



Tales from The Leeds Library

season 2

S2E5: Aoife Larkin – Collections Librarian at Leeds Arts University

Transcript

00:00:14 Molly

Hello and welcome to tales from the Leeds Library, The Leeds Library's Podcast series in which we talk to members of our extended community about their lives, their work and their relationship to books, libraries and literature. Founded in 1768, the Leeds Library is the oldest surviving subscription library in the UK and throughout this series we will also be diving periodically into the library's rich history to find out what makes us and our Members one of the most interesting and unique cultural institutions in Leeds and the UK. I'm Molly Magrath, the project's assistant at the Leeds Library and today our guest is Aoife Larkin. Aoife is currently the collections librarian at the Leeds Arts University. She has an academic background in art history, curating and preventative conservation, and started her library career in fellow independent Manchester based library, the Portico.

00:01:11 Molly

OK, so hello Aoife, welcome. Thank you for talking to me.

00:01:16 Aoife

Thanks for having me.

00:01:15 Molly

So, so first of all you're currently the collections librarian for Leeds Arts University and I guess I kind of want to talk about this first before we talk about independent libraries a bit more. So can you tell me a little bit more about what this role involves and the different collections that you have at the university.

00:01:40 Aoife

Yeah, sure. So, I started as the collection's librarian at Leeds University about a year ago now, it was at the beginning of last March. And the role day-to-day really involves running the library service for the university. There are two sites, one at Blenheim walk and one at Vernon St, and there's a library at each and we're just a small team really. There are eight of us all together and I basically kind of Co-manage the service with my colleague Theo Stubbs, who's the digital librarian. And yeah, it's mostly running the library service, but as you can tell from the distinction in our job titles, Theo focuses on digital and I focus on collections, meaning special collections and archives, and physical collections. Those kinds of things. So our roles are really integrated in terms of running the service

together. But then we have these sort of separate specialisms as well, so my role does involve managing those other special collections and archives. And I suppose, promoting access to those.

00:02:53 Molly

Yeah, yeah, can you tell me about the special collections? What kind of texts you have, I imagine that it is well, it's an art university, so it will be a specialised library. But what does that involve when you're when you're buying, I guess or when you're kind of getting books in, and yeah, what kind of areas do you tend to specialise in?

00:03:15 Aoife

So the special collection was kind of established actually by a combination of staff who were teaching at the University or Leeds College of Art as it was then, and people working in the library who just had a love and an interest in in special collections and special books and artist's book. The original remit for collecting was to just bring together artist books specifically and the idea was that as many different kinds of artist books would be brought together and assembled and then use as a as a kind of teaching resource for the students to show them all the possibilities available to them in thinking about making publications and making books and books as artwork. But now that's actually just one sub collection. We have two more sub collections in the special collections. One is photo books and it's not an enormous collection. It's not an enormous collection by any means in general, I think we have something like 2500 items in the special collections altogether, so it's a relatively young and small collection. But we have about 600 photo books, some of which are really special editions, really exquisite work. And then the third subcollections illustrative books. OK, and by illustrative books we basically mean any books where the illustrative content is the sort of primary content or almost the leading content. So those are the three types of books that we collect, and it hasn't been expanded any further yet. But yeah, that's what it looks like.

00:04:58 Molly

Yeah, so when you collecting are you? Are you're kind of primarily keeping up with contemporary stuff as it's being published or brought out, or are you looking at historic books like you know, historic illustration or photography, for example? Or is it kind of a mixture of both? What do you find that you tend to get more of?

00:05:21 Aoife

I'm not sure if there's more of one thing or another, but it is quite a variety of different things as you say. Say for instance we collect artist books that might have been made by former students or made by staff as part of their own artistic process. We also might buy new publications by practising artists in the UK or internationally. They might not necessarily be very expensive or valuable volumes, but they'll be like that artist's latest output, for instance. We also might have something donated to us and we also might acquire something that is the product of an event or an activity that might have taken place at the university or in association with the university. Yeah, those kinds of things.

00:06:17 Molly

I think there's often a kind of a misconception that arts courses and fine art courses are kind of quite practical and practise based and don't involve a lot of reading, but I think that's you know that's definitely untrue. But how do you find that students engage with the collections? And yeah, how do you encourage that? Or do you do projects around that?

00:06:47 Aoife

Yeah, I mean absolutely. There's maybe a different kind of research going on at an arts institution, but there's definitely still research going on. So, the students in the first instance are there obviously for their education and to expand their horizons in terms of the written and visual content that they're that they're absorbing, so as a specialised library we might provide more visual resources, and there might be a great deal of visual research taking place as they're developing their own style, their own niche or subject area that they might like to explore. There's a huge amount of research going on in that sense. But it is also a university, and there are researchers and academics working there who have their own practise, and they're all encouraged to create their own research outputs as part of their work at university. So, they'll also be using the collection to inspire those, and we actually have an Open Access research repository where those outputs are stored online and are publicly accessible, so the work that the academics and teaching staff are making at the university sort of becomes a learning resource and its own sense. Yeah, in its own way.

00:07:56 Molly

Part of the library.

00:08:09 Aoife

So, the other things that happen are I mean, for instance, engagement with the special collections. We deliver handling sessions for the students so they can come in and get to grips with the special collections and the archive and get inspired by those. And there used to be something called library interventions at Leeds Arts University, which was an engagement programme where artists and researchers were invited to create some kind of intervention in the library space or develop a kind of a project or curatorial activity using the collections, and then that was displayed through an exhibition or an event or happening in the library and that was really successful. But sadly, it was something that the pandemic put paid to, and also in that time there have been like quite a lot of staff changes at the university. So, there's now new people managing the library, as in me and video, but also our manager is new as well and it means that the programme will maybe change a little bit. But I think in principle it will continue in the same way in wanting to encourage that interplay and engagement between research and practise and the library and that kind of thing. Another interesting thing to say about the structure, I suppose of the the department is that it's a little bit unorthodox, because when Theo and I were appointed, they created new roles and they had never previously had the collections library and digital library working together in those specialisms before, so that there were just senior librarians as you would normally expect. And we're not managed by the head of library services as you also might expect we're managed by the university curator, and we're part of the curation and Library Services department. That means that there's a lot of engagement, a lot of communication and conversation, and we're always sort of thinking of one another whenever we're doing our work and developing projects.

00:10:31 Molly

That's really interesting, and I feel that we're kind of, uh, I guess at a similar stage here, in that we kind of just about to really expand and do loads of kind of engagement work with the collection, and we're really trying to kind of broadcast it and let people know that we've got this amazing historic collection and so it's really interesting that you've done all of this amazing work with the collections and students have been able to create all of this stuff and I like the idea of, you know, research going back into the library. That's really nice. I love artist books, but I don't read them as much as I should or engage with them as much as I should. And I like that they sit in this weird middle ground between kind of a work itself, and then the document of the work and then kind

of, you know, more of a theory-based exploration of the work or a work. And they're often kind of expensive to buy or and they sit in these quite specialists, libraries like in in universities or art colleges. So I guess this is quite a broad question, but what can you tell us about art books or artist books that you've discovered or learned through working with these special collections?

00:11:51 Aoife

Uhm, well, one thing I have learned is that they are really difficult to define as you've kind of outlined in your in your question. One of the things we've, well, I've definitely found, and I think is potentially an issue that other libraries come across as well, is that it can often be really challenging to decide what collection an object should go into. Yeah, 'cause we often come across an item that we could justifiably decide to catalogue with the artist books or in the main collection or in the archive or one of the two or some combination and you just kind of have to make a call sometimes. So yeah, artist books, as you say, they have this really sort of changing and evolving function and meaning. So yeah, you have to be quite willing to be flexible and adapt when working with them and managing a collection of them. Also storing them has been a really interesting challenge to think about. In many cases they are built like traditional books are, I mean the photo books for instance, usually are in the traditional shape of a book because of course for the photographer a huge factor in creating that book will be to disseminate their work so they want it to be easy to transport and easy to store, whereas an artist book could be a one-off item and there's no other example. Or, you know, there is a short run of them, but they're all a little bit oddly shaped or unusually formatted. And in our collection of artist books, a lot of them are fairly traditionally shaped, but you do get quite a number of them cropping up where you think 'where am I going to put this?' It's just they're like oversized or they're really small, or they're made of really fragile organic materials. We have one that is basically like a little bonsai tree with poems on pieces of paper dangling from the little branches, and well, it's lovely. And so yeah that's been a challenge as well. They're fantastic to work with and, and another thing I really like about them is just how accessible a publishing format they are. Like Artist's books sort of throw open the the doors as to what a publication can be, and I think it takes a much more democratic look at the way it values publications and I think more DIY materials from subcultures and zines and things like that are being brought more and more into Artist's Book collections for that reason, and they're just as important to preserve anyway.

00:15:06 Molly

Yeah, I mean it sounds like you say kind of a pain, but also I imagine as a librarian that's part of the joy of it as well. Kind of discovering ways that people have, you know, created books in kind of weird and different ways that you haven't seen before exactly. So, my next question is do you think people should engage with artist books? I think I'm going to rephrase that to ask, how can people engage with artist books more and where can they find them? But also how would you approach it when you're kind of, you know you've got this like maybe this tiny Bonsai tree with poems hanging from it? What is important to bear in mind when you're, kind of, looking at these books?

00:15:52 Aoife

Uhm, I guess the more unusual the format, the more difficult they are to provide access to because it requires the labour of a human being to provide it for you and that's increased tenfold when something has to be cared for so delicately and so preciously or in such a specific way. I mean what can I say? Look out for exhibitions. And also I think, for me, working at the Portico was a huge eye opener because it was the realisation that there are so many different kinds of libraries and so many

different kinds of archives and resources up and down the country many of which don't necessarily have the resources to promote themselves or promote their collections but are dying for people to see the wonderful things that they have. So, I think the best thing people can do is keep an open mind and look around for what's out there and don't be put off by places you think you might not be allowed to go to, well, sometimes just asking the question is all you need to do.

00:17:04 Molly

We'll talk about this later, but you're probably kind of ideally place to think about these things. 'cause you have a kind of background in curating and also conservation and working in libraries. So that's kind of the ideal blend for these really tricky texts, which maybe kind of don't fit anywhere. But I was going to ask you if there are any, I mean, you've talked a little bit about the Bonsai tree, if there are any particular kind of texts which stand out to you either from the university collection or from the Portico that have really amazed you or shocked you or, I don't know, made an impression?

00:17:52 Aoife

I suppose that the the collection at Leeds, the books I haven't sort of explicitly said so far that they're all much more modern than anything you'd find at the Portico. I mean, one of the things I love in the current collection, 'cause I do love history, is that there's an original copy of the of Andre Breton's Surrealist manifesto, which is wonderful, but that's a bit of an anomaly. Most of most of the artist books and photo books and illustrated books we have were probably collected in the last 20, 30, 40 years, and so it's a relatively modern contemporary collection, if you like and. And I mean I always find these questions so difficult

00:18:33 Molly

It's like what's your favourite band, isn't it? What's your favourite artist.

00:18:40 Aoife

Too many, but another thing that I really love about the current collection that I'm working with is the presence of work by former staff and students. To come across some really beautiful objects that have been made by students during their course is quite astounding and some of the things they've made are really intriguing. Like one of them is a concertina book that folds out with images printed on acetate and it's in a box accompanied by a tiny torch and you shine the torch through the acetate to cast the image on the wall. And then there's another book that a student made who was a visiting student from China and had made a book shaped like a suitcase and inside it was the story of her, I suppose her migration story in a way, and her adaptation to English culture through the lens of her student experience, at Leeds Arts University, so it's incredibly specific but very intimate and really moving.

00:19:54 Molly

Yeah, I really like that and there's kind of a similar sense with the the library's collection in that it's been built up by members. I don't know if it's the same at Portico, but it's through member recommendations, so it kind of tells a bit of a story of the kind of reading history of Leeds and I really think that that's one of the best things about smaller collections. Because obviously it's amazing if you have something like the British Library where you have every book that's been published, but I think the kind of incompleteness or weirdness, or one off-ness of collections, that's actually more interesting sometimes.

00:20:34 Aoife

Yeah and it shows you something about a little layer of culture that you might not have known about before, yeah?

00:20:40 Molly

Yeah yeah, and that your collection reflects your institution. I kind of wanted to ask about was this idea of books as material artefacts. So obviously if you're working with one off books that don't exist anywhere else, this is probably more of a kind of factor. But I'm really interested in this idea of this disconnect between books as kind of vehicles for information, which is immaterial, and then also these kind of amazing artefacts which can be artworks in themselves. So again, this is quite a broad question, but I'm kind of thinking more of your background in curating and conservation and I wonder if you could talk a bit about what we can learn from books as material objects rather than just, uh, you know words on a page.

00:21:36 Aoife

Page yeah, this is something that we used to talk about a lot at The Portico. I think I think it probably confronts historic collections. To me it felt like it confronted that historic collection more often than I found it confronting the collection at Leeds Arts. Perhaps that's something to do with the collection there feeling more current and having a very, very deliberate purpose in providing a physical object for someone to engage with for the purpose of making another physical object, so the physicality is kind of a requirement. Yeah, whereas I suppose you could argue that it's not necessarily a requirement of a historic text, although you can argue exactly the opposite to that as well, and so many people have and so much better than I probably will. I suppose 'cause I did a preservation conservation masters it's something that I am committed to and in terms of preserving objects, I mean it's absolutely crucial. I know people talk about, you know you can find marginalia. You can read something, read is a misleading term to use, you can discover facts about a book in its condition, in the ways that it's been damaged, in the the materials that have been used to create it and what that says about wider culture and the availability of those materials. There are endless things you can learn from an object, a physical object that just aren't present in the digital alternative. And also I mean in terms of a preserving technology, the best technology we have available to us, it's still a book. It's still a piece of paper in terms of longevity. We haven't actually discovered or been able to prove greater efficiency.

00:23:48 Molly

Umm, it's really interesting because, you know, you can always argue that books are irrelevant now that we use the Internet to find most of our information a lot of the time. But I was looking at the, what's it called, the electronic Literature Organisation's Forum where they have loads of digital literature and it's really interesting that that's actually really hard to preserve because the programmes that these kind of pieces of work are built on will be outdated and they won't work on like contemporary technology. So it's actually much more difficult to preserve digital literature often than it is a physical book which is really interesting. Before we started recording, we were just looking at the oldest that we have here, which is from the 1400s. You know it feels like new. Basically 'cause it's been so well preserved.

00:24:42 Aoife

Yeah it could have been made yesterday. It almost looks like it's a facsimile of that object. It's so perfect. Yeah, I mean the digital files are, I think pretty much recognised as being more fragile than

physical files and I mean, I'm not someone who would argue that one is necessarily better than the other, but I don't think they can be compared, or they can be put in this hierarchy and the loss of one or the other would be both be catastrophic.

00:25:19 Molly

Yeah, and well and each has its own kind of qualities that work really well with it, and I think that actually probably your artist books are maybe better at recognising that than you know, an academic textbook where you're right, like physicality is not so important at all. When everything in a piece of artwork is kind of considered and important to the meaning of the work then digital texts or physical texts are going to have more of an impact. But I know this kind of ties into a lot of the work that you did at the Portico Library, and you gave an amazing talk at the ILA conference last summer about the preservation project that you did and the kind of guide to conserving books, which was really cool. But I guess firstly can you give us a bit of context about what the Portico library is and the work it does there and then maybe talk a bit about your role and how it kind of changed over the years.

00:26:27 Aoife

Sure. So, for anyone who doesn't know the Portico is an historic library built in 1806 and it is located in Manchester City centre, and it was established as a subscription library before there were really any public libraries available at all. The library is accessed via this door that you have to kind of discover as you're walking around the streets. And I mean the description I'm giving at the moment is maybe more relevant to when I first started there than it is now because I know a huge amount of work has been done to bring attention to the Portico and what an amazing place it is. But when I first discovered it, I was brought there by a friend and rang a buzzer to get in and went up this long and winding staircase that was very unassuming, and then stepped through a doorway and was greeted by this incredible painted dome and open space with floor to ceiling books and it was just this sort of incredible surprise. When I started working there, I was along with the librarian, I was the only other member of staff and so it was a small team, shall we say. I think there had been various other staff members working there previously, but it was just the way that things had worked out with staff changeovers. The Portico now is somewhere that you can go and view exhibitions of the books but also exhibitions of artworks. You can have a cup of tea, you can come and learn about the history of the institution, you can join as a member. It's one of the most beautiful spaces in Manchester and not known by enough people, although I know I know the tide is turning on that. But when I first joined it was it was still a relatively quiet place and then the team sort of grew over the coming years and we all worked together to envisage how we could develop the library, and it was a very organic development and so was my job role, to be honest. My job role sort of adapted to what was needed of me and, where I could, it adapted to what it was that I wanted to do. And that kind of flexibility and autonomy was incredibly valuable to me as someone early on in my career, I suppose because I got to try so many different things and get experience in so many different things. And so, I started out as the administrative assistant, and I'd like to say as well that I had another job at the time. But when the Portico offered me a full-time position, I just dropped the other job instantly because I couldn't believe it and I'd found this place and I'd managed to get my foot in the door and I thought 'this is too good to be true' so even though I probably, I think I dropped hours and I probably dropped pay as well, I was like fully committed to this. So yeah, I started out as the administrative assistant, having previously been working in museums and art galleries in Manchester and from there my role developed and expanded into working on engagement programmes, the events programme, I was even managing the weddings at one point. I seemed to find myself steering away from the things that I was really interested in at heart, which was collections and history and

archives and books and artworks. These were the kinds of things that I wanted to focus on, and I suppose I saw a little bit of a niche at the library at the time, because there wasn't anyone who had a great deal of knowledge about how to care for and preserve the books. So I undertook to do a masters in preventative conservation and while I was doing that masters and still working at the library, I started introducing couple of new practises so that we could improve the way that we handle and manage the books and also as part of my dissertation put together some research on, I suppose, preservation practises in the portico but also did some surveying of other special collections to see what kind of practises they were using and how well they worked. And it was really interesting to see the degree to which you know policy and practise very often don't meet one another. Yeah, there's this sort of wish list of what you ought to be doing, and then there's the often very difficult realities of working in small institutions where you don't necessarily have the resources to carry out all the things you need to do. And so yeah, I did some interesting research on that incredibly niche subject. And the output was, as you mentioned, to kind of produce a concise guide for staff working in institutions like the Portico where they have very fragile materials that they're dealing with, but not necessarily the experience or knowledge about how to care for them, how to handle them, when to provide access, when not to provide access, those kinds of things, and I hope it's been useful. I know that there's a new collections officer, yeah, I'm not sure what her role is, but someone who's working on collections at the Portico now who's kind of taken on that role and she said that she found reading that dissertation very useful. It was nice. It's nice to know that one person found it useful!

00:33:14 Molly

More people than have read my dissertation to date so.

00:33:19 Aoife

No, yeah that's kind of my experience at the Portico, in a nutshell, I think.

00:33:25 Molly

Really amazing that you were able to do that piece of work, that research in in tandem with working there and then able to put that back. And you're right, it is really difficult, that's certainly something that we find here, to work with these collections of books which are really fragile and you know, we have volunteers who are really keen to help, but sometimes it's difficult. So, I think you've found a really amazing way to kind of get the best of both worlds in a way, to help people be able to engage with the collections but do it in a way that's safe for the books and for them. And it's I mean, it's really expensive to get books conserved. It can cost hundreds of pounds to get them rebound, and especially if they're in really bad condition.

00:34:12 Aoife

Yeah, yeah exactly, and rebinding isn't always what you want to do necessarily. In some cases, the best thing is to conserve the book, and in other cases the best thing is to just clean it and preserve it.

00:34:24 Molly

Yeah, well it goes back to what we were talking about, about the physicality of the book. When is that more important than keeping it in a kind of readable condition. When is the original bindings or the kind of extra stuff that you find in there more important than keeping it so it can stay on the shelves?

00:34:47 Aoife

Yeah, it's interesting it depends on the value of the book, and I don't just mean monetary value. But yeah, I guess so. I mean, it is interesting. You know there are many book traders that won't consider a restored book because they'll see the restoration as an erasure.

00:35:10 Molly

Yeah, so I mean, I imagine each collection that you work with has kind of very different needs and assessing that is obviously going to be a massive task. Do you find that what a collection needs both in terms of conserving, but also curating and providing access for, do you find that you kind of come into a job and know immediately or can see immediately what needs to be done and it's just a matter of finding the funding or the time? Or is it something that is more of a gradual process that you learn over time by working with collections. I guess, do you find that your relationship to them changes over the the years that you get to work with them?

00:35:58 Aoife

Yeah, I suppose so. I mean, when you come into working with a new collection, there are some things that you might be able to identify as a need very quickly. Depending on what stage of progress the collection is at. For instance, if you if you start a role somewhere where the collection has no policy, that might be something you want to start working on, right away because that will enable you to be able to do so many other things and make so many other necessary decisions. So I mean in terms of in terms of good collection management, I think librarians are in agreement now about what's good practise, what's not good practise and I think every librarian brings that to the collection in the work that they're doing so applying that benchmark is a really useful thing. And then having that standard is something that you would apply to any collection that you work with. But maybe in terms of the the research and curatorial potential of a collection that takes a little bit more time to research and understand and delve into and also part of that is understanding who your audience is and what they need, and that kind of thing can take a little bit more time to understand before you launch into things. But at the same time, I think like I mentioned before, sometimes when you arrive at a new collection you can see its potential immediately and you get so excited and you get so excited about all the people who are going to feel just as excited as you do and you start having ideas and you can almost, even though you don't know exactly how you're going to carry it out, you can kind of see the vision right away for all of the possibilities. For instance, at Leeds Arts University at the moment we've had this big changeover of staff and a big break because of the pandemic, so we're kind of visioning out what we'll be able to do in the future. And the university curator Marianna Tsionki has identified quite quickly, probably something that was known in the institution already anyway, but she's identified that the art collection that's held by the university and the special collections are kind of underutilised in terms of engagement with them, in terms of commissioning artwork from them and research into them, so that's the kind of thing that's going to drive the future programme. But yeah, you can kind of identify those things right away, but you can't always implement them right away. You know you mentioned funding, or it might just be some circumstances that have arisen over the lifetime of the institution that prevent you from doing the work that seems so obviously necessary, but the timing is huge and coming along at the right time is so important sometimes to be able to kick things into action.

00:39:07 Molly

Yeah, I think you're right about that initial energy, because sometimes I think when you've worked with a collection for a long time you're not as excited about it and certainly every time someone new comes into the Leeds library, there's that gasp, like 'oh this place is amazing, I can't believe it'

and I certainly felt like that when I first came, and I still do sometimes. But it's you know when you're working in a place every day, you kind of lose that kind of wonder or excitement. So yeah, I definitely think that kind of initial energy is really exciting and good to be able to work with.

00:39:45 Aoife

Yeah, yeah, I think it can be renewed as well, we don't often ask that of ourselves to sort of OK, put some time aside in your diary this week to go and get excited about the collections again. But it's probably a really good idea because I had the same experience, particularly at the Portico. You know, you become very clouded in in all of the tasks that you need to do in order to have had a good week that your enthusiasm for the the actual collection can become a little bit mystified and a little bit a little bit lost. And then when somebody new comes in and shows you the research that they're doing or is really curious about a particular topic you're reminded of what an incredible treasure you're working with. So yeah, maybe that's what we should start doing.

00:40:47 Molly

Yeah, well, that's why engagement work is really important as well actually and why it's so interesting, because you do really have to stop and think OK, what is going to get 14-year-old really interested in this collection? What would have got me really interested in the collection at this age, what's going to get a child interested in the collection. What's going to get someone who's in their 30s interested so it's really interesting to come to look at it from different angles and find different niches and little bits of extra stuff that maybe you don't find interesting, but someone else would.

00:41:22 Aoife

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. That's one really nice thing that I've been able to start doing at the university is putting on very small-scale exhibitions. They're just big enough to be like manageable within my workload. But just two or three a year varies, very small scale and they're usually just internal for staff and students to see the special collections, although they can be seen by appointment on occasion as well. I feel incredibly happy to have the opportunity to be able to say OK, there's a new exhibition coming up and this means that I can put two days aside to just like acquaint myself with collection and can become enthused by it again.

00:42:09 Molly

Where do those come from then, is that just when you're kind of working or looking after the books and then you get an idea and then do some research then?

00:42:32 Aoife

Well the first one I did was kind of inspired by a new acquisition that we had to the archive. Judith Cash, who kind of created the Paperchase brand, had been a student of Leeds College of Art in the 50s. And she recently passed away and her son donated the dissertation that she had made when she was a student at the college. And she'd handwritten and hand illustrated with gouache paintings, and it was illustrated with her photographs and all kinds of things, this book, which was bound and it's unbelievable, it's quite a long book, and she's handwritten the whole thing. It's called Pigeons and Pigeon Men and it's and it starts out as the story of herself wandering around Barnsley, trying to find inspiration for her art projects, and she finds these guys, these pigeon fanciers and she starts sort of like loitering around watching what they're doing, and they finally invite her to come and look in the pigeon loft and they start telling her all these incredible facts about pigeons and this

sort of ignites the fascination for her with these birds who are often looked down upon but historically have also had a really high status because they were used in the war and they are carrier pigeons. And you know, this kind of really interesting, like closely connected history we actually have with these birds who, just like live among us. So I was inspired by her book and then I just started digging in the collection to find other things that I could display to complement that and I think other things come up here and there. You just find something in the collection, and you think I want to show this and how can I expand on it? Or sometimes there might be certain topics or themes like sustainability that are really important to the institution, and so we might find a way to explore some ideas around that and put on a display for that.

00:44:38 Molly

That sounds absolutely amazing and so interesting, and you can see them by appointment. Is that right? Or are they mostly just kind of internal?

00:44:47 Aoife

So, the the way that they're laid out at the moment is that the displays are sites sort of in these like little corners and pockets throughout the university building. So, in order to see them what you'd need to do is e-mail the library and make an appointment so that somebody could come and basically show you around the building and give you some time to look at them. The university does have its own gallery as well, which is publicly accessible, and the programme has been on hiatus over the pandemic but is reopening at the end of this month, so you'll hopefully start to see more news about exhibitions from the university circulating.

00:45:32 Molly

Wonderful, really exciting. My final question, I'm not sure your thoughts to it, but I basically wanted to ask about the differences between working with contemporary collections and historic collections. And if you have a preference?

00:45:58 Aoife

I think my personal preference is probably working with historic collections. I've kind of, I studied history of art for my BA and then I did a contemporary curating MA and then I went to work at the historic library and now I'm working at a place where work is being made in the very building. And so I think I usually just come back to feeling more at home among historical books and historic items.... I don't know, I just like reading! Maybe that's got a lot to do with it as well. I like reading about the past so I think that's probably my personal preference, but I really, really enjoy being just like among this community of young people are there and having their university art school experience and making things and collaborating with one another and like right at the beginning of their, well maybe not right at the beginning, but like early on in their kind of journey of discovery of like who they are and what work they're going to make, and all the things they've yet to discover about the history of the world and the art world, and how that all works, good and bad.

00:47:31 Molly

Yeah, it's a tricky. It's a difficult question

00:47:42 Aoife

Yeah, I'm not missing the historical library that much at the moment. 'cause I'm enjoying what I'm doing that much.

00:47:43 Molly

You have older texts there as well, if they're kind of fewer and farther between. But I mean that kind of middle ground between kind of art and books and literature and heritage and kind of contemporary work and historic work is a middle ground that I'm obsessed with as well, and I also kind of went to art college and sort of literature and this is kind of a mixture of both as well, this library. So, think it's really exciting and actually, as opposed to just an art gallery or a Public Library, there's so much scope to do interesting work, to a certain extent. And that's what really excites me.

00:48:35 Aoife

Yeah, yeah me too. I feel very lucky to have found two roles really. I mean the Portico because there's such a dynamic visual arts programme there it was actually quite an easy transition to go from working in that environment to working at an art school library, and yeah, I feel really lucky to have had those roles where I've been able to blend all those things that interest me.

00:49:00 Molly

Yeah, thank you so much for chatting. To me this has been super interesting.

00:49:06 Molly

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