

Anton Zwemmer was a Dutch bookseller and publisher who settled in England during the early 1900s, fostering the growth and development of specialized art book selling and publishing.

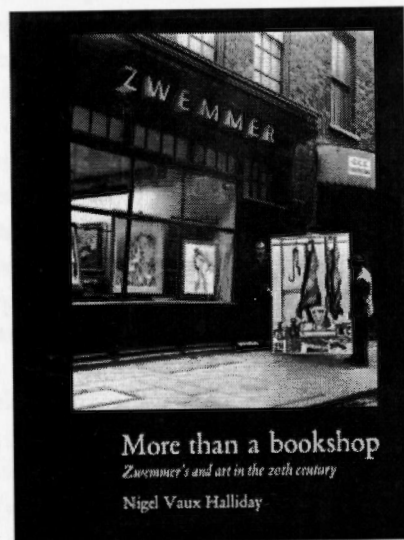
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Anton Zwemmer: London's Bookseller and Publisher for the Arts

JANE CARLIN

As a student of art history and subsequently as an art librarian, I have always been intrigued by the power images have to convey ideas and how art reproductions have the ability to influence one's interpretation of art. As an undergraduate studying art history, I was introduced early on to the importance of image quality. I can't forget sitting through early morning lectures in darkened auditoriums in which the professor would profusely apologize about the lack of a color slide for a key work of art, or alternatively, when a color one was available, offer an abject apology for the pink quality of the film. I can remember study sessions surrounded by huge stacks of art books filled with reproductions in both color and black and white. And, as a graduate student in library science, I was fortunate to work at both the Fine Arts and the Lilly Rare Book Libraries at Indiana University. I spent countless hours gazing at hand-illustrated books and beautifully printed *livre d'artistes*. My first professional position was at the Herron School of Art in Indianapolis where as the slide librarian my awareness of the importance of image accuracy was heightened by my copy photography work. So, it was inevitable when a call for proposals for post graduate study tenable at the University of Wales in Great Britain was announced by B. H. Blackwell, the Oxford bookseller, I seized on the opportunity and submitted a proposal to study the history of the illustrated art book. I was fortunate to receive the academic fellowship which resulted in a lifelong love affair with the art book!

My research took me to the Victoria and Albert National Art Library where I spent countless hours examining early and contemporary illustrated art books; to the homes of noted publishers such as Elly Miller; to the daughter of Bela



Horowitz, founder of the Phaidon Press; and to the many specialist art bookshops throughout London. It was during my walks around Charing Cross Road and interviews with specialist booksellers, librarians, and publishers that I was introduced to the contributions of Anton Zwemmer, one of the leading art booksellers and publishers in the early part of the twentieth century.

Very little is written about Anton Zwemmer, but Nigel Vaux Halliday's book, *More than a bookshop: Zwemmer's and art in the 20th century*, is an exceptional account of his life. This article provides a snapshot into the many contributions of Anton Zwemmer; bookseller and publisher of the arts.

THE EARLY YEARS

Anton Zwemmer was born in Haarlem, near Amsterdam, in 1892. He was the eldest son of Arie and Baukje Huizinga Zwemmer. His family was of modest means and Anton went to the local Christian School for the Working Class where he received a strong foundation in general subjects. He completed his education at age fourteen and found his first job in the publishing house of Herman Tjeenk Willink in Haarlem. But Anton proved to be an industrious young lad and it was not long after joining Willink's that he moved to a new position at the Haarlem firm of H. N. Mul, specializing in music and bookselling. It was here that he learned the fundamentals of the book trade. It was also in 1911, while working at Mul's, that fate intervened in his life, giving him the opportunity to further his career. In January of 1911, Zwemmer had received his call, like all young men of his age, for national service which was to begin in January 1912. The Dutch Army granted exemption to only a small number of recruits through a lottery. It was pure luck that Anton Zwemmer's number was picked and he was granted exemption for service. Therefore, he did not have to serve in the First World War. In his book Nigel Halliday refers to an interview Zwemmer gave to a Dutch paper in the 1950s in which he "still talked about this piece of paper which had such a significant influence on the course of his life" (Halliday 1991, 20). And so it was in 1912, at the age of nineteen, he left his hometown of Haarlem to begin work in Amsterdam. His first position in Amsterdam was as an assistant at the established firm of Kirberger & Kesper, which specialized in English literature. Zwemmer had the opportunity to travel to England and to develop connections with booksellers and publishers including Simpkin Marshall, Britain's leading book wholesaler. By this time he had become proficient in English, which no doubt led to his desire to establish residency in Britain. So it was no surprise when in 1914 he moved to Britain to work for Simpkin Marshall. After a short period of time, he moved to a new job at the iconic Harrods department store where he managed the bookshop. Anton acquired not only keen business acumen, but he also recognized his natural ability to sell books. His next position provided the

opportunity to combine both his knowledge of the book trade, language, and business skills with his uncanny sales ability. He took a position as an assistant for German born Richard Jäschke, a bookseller specializing in antiquarian and modern first editions at no. 78 Charing Cross Road.

ARTS BOOKSELLER

Zwemmer settled in to work with Jäschke and quickly became an invaluable assistant. His ability to speak several languages and his connections with Europe and Holland were an asset to the growing business. Jäschke was a German immigrant that had never sought naturalization. As the First World War progressed it became increasingly difficult for Jäschke to manage his business due to his German background. Zwemmer took on more and more of the day to day business operations. He eventually acquired a partnership and took over the business which provided him the opportunity, after the war, to establish his own specialized clientele and focus on art publications. He began to replace the antiquarian books of Jäschke with imported European books on art and quickly established himself as the only specialist art book dealer in London. This was during a time when the British public, after years of restricted access to new publications from Europe, was ripe for new information. Zwemmer had an uncanny ability to understand that the timing was right to specialize in art. Several factors contributed to the growing interest in art. The Post-Impressionist exhibitions in London organized by art historian Roger Fry before the war had made a dramatic impact on Britain and in turn generated an interest in new art forms. Artists were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the restraint of the Royal Academy and after years of being cut off from primary sources of modern art in France and Germany due to the war, the paintings of artists such as Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh with bold imagery and colors created excitement in art circles. The major galleries did not yet embrace this avant-garde or modern art and Zwemmer's became the source and place where this new art could be explored.

Zwemmer not only stocked art books but also high quality art reproductions and a large stock of domestic and foreign art journals. The shop was the only UK supplier for many of these specialist journals including *The Studio*, *The Fleuron*, *Jugend*, *Cahiers d'art*, and *Verve*. These journals which catered to new emerging art and artists, often served as the only outlet for European art criticism, and in many cases provided the British public with the very first reproductions of the new art. Noted British art historian Sir Kenneth Clark reflects upon on the artistic climate after the war and the void filled by Zwemmer:

In this wilderness, Mr. Zwemmer's bookshop was the source of refreshment. Generations of Oxford undergraduates have claimed that their

education took place in Blackwell's but at least one art historian can claim the same for Zwemmer's. This oasis had an even greater influence upon the formation of our taste. To those who had not seen the Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1911, the great nineteenth century painters were almost unknown. In England, the people who had seen a Cezanne or Renoir were few. More incredible still, colour reproductions of Van Gogh did not exist and when they appeared in Mr. Zwemmer's windows, they were almost deliriously exciting. The same is true of Picasso and Matisse, only with them one could enjoy the added excitement of a movement belonging to one's own time. Young people ask, what is happening now? Only in Zwemmer's bookshop could they find the answer. (Anton Zwemmer: Tributes 1962, 3)

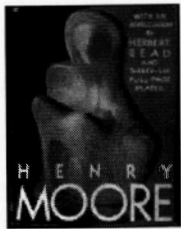
Stanley Morison, noted British typographer and printer, also reflects about the changes Zwemmer made to Jäschke's storefront:

The new proprietor put in his window a book that would not have appeared in his predecessor's time. A modest introduction to the life and work of Cezanne. Out of the small beginning signified by the display in the window of the book on Cezanne grew the institution that has been the main source of education and inspiration for artists and art historians. (Anton Zwemmer: Tributes 1962, 26)

ZWEMMER AS ART PUBLISHER

In the mid-twenties, while not only growing his collection of imported and domestic books and periodicals devoted to arts, Zwemmer added to his list of business ventures the publication of art books. His first forays were often co-editions with already established publishers. He produced the first book on Giotto since John Ruskin: *Giotto* by author Carlo Carra, an Italian painter and writer. *Giotto* was published in 1925 and contained 192 full page reproductions of photographs executed by the Italian photographic firm of Alinari and reproduced in collotype. Two years later he followed with a companion volume of Botticelli. In 1930, he connected with the French publisher Gualtiero di San Lazzaro's publishing house Editions des Chroniques du Jour. He co-published books on both Matisse and Picasso. These publications, with their integration of text and illustration printed with modern typefaces, were sophisticated in design format and it is easy to understand how, with their striking green and orange covers, they created a sensation when they appeared in the windows of Zwemmer's shop. The volume on Picasso, published in 1931, was the first English language monograph of the artist. Zwemmer worked with a number of publishers in Europe and the United States throughout his career and certainly helped promote the international co-editions of illustrated arts books.

Zwemmer also supported emerging British artists. His ongoing support of contemporary artists is reflected in his publication of the first book on the sculptor Henry Moore by Herbert Read, one of Britain's most respected art historians. As Read states, "Zwemmer's is a word immediately associated with the origins and developments of the modern movement in British art. In general,



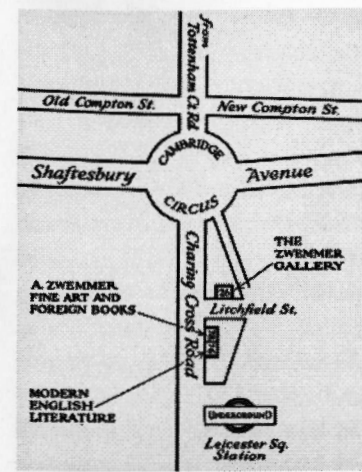
illustrated books and magazines have had a historical influence not sufficiently appreciated by students of contemporary art. It was Mr. Zwemmer who, in 1934, when no other publisher was willing, undertook my first book on Henry Moore" (Anton Zwemmer: Tributes 1962, 19). Read's book contained over thirty-six half-tone plates printed on high gloss art paper which represented Moore's work in stone, terracotta, concrete, metal as well as in drawings. The young artist Henry Moore also reflects upon the influence of Zwemmer's:

I discovered Zwemmer's bookshop in October 1921, in my first term at the Royal College of Art. I was a provincial student, raw from Yorkshire. That first year in London was the most tremendous exhalation for me. No doubt the British Museum contributed most of all to my excitement and education – but the art books I found in Zwemmer's had a great share too. Charing Cross Road is between the British Museum and the National Gallery, and so it was easy to combine weekly visits with a "call-in" at Zwemmer's. These calls would sometimes, quite shamelessly, last an hour. Having only my scholarship grant I couldn't afford to buy a book, unless I was sure it was one I would want to consult continuously – but looking at a coveted book week after week it often became unnecessary to buy it, so most times I would walk out with no purchase, but nobody bothered. (Wilkinson 2002, 95)

ZWEMMER'S ART GALLERY

In 1929, he established a gallery on Litchfield Street, around the corner from his Charing Cross bookshop. The gallery became, like the bookshop, a mecca for artists throughout Britain and a center for the modern art movement. Early shows featured the work of sculptors Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. In 1932, Zwemmer staged an exhibition of the Curwen Press which included decorative papers, stencils, and books. Zwemmer was already representing the Press' journal *The Fleuron*, which was established by book designer Oliver Simon and later edited by Stanley Morison. Zwemmer supported the Curwen Press throughout his career, often asking the Press to print the catalogs and invitations for many of his gallery shows. The exhibits of the art gallery were

often closely tied to the publication of books. For example, also in 1932, three exhibits were linked to new books published by Zwemmer: *Room and book* by



Paul Nash, *Art forms in nature* by Karl Blossfeldt and Nina Hamnett's *Laughing Torso*. Zwemmer continued to showcase modern artists with exhibitions of Miro, Braque, Chagall and Rouault as well as to sell original prints and high quality reproductions. The persistent theme was to support recent work by living artists and to encourage new ideas.

ZWEMMER AND ALBERT SKIRA

Many of Zwemmer's publishing ventures were a result of his collaboration with Albert Skira. Born in Switzerland, Skira also worked in France and is best known for his lavish color illustrated books and for the production of *livre d'artistes*: beautifully produced books, often with a historical text, illustrated with original prints by contemporary artists.

In Paris, Skira had the opportunity to meet many of the most prolific artists of the period and forged friendships with both Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. In 1928 he asked both artists to illustrate books for him. Picasso began work on the illustrations to *Les Metamorphoses D'Ovide*. Skira took a chance on this book but because of its avant-garde nature it was not well received by the established arts community. However, like the lottery that had many years earlier saved Anton Zwemmer from military service, so fate once again intervened, this time to connect Albert Skira with Anton Zwemmer. Back in England Zwemmer's business was thriving and he received regular orders from Britain's National Art Library in the Victoria & Albert Museum. He received an order for the Skira edition of the *Metamorphoses*. Zwemmer was the only dealer to order an advance copy from Skira. Skira was so thrilled he traveled to London in the middle of winter to meet the person whom he described as courageous for sending in the first order, and as Halliday reflects in his book, "Intrigued that anyone should be dealing in luxury books at such a time, Skira is reputed to have asked 'Qui est ce fou?' After phoning from Paris, he came in the depths of winter, trudging through the London snow, to visit Zwemmer" (Halliday 1991, 66). From this initial meeting Zwemmer and Albert Skira became close friends and business associates. Zwemmer became the agent for Skira's books in Britain and he used his windows to showcase the distinctive covers and the lavish color reproductions from the books which in turn drew in regular customers.

Zwemmer's business continued to thrive, but the Second World War curtailed many of the collaborative projects. During the war years, Zwemmer focused on the antiquarian book market due to the shortage of publications from Europe. And he gradually began to involve his two sons, Desmond and John, in business operations.

AFTER THE WAR

The end of war marked a new era for publishers. Wartime restrictions were lifted and publishers were able to expand international markets. Zwemmer still kept his focus on quality publications and he and his son Desmond continued to work closely with Albert Skira after the war. But with the end of the war, also came competition for the first time. New specialist bookshops expanded due to the growth of art publishing after the Second World War and Agatha Sadler opened St. George's Gallery in 1945. Sadler, when reflecting on this period states, "You cannot imagine how incredibly few art books there were. Zwemmer's was the only place you could purchase foreign publications" (Snider 1983, 59). Sadler's shop, like Zwemmer's drew a new clientele, many of them young art historians. This was also the time where the exhibition catalog was evolving to fit the renewed interest in the academic discipline of art history. Many galleries and museums were producing well-illustrated catalogs of works never before seen. Sadler seized on the importation of exhibition catalogs, thus complementing Zwemmer's publishing efforts.

In 1949, in collaboration with Skira, Zwemmer published the English translation by Stuart Gilbert of André Malraux's two volumes *The Psychology of Art*. This publication is a visual testimony to Malraux's museum without walls philosophy. The plates appear in the text at the exact point where they were expected to illustrate the ideas presented by the author. This was no easy feat, as the sixty-five photogravure plates of different sizes had to be integrated into the text and the twenty-one full color illustrations had to be tipped in at regular intervals. He also published a multi-volume set cataloging the sculpture and drawings of friend Henry Moore with British publisher Lund Humphries. Zwemmer still remained a driving force in the business but his sons continued to assume more operating responsibility. While John continued to oversee the bookselling, it was Desmond that continued to grow the publishing business and it was in the late 1950s that Desmond recognized the void in scholarly publications associated with architecture. Desmond Zwemmer is responsible for establishing *The Studies in Architecture* series that published many of the first books to recognize the contributions of some of the world's major architects. The series was initially edited by Rudolf Wittkower, German architectural historian and Anthony Blunt, British art historian, and eventually ran to thirty volumes.

CONCLUSION

In our digital age where it seems that everything is available at the touch of a keyboard or the click of a mouse, it is hard to imagine being unable to find information. In our high tech world where everything is animated and in full color, it is hard to imagine a world where color reproductions were not the norm. I like to close my eyes and visualize a cold, dreary and rainy day (maybe not so different from what we experience in the Pacific Northwest) in London. I like to think of walking down Charing Cross Road in search of inspiration and new ideas and then think about what it must have been like to turn the corner and gaze upon Zwemmer's window display of vibrant colors and new publications promoting European and British artists.

In 1962 Anton Zwemmer celebrated his seventieth birthday and to mark the occasion, a festschrift was published in his honor which included contributions from Stanley Morison, Geoffrey Grigson, Herbert Read, Kenneth Clark, Albert Skira and Henry Moore. I believe Henry Moore's statement below eloquently sums up Anton Zwemmer's contributions to book selling and publishing:

There are a few individuals in every age and country, whose vision and vitality applied in a particular sphere, have immense influence. I could mention eight or nine such individuals whose efforts during my lifetime have helped to change the whole climate of the English art world. Some of these I am very happy to count as my close friends, and one of them is Anton Zwemmer. (Wilkinson 2002, 95)

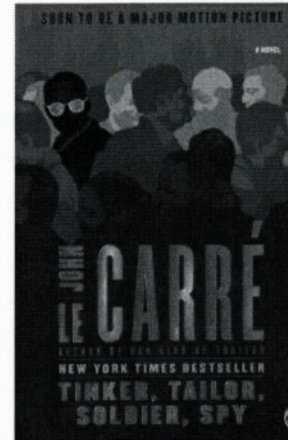
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As evidence of Zwemmer's place in British cultural history, it is even mentioned in John Le Carré's 1974 classic, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier Spy*. I think it is Toby E. that pops into "Zwemmer's" to browse while fleeing from one of those Russian spies!



Out in the street he scanned down the Charing Cross Road peering at the windows of the bookshops while his other mind checked both sides of the pavement. It had turned much colder, a wind was getting up, and there was a promise to people's faces as they bustled by. He felt elated. Till now he had been living too much in the past, he decided. Time to get my eye in again. In Zwemmer's he examined a coffee-table book called *Musical Instruments Down the Ages* and remembered that Camilla had a late lesson with Dr. Sand, her flute-teacher. He walked back as far as Foyle's, glancing down bus queues as he went. Think of it as abroad, Smiley had said. Remembering the duty room and Roy Bland's fishy stare, Guillam had no difficulty. And Bill, was Hayden party to their same suspicion? No. Bill was his own category, Guillam decided, unable to resist a surge of loyalty to Hayden. Bill would share nothing that was not his own in the first place. Set beside Bill, those other two were pygmies.

Jane Carlin is currently the Director of the Collins Memorial Library at the University of Puget Sound. She has worked as an art librarian at Oxford Brookes University in Oxford, England as well as the Herron School of Art, the University of Texas, and most recently at the College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning at the University of Cincinnati. She has promoted the book arts through lectures and exhibits. She "dabbles" in collecting art books published by Albert Skira, early editions of the Phaidon Press, and those published by Anton Zwemmer.