

Collecting Fifty Years of Computer-Generated Art at the V&A

Many people assume that the history of digital art goes back a decade or two, at most. As DAM's *Aesthetica* show highlights, the first exhibitions of computer-generated art actually took place some fifty years ago, in Stuttgart and New York. Nevertheless, many museums and art galleries have taken a very long time to acknowledge the importance of digital art, if they've recognised it at all. In the UK, the Victoria and Albert Museum began to collect computer-based artworks as long ago as 1969, when it acquired a set of prints published in conjunction with *Cybernetic Serendipity*, the landmark exhibition held at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1968. The complete set was purchased by the V&A at a cost of just £5, equivalent to about £200 or €280 today. However, the Museum's official records reveal that some curators definitely weren't persuaded that computer art was worthwhile, at any price. The acquisition files for the *Cybernetic Serendipity* prints include a number of negative comments, such as "I am far from convinced about their aesthetic validity" or "they should be represented in the museum as characteristic aberrations".ⁱ The *Cybernetic Serendipity* Presentation Set, as it was called, ended up in the V&A's Circulation Department, and was subsequently transferred to the Prints, Drawings and Paintings Department. The portfolio includes works by the Computer Technique Group, Charles Csuri and James Shaffer, William Fetter, Maughan S. Mason, Donald K. Robbins and Kerry Strand. The individual prints are now in great demand, and loaned to various exhibitions around the world. One of them – *Running Cola is Africa*, by CTG - is even due to go on semi-permanent display in the V&A's Toshiba Gallery of Japanese art and design.

The Museum also acquired some screen prints from Manfred Mohr's *Scratch Code* series in 1978, but curators at the time were undoubtedly still concerned about collecting examples of computer art. Some original plotter drawings were known to be light sensitive, or produced on thin computer paper, or both. Other works were thought to be of limited aesthetic quality, or simply inappropriate for a major museum. As a result, the V&A collected very few computer-based artworks until the 2000s, when the Museum's focus changed significantly. An increasing awareness of the significance of digital art and design led to the acquisition of two major collections, both of which contained a substantial number of individual artworks. First, the Museum's newly established Word and Image Department acquired the Patric Prince Collection, which contained some 250 artworks - plotter drawings, prints, photographs and computer files - plus a huge amount of supporting documentation. Patric was an art historian and archivist of computer art, and she had accumulated a large library of printed books, plus correspondence, photographs, digital recordings and ephemera in addition to the individual artworks. In parallel, the V&A obtained the archives of the Computer Arts Society, established after the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition of 1968. The CAS collection also contained around 250 artworks, plus some archival material. With more than 500 computer-based artworks by 2008, the Museum suddenly became one of the world's leading public collections of early computer art and graphics.ⁱⁱ

In the following years, the V&A created digital images and online catalogue records for the Patric Prince Collection and the Computer Arts Society archive, plus numerous other

individual acquisitions.ⁱⁱⁱ We also undertook a research project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, and this resulted in a V&A exhibition entitled *Digital Pioneers* (2009-10). The *Digital Pioneers* show attempted to provide a brief overview of the history of digital art and design, based upon the Museum's holdings at the time. Artists in the show included Ben Laposky, D.P Henry, Georg Nees, Frieder Nake, Herbert Franke, Vera Molnar, Ken Knowlton, Lillian Schwartz, Charles Csuri, Harold Cohen, Manfred Mohr, Paul Brown, Jean-Pierre Hébert, Roman Verostko, Mark Wilson, Barbara Nessim and James Faure Walker, among others.

In parallel, the Museum also organised a contemporary exhibition entitled *Decode: Digital Design Sensations* (2009-10), which was heavily interactive and hugely popular too. The V&A's Word and Image Department subsequently acquired some of the born-digital pieces, including Daniel Brown's *On Growth and Form*, Aaron Koblin's *Flight Patterns* and Karsten Schmidt's *Recode Decode* digital identity for the show itself. We also purchased some pieces with a physical aspect to them, such as Random International's *Study for a Mirror*.

The success of *Decode* and *Digital Pioneers* certainly put the Museum on the digital art map, and our holdings have grown significantly in recent years. Highlights include additional works by Frieder Nake, A. Michael Noll, Vera Molnar, Manfred Mohr, Harold Cohen, Roman Verostko, Mark Wilson and Casey Reas, all of whom are represented in the *Aesthetica* exhibition. In some cases the works were acquired with the help of DAM, which remains one of the few European galleries with real expertise in this area. Other recent acquisitions include plotter drawings by Darrell Viner and Stephen Scrivener, both of whom attended the Slade School of Art in London during the 1970s. In addition, we have an increasing number of "Computer Creations" by Lloyd Sumner, produced in the late 1960s, plus a complete set of impact prints by the American hard-edge painter Frederick Hammersley. The Museum has also continued to collect works on paper and born-digital artworks by pioneering artists such as Ernest Edmonds and Paul Brown. As a result, we now have some 1,500 artworks in total, plus a great deal of documentary material. The Museum even has a set of Fortran punched cards, used to create one of Manfred Mohr's artworks in 1970.

Of course, there are still many significant gaps in the V&A's collections, and we hope that some of these can be filled in the coming years. The Museum's newly established Design, Architecture and Digital Design department is also heavily involved in documenting the impact of digital technology, acquiring works that range from Flappy Bird to Cody Wilson's infamous 3D-printed gun. We have thus come a long way from the 1960s and – like many other museums – are actively engaged in the ever-evolving world of digital art and design.

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ⁱ See V&A nominal file for the publisher, Motif Editions, MA/1/M2971

ⁱⁱ Perhaps the largest collection at the time was held by the Kunsthalle in Bremen, which had recently acquired the Herbert W. Franke collections and published an invaluable printed catalogue of its holdings.

ⁱⁱⁱ The V&A's collections database is at collections.vam.ac.uk. It includes records for all the artists and artworks mentioned in this text.