Keywords
Technologies of Romance, introduction, collections storage, Blythe House

Introduction

In 2010, Stephen Hawking commented that, “Science is not only a disciple of reason but, also, one of romance and passion.” This is not a connection we might readily make in the modern world. Science is technology, laboratories, facts and figures. It is experiment, cold, hard evidence, and equally cold, hard environments. Yet, visitors to the Science Museum Group’s museums (and readers of the Science Museum Group Journal) know that this is not the case. Many have recently stood in awe at the Soyuz TMA-19M descent module that brought Tim Peake and colleagues back to Earth from the International Space Station, cowed by the fragility, complexity and humanity of such an object: its romance.

Indeed, Hawking was talking about sending astronauts on dangerous missions when he spoke about romance. Although unmanned space flight was perfectly possible at the time, and eliminated the risk to human life, he believed that human participants were a fundamental part of the endeavour. The exploration, the adventure and the risk were essential. There is romance in the stars that inspires humans to advance, but a romance that technology devoid of human connection cannot convey.

Yet, technology also has its own romance. There is a nostalgia, an emotional pull, to technologies that we have known and spent time with over the course of our lives. Technologies facilitate romance – the phone call, the dating app, the email, the letter, the train journey, the meal, the contraceptive pill. Technologies open a new world of experience to us, whether through travel, enhanced vision, means of recording, or display. But technologies can also be ‘romanticised’, over-simplified into a black box that masks realities of labour, discrimination, resource exploitation or environmental damage.
This complex relationship, as well as the sheer variety of what we might consider technology, or romance, to be was investigated as part of a collaboration between the Science Museum Group, Central Saint Martins, and eeodo publishing in 2018, and is further developed in the papers that make up this mini collection.

The romance of collections

The Science Museum Group’s collection of objects is also embarking on its own journey into a new space. As part of the ‘One Collection’ programme, some 350,000 objects are undergoing the process of hazard checking, inventory, photography and packing, in order to move from London to a new store at the National Collections Centre in Wiltshire. Along with collections from the museums in Manchester, Bradford and York, the National Collections Centre will house eighty per cent of the Science Museum Group’s vast collections by 2023. This new facility is designed to increase public engagement with, and access to, the stored collections of the Science Museum Group. In so doing, the collection, as well as being physically moved, is also being re-centred as a resource not to be stored, but used, researched, visited, and enjoyed.

The current centre of the One Collection programme’s activity is the collection’s point of departure – Blythe House in West London. This imposing Edwardian Baroque building was designed by noted architect Sir Henry Tanner, and opened as the Post Office Savings Bank in 1903, itself an innovative building and concept at the time.
After banking activities ceased in the mid-twentieth century (and a brief sojourn as a Thames TV film studio – though it continues to be a mainstay of large-scale film productions today), Blythe House became a museum store for the V&A, the British Museum and the Science Museum. It is currently home to the majority of the Science Museum’s object collections, in over one hundred rooms and scattered across six floors. The collections at Blythe House vary considerably across the topics of science,
medicine, technology and art, ranging from ship models to iron lungs, quadrants to drones, anatomical drawings to pocket watches.

**Figure 2**

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View of the Science Museum stores at Blythe House, showing objects from the Road Transport collection

DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191208/006](http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191208/006)
Figure 3

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View of the Science Museum stores at Blythe House, showing objects from the Water Transport collection

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Around 97 per cent of the Science Museum’s collections are in storage at any one time – a statistic which holds true across much of the heritage sector. Sometimes referred to as the ‘reserve’ collections, they are available by appointment or request, but receive far fewer visitors than their counterparts on display; while the Science Museum receives over three million visitors a year, Blythe House receives only around a hundred. The thematic massing of objects together in close quarters produces a different kind of curatorial statement. Without explanatory labels, stores offer little interpretive assistance for their objects – their current life, as part of a working, moving collection in a museum, is often more apparent than their historical significance. The objects are interpreting themselves.
Figure 5

Objects in the Medicine Collections at Blythe House: prosthetic legs

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One of the lesser known parts of the collection may well be the Art. Although present in the Science Museum since its inception as the South Kensington Museum in 1857, visual collections remained somewhat hidden until the creation of a Pictorial Collection in the 1970s, and its subsequent expansion into the Art collection. Officially named 'SCM – Art’, this now ranges broadly and deeply across art and visual culture, including paintings and drawings, printed bills and trade cards, photography, sculpture, digital art, installations and more. It shows artists and scientists inspiring and critiquing each other, science represented in and to the world, and imagery forming part of scientific work.
Collections Engagement work forms a core part of the One Collection project exploring ways of opening our collections to new audiences, in new ways, and with new questions. Working experimentally with art, now, offers the opportunity to engage different audiences with the collections and bring in different perspectives. One such perspective has been engaging with staff...
and students from the BA Fine Art and MA Art and Science courses at Central Saint Martins, through extended collaboration with artist and lecturer Paul O’Kane, and eeodo founder Bada Song.

Paul has taught and written before on the concept of ‘Technologies of Romance’. A first volume publication with eeodo came out of seminars held with students at Central Saint Martins and visits to the Science Museum to look at collections of science, technology and medicine as subjects for an art student’s eye. Through discussions, invited speakers and visits to the stores, we developed a project with Paul and Bada for a symposium with a difference.

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Technologies of a symposium

The 'Technologies of Romance' symposium, held at the Science Museum in November 2018, foregrounded an experimental approach for both institutions, bringing together new voices and new ways of working and presenting, combining performance, practice, analysis and discussion. Groups of students from the BA and MA courses visited Blythe House, with Paul O’Kane and Laura Humphreys, Curatorial & Collections Engagement Project Manager for One Collection. Inspired in part by the large collection move, and that Blythe House will no longer be accessible after 2019, the BA Fine Art students developed a task for attendees at the symposium. A series of postcards, based on images from their visit, were offered as prompts for answering a series of questions. These images were not just of objects, but of their context in a working store; hazard labels, barcodes and shelving all feature as an important element of how collections are conceived and experienced.

Passing on each postcard after giving an answer, the students proffered us a series of questions about their images:

1. What is the first thing that comes to mind about your object? Describe it.
2. Why would someone give you this?
3. Where would you store this object in your house?
4. Your house is on fire and you choose to save this object. Why?
5. You lose this object. How did you lose it?
6. If you found the postcard, how would you sign it off, given all that has been written on it?
Example of a postcard produced by the BA students for the 'Technologies of Romance' Symposium

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Figure 9

Example of a postcard produced by the BA students for the 'Technologies of Romance' Symposium

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Our collaborative answers proved delightful. Playing between the serious and whimsical, curators, academics and artists considered the place of objects as disparate as ice cream makers and asbestos-labelled radios in their lives, homes and personal narratives. We looked on these objects in store afresh, charmed by these unexpected combinations of context and perspective.

Postcards are of course, themselves, a technology of romance. Once a crucial vehicle for fast, efficient communication while abroad, combining an image of a distant place with news of experiences gained at a distance, postcards now present a nostalgic, analogue, personal and slow means of contact, preserving a holiday in a romantic way, compared to the immediate snap sent by digital message. It was a particularly appropriate medium for a collection embarking on a journey: about to go away for a while, but to return to public view refreshed and in a new home. The students asked questions that situated each pictured object in relationship to us, the viewer and user, how we might establish relationships with it in our lives and homes. Thus, their visit to the stores became entangled with the analogue nostalgia of the holiday postcard, but mediated of course through the instant digital snapshot that captured the objects in store. The MA students responded, by contrast, to the broader imaginary realms to which the Science Museum Group collections might take one, giving us a performance of imagined flight, exploring the Moon through photographs, film footage, quotes and personal narrative, projected into the symposium space and performed by members standing around the room. John F Kennedy's voice spoke alongside astronauts Yuri Glazkov, Pham Tuan and Mohammad Ahmad Faris. We contemplated a piece of Moon rock (on display in the Science Museum Space gallery) alongside images of the Earth from space. The students spoke of Icarus, Selenites, lunatics, Shakespeare and Cleopatra, contrasting the Moon as muse and inspiration, to its increasing reality as a junkyard for space technology. They showed us how technology has taken us to the Moon, and brought the Moon to us, firing our imagination with the romance of space travel. But what impact have our technologies wrought on the Moon itself?

Between these performative responses, papers were presented by Museum staff, Central Saint Martins lecturers, invited artists
and academics. We explored the history of technology in its broadest sense, finding romance in objects spanning from the everyday (books, photocopiers, typewriters, clocks, phones) – to the exceptional (flight, space exploration, explosives, deadly disease). We explored the heights and depths of what we might consider to be romance or romantic – from the Romantic poets and Romance languages to love, sex, fetishism and nostalgia. What makes romance? What does it hide, and what does it reveal?

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Exploring technology and romance

Papers in this collection emerge out of this rich day of discussion and performance, and attempt to answer some of these questions, inevitably raising more. Paul O'Kane explores the romance of video art, exploring the history and the evolution of the medium, and the technological intricacies that make it both exciting and difficult to work in. He focuses on three works that were presented at the symposium, by established and emerging artists, which variously feature technology common to both the working and domestic lives of the twentieth century. He reminds us that art too is rooted in an understanding of different technologies.

Catherine Dixon directs our attention to something we might not immediately think of as technology, or indeed romantic. The typeface in which our words are designed and set informs, she shows us, the whole context of how we read. Such choices have significant implications for imperial legacies and gender relationships, as well as for how we think about the book itself as a technology, either analogue or digital. She considers the typeface chosen for Paul O'Kane's first publication on *Technologies of Romance* to open out both the functional and emotional ambitions behind choosing a typeface. What might we learn from the fact the *Science Museum Group Journal* is set in Calibri?

Lee Mackinnon looks at what romance might obscure, exploring the violence experienced by humans at the mercy of materials. Minerals harnessed for technologies have a long history of hurting the humans who make and use them. Mackinnon focuses our attention on the modern smart phone, how it connects the world through relocating rare minerals, and what the human cost of that is. She encourages us to think more carefully about whether romance might damage our understanding of certain technologies and what impact these have on our bodies. What is the real impact of sending that romantic text or picture message?

Elizabeth Bruton’s annotated poem uses a new technology of today – the Content Management System used to produce the *Science Museum Group Journal* – to illuminate how a new technology of the past – the telegraph – fascinated contemporary writers. The romantic potential of sending an instant message via telegraph raised questions of identity and authenticity over who was speaking and how, which clearly resonate with our modern social media era. In Maxwell’s poem, the clerks become indistinguishable from their telegraph, expressing and receiving love through the language of telecommunications technology.

The symposium, then, drew our attention to technologies of romance in a multi-disciplinary and multi-sensory manner. We sat in a darkened room, watching projected images or film, aware of the heated air improving the November chill, the glare of a laptop screen, the scratch of a pen, the printed postcard. We were challenged to consider the emotions that we attach to different technologies, what romance and passion we, like Stephen Hawking, might consider essential to engaging with the world. We hope that the following papers will encourage you to do the same.

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Appendix

Postcard transcripts

1. Feet, bother,
   As a joke?
   Personally, in the loft. But if someone needed to use it...
   It is bigger than me + feel safe nestled inside it.
It fell off and I was too drunk to notice.
You left me at the bar without warning, and this is what happened – I’m now stuck without a means to return home.

2. Tissue paper shapes = protective
   Because they were told to
   On the kitchen table at all times
   The object might be the answer for my next space travel
   I tried to make it flight from the empire state building
   Love, dad

3. Butter Churn with sexy legs
   Because it’s a very sexy object. Its uses can be reinvented forever
   In a dairy if I had one, but since I don’t, in my kitchen.
   Hopefully it contains alcohol to help me recover from the trauma of my house burning down...
   Because it has no barcode, I couldn’t keep track.
   Perhaps I’ll put it on wheels and take it to work.

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Tags
- Exhibitions
- Museology
- Science and society
- Public engagement
- Science and art
Footnotes

2. eeodo publishing is a non-profit maker and publisher of artists’ books.
4. With thanks to the BA Fine Art students who contributed to this project: Hannah Smythe; Zhelun Wang; Kaius Mowbray; Lily Hudson; Simran Dosanjh (all from Central Saint Martins), and Sam Stafford (from Chelsea School of Art).
5. With thanks to the Central Saint Martins MA students who contributed to this project: Phil Barton, Catherine Herbert, Becky Lyon and Hannah Pratt.

Author information

Laura Humphreys
Curatorial & Collections Engagement Project Manager

Laura Humphreys is Curatorial & Collections Engagement Project Manager at the Science Museum in London. She works on the One Collection Project, which will see 300,000 objects moved from their current store in West London to the new National Collections Centre in Wiltshire – her role is about increasing access to and engagement with the Science Museum Group collections during and after this historic move. Previously she was a Curator at the National Maritime Museum, and has worked at the Geffrye Museum of the Home, Chiswick House, and Tredegar House. She has a PhD in Victorian and Edwardian Domestic Labour & Technology from Queen Mary, University of London.

Katy Barrett
Curator of Art Collections

Dr Katy Barrett is Curator of Art Collections at the Science Museum, London. Previously, she was Curator of Art, pre-1800, at Royal Museums Greenwich and has held various posts at the Whipple Museum for the History of Science in Cambridge, the Natural History Museum, the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. She has higher degrees in History of Art and History of Science and is active on social media as @SpoonsonTrays. Katy has co-authored The Sun: One Thousand Years of Scientific Imagery, published Autumn 2018.