# AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnership (CDP) PhD Studentship: Re-Evaluating the Status of Prints at the British Library

## Project details

The focus of this project is on identifying and researching the provenance, changing status and visibility of about 500 books of prints. These were listed in an 1812 finding list written by then British Museum Keeper of Prints, William Alexander. The list was later marked up by his successor, J. T. Smith, when about 90% of the books were returned to the Library, where they remain. The recent discovery and sharing of this document has led to a rethinking of the history of the collection, overturning the previous broad assumption that all the prints considered of 'artistic' merit were transferred permanently to the new British Museum Print Room in 1808.

The student will investigate the implications of these works' categorisation, cataloguing and placing at the Museum, the Library and beyond. While based around a quantitative methodology which will involve a deep dive into the collection, the project will explore larger questions around the role of visual materials in collecting history and scholarship, the emergence of expertise, disciplinary norms and museological frameworks in the nineteenth century, and the relative status of visual and textual knowledge.

The student will be encouraged to develop the project according to their interests, experience, and following the course of the research, but the core focus will be on an almost entirely neglected but key aspect of the history of prints. The single sheet print has gained an unassailable value and significance, often mounted and presented as a work of art. Dealers and collectors have broken up print books, as well as albums and extra-illustrated volumes, to separate out images, both engaging with and reinforcing this hierarchy of taste and worth. However, this has led to widespread misunderstanding about the ways in which prints were produced, marketed and consumed in the early modern period. Many prints were in fact conceived in sets or series, sometimes only subsequently put together as books, but often offered in 'numbers' (England) or 'livraisons' (France), with the express expectation that the purchaser would then have them bound, with letterpress. Books and individual prints would typically be sold by the same firms, and inventories and catalogues from the period routinely show the complexities of and overlaps between library and art collections. But this is a history obfuscated by subsequent practices.

Research questions could include:

* What does this corpus of 500 volumes tell us about the taste, values and expectations of print collectors and librarians at the beginning of the nineteenth century?
* How do we experience prints differently as single sheets and within these bound volumes?
* How have the meanings and value of prints been shaped by their physical and organisational placement and classification?
* What can this tell us about the relationship of the literary and the visual within the broader category of print culture?
* How does our experience today compare both with that of the original purchasers, and those who subsequently organised and catalogued collections?
* How can we categorise different kinds of print book, and which were the most significant publications?
* How were these volumes conceived in relation to book, manuscript, print and art collections more broadly?
* How has art historical knowledge been shaped in the longer term by the distribution of prints across different museum and library contexts?
* How does the classification and treatment of these prints at the British Museum and Library compare to other national library collections?
* How might we develop methodologies to allow a more satisfactory, holistic understanding of these objects as both works of art and books, engaging both with the artistic significance of the prints and with their place in the bound codex?
* How can we strike a more productive balance in cataloguing and digitisation work?

## Benefits and Opportunities

The successful candidate will be registered with the [School of Historical Studies](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/school/historical-studies) at Birkbeck, University of London, including History of Art, Museums and Heritage, History, Classics, Archaeology and Philosophy. The School has the largest cohort of MPhil/PhD students at Birkbeck, playing a key role in an active and ambitious research community. Skills sessions are complemented by numerous opportunities to present and discuss work in writing and reading groups, alongside wider events organised within various Research Centres and Institutes.

The British Library has a [vibrant cohort of collaborative doctoral researchers](https://www.bl.uk/research-collaboration/doctoral-research). The successful applicant will be given staff-level access to the Library’s collections, resources and in-house training and development opportunities. CDP students also benefit from a dedicated programme of CDP Cohort Development events delivered in tandem with the other museums, galleries and heritage organisations affiliated with the AHRC CDP scheme.

This collaborative PhD studentship offers the opportunity to combine academic training with practice-based experience and research behind the scenes of a major cultural institution. Offering a combination of sustained and systematic analysis of an important documentary source with visual analysis, it will develop a broad knowledge of print history and artists, as well as an understanding of the inner working of print rooms and library collections.

Given staff-level access to relevant holdings, the student will receive training in and gain hands on experience of handling, identifying, researching and cataloguing prints. They will catalogue the prints under scrutiny using a specially designed spreadsheet to create records which will then be ingested to the British Library's main catalogue. We will also encourage the student to engage in supervised social media activity reflecting their discoveries. In contributing to blog posts, they will receive support and feedback regarding the use of social media tools and the development of writing skills, in accordance with Library guidelines and practice. They will also be encouraged to work with and potentially shadow colleagues in Conservation, Metadata, Digitisation, Western Heritage and Culture and Learning at the Library, gaining broad understanding of the history of the collections, and how they are being made more accessible through research, cataloguing, digitisation and display projects.