



AHRC PHD STUDENTSHIP

Plants and their Products: Biocultural collections at Kew Gardens & the South Kensington Museum during the long nineteenth century

Start date: 1 October 2025

Closing date for applications: **Friday 16 May 2025**

Interviews will take place online on Thursday 29 May



The V&A, Royal Holloway, University of London and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew are pleased to announce the availability of a fully-funded Collaborative Doctoral Studentship from October 2025 under the AHRC's [Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships \(CDP\) scheme](#).

The project considers the emergence and significance of biocultural collections containing both specimens and artefacts during the long nineteenth century, with a particular focus on plants and their products.

This project will be jointly supervised by Professor Felix Driver (Royal Holloway, University of London), Dr Simona Valeriani (V&A) and Dr Caroline Cornish (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew). The student will be expected to spend time at Royal Holloway, the V&A and Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (RBG Kew), as well as becoming part of the wider cohort of CDP students.

We encourage applications from a diverse range of people, from different backgrounds and career stages. The studentship can be studied either full or part-time. Students should have a Master's Degree in a relevant subject or be able to demonstrate relevant equivalent experience.

The studentship is open to both home and international applicants.

Project Overview

The project focusses on two prominent nineteenth-century collections – one in a botanical garden museum (RBG Kew), the other in an art & design museum (South Kensington). Both were part of a state-supported complex with shared understandings of the utility of the collection, display and circulation of plant-based 'raw materials' and finished products.

The purpose of the project is to re-frame the understanding of biocultural collections as central to the nineteenth-century museum project, reconnecting economic, cultural, scientific and political aspects of the history of collecting in the colonial era. Such collections are also of particular interest in the context of contemporary concerns over nature and environment, especially the biodiversity crisis.

The PhD is intended to further understandings of nineteenth-century museums through a focus on the role of plant materials in the making of products: from food and toys to clothes and medicines. The project will investigate the construction of the category of 'raw materials' in the museum context, examining the collection and display of plants and their products in contemporary museums and exhibitions. It will consider the ways that objects, whether individually or in series, were used to present 'object lessons' in the commercial geography of trade and empire. And it will explore the linkages, both past and present, between natural and cultural collections by looking specifically at the relationships between the economic botany collections at RBG Kew and plant-based collections at the V&A including the food collection once on display at the Bethnal Green Museum.

The project will also involve exploration of the historical significance of the economic and commercial contexts of museum practice in the nineteenth century, including a re-evaluation of the role of the 'trade museum' as a motivating idea. This can be seen in the work of the 'Reporter on the products of India' John Forbes Watson, whose textile sample albums are in the V&A collections (Driver & Ashmore 2010); the development, display and re-circulation of RBG Kew's economic botany collections, especially in the context of the pedagogy of commercial geography (Cornish 2013; Cornish & Driver 2020; Newman & Driver 2020); and the emergence of the commercial museum in late nineteenth-century Europe and North America, whose influence can be seen in newer institutions such as the Imperial Institute (Muddiman 2014) .

In tackling collections which defy easy categorisation, and which bear the distinct imprint of colonial extractivism, this project will be engaging with difficult and to some extent dissonant heritage. On the basis of our experience in outreach and educational initiatives linked to biocultural collections (for example Cornish et al 2021), we believe that the project

will open up opportunities for public engagement through plants and their products, notably through consideration of food cultures, belief systems and cultural heritage. The project thus speaks to the wider role of colonial-era biocultural collections as resources for learning and reconciliation in the twenty-first century (Martins 2021).

Research questions might include:

- What were the contexts in which the collecting and display of plant raw materials and products took place?
- How were biocultural collections understood, managed and displayed within public institutions such as Kew Gardens and the South Kensington Museum?
- In what ways were biocultural collections in botanic gardens and museums linked, for example through object exchange or the circulation of knowledge?
- What were the broader networks in which biocultural collections were embedded?
- What is the legacy of past interest in plant raw materials and products in present-day holdings and prospective collecting practices?
- In what ways can we reactivate such collections for twenty-first century audiences?

These broad questions set the wider context for the research, while leaving much scope for the student to focus on particular themes and issues (for example, the types of objects, collection source region or thematic focus selected for detailed study).

Methodologies are likely to combine object-based approaches with archive-centred investigation. Primary materials include accessions records at both the V&A and RBG Kew and deaccessions records at Kew. The last of these has recently been the subject of a major AHRC project (Mobile Museum, 2017-20) which involved transcription and databasing, making the materials much more findable and amenable to analysis. While the precise focus of the PhD project will depend on student interest and aptitude, it is likely that object biography and other forms of intensive case study as applied within many collections-based doctoral projects supervised at Royal Holloway will provide the basis for in-depth analysis of particular issues and processes. The resources at both institutions, including extensive collections of periodicals, books and official publications provide ample support for such approaches.

This research studentship is one of three projects allocated to the V&A Museum Group by the AHRC. The successful student will be expected to spend time carrying out research and gaining relevant experience in the V&A as part of the studentship. The project is also a partnership with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where the student will be conducting archival and collections-based research.

Details of Award

CDP doctoral training grants fund full-time studentships for 4 years or part-time equivalent up to a maximum of 7 years.

The award pays an annual stipend, both home and international students, which is tax free. The UKRI Minimum Doctoral Stipend for 2025/2026 is £20,780 plus London Weighting of £2000/year. There is also an additional CDP maintenance payment of £600 per year.

The award pays tuition fees up to the value of the full-time home fee. Where an international student is awarded the studentship and is eligible for study in the UK, Royal Holloway will make an additional tuition fee award, wholly covering the difference between the home and the international tuition fee, meaning that no additional fees are payable.

Further details can be found on the [UKRI website](#).

The successful candidate is eligible to receive an additional travel and related research training expenses grant during the course of the project courtesy of the V&A and Royal Holloway worth up to a total of £4,250.

The successful candidate will be encouraged to participate in professional development events and activities organised for all Collaborative Doctoral Partnership students who are registered with different universities and studying with cultural and heritage organisations across the UK. These activities are organised by a coordination team based at the V&A and are designed to provide CDP researchers with the knowledge, networks and skills to thrive in their future careers.

Eligibility

This studentship is open to both Home and International applicants.

For further guidance on training grant conditions, based on revisions to Training Grant Terms and Conditions for projects starting in October 2025, see [Policy statement: review of the training grant conditions – UKRI](#)

We encourage the widest range of potential students to study for a CDP studentship and are committed to welcoming students from different backgrounds to apply. We particularly welcome applications from people of Global Majority backgrounds as they are currently underrepresented at this level in this area.

Applicants should ideally have or expect to receive a relevant Masters-level qualification in a relevant subject such as Anthropology, Art & Design History, Geography, History, Museum Studies or Material Culture Studies or be able to demonstrate equivalent experience in a professional museum or research setting.

Applicants must be able to demonstrate an interest in gardens, libraries, archives and the museums sector; and the potential and enthusiasm for developing skills more widely in related areas.

As a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership project, the successful applicant will be expected to spend time at both the University and the partner institutions.

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

How to apply

Application is by email to f.driver@rhul.ac.uk

Please include in your application:

- Your CV (2-3pp)
- A cover letter (500-1000 words) explaining why you are interested in researching this topic, including what you would bring to the project and how you think you would develop it to reflect your own interests and expertise
- A sample of writing. This could be a piece of academic writing (e.g. MA coursework) or a text written in the course of any current or previous employment.

The successful applicant will be expected to submit a full application through Royal Holloway's applicant portal.

The closing date for receipt of applications is **Friday 16 May 2025**

We ask all applicants to complete a voluntary EDI monitoring form [here](#). All responses are anonymous.

Interviews

Interviews are expected to be held online on **Thursday 29 May**.

Further Information

For informal enquiries about the project, please contact Professor Felix Driver (F.Driver@rhul.ac.uk)

For further information about the research environment at Royal Holloway, see: <https://www.rhul.ac.uk/Geohumanities>

For further information about the V&A's Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships, see: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/collaborative-doctoral-partnerships>

For information about Interdisciplinary Research at Kew, including the Plant Humanities, see <https://www.kew.org/science/interdisciplinary-research>