

CCMC students care for the University's cultural collections

Cushla Hill, Jude Fraser and Thea Peacock

The first year students of the University of Melbourne's Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC), undertaking their Master of Arts in Cultural Materials Conservation, are tapping into the rich resource of the University's cultural collections. The students undertake materials and techniques research, condition assessments, and treatments in a specialist area, chosen from one of three main streams: paintings, paper or objects conservation. The CCMC students have the advantage of having access to the University's collections, while the collections also benefit from the work carried out by the students. The program has been valuable in reinforcing the existing relationships between conservators and collection managers.

Paintings

Seven paintings from the Historical Students Collection at the Victorian College of the Arts are currently undergoing treatment by the paintings conservation students, under the supervision of paintings lecturer Cushla Hill. These seven portraits by Marion Jones present a unique opportunity to examine the early materials and techniques of the artist within the historical context of art training practice at Melbourne's

National Gallery School in the early 20th century. Marion Jones (1897–1977) attended the Gallery School from 1912 to 1917, winning several major prizes for her painting from life, the most prestigious being the National Gallery of Victoria travelling scholarship in 1917. Delayed by World War I, she travelled to London where she exhibited with the Royal Academy, London Portrait Society and Paris Salon.

The un-stretched canvases were for many years stored rolled, in very poor storage conditions, under the artist's home. The paintings have now been cleaned to remove a thick obscuring white deposit. Additionally, strip-lining and re-stretching of the canvases onto new stretchers will ensure the long term preservation of the original painting materials: canvas, ground and overlying paint layers. Materials for the treatments have been purchased through the 2008 Cultural Collections Grants Program which was funded by donations from staff, alumni and other benefactors towards the 2007 University Fund Annual Appeal.

It is hoped the conservation of this important collection and ongoing research into the unusual art materials used by Marion Jones will showcase the work of an important female



Victorian artist, whose work has seldom been exhibited.

Paper

The paper conservation students, under the supervision of paper lecturer, Jude Fraser, have been researching and treating sheet music material from the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library. Some of the titles included are *Anne Dreyer's Aboriginal songs for you and me*,¹ *Good-bye, my sweet Australian lassie*,² and the patriotic *Coo-ee! Coo-ee! You're wanted at the Dardanelles*.³ Treatments being undertaken include dry cleaning to



Opposite: Edward H. Tyrrell, *Coo-ee! Coo-ee! You're wanted at the Dardanelles* (for voice and piano), words by Peter L. Tighe, music by Edward H. Tyrrell, Sydney: W.H. Paling & Co., c.1914–1918, front cover. Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library, Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.

Left: Benita Dass-Grasse working on a portrait of a man by Marion Jones, from the collection of the Faculty of the VCA, University of Melbourne.

remove surface dirt, removal of adhesive tape and associated residues, stain reduction, flattening and repair of tears.

This is the second year that material from the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections has been treated by CCMC paper conservation students. Treatment is aimed at stabilising the paper to slow down the inevitable degradation process, and at reinforcing damaged areas so researchers can more safely handle the sheet music.

Objects

For the past three years, students in objects conservation have worked on botanical models belonging to the University of Melbourne Herbarium. Most of these spectacular models have a base of papier-mâché and/or wood, and are elaborately painted. Once used as teaching models, many have removable parts to show inner plant structures.⁴ Students have carried out treatments under the supervision of objects lecturer Thea Peacock, including cleaning, consolidation of paint, and stabilisation of cracks and delaminations in the base structures. Students are trained in preliminary investigations such as testing solubilities of the paint prior to cleaning. Ethical considerations are

also important in formulating conservation treatments. For example, damage to a model may have occurred during use and would therefore be considered as part of its history. If this is the case and the object is otherwise stable, it might not be treated. Students are instructed to consider this when examining an object, and based on visual and documentary evidence, may decide that an object should be left untreated. In presenting a range of interesting conservation problems, the botanical models have provided a fascinating opportunity for students to develop their practical skills.

Cushla Hill has been Senior Paintings Conservator at the CCMC since 2002. After graduating from the University of Otago with a Bachelor of Arts, she undertook a Bachelor of Applied Science in the conservation of cultural materials at the University of Canberra. As well as undertaking conservation treatments she teaches in the CCMC Masters course.

Jude Fraser is the Grimwade Conservator at the University of Melbourne. After completing a certificate in cartography at the Queensland Institute (now University) of Technology, she graduated from the University of Canberra with a Bachelor of Applied Science in conservation of cultural materials. Jude manages conservation programs for the University collections and the CCMC's fee-for-service consultancy programs and teaches in the CCMC Masters program. In 2001 she received the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material Conservator of the Year award.

Thea Peacock joined the CCMC as textiles conservator in 2007, where she also teaches in the Masters program. She holds a Bachelor of Applied Science in the conservation of cultural materials from the University of Canberra, and several degrees (including a PhD) in information technology. In conservation, Thea has worked in Hong Kong at the Museum of History and in London at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Notes

- 1 Anne Dreyer, *Anne Dreyer's Aboriginal songs for you and me* (for child's voice and piano), music by Robin Wood, illustrations by Marjorie Howden, Melbourne: D. Davis, c.1954. Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library, Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.
- 2 George W. Walker, *Good-bye, my sweet Australian lassie* (for voice and piano), Melbourne: Allan & Co., c.1914–1918. Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library, Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.
- 3 Edward H. Tyrrell, *Coo-ee! Coo-ee! You're wanted at the Dardanelles* (for voice and piano), words by Peter L. Tighe, music by Edward H. Tyrrell, Sydney: W.H. Paling & Co., c.1914–1918. Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library, Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.
- 4 For illustrations of botanical models from the collection of the University of Melbourne Herbarium see *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 1, July 2007, front cover; and Nicole Middleton and Sophie Chan, *Sowing a seed: Art inspired by the Herbarium* (catalogue of exhibition held in the Leigh Scott Gallery, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne, 15 September–23 November 2008), University of Melbourne, 2008, pp. 34–35.