

*Beyond Books and Cross-Continents: Cataloguing English Printing Copperplates and
Woodblocks in American Library Collections*

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Non-book materials, especially non-paper materials, in library collections are usually a marginal area. This paper intends to address the rather awkward situation for printing objects located in libraries, and the problem of cataloguing them.

Museums and libraries have already established clear systems for historical objects, printed books and manuscripts. However, there are rarely any cataloguing methods for printing objects, namely engraved or etched copperplates and woodblocks, although they are also collected for their historical and artistic value and close affinity to printed materials. These objects are often neglected and become hidden collections in museums and libraries. This paper considers the problems and reasons of the neglected printing plates and woodblocks, and the cataloguing methods for the use of wide researchers, with specific examples at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, and the Huntington Library, California, which catalogues I established from the start.

First of all, I should state that I am not a librarian but an art historian with some museum documentation training. My concern will therefore be more user or researcher oriented than technical issues on which librarians would normally concentrate. I started studying printing plates when I was researching the English Romantic writer and artist William Blake (1757-1827). My PhD thesis was about the technical and material study of Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826), mainly concerned with his engraved copper plates and their historical context. It has been later enlarged and revised into a book, *William Blake and the Art of Engraving* (2009). For the research of Blake's plates, I visited various museums and libraries in the UK and the USA to examine printing copper plates and woodblocks by Blake and others for comparison and to build the historical context of Blake's engraving. My archival research includes collections of the British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Fitzwilliam Museum, Bodleian Library Oxford, Houghton Library Harvard, Yale University Art Gallery, National Gallery of Art Washington D.C., Morgan Library New York, Huntington Library LA and Museum of Fine Arts Boston. During my archival visits, it has been clear that printing plates are rarely treated as equal to books, manuscripts, and even prints. Very few of them are properly catalogued, and therefore are unknown to the public. The storing situation of the copper plates and woodblocks in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston is an example of most archives' treatment for such collections. They were wrapped tightly in papers and boxes, obviously never examined before my visit.



One reason for the poor treatment of the printing objects is that these items in library collections are relatively few in number, and the other is that their physicality is very different from books and manuscripts. Libraries usually have problems of cataloguing or even storing these objects. As printing templates, they share the information of author, publisher, text and image, publishing date and so on, with books. But the material they are made of and their 3-dimensional physicality separate them completely from paper-based books and manuscripts normally collected in libraries.

To give a few examples of the current state of cataloguing printing objects, the Newberry Library in Chicago puts printing plates under the subject of “Type and type-founding” and the genre/form of “Artifacts”. Comparing the catalogues of book and printing plates, the major difference is that books use “Subject” as a distinct field, and printing plates are placed under the field of “Genre/ Form”. The HOLLIS catalogue of Harvard University has a similar way of dealing with these materials. Considering Harvard University has a number of art and science museums, archives and libraries of special subjects, each with their own rich collections, the HOLLIS catalogue has a hard task to integrate all the collections in one online system. During my research trips at Harvard, I learned that the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts at the Houghton Library stores some 200 printing plates and around 500 woodblocks. However, there are also similar collections in Harvard Art Museums and other Harvard libraries. For example, a Rembrandt’s copper plate is stored in one of the Harvard Art Museums (Record Identifier: HUAM238157) rather than the Houghton Library. In other words, printing plates and woodblocks are both collected by museums, art galleries and libraries. This explains how uncertain or boundary-crossing the printing plates are in classification. Yale University puts its collection of printing plates and woodblocks in the University Art Gallery rather than the main Library or the rare book Beinecke Library, under the category of “Print

Templates”. The British Library does not have printing plates and woodblocks. They have been kept in the Prints and Drawings Room of the British Museum since the Library and the Museum were at the same location on the Great Russell Street before the Library moved to Euston Road. The Bodleian Library of Oxford University has many printing plates in its special collection, but has no online catalogue for them. In 2002 while I was researching William Blake’s printing copperplates, I had to write ahead to the staff of the Rare Books and asked them to pull out the items I found in a reference book written by a Blake scholar. In my short visit, I found that the John Johnson Collection of the Bodleian Library at the very least has over 400 copperplates for Richard Gough’s *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* (1786). The question is how these objects can be made known to the researchers if a book catalogue is not ideal to accommodate them.

It seems lately some libraries have found a good way to deal with these visual materials using the online digital library and image library. The image database of Harvard University (Harvard Library—Digital & Image library—VIA, “Visual Information Access”) not only serves as a museum-like collection database with useful digital images for researchers, but also integrates visual materials in all collections in its many separate libraries, archives and museums. The online database successfully solves the problem of integrating items of different materials and physical characters in sporadic collections, and is easy for researchers to search them.

In view of these, for the next part of my paper I would like to share the experience of my research on printing plates and woodblocks in two major collections, the problems I encountered and possible solutions for cataloguing them. The two particular collections of the printing plates and woodblocks I have been working on are those of the Houghton Library at Harvard University and the Huntington Library in Los Angeles. I have researched around 200 printing copper and steel plates at the Houghton and catalogued 1700 woodblocks at the Huntington. Both collections represent certain early 20th century American collectors’ interest in English culture. As a whole, the collecting motivation for printing plates and woodblocks is associated with the interest in prints and books. This is reflected by the two American collectors, W.B.O. Field and Henry E. Huntington.

The printing plates in the Houghton collection were deposited by W.B.O. Field in

1944, including around 200 copper and steel plates and some woodblocks. According to the family papers in the New York Public Library, William Bradhurst Osgood Field (1870-1949) and his family were prominent members of society in New York City and Lenox, Massachusetts during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Field was an engineer and businessman. His interests also defined him as an enthusiastic book collector and philanthropist. Field sat on the boards of many charitable and commercial organizations, and was a member of over twenty clubs and societies, notably serving as president of the Grolier Club. (New York Public Library website) He collected rare books, book illustration, manuscripts, prints and caricatures, coins and collectibles, and supported numerous charitable and cultural organizations. He bequeathed part of his collections to Harvard College Library, Lenox Library and others. The printing plates and woodblocks he gave to Harvard and now in the Houghton Library are those for illustrations by Hablot K. Browne, George Cruikshank, and John Leech, mostly 19th-century English engravers and caricaturists. (HOLLIS finding aids for Call No.: *44W-3093-3117, *44WM-48-49)

The other collection I consulted and have recently been intensely working on towards an online catalogue is the woodblock collection in the Huntington Library. The Armstrong collection of woodblocks, ranging from the 16th to the 19th century, has initially been recorded to have a total amount of nearly 4000 items by the former owner James Tarbotton Armstrong (c.1850-1933). Armstrong was an English engineer with an interest in printing and bookplate. He immigrated to California in 1910s, and sold his woodblock collection in 1917 to Henry E. Huntington, the eminent art and book collector and founder of the Huntington Library. (Huntington Library rare book collection)

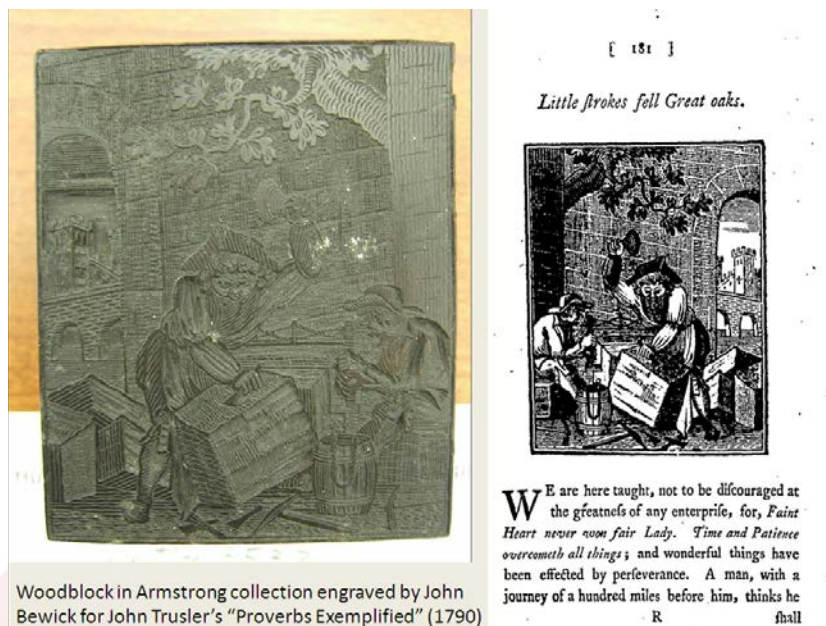
Both late-19th and early-20th century American collectors, Henry Huntington and W.B.O. Field started as businessmen, and with their wealth developed an interest in collecting rare books and art works. Both were interested in collecting English prints and books, which lead to the collecting of printing plates and woodblocks. While they were genuine art and book lovers, and either donated their collection or opened a non-profit library to the public, James Armstrong was a more dubious figure in collecting history. Armstrong created a catalogue draft with very simple entries and sample prints from his woodblocks pasted in the poorly bound paper from the London Ex Libris Society which he once served as treasury.



James T. Armstrong's catalogue, Huntington Library

The records, however, prove to be incomplete and have countless mistakes and mis-attributions. With the purpose of selling his collection with a fair price, Armstrong attributed many of the items to famous artists and engravers such as William Blake, George and Robert Cruikshank, Thomas Bewick, William Morris (Kelmescott Press), William James Linton, John Leech, George Baxter, etc. My initial investigation has revealed that many of these attributions are not true. It has been realized over the years by the librarians that Armstrong's catalogue was not a reliable one. According to a recent letter to the Huntington Library from the current treasurer and membership secretary of the Bookplate Society in London, Anthony Pincott, Armstrong went bankrupt in 1905 and was considered by some members of the Ex Libris Society to have wrecked that society.

In spite of this, the collection is full of interesting information regarding wood engraving practice and has many well-executed works which will be great interest to book historians. Among them, I have identified some authentic woodblocks, which match exact publications and were executed by Thomas Bewick, the master of modern English wood engraving, and his brother John Bewick, also a talented wood engraver and Thomas' pupil. The Armstrong woodblock No. 3532 is one of the woodblocks engraved by John Bewick for John Trusler's *Proverbs Exemplified* (1790).



The librarians regard the collection worth a proper catalogue, and the work started in 2006. For my part, beginning with Blake studies on his materials and techniques in engraving, I started to look beyond the 18th century, and the Houghton copper plates and the Huntington woodblocks took me to the field of librarianship. In 2006 and 2007, I volunteered to catalogue the copper and steel plates at the Houghton collection, and started cataloguing the Huntington woodblocks from 2006.

In terms of cataloguing, copper or steel plates are much easier than woodblocks because there are in most cases inscriptions of the title, engraver's name, publisher, and publishing date. For example, one copper plate at the Houghton Library was easily identified to be the printing template for George Cruikshank's print "The Fiend's Frying Pan" (1832) because the title is engraved underneath the image, and the inscription "Designed Etched & Published by George Cruikshank Sept 1 1832" at the bottom left of the plate clearly stating the designer, engraver, publisher and date.

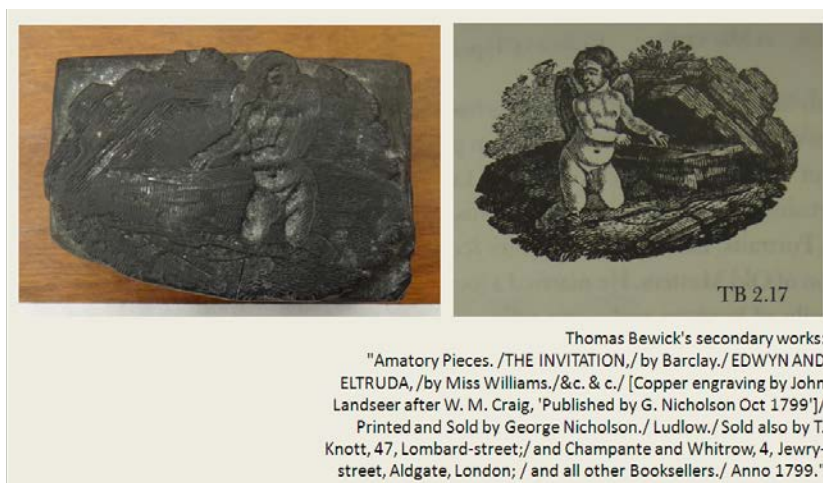


There are problems of cataloguing metal plates when the inscriptions are blurred or incomplete, or when they are illustrations of a book instead of a separate print. The artist's *catalogue raisonné* will be helpful for the search of its publication, but these are not always available, especially if the engraver or the designer/artist is less known. In comparison, it would be much harder to catalogue woodblocks for the reasons described below.

In discussion with the Huntington librarians, my first step of cataloguing the Huntington woodblocks was to define a number of fields using Microsoft Office Access for the database: the number, artist, title, genre, date, size, image description, marks and other physical features, condition, and additional notes. The librarian later successfully converted it into a FileMaker Pro file to fit their own system.



Different from metal plates, the identification is particularly difficult when cataloguing woodblocks. This is because in woodblock printing the images are normally separate from the text, and there is hardly any inscription on the blocks. A typical one is the Armstrong woodblock no. 1656, with the image of a winged cupid kneeling by a large open box. This is a vignette in the 19th century white-line engraving style. But what is the subject and who engraved it? While looking at reference books, I accidentally found it's print in Nigel Tattersfield's *Thomas Bewick: The Complete Illustrative Work* (Tattersfield 2011, Vol. 2, p. 86), and proved that it is actually Bewick's wood engraving after Landseer's copper engraving.



Another example is the Armstrong woodblock no. 1156, a style of late 19th century engraving for book illustration, which has a signature of W.H.W. But who is W.H.W.? And what is the subject and title? To search for the answer is exactly like looking for a needle in a haystack.



Since identification is the biggest problem for the catalogue, the librarians have decided to put the database and their images online in the short future under the Huntington Digital Library: <http://hdl.huntington.org/cdm/> and hope the worldwide audience and readers will offer information. The database will then need substantial work of maintenance later on.

For its research potential, I think it is worth the time and effort to maintain such an online catalogue. It is also hoped to create a research network and make future joint

projects possible. In the internet era, we hope this will not only offer a rich online primary research source, but also encourage interdisciplinary dialogues and cooperative research projects, and create a large community in history of the books. This paper wishes to serve as a pre-launch for the Huntington digital database, as well as a call for suggestions of other possible solutions for the database.

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British Museum Collection:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectId=1439713&partid=1&searchText=william+blake+book+job+copper&fromADBC=ad&toADBC=ad&numpages=10&images=on&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx¤tPage=1

Harvard University Library, Visual Information Access:

http://via.lib.harvard.edu/via/deliver/chunkDisplay?_collection=via&inoID=39908&recordNumber=20&startChunkNum=1&endChunkNum=1&totalChunkCount=1&chunkNumber=1&method=view&image=thumb&offset=0

HOLLIS (catalogue of Harvard University Library) finding aids for Call

No.: *44W-3093-3117, *44WM-48-49:

http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/deepLink?_collection=oasis&uniqueId=hou01673

Huntington Digital Library:

<http://hdl.huntington.org/cdm/>

Newberry Library catalogue:

https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?v1=3&ti=1,3&SAB1=bewick&BOOL1=all%20of%20these&FLD1=Author%20Words%20%28NKEY%29&GRP1=AND%20with%20next%20set&SAB2=artifacts&BOOL2=as%20a%20phrase&FLD2=Subject%3A%20Genre%2FForm%20%28655A%29&GRP2=AND%20with%20next%20set&SAB3=&BOOL3=any%20of%20these&FLD3=Any%20Words%20%28GKEY%29&CNT=20&PID=8yqziSSeyDj6hd8tez_0Ip&SEQ=20130425050557&SID=3

https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?SAB1=bewick&BOOL1=all+of+these&FLD1=Author+Words+%28NKEY%29&GRP1=AND+with+next+set&SAB2=book&BOOL2=as+a+phrase&FLD2=Subject%3A+Genre%2FForm+%28655A%29&GRP2=AND+with+next+set&SAB3=&BOOL3=any+of+these&FLD3=Any+Words+%28GKEY%29&PID=nIfzFFfQzG2PmVK6_Aptq&SEQ=20130425050536&CNT=20&HIST=1

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<http://ecatalogue.art.yale.edu/results.htm?rf=0&rpp=25&sb=objectNumber&sd=0&cl=Print+Templates&byr=0&eyr=0&lv=1&la=2&ls=0&pn=3>

