dort Packet-Boat from Rotterdam Becalmed*, and his stormy image of *Staffa, Fingal’s Cave*; Constable’s *Hadleigh Castle*, his full-scale sketch for *Stratford Mill*, and a number of his famous cloud studies; as well as a brilliant group of views in France and Italy by the great Richard Parkes Bonington.

Thanks to the special interests of Mr. Mellon, the Center also has one of the greatest collections of British sporting and animal paintings in the world. It includes a number of pictures by the preeminent artist of this genre, George Stubbs. Foxhunting, horseracing, and other equestrian scenes by John Wootton, Benjamin Marshall, and Alfred Munnings are among the Center’s treasures.

Other genres represented prominently in the collection are marine painting, especially the works of Samuel Scott and Charles Brooking; the London cityscape, including a remarkable group of views on the Thames by Canaletto and his English followers; the work of travel artists, with special emphasis on India; and scenes from the plays of Shakespeare, together with many portraits of eighteenth-century character actors.

The Center’s growing sculpture collection is especially strong in works by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists such as Louis-Francois Roubiliac, Joseph Nollekens, and Francis Chantrey. The Center also holds spectacular examples of twentieth-century sculpture, including works by Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore, and Barbara Hepworth.

**Prints and Drawings**

The Center is home to a collection of more than 20,000 drawings and watercolors and 30,000 prints, offering a comprehensive view of the development of British graphic art from Elizabethan miniaturists to the present. The focus is on the flowering of the British watercolor school in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
Paul Mellon’s love of British sporting art is reflected by his acquisition of fine drawings by Sawrey Gilpin, James Ward, and George Stubbs, and an exhaustive selection of sporting prints. Among the outstanding block acquisitions are the Girtin collection and the Thomas Edmond Lowinsky collection of figure drawings. These core building blocks of the collection have been supplemented with works by William Hogarth, Paul Sandby, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and others. There are nearly four hundred lively drawings by Thomas Rowlandson, and William Blake is represented by one of the foremost collections of his illuminated books, in rare combination with his drawings, watercolors, tempera paintings, and prints. Nineteenth-century masters include John Constable, Samuel Palmer, Richard Parkes Bonington, John Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelites. The limitless variety of J.M.W. Turner can be seen in what is perhaps the best balanced group of watercolors by him outside London.

Areas of specialized interest include architectural drawings, topographical prints, caricatures, mezzotint portraits, and Shakespearean subjects. Representations of twentieth-century graphic art include Walter Sickert, Duncan Grant, Paul Nash, Edward Burra, Stanley Spencer, and one of the largest collections of work by Augustus and Gwen John outside the United Kingdom. An equal number of sheets is devoted to the decorations for the infamous cabaret club, the Cave of the Golden Calf. These include most of Spencer Gore’s preparatory drawings for the murals, Eric Gill’s design for the entrance sign, and Wyndham Lewis’s magnificent watercolor study for his lost oil Kermesse. Among the prints are signature examples and portfolios by Edward Wadsworth, David Bomberg, C.R.W. Nevinson, John Banting, Keith Vaughan, Graham Sutherland, David Hockney, Eduardo Paolozzi, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Peter Doig, Langlands and Bell, and Gary Hume.

**Rare Books and Manuscripts**

Housing approximately 35,000 volumes, the Center’s collection of rare books and manuscripts focuses on material relating to the visual arts and cultural life in the United Kingdom and former British Empire from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Its particular strengths include illustrated color-plate books, sporting books and manuscripts, early maps and atlases, and archival material relating to British artists of all periods. The collection also includes a complete set of William Morris’s Kelmscott Press publications as well as a growing collection of contemporary artists’ books.

The core of the collection of illustrated books is the material amassed by Major J. R. Abbey, one of the first collectors of British color-plate books, and includes more than 2,000 volumes describing British life, customs, scenery, and travel during the period 1770–1860. The Center’s collection also contains a significant number of early maps and atlases.

The collection also includes all of the important British cartographers, as well as John Speed’s *Theater of the Empire of Great Britain* and John Ogilby’s *Britannia*. The greatest of the cartographic treasures are the Brixen globes, an extraordinary pair of terrestrial and celestial globes made for Sebastian Sperantius, ordained as bishop of Brixen around 1521–22. The collection also includes the earliest surviving manuscript map showing Sir Francis Drake’s circumnavigation (ca. 1587) and a manuscript map of the southeastern part of North America (1721).
The Center houses hundreds of artists’ manuals, dating from 1600 to 1900 and ranging from simple drawing manuals to advanced treatises on technique, perspective, anatomy, and aesthetic theory. Archival material includes letters, journals, and account books by artists Thomas Gainsborough, David Roberts, James Ward, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Vanessa Bell, and others.

The collection also includes some of the first books printed in the English language, as well as some 1,300 individual leaves from illustrated incunables (books printed before 1501), most from books printed on the Continent.

Reference Library and Archives
The Reference Library collections are open to researchers of all types; students, scholars, and the general public are welcome to browse the 30,000 titles and more than eighty current periodicals devoted to British art, artists, and culture from the sixteenth century to the present day. The collections include all of the essential reference works on British artists, but also contain resources on British architecture, print and book culture, performing arts, costume, town and county histories, and travel books. The Reference Library maintains a growing and vital collection of art conservation and technical analysis materials and offers a station for viewing a rich collection of the Center’s past lectures and programs.

The Photograph Archive, located within the Reference Library, is a study collection of more than 200,000 photographic reproductions of works of British art from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century. The archive represents both public and private collections worldwide with a particular focus on collections in the United States, Canada, and Australia. The Center’s Institutional Archive, which was created in 2009, holds more than 1,000 linear feet of records and hundreds of architectural drawings that document the Center’s construction and stewardship from the mid-1960s onward.

The Reference Library’s holdings, not including the Photograph and Institutional Archives, can be searched either independently or in conjunction with the Center’s art and rare books collections through Collections Search, as well as through Orbis, Yale Library’s online catalogue.

Conservation Laboratories
The Center houses two modern facilities dedicated to the conservation and restoration of works of art in its collection. They provide complete technical examinations of the museum’s collections. Treatments range from gentle surface cleaning to complex structural repairs. In addition to supporting its own conservation needs, the Center cares for works of art on paper from the permanent collection of the Yale University Art Gallery.

Both facilities are dedicated to educating staff, fellows, Yale students, and the public about conservation practices through lectures, demonstrations, workshops, and research projects.

Study Room
The Study Room is the principal means of access to prints, drawings, watercolors, rare books, manuscripts, and maps in the Center’s collection. Hours: Tuesday–Friday, 10 am–4:30 pm. No appointment is required.
Publications
The Center is active in the publishing of research, and collaborates with Yale University Press on publications accompanying its major exhibitions. In conjunction with the Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art, the Center is also responsible for Studies in British Art, an ongoing series of essay volumes published by Yale University Press.

Public Programs
The Center offers a rich array of public programs throughout the year, offering visitors opportunities to attend talks, film screenings, and performances by renowned artists, scholars, directors, musicians and performers.

Research Programs
As well as fostering public programs, the Center offers opportunities for scholars at all levels to study its collections, and participate in its scholarly programs. The Center offers short-term residential Visiting Scholar Awards at pre-doctoral and postdoctoral levels; opportunities for students at Yale and elsewhere, including travel grants, research positions, an annual Graduate Student Symposium, and a biennial Graduate Student Summer Seminar.

Schools and Teachers
Education Staff works closely with local teachers to supplement classroom teaching with access to works of art, and by helping teachers integrate visual learning into their curricula. In addition, the Center offers a range of opportunities customized to the needs of teachers looking to use visual resources in their classrooms.

Yale in London
Yale in London is a unique opportunity for Yale College students to spend the spring or summer in London taking classes in the history of British Art, literature, history, and culture. The program is based at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

Yale Student Guide Program
The Center is home to an active undergraduate Student Guide Program. Admittance to the program is highly competitive and guides offer to the public specially devised tours of the collections every Saturday and Sunday during the academic year. Each year the guides curate an “Art in Focus” exhibition, presenting objects from the collections to the public and gaining experience in every aspect of exhibition practice.

Museum Shop
Browse the catalogues and books on British art; discover a unique gift for a special occasion or a beautiful object for your home; or visit the children’s section, devoted to books, toys, and games. The Museum Shop is a favorite with Center visitors for its good taste and hard-to-find items.