

# Working with University of Birmingham collections

Kim Goldsmith

The Universitas 21 International Student Museums and Collections Award is an annual student exchange between the University of Melbourne and the University of Birmingham. As the 2015 Melbourne recipient, I worked with the Birmingham collections for four weeks in early 2016, learning about the operation and management of galleries and museums, interpretation, object-based learning, and the conservation of cultural artefacts, all in a university context.

Each day I would rotate between different projects across a range of collections, including the Danford Collection of West African Art, the Wilson Paper Conservation Studio (attached to the Cadbury Research Library), the Lapworth Museum of Geology, and the Learning and Access Department of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts. My projects included conserving 19th-century pamphlets illustrated by George Cruikshank, producing a volunteer newsletter, creating a children's art trail called 'Pooches in Paintings', and setting up and uninstalling exhibitions.

My most challenging project was helping university curator Clare Mullett and her team prepare an exhibition titled *Empires of emptiness*, which consisted of nine outdoor



pods displaying 27 images of early 20th-century fortresses built by French and Russian colonising powers in the Sahara Desert. I also worked independently to produce a complementary display of eight Tuareg leather and metal artefacts from the Danford Collection of West African Art. This entailed research, interpretation, writing labels, condition reporting, basic conservation, designing the display

and creating object mounts and supports.

The Tuareg are a semi-nomadic indigenous people of Berber origin, who live across the Sahara, and whose way of life was threatened during colonial rule. They are renowned for their highly skilled craftsmanship in leather, metal and wood. The objects I selected represented aspects of Tuareg identity and daily life, and included a leather saddlebag for a camel, hand-painted with typical designs including Agadez crosses, dots and hatched lines, and adorned with green and red embossed tassels that would sway attractively as the camel walked across the desert. The bag would be used to carry clothing and materials for tents, while smaller bags held tea, milk and food. A sword incorporating broken car parts and recycled metals was another unique object in the collection.

In my last week at Birmingham, I was invited by Research and Cultural Collections staff to make and display some of my artwork. I created a series of small cocoon-like objects, titled 'There is no place like home', from found materials collected in Birmingham, which was a reflection on my sense of identity as a dual national of England and Australia. These works inspired a new series of porcelain cocoons that I have

**Opposite:** Kim Goldsmith conserving pamphlets illustrated by George Cruikshank, in the Wilson Paper Conservation Studio, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, 2016. Photograph by Marie Sviergula.

**Below:** Display of Tuareg objects from the Danford Collection of West African Art, Research and Cultural Collections, University of Birmingham, 2016. Photograph by Kim Goldsmith.

just completed for two exhibitions in Taiwan, including *Stunning edge* at the National Taiwan Craft Research and Development Institute in Taipei.

My experience at Birmingham has benefited my studies, influenced my arts practice, and reinforced my desire to work in a museum or university collection when I graduate. Intrigued by the Lapworth's geology collections and the Oxford University Natural History Museum, when I returned to Australia I completed a natural history conservation placement at the Australian Museum in Sydney. The award also gave me confidence in my interpersonal and communication skills, and I have since presented papers on my experience at four different venues, including the conference of the Council of Australian University Museums and Collections, held at the University of Sydney.

The most rewarding aspect of the placement was that all the projects were collaborative; I could test and expand my skills and knowledge while being guided and supported by a team of experienced curators, academics and conservators. I recognised that working in a university collection requires a high level of communication and negotiation skills, as many projects are cross-disciplinary and involve

staff from diverse departments on campus. I strongly encourage students to apply for this award, and the universities to continue to expand the program to enable more students to reap the personal and professional benefits of this exchange.

Kim Goldsmith is completing her Master of Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. She is a professional artist, and has lectured in a range of art, design, craft and architecture programs at Sydney College of the Arts, the University of Sydney and the University of Nottingham's Ningbo China Campus. After graduating she plans to work in a museum, continue lecturing, and expand her artistic practice.

