

Histories of Pollution in Urban Art Museum, c. 1840–1900 (London, 1 Oct 26)

University College London and the National Gallery, Oct 01, 2026

Application deadline: May 4, 2026

Nicholas Robbins, UCL

University College London and the National Gallery are pleased to announce the availability of a fully funded collaborative doctoral studentship from 1 October 2026 under the AHRC's Collaborative Doctoral Partnership Scheme.

This project examines intersections between urban pollution and the Victorian art museum. By exploring the threat that pollutants posed to cultural artefacts and buildings, and the ways that curators, conservators, scientists, critics, artists and the public responded, this PhD project will develop new understandings of the relationship between the museum and environmental histories of the nineteenth century. Centring the National Gallery as a key site of critical scrutiny and the development of new practices across this period, this research will explore networks of key individuals involved in studying the effects of pollution and mitigating its impact on art museums and art objects. This project will be jointly supervised by Dr Nicholas Robbins at UCL and Dr Susanna Avery-Quash at the National Gallery. The student will be expected to spend time at both UCL and the NG, as well as becoming part of the wider cohort of CDP-funded students across the UK.

Project Overview:

The environmental conditions of Victorian London presented increasingly hazardous conditions for people, the built environment and works of art alike. This Collaborative Doctoral Award will examine how practices of displaying, documenting, conserving, and writing about art changed in response to the threats that pollution posed to art objects and museum spaces. While attention has been paid to the way works of art depicted airborne pollution and urban overcrowding, this project intends to focus on the impact of these changing urban conditions on museums and the collections within them, building on the work of historians of conservation. This research will explore this topic through the history of the National Gallery, identifying it as the locus of a wider network of museum professionals, conservators, critics and artists who spanned many of London's other art institutions. This will include attention to figures from across cultural spheres, including but by no means limited to: Charles Eastlake, Michael Faraday, John Ruskin, R.N. Wornum, George Field, William Dyce, and William Morris. Drawing on the rich archives of the NG and other London institutions, the project will uncover and situate these archival histories within an evolving historical literature on environment and ecology in art history, conservation history, and cultural history.

From parliamentary Select Committees to occasional correspondence between museum employees, there was constant attention across the nineteenth century to the damage airborne and other

pollutants caused to paintings and other works of art. Subsequent practical measures were put in place, and, more broadly, efforts were taken to design museum spaces that could maintain a suitable and predictable environment for art. Beyond direct interventions in object care and conservation, these also included new methods for framing and displaying works of art; new technologies of heating, ventilation and lighting; new technologies for testing and preventing material change; and new approaches to documenting works of art to track their condition over time. This project will also pay attention to the role of art criticism and the press in framing wider understandings of these problems; to the role of the state in convening investigations about the problems that museums faced; and to the expertise that artists and scientists contributed to these efforts. In responding to the problems of urban pollution, museum staff, conservators, artists, critics and the public came to understand the art museum as a charged site for confronting the strains that industrial capitalism placed on Britain's cultural and social fabric. In this sense, the project will offer a new narrative about the relationship between art, environment, museums and the public during the nineteenth century.

Eligibility:

Applicants should have, or be currently completing, a master's-level degree in a relevant subject (e.g., history of art, museum studies, history of science, cultural history, technical art history) or be able to demonstrate equivalent experience in a professional setting.

This studentship is open to both Home and International applicants.

To be classed as a UK 'Home student', candidates must meet the following criteria:

- Be a UK National (meeting residency requirements), or
- Have settled status, or
- Have pre-settled status (meeting residency requirements), or
- Have indefinite leave to remain or enter

- Further guidance can be found here -
<https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/UKRI-030221-Guidance-International-Eligibility-Implementation-training-grant-holders-V2.pdf>

International students are eligible to receive the same full award for maintenance. If an international student is selected for the studentship, an International Scholar Award for Doctoral Training (ISAD) from UCL will provide top-up funds to cover the difference between home and international PhD tuition fees.

All applicants must meet UKRI terms and conditions for funding. See: <https://www.ukri.org/funding/information-for-award-holders/grant-terms-and-conditions/>

Details of Award:

CDP doctoral training grants fund full-time studentships for 4 years or part-time equivalent up to a maximum of 8 years.

The award pays tuition fees up to the value of the full-time home UKRI rate for PhD degrees. An International Scholar Award for Doctoral Training (ISAD) from UCL will provide top-up funds to cover the difference between home and international PhD tuition fees.

The award pays full maintenance for all students, both home and international. The UKRI National Minimum Doctoral Stipend for 2026/2027 is £21,805/year, plus London Weighting of £2000/year and a CDP maintenance payment of £600/year.

The student is eligible to receive an additional grant for travel and related expenses, courtesy of the National Gallery, worth up to £1000 per year for 4 years.

The successful candidate will be eligible to participate in events organised for all Collaborative Doctoral Partnership students who are registered with different universities and studying with cultural and heritage organisations across the UK.

How to apply:

Please include in your application:

- Personal Statement (up to 1,500 words). The statement should explain your interest in the research project, detail how your academic and/or professional background have prepared you to undertake this research, and discuss how the project will enable you to develop your expertise and skills
- A sample of writing. This could be a piece of academic writing (such as an MA dissertation) or a text written during any current or previous professional work
- Your CV
- Two references (at least one of these should be academic)
- Transcript(s) of university-level grades and qualification certificates

UCL and the National Gallery will assess the applications jointly and, following an interview during the week of 25 May 2026, will select a candidate. The successful candidate will then be asked to officially apply for the PhD programme in History of Art via the UCL online portal.

For informal enquiries about the project, please contact the lead co-supervisor Dr Nicholas Robbins at n.robbins@ucl.ac.uk.

We also ask that all applicants to complete a voluntary EDI monitoring form. Responses will be anonymous.

All CDP projects are part of a nationwide programme called the Collaborative Doctoral Partnership consortium. The CDP consortium will host an online webinar for prospective applicants on 13 April 2026 at 11 am. These webinars will provide an overview of the CDP funding scheme.

To sign up for a webinar, please email cdp@vam.ac.uk with the subject line 'Prospective Applicant Webinar' from the email address you would like to join the online meeting from. Sign up will close on 10 April 2026 at 5 pm.

Please note, the webinars will not focus on individual projects.

The application can be found here: [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/work-at-ucl/search-ucl-jobs/details?jobId=42669&jobTitle=AHRC+Collaborative+Doctoral+Partnership+\(CDP\)+studentship:+Histories+of+Pollution+in+the+Urban+Art+Museum,+c.+1840%C3%A2%C2%80%C2%931900+&source=jobs.ac.uk&sType=jobs.ac.uk&stype=-](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/work-at-ucl/search-ucl-jobs/details?jobId=42669&jobTitle=AHRC+Collaborative+Doctoral+Partnership+(CDP)+studentship:+Histories+of+Pollution+in+the+Urban+Art+Museum,+c.+1840%C3%A2%C2%80%C2%931900+&source=jobs.ac.uk&sType=jobs.ac.uk&stype=-)

NameOfSource&board_id=3086&board_name=jobs.ac.uk

Reference:

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