

The frame job



Conservation intern Emma Northwood speaks to *Look* about her internship experience and teaches us a thing or two about gilding along the way.

Frame conservation is a delicate and intricate business. One wrong move or a single heavy breath can uproot your gold leaf and send it spiralling. This fine craft isn't for everyone, especially the restless, but it is a world in which Emma Northwood thrives.

Sitting with Northwood at the Art Gallery, she is at ease in the environment which was her host for three months last year. Northwood's interest in conservation dates to her high school years. She recalls travelling across the city to a conservation talk at another school because it wasn't offered at her own. It turns out this talk was led by Analiese Treacy, conservation manager of paper and frames, who became one of Northwood's supervisors alongside an expert team of conservators led by Barbara Dabrowa and including Genevieve Tobin and Tom Langlands.

Northwood's journey at the Art Gallery started when she joined the Youth Collective: 'I guess I wanted a sense of peership and to meet other young people in the arts. Being able to meet people interested in the same things as me for the first time was great. My life would be completely different if it didn't happen.'

The Youth Collective offers mentorship for people aged 15–24 where they are empowered to lead and deliver a series of projects and events. As Treacy says, 'The Youth Collective is levelling in that it brings people from all walks of life. It's an open and accepting program giving opportunity to people from a variety of study areas.'

Emboldened by this experience, Northwood applied for an internship in conservation at the Art Gallery during her undergraduate study at The University of Canberra.

Deciding on a frame to assign Northwood for her internship, Treacy and Dabrowa looked for something that would offer a challenge but could also be completed over a few months. They came across a medium-sized frame that had a variety of conservation challenges and housed the watercolour painting *St Albans Cathedral* c1888 by Harry T Hine.

This artwork, one of the Gallery's earliest acquisitions, had accrued damage due to age and historic interference, including its gilded surface being coated in bronze paint. This was a popular practice around the 1960s and 1970s and was done to achieve a more unified look across displays. Bronze paint, however, weathers badly over time by oxidising and tarnishing. Combine this with cracking, flaking and missing ornamentation and you have a frame that needs a good amount of consolidation and repair.

When it comes to frame conservation, there are few ways to gain experience in Australia. There is only one dedicated conservation course in the



Left to right: Emma Northwood, photo © AGNSW, Christopher Snee

Emma Northwood gilding in the conservation room, photo: Louis Waters

Definitions

Micron
Equal to 0.001mm thick, approximately the size of a hair.

Composition material
A mixture of chalk and animal glue dissolved in water with the addition of rosin and glycerol.

Bole
A specific natural clay from the soil, which can appear as an ochre yellow, red or black. When ground and mixed with animal glue it is used as a base for traditional water gilding.

Water gilding
A centuries-old traditional process that transforms the appearance of wood into smooth gold using a wet surface.

Cabachons
Ornamentation that is smooth and oval in shape.

country and even then, many students choose to focus on other specialisations. As Treacy explains, ‘an internship in frames conservation is similar to a traineeship as it offers an opportunity for the student to enhance their technical and hands-on skills in the workplace’. As to the day-to-day nature of her project, Northwood energetically described the structured and technical stages needed to achieve a polished result:

Stage 1: Cleaning and preparation

‘The process started off with cleaning, taking tape off the back of the frame and removing the bronze paint. Because I don’t have chemical experience in working with solvents yet, I had to mechanically surface clean it, which meant using a scalpel. It was difficult to take off the very top layer of bronze and to leave the gold intact. The gold is a micron thick, so it was a lot of being really patient. It took maybe a month just to scrape the paint off. It was really satisfying to see it come up and to give it the care it needed.’

Stage 2: Moulds

‘With Tom, I took moulds of the bay leaf ornamentation. We used dental putty for the moulds, which smells minty. So many conservation materials were initially developed for other fields. After taking the moulds we then used composition material to take negative impressions. We used a putty which is a gap filler, only archival. This consolidates the appearance of the frame.’

Stage 3: Gilding and restoration

‘We moved on to gilding and restoring the surface. For the parts that were reconstructed, we needed to apply bole. You paint the frame with bole and then polish it with a cotton glove. Because bole has animal glue in it, when you wet it again, the gold adheres perfectly to the frame. I got to traditionally water gild the back edge and the cabochons on the corners. Barbara and Gen were so patient with me while I was learning the ropes with this, as it’s notoriously difficult. The rest of the frame was non-traditionally gilded using an acrylic emulsion. You paint that on then press the gold leaf into the ornament, making sure it looks cohesive.’

Stage 4: Patination

‘For patination, you take watercolours [gouaches] and paint them on the frame to give it a more aged appearance. When hanging in the gallery, you want the frame to have that aged look so that it matches the works around it and is relevant to the time it was made.’

This detailed process has led to an exceptional frame fit for the artwork it houses and coherent with the time of its creation in the 1800s. Northwood’s technical knowledge and manual skill is clear, alongside a strong understanding of frame ornamentation throughout history. So, what is her favourite style of frame? ‘I think the Louis 14th and 15th frames are my favourite. They are the really gaudy ones, the ones with the rails that are flamboyant but so much fun. They might be a bit distracting to the paintings sometimes, but that’s part of the charm.’

Reflecting on the mentorship she received at the Art Gallery, Northwood says, ‘I find conservators are especially keen on training the next generation. It’s part of the job to want to maintain things.’ The conservation team wholeheartedly agrees, as Dabrowa notes, ‘I wanted to focus on training students. It is mutually beneficial for the team to have a student on board like Emma who asks questions and has good instincts’.

For those looking to enter the field, Northwood recommends various scholarships, fellowships and internships and advises students to keep track of the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM).

Next on Northwood’s agenda is a masters of conservation, which is the industry standard in the field. Asked if she had time for a trip to Europe in her schedule, she tells me her time will come. When she does go, Italy will be a key stop, not least because it’s especially known for gilding.

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Emma McLean,
deputy editor, *Look*

To find out more about the Youth Collective, visit artgallery.nsw.gov.au/learn/our-projects/youth-collective/



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‘At the Diggings’ Thredbo, 2019, gouache on paper, 29.5x42cm; Along the Track, Gammon Ranges SA 14th June 22, 2022 gouache on paper, 28x37cm. Photography Michael Bradfield.

Elisabeth Cummings
Gouaches

6 February
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