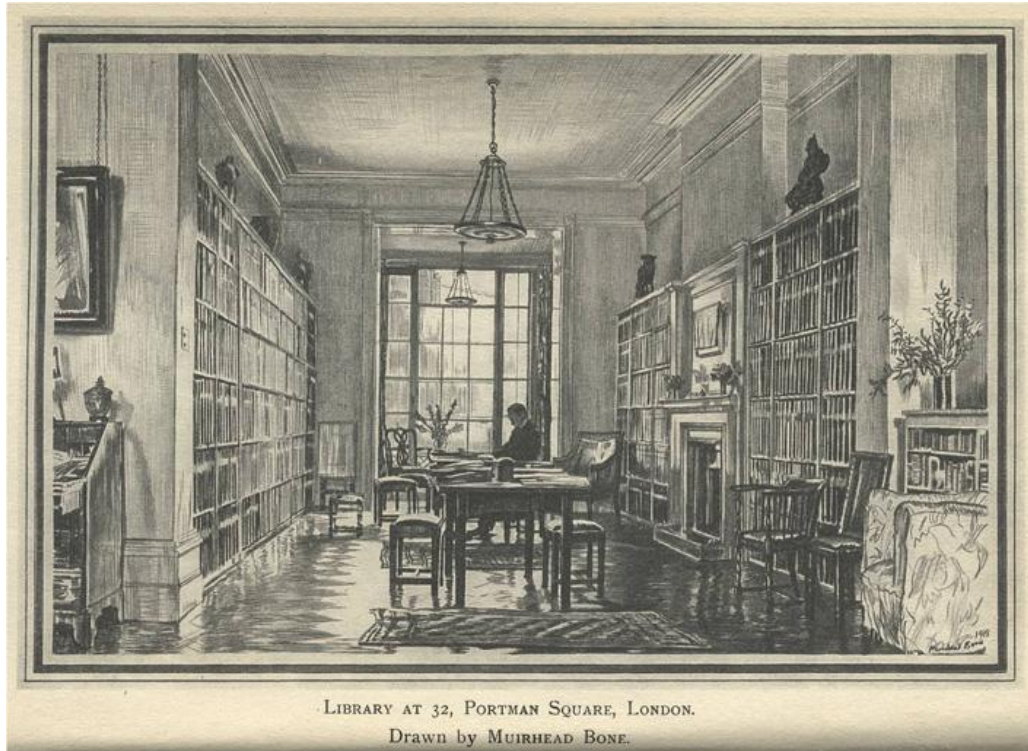


## Art for the Nation: Sir Robert Witt and the War Years

By Zachary D. Stewart

Collecting and the Courtauld Project, Research Forum, Courtauld Institute of Art

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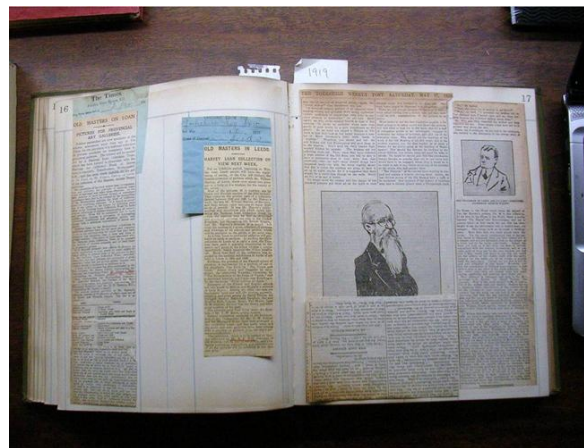
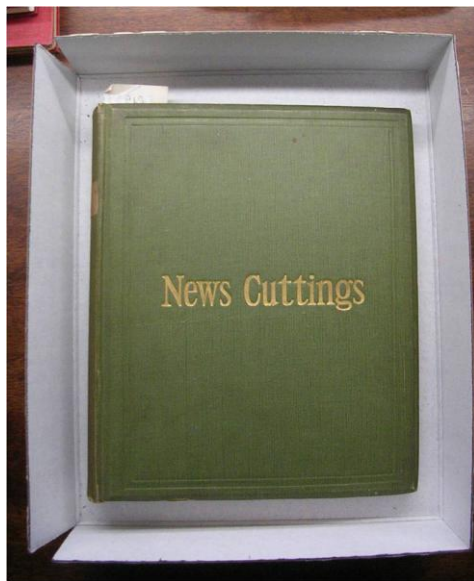
Frontispiece to the 1920 *Catalogue of Painters and Draughtsmen*

Sir Robert Witt was one of the most visible advocates for the cause of art in Britain during the tumultuous events of the First World War. This much is clear from a short examination of the many newspaper clippings, articles, and other documents he preserved in the numerous albums that constitute the archives investigated by the ‘Collecting and the Courtauld Collections’ project this year. What is more difficult to assess from these materials—particularly those dating to the time of the war—is how Witt’s extensive collection of photographic reproductions grew and developed during this same period. However, although the archives contain very little direct information about his library of reproductions, they do provide useful insight into the ideas and experiences that shaped his attitudes towards art. A close investigation of the activities in which Witt engaged during the war years demonstrates that his convictions about the acquisition and exhibition of artistic objects affected not only his public pursuits as an art advocate but his private practices as an art collector as well. In the end it is possible to see his collection of photographic reproductions as an extension of his greater objective to raise the profile of art in Britain in order to both support academic scholarship and strengthen British society.

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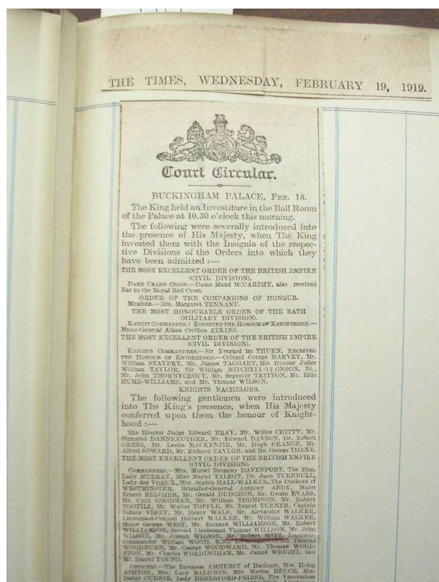
Before investigating how the archives illuminate our understanding of the photographic collection now housed in the Witt Library it is necessary to briefly

describe the archival materials themselves. I examined two albums containing old pasted cuttings. The first of these was a green volume whose contents, with the exception of two items, date from the first half of 1919.



Green 'News Cuttings' Book

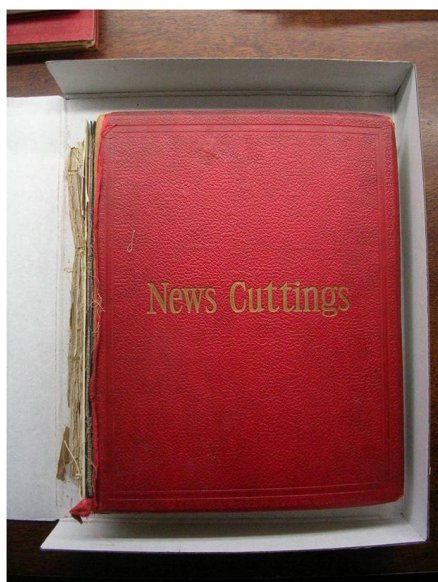
The book contains a variety of materials, including newspaper clippings, journal articles, and miscellaneous pamphlets and programs. Most of these items refer to events Witt personally attended or issues he publicly championed. The contents of the book only fill one-quarter of the album and do not extend past the middle months of 1919. This abrupt discontinuation, taken together with the nature of the cuttings themselves, seems to suggest that the book was begun as an impetuous and short-lived record of Witt's new social calendar following his appointment as a Commander of the Order of the British Empire by King George V in February 1919. Although one would expect to find it in a more prominent place, a public notice of this important event nevertheless survives inside the volume, buried inconspicuously within its middle pages.



"Court Circular" notice in *The Times*, February 19, 1919 (Witt's name is underlined in red)

Although it is difficult to determine precisely why the book was left unfinished, it seems likely that the process of preserving every record of Witt's professional and social activity simply became too laborious. However, in spite of its brevity, the volume nevertheless contains important information regarding a particularly active year in Witt's life following the end of the First World War. Additionally, it contains the only direct reference yet found within the archives to the photographic collection the Witt Library now possesses, a fascinating piece of evidence to which I shall return at the end of this paper.

The second album I examined was a red volume containing cuttings that belonged to a thirty-two year period between 1896 and 1928.



Red "News Cuttings" Book

These cuttings comprise many of Witt's published writings on a variety of topics, including reports on colonial conflicts in southern Africa, political analyses, book reviews, works of popular art-criticism, scholarly art articles, and a number of other items. My attention focused on those materials dating approximately from the time of the First World War since this period encapsulated and defined much of Witt's subsequent work in the art world.

It is worth noting that the archives present an engaging but extremely one-sided view of the issues Witt addressed during this contentious time. One would like to know, of course, just what arguments his opponents presented, and although the archives do contain a limited number of editorials and other records that shed light on divergent contemporary perspectives, the vast majority of the material simply presents Witt's side of any given argument. As such our understanding of Witt and the wider art culture in which he moved and worked is limited. Much like this drawing he commissioned as a frontispiece to the first catalogue of his photographic collection the archives paint a captivating yet self-consciously contrived portrait.

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Several common themes run throughout Witt's various writings and activities around the time of the War. These include the defense of democratic and nationalistic ideals, the promotion of vigorous educational policies, and the vindication of so-called 'secondary' art often excluded by his contemporaries. One can detect the presence of each of these issues in a relatively early letter he wrote to the editor of *The Times* on January 17, 1912, in which he suggests that 'the great London galleries and museums should publish at regular intervals an official report of new purchases, loans and gifts, new arrangements, and special exhibitions'.<sup>1</sup> Witt proposes that these reports should deal with 'objects of every kind' and contain illustrations and commentary 'written by the leading authorities on every subject'. In the end he concludes that 'such a publication would appeal to that large and growing class which is interested in art and the national collections, besides proving a stimulus and reminder to donors and benefactors.' Thus, by arguing for bureaucratic transparency, diverse collecting, scholarly involvement, and engagement with the art-loving public, Witt revealed the key convictions that shaped his attitudes towards art in general and collecting in particular. He emerges as an educated populist eager to expose the general public to a broad sampling of artistic work in order to improve the welfare of society and the status of the nation.

The intensely nationalistic rhetoric that runs through many of Witt's speeches seems to have taken root early in his career and proved definitive in his future undertakings. As early as 1900, in a piece dramatically entitled 'The Imaginative Faculty' in *The Westminster Review*, Witt rhapsodized about the transformative power of artistic endeavors in national life. He concedes in the article that 'practicality' is Britain's 'strongest national characteristic' but nevertheless believes that creativity is equally crucial to the advancement of any civilization.<sup>2</sup> 'Imagination', he writes, 'has power to alter the face of the world, to bridge distance, to annihilate time; like an alchemist it can transmute, refine, transform'. This attitude appears to have changed little over the years. It is strongly present sixteen years later in Witt's testimony before the Prime Minister as part of a deputation appealing the closure of London's museums during the war. Witt testified that the museums were 'not merely a kind of peep-show for the curious' but rather 'the intellectual workshops of the nation'.<sup>3</sup> He reinforced this position a year later in a piece he authored in *The Nineteenth Century* concerning the state of art collecting in the Western world.<sup>4</sup> Against the high-stakes backdrop of the war, he provocatively, though obliquely, suggests that artistic achievement is indicative of overall national merit and wonders aloud exactly where Britain stands:

It has often been asserted, though never proved, that Great Britain has no true love of Art; that we, unlike some of our Allies, are essentially inartistic; that those who care for music and pictures, or sculpture of architecture are few, and that even these few hate one another more than they love their arts.

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Witt, 'The National Art Collections', *The Times* 17 Jan. 1912, in *News Cuttings 1896-1928*, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Witt, 'The Imaginative Faculty', in *The Westminster Review* (Aug. 1900), in *News Cuttings 1896-1928*, pp. 6-7, insert.

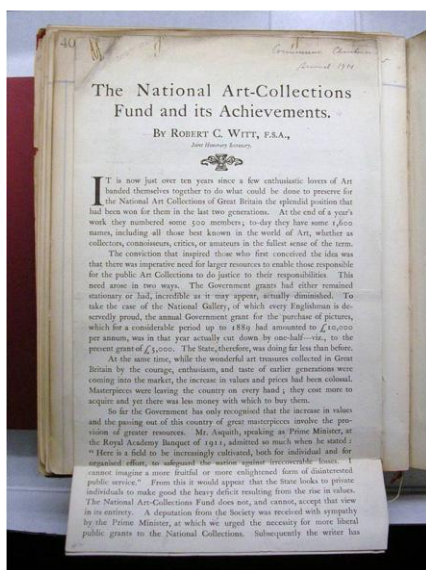
<sup>3</sup> R. C. Witt, *Report of a Deputation to the Prime Minister on the Closing of Museums*, ed. The Museums Association (Feb. 1916), in *News Cuttings 1896-1928*, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Witt, 'A plea for readjustment in the art-world', in *The Nineteenth Century* (Aug. 1917), in *News Cuttings 1896-1928*, pp. 56-57.

By raising the specter of international criticism regarding Britain's artistic achievements, Witt reveals his ideological conviction that the art world is, in a very real sense, a microcosm of the geopolitical world. The hierarchies in each are essentially interchangeable. Thus, for him, the act of preserving and promoting the art of the nation is not merely a cultural undertaking but a patriotic one as well.

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Two of Witt's major public endeavors in the first couple decades of the century best illustrate his complex combination of national, democratic, and academic motivations. The first was his crusade to keep important artistic works from being sold by British aristocrats to eager collectors in Europe and America. He was instrumental in helping found the National Art Collections Fund (NACF) in 1903 and served as its Honorary Secretary (1903-1919), Vice-Chairman (1919-1945), and, finally, President.

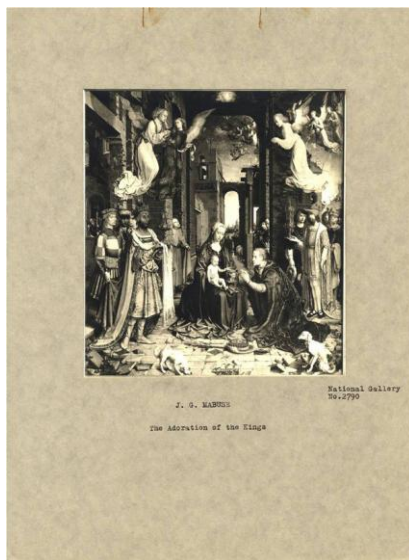
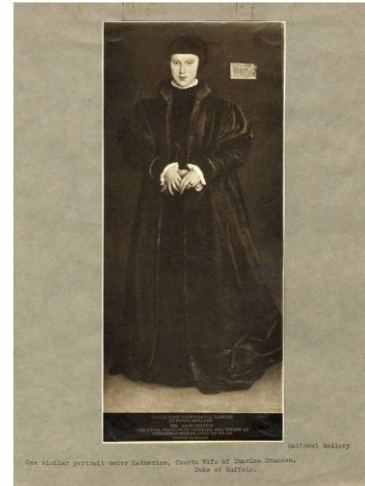


Opening page of 'The National Art-Collections Fund and its Achievements'

In the commemorative catalogue published to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the NACF, Witt wrote that the purpose of the society was to 'stem the tide of emigration setting predominantly westward across the Atlantic' and to 'fight the multi-millionaires of the New World'.<sup>5</sup> Three works Witt was particularly proud of saving were the so-called Rokeby 'Venus and Cupid' by Velasquez, the 'Duchess of Milan' by Holbein, and the 'Adoration of the Magi' by Mabuse.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> R. C. Witt, 'Introduction', in *Twenty-Five Years of The National Art-Collections Fund 1903-1928*, ed. D. S. MacColl (Glasgow, 1928), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> R. C. Witt, 'The National Art-Collections Fund and its Achievements', in *The Connoisseur* (Christmas 1914?), in *News Cuttings 1896-1928*, p. 40.



Photographs of the *Venus and Cupid* by Velasquez, the *Duchess of Milan* by Holbein, and the *Adoration of the Magi* by Mabuse in the Witt collection

These paintings became so famous that Witt later used them to promote public outrage during his attempts to reopen London museums after the conclusion of the War. In a humorously-titled article in *The Evening Standard* under the headline, 'Art in the basement. National treasures hidden from the public. How Venus Heard the Trains', he said the following:

The storing of these art treasures was in itself a romance of the war. The bulk of those from the Tate and National Galleries were stacked in an unused, bricked up, underground tube station, and were within a few feet of such works as the Velasquez 'Venus' and Holbein's 'Duchess,' the trains passed and repassed, packed with passengers all unsuspecting the proximity of these priceless works.<sup>7</sup>

For Witt, the work of the NACF perfectly coincided with his own passion for expanding public access to great works of art. He described the society as 'a clearing house for ideas permeating the world of art' that improved the condition of the

<sup>7</sup> 'Art in the basement. National treasures hidden from the public. How Venus heard the Trains', *The Evening Standard* 26 Mar. 1919, in *News Cuttings 1896-1928*, p. 59.

country in general and advanced the scholarship of art history in particular.<sup>8</sup> His perennial defense of the diverse collecting habits of the NACF revealed his own ‘catholic’ tastes. He believed art-lovers should not only collect the Old Masters but also ‘objects of comparative unimportance and modest value’ since these latter works informed one’s understanding of the broader visual context of the former.<sup>9</sup> This was precisely the rationale Witt employed in forming his own personal collection of drawings and photographic reproductions. Thus, the work of the National Art Collections Fund was patriotic in addition to being merely preservationist.

The second major public endeavor that illustrated Witt’s nationalistic, democratic, and academic ideals was his campaign to keep major museums and galleries in London from being converted into governmental office space during the war.



From *Punch* (1919)

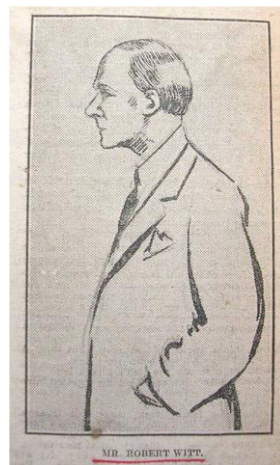
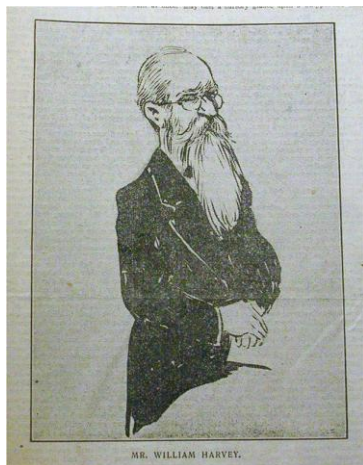
His operations failed since, as this satirical cartoon demonstrates, many politicians found institutions like the British museum to be a ‘most expensive and extravagant luxury’ once the war was underway. But Witt remained determined and led a renewed effort to reopen the museums after the armistice was signed. This, too, bore little fruit, but Witt remained practically monomaniacal, and the archives are littered with editorials, interviews, and invectives regarding the issue. However, his arguments for

<sup>8</sup> ‘Art in Education. Where Schools and Universities Fail’, *The Morning Post* 15 Jul. 1919, in *News Cuttings 1919*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> R. C. Witt, ‘Introduction’, p. 19.

art as a benchmark of societal progress fell on deaf ears. Indeed, if the testimony of one government witness at an inquest into the matter in 1919 is any indication, it seems that governmental employees who worked in the museums were anything but impressed with their ‘dismal surroundings of pictures and curiosities’.<sup>10</sup> Another witness, whom Witt must have found a distressingly belligerent philistine, was even more disparaging and sneered that ‘a great deal of nonsense was talked about art’; he claimed that the only artistic productions worth anything were ‘those that stimulated people to greater activity’ by which he meant war posters and propaganda films. Poor Witt didn’t stand a chance. But the opposition he faced encouraged him to follow the logical implications of his own democratic principles and promote the exhibition of art at provincial institutions outside the capital. In a long article in *The Observer* from May 1919 entitled ‘The London art galleries...Some suggestions for reform’ Witt continued to lash the government for its prolonged occupation of the city museums but also set out an impressive agenda for the establishment of both traveling exhibitions throughout the Empire as well as cooperative exchange programs between museums throughout the world.<sup>11</sup> He believed that exposing the general public to the artistic achievements of human civilization would rally the morale of a war-weary nation. Thus, the conflict over the closure of museums and galleries in London forced Witt to reevaluate accepted methods of organizing and exhibiting art and aided the development of curatorial practice in Britain.

Witt’s efforts to protect British-owned art and fight for the rights of British museums converged in May 1919 in the form of an ambitious exhibition of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art in Leeds. William Harvey, a nephew of the wealthy industrialist of the same name who had assembled the collection, donated the paintings in 1917 to the nascent National Loan Trust, a society that worked closely with the NACF and was also chaired by Witt.



Harvey and Witt portrayed in *Punch*

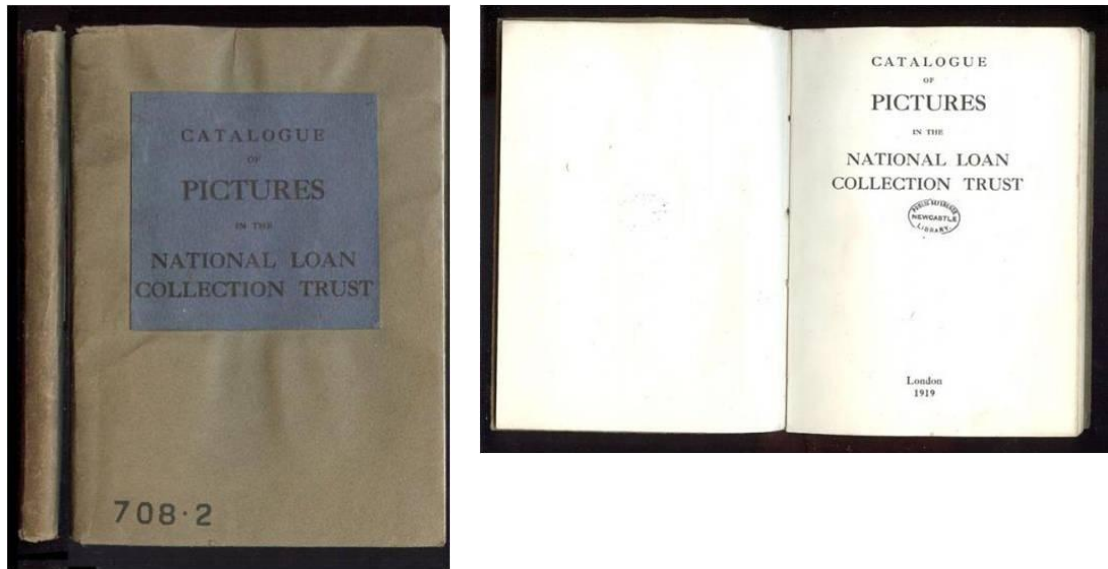
The exhibited works were intended to function as the ‘nucleus a collection of pictures and drawings of all schools and periods’ that would travel the Empire.<sup>12</sup> Witt believed that this traveling exhibition would satiate what he perceived to be a rising demand

<sup>10</sup> ‘Clear the Galleries’, *Punch* 2 Apr. 1919, in *News Cuttings 1919*, p. 12.

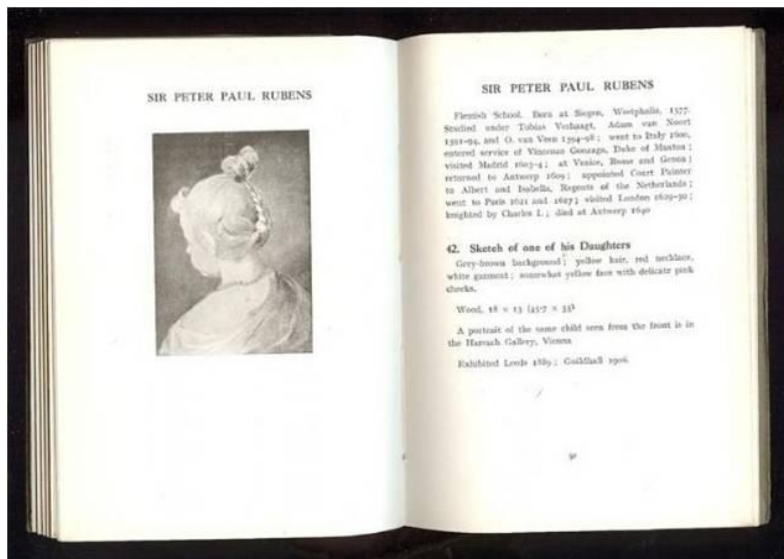
<sup>11</sup> ‘The London art galleries. When will they be restored? Changes at the Tate. Some suggestions for reform’, *The Observer* 4 May 1919, in *News Cuttings 1896-1928*, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> R. C. Witt, ‘Introduction’, in *Catalogue of Pictures in the National Loan Collection Trust* (London, 1919), p. 4.

throughout the Empire to see the art treasures of the home country as stimulated by the reports of colonial servicemen who had experienced the museums of London while on duty in England during the war. He also hoped that the Harvey collection would attract donations from other wealthy aristocrats in Britain who might otherwise be tempted to sell some of their art holdings to voracious European and especially American dealers. Not only did the Leeds exhibition represent a kind of breakthrough in curatorial practice; it also produced what Witt boasted to *The Yorkshire Observer* was ‘the best catalogue in the country’ due to its use of ‘new ideas and new methods’ that set ‘a new standard’ in catalogue design.<sup>13</sup>



An examination of a copy of the catalogue, which Barbara Thompson acquired in March for the Witt Library archives, reveals that the facing-page layout pairing painting reproductions with descriptive texts is indeed innovative for the period.



<sup>13</sup> ‘Harvey Art Collection in Leeds. Function of the Trust’, *The Yorkshire Observer* 13 May 1919, in *News Cuttings 1919*, p. 14.

That the usefulness of the catalogue was not lost on contemporaries is demonstrated by the fact that the art critic at the *Yorkshire Weekly Post*, whose own opinions could be quite cynical, found the catalogue to be ‘permanently instructive’.<sup>14</sup> The Leeds exhibition, both in its conception and execution, provided Witt an opportune platform from which to test his principles regarding the organization and presentation of art.

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The catalogue from the Leeds exhibition becomes even more intriguing in light of my discovery of the earliest-known reference to Witt’s collection of photographs in the archives. It is an article written by an art critic from *The Glasgow Herald* concerning an exhibition of pre-1500 Florentine art held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club on the same month as the exhibition of the Harvey collection in Leeds. In the course of describing the works on display the critic writes the following:

From his invaluable collection in Portman Square—to which, it is worth noting, all students are allowed access—Mr. Robert Witt lends a number of reproductions of pictures and drawings by the masters represented, thus greatly supplementing the educational worth of the show.<sup>15</sup>

An examination of the Burlington House exhibition catalogue sadly does not reveal what particular reproductions Witt provided; it merely says that they were arranged on a table adjacent to the rest of the exhibition.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the catalogue is important because it demonstrates that not all of Witt’s reproductions stayed permanently locked away in their boxes on Portman Square. One wonders if Witt similarly lent some of his reproductions to the exhibition in Leeds, especially given its educational objectives and its status as the inaugural event organized by the National Loan Trust. Indeed it is tempting to theorize that some of the images in the groundbreaking Leeds catalogue of which Witt was so proud of came from his own collection of reproductions. In the end, however, it is ultimately impossible to prove such a theory since the catalogue does not contain any photo credits. Nevertheless the Burlington House exhibition, together with the Leeds exhibition, demonstrates how Witt attempted to use photographs to enhance the educational content of artistic displays.

In noting that ‘all students’ were ‘allowed access’ to Witt’s collection of reproductions, the excerpt from *The Glasgow Herald* is also significant because it reveals that the collection already possessed a reputation as a prominent teaching resource in the years following the First World War. Since the earliest visitors book kept by Witt appears to date to October 1923, it has thus far been difficult to ascertain precisely when scholars and students began to access his photographic materials. It appears now that Witt’s collection was already in active public use well before he began to record admittance in the mid 1920s. Perhaps he first opened it up on a regular basis during the war years in response to the limited accessibility of museum collections under government occupation. The increased use of the collection to which the reporter from the *Herald* alludes may, in fact, have been the primary reason

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Old Masters in Leeds. Harvey Loan Collection on View Next Week’, *Yorkshire Evening Post* 10 May 1919, in *News Cuttings 1919*, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> [‘Article title missing’], *Glasgow Herald* 22 May 1919, in *News Cuttings 1919*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Florentine Painting before 1500*, Burlington Fine Arts Club (London, 1919), p. 35.

Witt soon decided to publish a guide to his vast holdings of photographic reproductions in 1920. In the introduction to the book, which bore the unwieldy title *Catalogue of Painters and Draughtsmen Represented in the Library of Reproductions of Pictures and Drawings Formed by Robert and Mary Witt*, Witt wrote that his photographs were available for examination to any interested party and formed a ‘central and comprehensive storehouse for easy and rapid reference and research’ without contemporary precedent.<sup>17</sup> Such a thorough collection could only help further academic research into artistic subjects. What began, therefore, as a private hobby for Witt during his years at Oxford in the mid 1890s gradually evolved into a semi-public endeavor that complemented his public advocacy for art in Britain during and following the war years. His collection of photographic reproductions, like his work with London museums and ground-breaking art exhibitions, was highly pedagogical and—to the extent that it was intended to affect the study as well as the production of art in Britain—also strongly nationalistic.

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Thus, in conclusion, Witt’s goals to ‘clear the national museums’ and ‘save the art of the nation’ were born of an ideological conviction that the health of society and the health of the arts were inextricably linked. This had implications for both his public activism as well as his personal collecting. Organizing and promoting a collection of painting reproductions like that now housed in the Witt Library was not only an exercise in scholarly curiosity; it was also an act of national devotion as well.

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<sup>17</sup> R. C. Witt and M. Witt *Catalogue of Painters and Draughtsmen Represented in the Library of Reproductions of Pictures and Drawings Formed by Robert and Mary Witt* (London, 1920), p. iii.