



Who are you, where are you based and what do you do?

My name is **Robin Armstrong Viner** and, like many M25 colleagues, I am mostly on Teams and Zoom. Having joined **The Courtauld Institute of Art as Head of Library Services** in September 2019, I have now spent longer working from home near Canterbury (43 weeks at the time of writing) than at either of our sites in London. The Courtauld opened a second campus at Vernon Square near King's Cross while we transform our spaces in the North Block of Somerset House. At the moment the Library's teaching collections are at Vernon Square but our image and special collections remain at Somerset House.

Although we reopened between lockdowns, I spend relatively little time on campus. It is easier for me to work from home than for many of my colleagues. I also want to avoid compromising the social distancing practices and team bubbles we have established since we returned to site in July 2020. It has been really challenging finding ways to lead The Courtauld's library services remotely, particularly as I prefer to work through ideas with colleagues, but I need to adapt to the circumstances in the same way that I am asking our users and my colleagues to.

What do you most enjoy about your job?

I am so lucky to be part of such a brilliant community at The Courtauld. Our students, alumni, and external users not only encourage the Library team to be the best we can but are very generous in sharing their insights into the collections. I get to work with academic colleagues who are both experts in their field and passionate about their teaching. My professional services colleagues are constantly innovating and finding new ways to open up our content.

I love the very human tales that weave through our collections and bind them together. Recent accessions include a number of letters that show the very real suffering that some of the most influential figures in the history of art experienced in the run-up to and during World War 2. Together with a collection of rare books we were gifted, they help tell the story of how this close-knit community shared their knowledge with their peers and successors and shaped the discipline. We are fortunate that their interaction with the collections inspired those scholars and their families to gift material and further enrich our holdings.

Then there are the spaces. Watching the transformation of the area around Vernon Square is really energizing. I still have to pinch myself when walking through the Courtyard of Somerset House with the sun reflecting off the stone in summer or watching the ice skaters in winter...

What motivates you in your work?

Connecting people to collections and helping them develop the skills they need to make the most of those resources is incredibly rewarding. Breaking down barriers is a huge part of that. It is wonderful when researchers draw narratives from or use those materials in ways we could not imagine, but they need to feel empowered to do so. I am passionate about providing

opportunities and spaces, both physical and digital, that allows everyone to experience and engage with the items we curate on their behalf.

I want our users to have a sense of ownership and pride around the collections as well as feeling the joy associated with the discovery and acquisition of knowledge. Happiest finding ways to improve users' experience, I always want to make things better. I have learnt that the smallest of changes and the slightest of contact can have a huge impact, particularly in the current pandemic. Although I tend to try and work at scale to benefit as many users as possible, I am enjoying the smaller collaborations associated with this role.

How has/can the M25 Consortium support you in your career?

Apart from three and a half years in Aberdeen, I have spent my entire career in London and South East England so the M25 Consortium has been a big part of my professional life. An M25 course helped me develop my leadership skills in my first senior role. It is lovely to exchange occasional emails with fellow alumni or to find a welcoming face in a room full of strangers. Librarianship is a wonderfully generous profession but the M25 Consortium has helped me build a local support network that has enabled me to navigate so much.

I am acutely aware of the benefits for my colleagues too. There are lots of opportunities for heads of service to network but the M25 Consortium provides them for library staff working at any level. In previous roles, I have seen how attending M25 events has eased colleagues' sense of isolation and reassured them that others face similar difficulties. Even better, it has often helped them to think around those problems and give them confidence that their ideas will work.

What would it surprise people to know about you? That I am an accidental librarian - it feels like such a natural fit! I grew up wanting to be an architect and studied architecture as an undergraduate. Fortunately, I was inspired by an amazing subject librarian to consider it as a career. I was just as lucky in spotting and securing a graduate traineeship at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). Through my time at the RIBA and my library degree, I discovered the diversity of roles in the profession and have not looked back since.

I am also an introvert. Although it might not be as much of a problem in libraries as it would in other workplaces, this is particularly challenging in leadership positions. I have found ways to manage speaking in public (apologies if you have sat through one of my many terrible presentations) but it still exhausts me. Brilliant mentors and role models encouraged me to build time both to prepare and to reflect into my schedule, helping me to be the very best I can.

Complete the sentence:

If I wasn't working in a library, I would be... trying to get a job in a library **because...** there is nothing I would rather be doing. I feel very privileged to be able to help so many people in my own small way. The utterly stunning collections I look after are rich with fantastic content that both delights and inspires me. I also get to work with a fascinating group of lovely people, whose range of backgrounds and interests beyond their professional lives broaden my horizons. Besides, there has always been lots of cake in every library I have ever worked in!