

# MHRA

Modern Humanities Research Association

Professor Malcolm Cook  
Chairman

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The Modern Humanities Research Association applauds the Victoria and Albert Museum for its recent decision to abolish reproduction fees for scholarly use of images of its collection.

Malcolm Cook, Chairman of the MHRA, commented: "This is a major event, opening an important archive for practical scholarly use, and making a significant contribution to the vital debate on the social purposes of copyright. British scholars are very often obliged to pay from their own pockets for the rights to use images in their books. One might be charged £500 to reproduce a painting by Rembrandt, who died in 1669, even when the image is used for scholarly purposes in a book whose sales income will barely cover printing costs. (A typical art history book might need 60 such illustrations.) The process of rights clearance is not only expensive: it is also cumbersome and legally fraught with risk. Museums very often grant licences with terms which do not meet the needs of the book, restricting subsequent reprints, for instance."

As the British Academy's recent report on copyright law commented, the practice of charging rights fees for works in public hands is a serious threat to the academic study of art and culture. We hope that the ongoing Gowers Review into intellectual property will take note both of the BA report and of the V&A's change in policy, and will recommend clarification of the law in this area.

For all these reasons we welcome the V&A's decision. Over time, we believe it will substantially raise the profile of the V&A collection, and can only benefit the museum. As trustees and curators, museums must of course raise funds for buildings, staff and restoration. But rights fees can only be a significant income stream if they are priced at unreasonably steep levels, and such a practice endangers the living body of scholarship on which every great art collection depends. The highest purpose of a museum is to open its collection for all, and we hope that other great public collections will follow the V&A's lead, both in the UK and beyond.

**Modern Humanities Research Association**

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