society of antiquaries

Frank Waterton, assistant librarian at The Society of Antiquaries of London, explores the shared history of interpretation between archaeologists and artists.

Art and the antiquaries

Based in the heart of London, The Society of Antiquaries of London is the centre of antiquarian learning, discovery, and community.

As a royal learned society, our fellows have been inspiring scholarship, debate, and research for over 300 years. More recently, we have welcomed enthusiasts such as affiliates and the general public to share in our journey, to understand the past and its relevance today.

In addition to our premises at Burlington House in Piccadilly, the Society of Antiquaries also owns Kelmscott Manor, the former home of William Morris and his family.

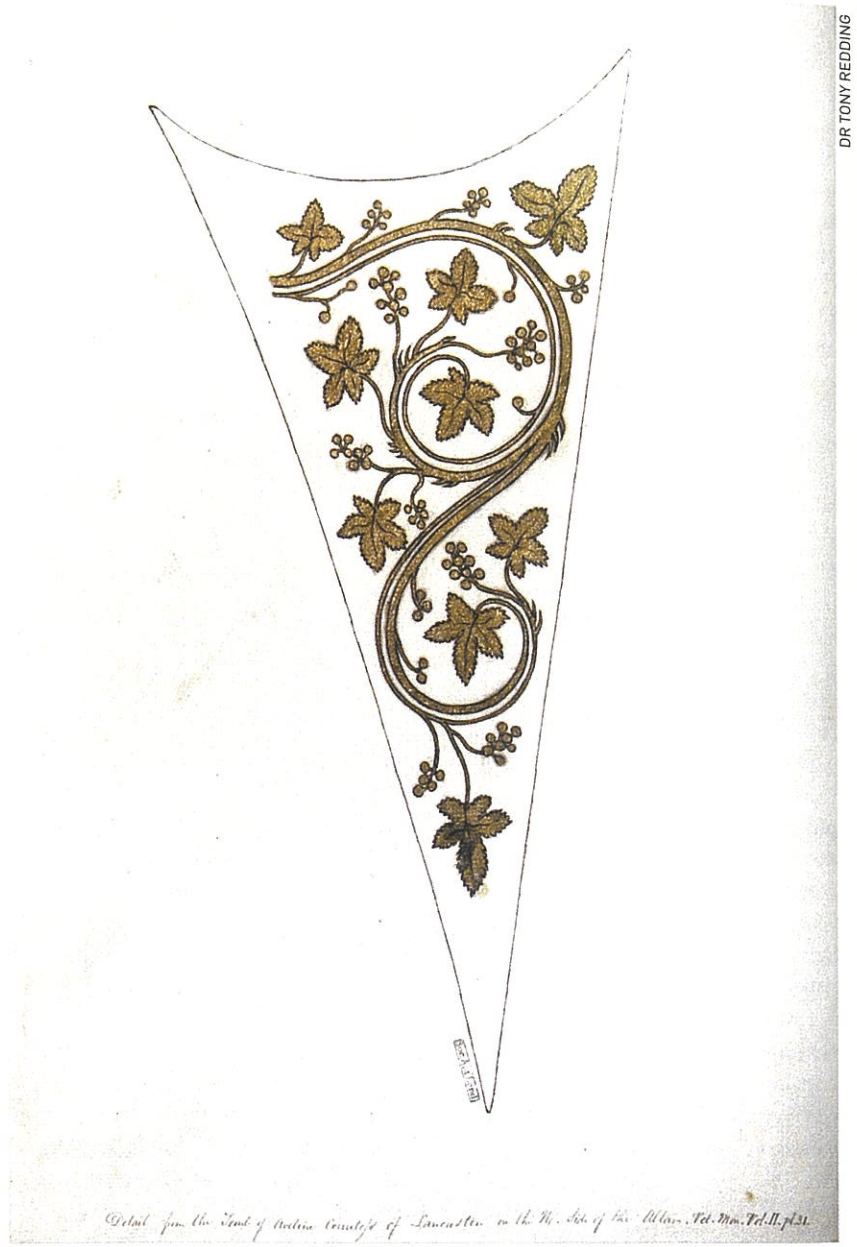
At our home in Burlington House, the Society runs a display programme aimed at sharing our collections with a wider audience, which is open to the public through our Open Fridays as part of our Sensing History project.

Located in our main entrance hall, the Society's latest exhibition Art and the Antiquaries focuses on the relationship between the Society, antiquarians, archaeologists, and artists, to understand how the material past has been recorded, interpreted, and published for different audiences.

The display begins by examining objects in our collection which represent how antiquarians have used art to record objects of interest in the field, such as the architecture of historical remains in Italy, temples in Egypt, English effigies, and the Bayeux Tapestry.

Each object illustrates how creative processes such as watercolour, plaster casts, and rubbings were important mediums in the field of archaeology, and how they assisted research in further understanding the visual elements of the material past.

The exhibition also explores select Fellows of the Society who were artists by trade, and who found inspiration for their artworks through their love of history and archaeology. For instance, the aforementioned William Morris, an artist, and antiquarian with a deep love for history and knowledge, who used his interest in the past to inform his creative output.



DR TONY REDDING

Above: Design detail, featured in Vetusta Monumenta volume II, a collection of work by artists that were published and distributed among the wider community

Morris was deeply influenced by medieval and Renaissance design and one volume from Morris' personal library, which features in the exhibition, contains four Italian Renaissance writing books.

These were four of the first complete manuals dedicated to the design and study of text and type completed in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century.

Morris acquired the books some time before 1875, studying them attentively alongside his study of manuscripts with which he was particularly occupied in the 1860s and 70s. The books also helped to influence the type used in Morris' publishing venture, the Kelmscott Press. He also recommended the book to his daughter May Morris as an aid for her own artwork.

Throughout the Society's history, we ourselves have published many different titles, including our two largest historical publications, *Vetusta Monumenta* and *Archaeologia*, the latter preceded by *The Antiquaries Journal*.

For these publications, we employed artists to produce the images which would be published and distributed to the wider community, often allowing these images and discoveries to be seen for the first time.

Above: William the Conqueror at Hastings by James Basire FSA (1769-1822), after Charles Sothard FSA; hand painted by Stothard (1786-1821), 1816-19

Right: Illuminating Knowledge, the re-imagining of the society's emblem

As a result of these partnerships, the Society has a large collection of prints and drawings, which show the process from sketch to engraving, and artist to engraver, an invaluable source for the study of printmaking as it allows the engraving to be compared to its drawn counterpart and to see the artistic decisions which were made to get to the final print.

Among the artists explored here are William Blake, James Basire FSA, and Charles Stothard FSA, all of whom were employed by the Society.

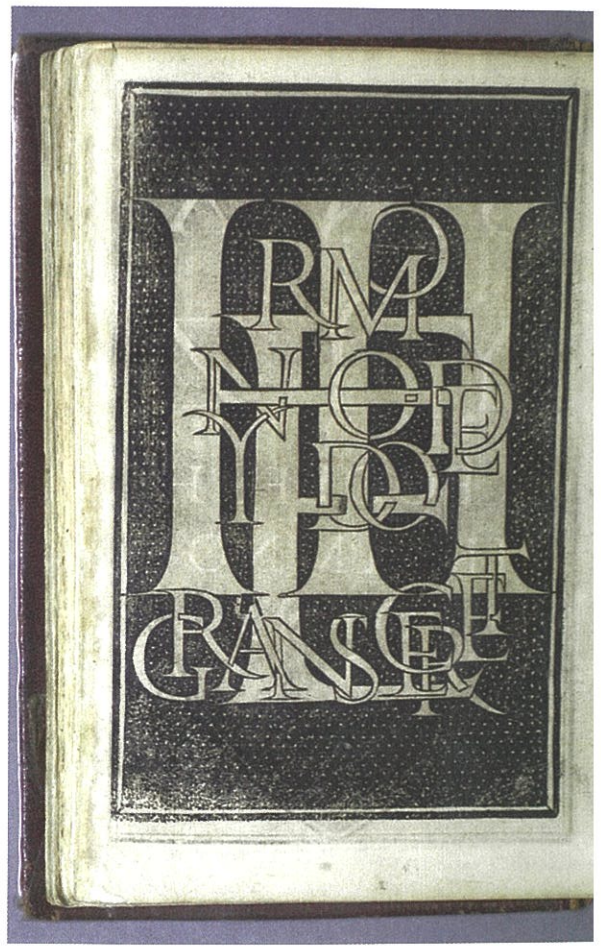
The Society still collaborates with artists on many different projects and is committed to engaging with artists in new and exciting ways to help foster an interest in the past.

In recent years, the Society has pushed to work with artists to re-evaluate the past and to create new ways of looking at our collections. From makers-in-residence to site-specific installations and engaging workshops for our Friday Late programmes, these partnerships are a creative and stimulating way to view our history.

In 2022, Katherine Van Uytrecht and Katy Drake began their residency at the Society with the research carried out by the Beyond Notability project (https://beyondnotability.org/) examining histories of women active in archaeology, history, and heritage as revealed in the Society's archives, and the archives of the Royal Archaeological Institute (RAI).

The culmination of this residency produced the screen print re-imagining of the Society's emblem, the Lamp of Knowledge, with the piece 'Illuminating Knowledge', which now hangs in the main library.

Kath and Katy have included over 200 shapes in the print to represent the women associated with the Society from 1870-1950. These shapes are inspired by Roman and Athenian fictile and votive lamps, ranging in date from the fifth century BCE to the second century, held in the Society's collection.



Above: The typefa used by Morris' Kelmscott Press w heavily influencea Renaissance writi books

Art and the Antiquaries will be open to the public as part of our Open Fridays scheme from 1 May to 31 July at Burlington House, Piccadilly. ■