a journal by the student conservators at melbourne
vol. 3 (November 2023)

[scroll]

Always Was,
Always Will Be

Scroll Volume 3 was assembled on the lands of the
Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation.

The editors acknowledge the Traditional Owners
and their continuing connection to land, water, and culture.
We pay our deepest respects to the Elders of today and yesterday.

In 2023, Australia has failed to enshrine
an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in its Constitution.
Scroll stands in solidarity with First Nations people
in this historic moment of shame.

The sovereignties of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
peoples have never been ceded or extinguished.

https://ulurustatement.org/

[scroll]

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About
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[www.studentconservators.com]

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This volume's cover

Our cover artwork is adapted from the photograph below, taken in June 1964 by Bob Donaldson.

It depicts a trove of artworks by Australian painter Sir William Dobell, best known for his expressive, Archibald Prize-winning portraits.

Image from the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.
Learn more at:
[State Library New South Wales]

from the editors

Image
Your editors (left to right) Lauren, Josh, Jonathan, Holly, Misty, and Emily. Photograph taken on 26th July 2023, after the team's weekly meeting .

Welcome to Volume Three of **[scroll]**.

Scroll is a space for students and emerging heritage professionals to talk about cultural materials, its study and preservation. It is a platform for critical and creative writing, supported by constructive editorial feedback. Through *Scroll*, we call on our peers to share their ideas, passions, and stories.

In 2023, we farewelled two of our founding editors, Emma Dacey and Rachel Davis. The remaining team — Josh, Emily and Jonathan — also welcomed three new editors: Lauren, Misty and Holly. After a year of collaboration and hard work, we are proud to present *Scroll* Vol. 3, a rich collection of local and international submissions.

Within these pages, you will find stories honouring communities and the memories of ancestors. Articles that speak to conservation in less established regions. Essays that shine a light on overlooked issues, as well as exhortations to push against the grain. Naturally, there are insights, techniques and methods that will prove useful in the conservation lab. This year, we are also excited to showcase creative pieces from two artists. We thank all thirteen contributors for trusting us to share their inspiring work.

Without further ado, we invite you to... **[scroll]** on.

Your editors,
Lauren, Josh, Jonathan, Holly, Misty, and Emily

foreword

Bella Lipson is a textiles conservator at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). She previously worked in Frames and Furniture conservation at the NGV, and on the Arts Center Melbourne's permanent collection. Bella graduated with a Master of Cultural Materials Conservation degree in 2020.

Belle Williams is an objects conservator at Artlab Australia (Adelaide, South Australia) working on the Cultural Institutions Storage Facility project. She was previously a Collections Manager at the Benalla Art Gallery. Belle graduated with a Master of Cultural Materials Conservation degree in 2022.

Bella and Belle first worked together as students of the Grimwade Centre through their involvement on the SC@M committee. Bella and Belle are interested in spreading news to emerging conservators and ensuring that they are supported as they navigate the professional field.

City and country, homes and museums, old crafts and new technologies — culture is everywhere, and so student and emerging conservators end up in all kinds of different places as well. Emerging conservators have an amazing variety of backgrounds and interests, bringing together a wealth of perspectives, skills and knowledge. It is no surprise then that the career pathways that conservators take are also wide-ranging. This variety is one of the greatest attractions of the field, but it can also be isolating as we head out from university in different directions.

Scroll provides an alternative platform for emerging conservators to continue to share their valuable research and general ponderings of the profession with our peers. It is a wonderful opportunity for students and alumni to hone their writing skills and expand their ideas. It is also an excellent way for us to take interesting conversations beyond the tearoom and deliver in-depth essays without assessment guidelines. As the next generation of conservators, our research, partnerships and enthusiasm in this profession will shape not only our own careers but equally those of our colleagues in the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives & museums) sector and the organisations and projects we embark on. This volume of *Scroll* shares just a tiny glimpse of what is to come in our careers, and it's exciting to see where it will lead us.

As many of us know, the passage between graduation and employment can be a daunting period to navigate in our lives. The strong sense of community that forms among students throughout the path from our first grounding in the ethics of conservation to group treatments and thesis proposals is paramount to our learning. These connections will equally guide us through our first job applications, short-term contracts and successful careers. Our peers are one of our best assets as we move into the profession, to bounce ideas off, for inspiration, and emotional support. *Scroll* helps student and emerging conservators maintain the connections between us, and provides insight into our individual pathways. We hope you will enjoy exploring the many perspectives brought together by the *Scroll* team in this latest volume.

Bella Lipson & Belle Williams
Co-Convenors, AICCM Emerging Conservators Special Interest Group
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November 2023

Welcome to the Lucky Country:
Navigating the complex cultural histories of immigrant, diasporic, and refugee communities

by Vicki Car
hello@wednesdayjones.com.au

Vicki is a first-year student pursuing the master's program at the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne. As the daughter of Croatian immigrants, her interest lies in the spaces and stories where conservation and ethnography meet to reveal the value of what we aim to preserve, and why.

[Editors' note]
Vicki advocated for the conservation of cultural heritage of immigrant, diasporic, and refugee communities in an assignment submitted to the University of Melbourne. Her ideas were substantially re-worked for publication in *Scroll*.

Australia today is a melting pot of cultures, some recent arrivals fleeing war and terrorism, some established for generations and now a part of our cultural landscape. What we all share, unless we are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, is that we all came from somewhere else. My story, and the story of my family, is similar to that of many others. My parents were born in what was then Yugoslavia at the beginning of the Second World War, Croatians living under the Socialist Government of President Tito.[1] Arriving in Australia separately in the early 1960s, they married in 1965 and raised three children. Mum and Dad eased into their new lives somewhat, managing to stay connected to their homeland through a thriving diasporic community while finding their way in a country that didn't quite yet feel like home. In writing this article, I hope to understand more deeply the preservation of cultural heritage through the lens of immigrant, diasporic and refugee communities, and how as conservators we must advocate for access to the conservation knowledge that will allow these communities to care for their heritage.

Background on migration

The migration of humans around the world is not a new phenomenon. War, religious and cultural persecution, economics, opportunities for study, climate catastrophe, love, and terrorism have always driven the movement of people around the globe and Australia's history is no different. What is notable however, are the numbers. For the last five decades those numbers have been increasing at a staggering rate. According to the International Organisation for Migration (2021), 281 million people lived in a country other than their country of birth in 2020, up from 128 million in 1990. But numbers alone tell a limited story. Why do people leave their homeland? Do they intend to return? *Can* they return? What those figures also cannot tell us is how communities intend to preserve their own cultural heritage: not only through the objects and traditions they bring with them, but also through memory and storytelling, food, handcrafts and more (Dellios 2018a). As conservators, whose stories do we help to tell, and why?

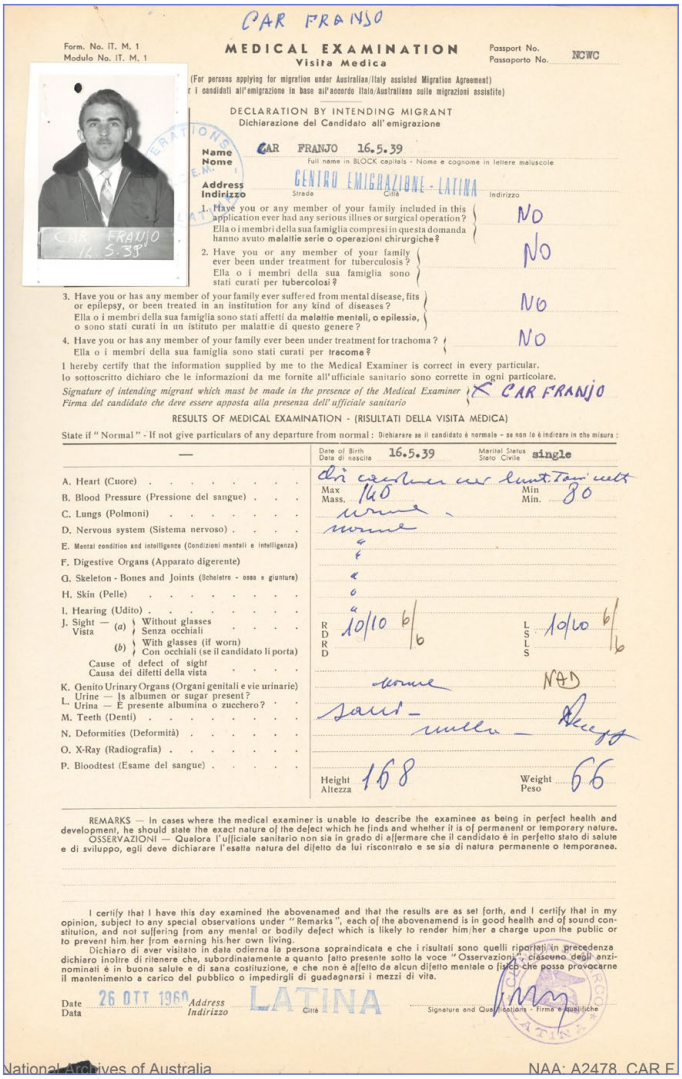
1 After the Second World War, the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, under the rule of President Josip Broz Tito, was declared. This federation comprised the six nation-states of Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia. For many like my family, Tito was not a hero of the people, and his repressive one-party dictatorship was the reason they fled to Australia.

The Lucky Country

Many Australians take pride in the idea that ours is a multicultural society. We view ourselves as pragmatic and welcoming of immigrants and refugees, to provide a fair go to anyone willing to work hard and play by the rules of what it means to be an "Aussie". But how true is this notion of an open society for those who come from 'somewhere else' (Pennay 2012)? Do we understand or even attempt to engage with the conflicting and contradictory voices that are present in every honest examination of the migrant or refugee experience, especially when the official version is often presented in a vastly different way to the lived experience (Dellios 2014)?

While these questions may seem at first glance to be in the remit of politicians and social scientists, the answers have far reaching consequences for all of us, not just our profession. In order for conservation to be seen as a public good, we must first perceive cultural heritage and the communities that it belongs to — those different to ourselves — as also worthy of our care (Meredith, Sloggett & Scott 2021).

There is significant research available that documents the link between connection to community through cultural heritage and positive outcomes for mental health. Some of this research relates to Indigenous communities throughout Australia (Colquhuon and Dockery 2012) and North America (Chandler et al. 2003), but the findings are also relevant to diasporic, immigrant and refugee communities. It matters little where we came from; what matters is our ability to connect to our ancestors and the thread that runs through our identity. And it is this resilience gained through access to cultural heritage that is so crucial to our wellbeing (Lewincamp & Sloggett 2016). Equally, as conservators, we must not underestimate how complex experiences of culture can be.


CAR FRANJO

Form. No. IT. M. 1
Modulo No. IT. M. 1

MEDICAL EXAMINATION
Visita Medica

Passport No. Passaporto No. NOWC

(For persons applying for migration under Australian/Italy assisted Migration Agreement)
(per i candidati all'emigrazione in base all'accordo Italo/Australiano sulle migrazioni assistite)

DECLARATION BY INTENDING MIGRANT
Dichiarazione del Candidato all'emigrazione

Name / Nome: CAR FRANJO 16.5.39
Full name in BLOCK capitals - Nome e cognome in lettere maiuscole

Address / Indirizzo: CENTRO EMIGRAZIONE - LATINA
Strada / Città / Indirizzo

1. Have you or any member of your family included in this application ever had any serious illnes or surgical operation? / Ella o i membri della sua famiglia compresi in questa domanda hanno avuto malattie serie o operazioni chirurgiche? — No
2. Have you or any member of your family ever been under treatment for tuberculosis? / Ella o i membri della sua famiglia sono stati curati per tubercolosi? — No
3. Have you or has any member of your family ever suffered from mental disease, fits or epilepsy, or been treated in an institution for any kind of diseases? / Ella o i membri della sua famiglia sono stati affetti da malattie mentali, o epilessia, o sono stati curati in un istituto per malattie di questo genere? — No
4. Have you or has any member of your family ever been under treatment for trachoma? / Ella o i membri della sua famiglia sono stati curati per tracoma? — No

I hereby certify that the information supplied by me to the Medical Examiner is correct in every particular.
Io sottoscritto dichiaro che le informazioni da me fornite all'ufficiale sanitario sono corrette in ogni particolare.
Signature of intending migrant which must be made in the presence of the Medical Examiner / Firma del candidato che deve essere apposta alla presenza dell'ufficiale sanitario: CAR FRANJO

RESULTS OF MEDICAL EXAMINATION - (RISULTATI DELLA VISITA MEDICA)

State if "Normal" - If not give particulars of any departure from normal: Dichiarare se il candidato è normale - se non lo è indicare in che misura:

Date of Birth / Data di nascita: 16.5.39 — Marital Status / Stato Civile: single

A. Heart (Cuore)	
B. Blood Pressure (Pressione del sangue)	Max Mass. 140 — Min. 90
C. Lungs (Polmoni)	normale
D. Nervous system (Sistema nervoso)	normale
E. Mental condition and intelligence (Condizioni mentali e intelligenza)	
F. Digestive Organs (Apparato digerente)	
G. Skeleton - Bones and Joints (Scheletro - ossa e giunture)	
H. Skin (Pelle)	
I. Hearing (Udito)	
J. Sight — Vista (a) Without glasses / Senza occhiali	R D 10/10 b/b — L S 10/10 b/b
(b) With glasses (if worn) / Con occhiali (se il candidato li porta)	
Cause of defect of sight / Causa dei difetti della vista	
K. Genito Urinary Organs (Organi genitali e vie urinarie)	normale
L. Urine — Is albumen or sugar present? / Urina — È presente albumina o zucchero?	NAD
M. Teeth (Denti)	sani
N. Deformities (Deformità)	nulla
O. X-Ray (Radiografia)	Negg
P. Bloodtest (Esame del sangue)	

Height / Altezza: 168 — Weight / Peso: 66

REMARKS — In cases where the medical examiner is unable to describe the examinee as being in perfect health and development, he should state the exact nature of the defect which he finds and whether it is of permanent or temporary nature.
OSSERVAZIONI — Qualora l'ufficiale sanitario non sia in grado di affermare che il candidato è in perfetto stato di salute e di sviluppo, egli deve dichiarare l'esatta natura del difetto da lui riscontrato e se sia di natura permanente o temporanea.

I certify that I have this day examined the abovenamed and that the results are as set forth, and I certify that in my opinion, subject to any special observations under "Remarks", each of the abovenamed is in good health and of sound constitution, and not suffering from any mental or bodily defect which is likely to render him/her a charge upon the public or to prevent him/her from earning his/her own living.
Dichiaro di aver visitato in data odierna la persona sopraindicata e che i risultati sono quelli riportati in precedenza dichiaro inoltre di ritenere che, subordinatamente a quanto fatto presente sotto la voce "Osservazioni", ciascuno degli anzinominati è in buona salute e di sana costituzione, e che non è affetto da alcun difetto mentale o fisico che possa provocarne il mantenimento a carico del pubblico o impedirgli di guadagnarsi i mezzi di vita.

Date / Data: 26 OTT 1960 — Address / Indirizzo: LATINA — Città — Signature and Qualifications - Firma e qualifiche

National Archives of Australia — NAA: A2478, CAR F

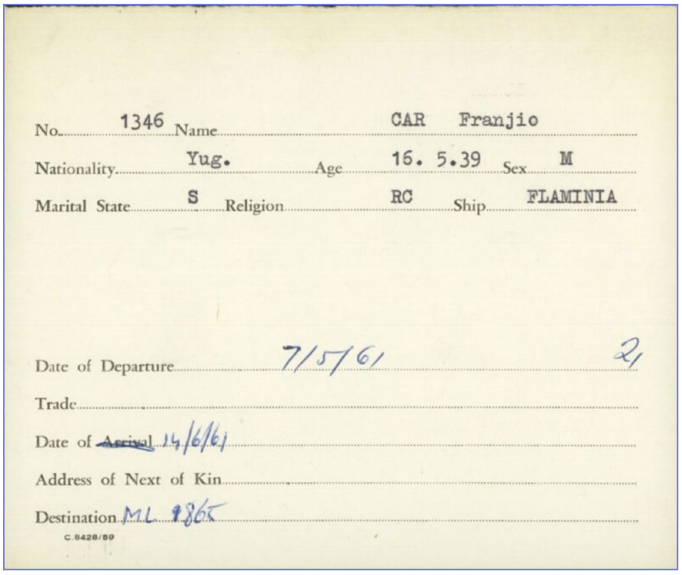
Figure 1: Dad's medical examination form. He was granted a visa to sail to Australia from a refugee camp in Trieste, Italy, after fleeing conscription into the Yugoslav Army. From the collection of the National Archives of Australia (NAA: A2478, CAR F).

Bonegilla Migrant Experience

My visit to the Bonegilla Migrant Experience is a case in point. Located near Wodonga in north east Victoria and now a heritage-listed commemorative centre, Bonegilla Migrant Camp processed over 320,000 people from Europe between 1947 and 1971, the vast majority non-British (Pennay 2012). Funded by the Victorian Government in 2005, a new visitor centre was added; it houses a gift shop and a computer terminal where visitors are able to view digitised copies of identity cards. After a short welcome speech by a volunteer, I was handed a map and left to my own devices. As I wandered the site, watching video interviews and reading testimonials, past dusty mannequins propped in the corners of rooms, and opening drawers to peer at the vignettes of discarded toys, shaving mirrors and bibles, I was surprised to realise what I felt most was anger. But why?

Many of the displays at Bonegilla aim to address the conflicting voices surrounding the camp. Much is made of the positives. Recipe books and menu-plans in the commercial kitchen speak of plentiful food provided not only to feed but to nourish. The dance hall displays vinyl records and party dresses of the time, and the school room is scattered with books and games provided for the children of the camp. Alongside these are video testimonials that speak about families being separated, the boredom, and the terrible conditions in uninsulated army huts; freezing in the winter and sweltering in the summer. As a tourist experience, much thought and planning has gone into how to engage the public in this physical place and time in Australia's history (Pennay 2009). As I wandered the buildings of Block 19, the scale of the camp slowly became evident as I realised that it was only one of twenty-four blocks that had been situated on this expanse of land.

Figure 2: The entrance to Bonegilla Reception Centre as it would have looked in 1961 when my dad arrived. From the collection of the National Archives of Australia (NAA: A12111, 2/1961/22A/13).

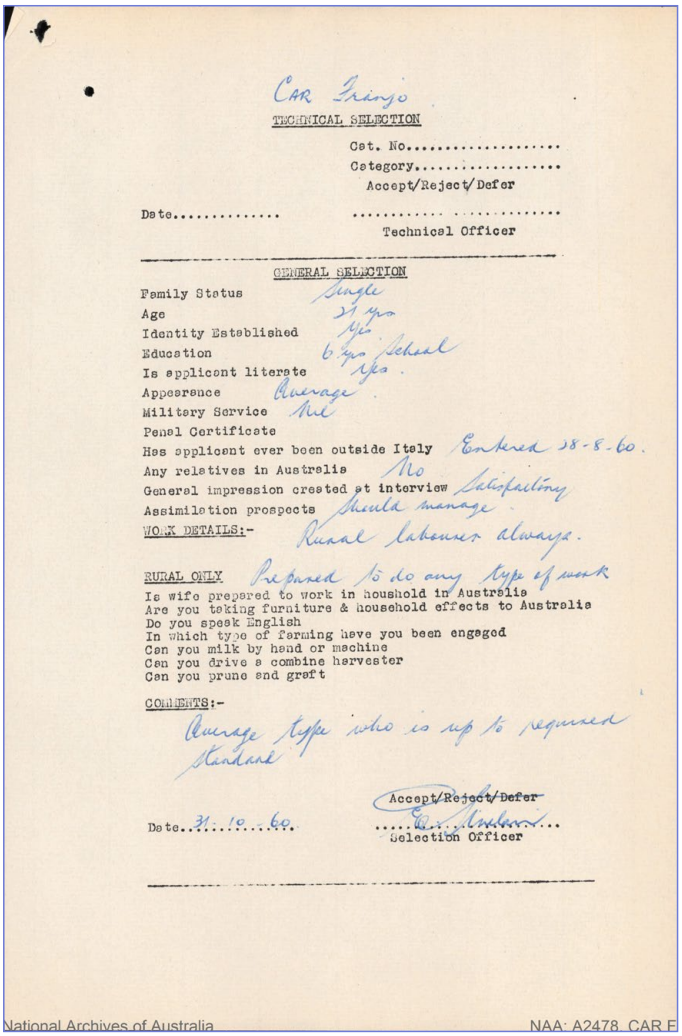


No. 1346 Name CAR Franjio
Nationality Yug. Age 16. 5.39 Sex M
Marital State S Religion RC Ship FLAMINIA

Date of Departure 7/5/61 2/
Trade
Date of ~~Arrival~~ 14/6/61
Address of Next of Kin
Destination MLL 1365

C.6428/59

Figure 3: Dad's identity card from Bonegilla Migrant Centre. On the back was the address of his intended residence in Geelong once he left the camp.



CAR Frango

TECHNICAL SELECTION

Cat. No.....
Category.....
Accept/Reject/Defer

Date..... .....
Technical Officer

GENERAL SELECTION

Family Status Single
Age 21 yrs
Identity Established Yes
Education 6 yrs School
Is applicant literate Yes.
Appearance Average
Military Service Nil
Penal Certificate
Has applicant ever been outside Italy Entered 28-8-60.
Any relatives in Australia No
General impression created at interview Satisfactory
Assimilation prospects Should manage
WORK DETAILS:- Rural labourer always.

RURAL ONLY Prepared to do any type of work
Is wife prepared to work in household in Australia
Are you taking furniture & household effects to Australia
Do you speak English
In which type of farming have you been engaged
Can you milk by hand or machine
Can you drive a combine harvester
Can you prune and graft

COMMENTS:-
Average type who is up to required standard

Accept/~~Reject~~/~~Defer~~
Date 31.10.60. .....
Selection Officer

National Archives of Australia NAA: A2478, CAR F

Figure 4: Dad's migrant interview document from 1960. 'Average type who is up to required standard'. From the collection of the National Archives of Australia (NAA: A2478, CAR F).

Bonegilla Migrant Experience occupies a complex and unique space in the preservation of cultural history, falling somewhere between an historical society (Wodonga's Historical Society is housed on the grounds of Bonegilla) and institutions such as Melbourne's Immigration Museum or the Melbourne Holocaust Museum. And while there are similarities in the presumed missions of these institutions in their desire to preserve the past and educate the future, my personal feeling is that Bonegilla Migrant Experience sits somewhat uncomfortably in the space in between. Not quite a history of Wodonga and not quite a deep and honest exploration of the trauma which prompted so many to leave their homeland, and of the reception they received once they arrived. I believe this has left the institution unsure of how to address its complex past as a site of trauma for some, and a representation of freedom for others.

Much of this is personal to me. In 1961, my Croatian father was processed at Bonegilla. Even writing that sentence makes me angry: "processed" is such a callous word when used in relation to human beings. Fleeing conscription into a hostile Yugoslav army, my father left his home and his family, making his way illegally across the border to Italy where he was put onto a boat to Australia. Like many arriving at Bonegilla, he spoke no English, had few possessions, and wanted nothing but to leave. Freezing cold, overcrowded, lonely, and afraid, many were unprepared for the prejudice they would find in their search for a better life. Regardless of occupation, men were almost uniformly listed as "labourer" on identity cards, and slurs such as "dago", "wop", "wog", or "spick" were common.[2] After five weeks, my dad left the camp. Through determination and a willingness to take any work he was offered he made a life for himself here, raising three children and five grandchildren who are part of the 1.5 million descendants of the immigrants that passed through Bonegilla (Department of Climate Change, the Environment, Energy and Water n.d.).

2 These words are still being used today in Australia as pejoratives for non-white people. Often used casually, they are aggressive and offensive to many. Interestingly, some of these words are being reclaimed; I am very comfortable referring to myself as a wog, often to the discomfort of others.

For many passing through, like my father, Bonegilla represented both trauma and freedom, and had he still been alive to visit with me, I think he would be amused by my anger on his behalf. Since my visit, I have thought deeply about how I understand not only this time in my father's life, but what this will mean for me as a conservator, and I believe the answer lies in the question of value. We cannot value objects without also valuing people. And how we value people is really quite complicated.

Negotiating complex cultural histories through conservation

One way to understand the complexity of immigrant, diasporic and refugee experiences is to understand how communities navigate multiple ways of viewing not only their past but also their heritage (Tse et al. 2018). These very personal experiences of culture may vary enormously depending on why people leave their homeland. For example, planned migration allows for a measured approach to what is brought along for a new life. A forced separation from homeland on the other hand can bring about loss, trauma and even strong nationalistic feelings. Understanding of this is crucial if conservators are to assist in fostering respect not only between communities, but between generations. This passing on of traditional knowledge and understanding of culture often dominates family life, overriding the new traditions and expectations of one's new home, and this conflict is not unusual for children born in their parents' adopted country (Bogossian-Porto and Bogossian 2021). My family was no different.[3] For those fleeing conflict, connection to heritage often relies more heavily on the intangibles of culture to keep people connected to home when home is no longer what or where it was. These intangibles can bring great joy, connections made around food (Marino 2018) for example, but they can also bring unexpected challenges within families and communities.

Figure 5: Me and dad in 1970. For years we would greet each other with the raised fist of a Socialist/Communist salute and the words 'Smrt Fašimu! (Death to Fascism!)'. It took me years to realise the irony of those words coming from his mouth, and the dark humour he found in teaching it to me. These were the words that helped form Tito's socialist state as they fought the fascists after the Second World War, and the reason my father was desperate to leave.

3 I learned to negotiate this duality of being at a very young age. Carrying the traditions and expectations of our heritage is effortless for some, but for others, the weight is heavier and more complex to reconcile. Growing up in a very white, middle class neighbourhood in the 1980s, I slipped through both sets of cracks. I was neither Australian enough, nor was I Croatian enough. It was only in my early 20s that I understood this to be my superpower.

Figure 4: Me and dad in Croatia in 1990, as the country was preparing to formally declare independence. By 1991, a bloody war had started and decimated much of the region.

The establishment of local football clubs around Australia in the postwar years is an example of this. These clubs provided not only a lifeline to many Croats that had fled a hostile Yugoslavia (Hay 1998), but also a source of ethnic tension with clubs established for the same connection to homeland by Serbs. For many, these cultural/social institutions helped heal the trauma and grief of loss and displacement. But animosities were often brought from home and deeply embedded, spilling over with sometimes violent consequences on the football field and in the stands (Mills 2012). Flags, chants and racial slurs were very effective in showing allegiance to one tribe and disdain for another. Often the very symbols and artefacts that are so important to one ethnic group can be signs of oppression to another, and how these objects are preserved and displayed can cause tensions in otherwise close-knit communities, as experienced by the Former Yugoslavian diaspora during the Balkan War.[4] Friends and neighbours were once again split along ethnic lines which had largely been forgotten or forgiven. Flags which were so often used to unify a people had the opposite effect. Instead, they became signs of resistance and nationalism used to antagonise and confront those once more viewed as the enemy, regardless of where home now was.

Understanding these cultural complexities is vital if we are to work within communities. Understanding who controls the narrative, how and why that narrative is valued, and who it excludes is crucial. What is certain is that there is no one way, and what is required is a more pluralistic approach when understanding what these collections mean to communities and why (Sloggett & Scott 2022). It is no longer enough for conservators and curators to be seen as experts. We must work closely with those whose understanding is personal and whose lived experiences inform their culture, whether tangible or intangible. We must listen and know our place, and we must never assume we know better. Naïve assumptions around joyful and open understanding between cultures need to be addressed honestly, taking into account past tensions, as well as conflicting voices in the present (Holtorf 2018).

4 Between 1992 and 1995, a bloody war of independence raged in the former Yugoslavia, with an estimated 100,000 deaths and the displacement of over two million. This war also had a devastating effect on the diasporic community that surrounded me as a child, with friendships and families shattered once more along ethnic lines.

Moving forward

It can appear overwhelming to understand what real change conservators can make to the myriad of inequities surrounding access to conservation expertise. We are, after all, only one part of the equation, and many of these imbalances are rooted in the public views and politics of immigration, refugees, the economy, and cultural significance. Thankfully, the work has already begun. A commitment to cross-community communication, knowledge sharing (Fekrsanati et al 2011), and the democratisation and diversity in decision making (Lloyd & Lithgow 2021) is evident in the lectures I attend as student conservator. We are challenged to think deeply about complex ideas such as ownership, agency, and the part we play, and we are encouraged to question and disrupt. Further, the involvement of source communities in heritage preservation is becoming increasingly normalised in Australia and around the world (Odegaard, Watkinson & Pool 2014; Tse et al. 2018). Much of this work aims to highlight the positive aspects of working with community volunteers, who often have long-standing and personal connections to collections. These volunteers are able to bring about increased morale and emancipation as well as provide cultural knowledge and awareness on a far deeper level (Saunders 2014). Such insight into the significance and relevance of cultural heritage is invaluable, and many institutions are now employing collection managers from source communities.

As the profession continues to examine, research, and reflect on its role in the preservation of cultural heritage in both our country and our region, we must also reflect on how and what we value. This is work that must be done with honesty and integrity. We must make space for access to the conservation expertise that is currently so absent for immigrant, diasporic and refugee communities, and find a way to help preserve the intangible culture of those fleeing conflict, terrorism, and climate catastrophe when they come with nothing. It is through the preservation of stories, traditions, food and hand skills that we as conservators are able to play our part in acknowledging the importance of cultural heritage, as well as understanding the importance of access to that heritage for communities that have already lost so much.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Single objects, many stories:
Sharing history as conservation

by Rachel Davis
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Rachel is a former *Scroll* editor, and a recent graduate from the Master of Cultural Materials Conservation course at the University of Melbourne, where she specialised in paintings conservation. She is currently a project conservator at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum.

A pen that fought racism, skis that restored a city's power supply, wooden steps that carry stories and performers, and a cable that connects a country to the world. These are among some of the objects that are a focus for *The Spinoff* series 'The Single Object'.[1] The series, containing both articles and a five-part short video series, aims to examine the material culture of Aotearoa New Zealand. Each part focuses on, aptly, a single object. And that object could be anything from a chainsaw to a cathedral to a curtain.

The Spinoff is an independent media group, established in New Zealand in 2014. It started as a site that examined television and culture. As it delves into politics, business, science, and current events, its cultural roots remain, and 'The Single Object' series is an example of the media group's intent to highlight historical stories that often get overlooked, and link them to more current discussions about culture.

The series is written by guest authors or regular *Spinoff* staff writers. Some have a background in researching and discussing cultural materials — such as Nina Tonga, a curator at Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, or Jessica Halliday, an architectural historian — but all the authors contribute to the series from a personal point of view. It is not simply that the articles often use first person voice. The authors appear to have been selected so as to draw from their own personal histories to make connections to the objects and argue their cultural importance.

That personal connection is the strength of this series. Kerry Ann Lee's article on the only surviving Chinese language printing typeface collection in New Zealand connects to the lettering from an artistic perspective, but she also explores the history of a worldwide Chinese community from her own background as a 'diasporic third culture kid'.[2]

1 *The Spinoff*, 'The Single Object', https://thespinoff.co.nz/tags/the-single-object

2 *The Spinoff*, 'Heavy metal afterlives: A sideways appreciation of the NZ Chinese Growers Monthly typeface', https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/06-05-2021/a-sideways-appreciation-of-the-nz-chinese-growers-monthly-typeface

Alternatively, interviews are used in both the articles and videos, so we get a chance to hear from others directly connected to the objects. This is important for giving voice to stories such as those of artist Lema Shamamba and her embroidery.[3] Her work is embedded with her life story in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which had been horribly disrupted by historic colonial interests and more presently by multinational companies.

> ‘For Congo, the story we told just in craft. Because all people in my country don’t know if they are artists, but I can say the whole village is like artist people. It’s about telling a story through the thing you made.’
>
> — Lema Shamamba

In some articles in the series, the reader accompanies the author as they start their journey in uncovering the history of the objects, often leading down rabbit holes that end up painting a larger story. They uncover connections that show a wider significance to these single objects. This is how Bronwyn Holloway-Smith’s article plays out, for example, on the internet cables that connect New Zealand to the rest of the world.[4] Her journey starts off as a PhD project, and has carried on throughout her artistic career, with the artworks she has created along the way reflecting the different iterations of the various communication cables that are hidden at the shores.

> ‘The Commonwealth Pacific Cable (COMPAC)… was celebrated as a triumph for the small nation that craved more reliable links to the rest of the globe, particularly for Pākehā settlers who, despite their ‘nation-building’, were still looking abroad for cultural validation.’
>
> — Bronwyn Holloway-Smith

You do not have to be versed in technical terms, or material analysis to read these stories — though those interested in textile conservation may be interested in some of the material descriptions in Kirsty Cameron’s article: ‘Wool’s gold: How Swanndri became a New Zealand icon’.[5] These are not academic, formal, conservation articles. But by engaging with these articles and videos as a conservator, you can understand and appreciate a different kind of value in the stories that are being shared.

3 *The Spinoff*, ‘The incredible life story behind this embroidery’, https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/22-04-2021/the-incredible-life-story-behind-this-embroidery

4 *The Spinoff*, ‘The Single Object: The internet cable that connects us to the rest of the world’, https://thespinoff.co.nz/partner/01-04-2020/the-single-object-the-internet-cable-that-connects-us-to-the-rest-of-the-world

5 *The Spinoff*, ‘Wool’s gold: how Swanndri became a New Zealand icon’, https://thespinoff.co.nz/partner/27-07-2023/wools-gold-how-swanndri-became-a-new-zealand-icon

Understanding the story of an object is imperative in conservation treatment. To understand an object's context is to garner a better understanding of the multitude of values imbued within it. As Dinah Eastop has argued, conservators have an ethical obligation to uncover these contextual stories as part of treatment, and therefore are better informed to make treatment decisions (Eastop 2011a; Eastop 2011b). And Eastop has put this into practice as part of her treatment work (Eastop & Dew 2016; Eastop & Brooks 1996).

'The Single Object' series reminds us of these other values and histories that objects can be imbued with. It is a reminder that, as conservators, we have a duty to treat more than just that tangible materiality. Prior to pursuing conservation study, what drew me to galleries, to museums, to history class, to the worn box of photographs and old family belongings tucked in my parent's wardrobe, were the stories. The objects showed the reality of those stories to me and made it all the more special to be able to physically connect to them.

Contemporary art conservation is already grappling with how we can uncover and incorporate these intangible values into practice. Methodologies and decision-making for the conservation of contemporary art aim to grapple with artist intent and with discovering what the defining properties of the work are. The initial steps of the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences' (CISC) *Decision-making model for contemporary art conservation and presentation* incorporate investigation of stakeholder values and intentions (CISC TH Köln 2021, p. 5). Steps in the model also provide room to interrogate an artwork's history, and what values it's imbued with, have changed over time (pp. 10–12). This is just one formalised model for consideration by conservators, and tailored for contemporary art. However, it gives us an example of the state of conservation thinking around practice, and what, beyond the materiality, we should be considering.

'The Single Object' series shows what the stories these considerations look like, as well as a way to share what we gather as we deep-dive into the objects we treat. This is an act of conservation itself. What *The Spinoff* aimed to do with this series was to ensure the cultural histories represented by the objects were shared with its audience. Being an online platform, its content can then in turn be dispersed through social media. Or written about in student conservation journals. Either way, the stories about these objects are now out there for readers to find, and share, and discuss, and remember. Now the objects have another way to live on.

> ‘I got to see [the pen] in the basement of the museum. Its ink is blue and there’s plenty still left in it. The chalk [David] Williams’ son mashed into the pen is still visible 40 years later. Whatever historical weight it may hold, it’s still just a pen. And though it’s often quoted that the pen is mightier than the sword, Williams took such a statement literally. But he also knows, and stresses to this day, that it was privilege that allowed him to enact change with only a pen. And those who share his privileges have no excuses for not doing the same.’
>
> — Madeleine Chapman

I cannot end without specifically noting the first article of the series: ‘The Single Object: a mighty pen’.[6] The article describes the story of how a lawyer, David Williams, employed at the University of Auckland, stole a pen from his employer. Williams then reported himself to the police. The subsequent treatment of this white, Pākehā lawyer, compared with Niuean, Iki Toloa, who allegedly committed a similar “crime”, ensured Toloa was released without conviction, and highlighted the racial inequalities in the 1970s. It is also one of the articles shared between editors of *Scroll* in 2020, when we were envisioning what kinds of ways it could be used to talk about cultural materials, and figuring out what the journal could be. *Scroll* is a journal dedicated to conservation, but reading and watching ‘The Single Object’ provides an example of the potential methods conservators can use to creatively engage with cultural materials.

6 *The Spinoff*, ‘The Single Object: a mighty pen’, https://thespinoff.co.nz/partner/26-07-2018/the-single-object-a-mighty-pen

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All that glitters is a nightmare:
Conserving pride at the Missouri History Museum

by Sejal Goel

Sejal is an emerging professional in objects conservation after receiving her degree from Durham University, England, in early 2023. She has a strong interest in modern materials and plastics as a growing medium in collections and modern vernacular art.

Anyone in charge of young children can tell you that glitter is a nightmare. I tend to think of it in the same way Anakin Skywalker thinks of sand in *Attack of the Clones*:

‘It’s rough and coarse and it gets **EVERYWHERE**.’

However, glitter is a common material in modern vernacular art. This is demonstrated in the Missouri History Museum’s upcoming *Gateway to Pride* exhibition, which has several glittery artefacts. Modern glitter is relatively new in collections and is easily overlooked, however, its friability and static charge creates a number of problems for handling and display. Therefore, conservation treatments are necessary in order to limit loss of the material.

History and Manufacture

Modern glitter was invented in 1934 in New Jersey by machinist Henry Ruschmann (Mangum 2007). Ruschmann began to grind up Mylar® film into tiny pieces, which he then coated with different colors of metallic powder. He found that the resulting material was lightweight, easy to work with, and had a unique reflective quality that made it perfect for decorative purposes (Mangum 2007). This quickly became a replacement for the previously common ground glass glitter which was primarily manufactured in Germany.

Modern glitter is manufactured as a multi-layer film: the base layer is usually a clear plastic, either polyethylene terephthalate (PET) or polyvinyl chloride (PVC), which is then coated with aluminium and colourants using vacuum metallisation, a process of coating a metal to a non-metallic substrate through evaporation (Tyne 2021). The most prevalent type of glitter, craft glitter, has approximately three to five layers which average to about 0.16 mm thickness (Tyne 2021). Cosmetic and edible glitter tend to be much thinner.

According to fashion and textile historian, Nancy Deihl, 'glitter is all about [evoking] jewels and metal' — and, thus, wealth and power (Oyler 2015). This is due to the reflective nature and variety of colours available in glitter. Humans have long been obsessed with sparkly things, and crushed mica, precious metals, and glass have been used for millennia as a representation of wealth.

Glitter also has a direct connection with LGBT+ history. From icons such as David Bowie utilising glitter in his Ziggy Stardust makeup, drag queens presenting outfits directly mirroring Deihl's comparison to jewels and precious metals, and the fact that it comes in a rainbow of colours (Oyler 2015).

At the same time, glitter's prevalence, environmental detriments, and static charge has led to a societal distaste for the material. Evidence of which was apparent as soon as I mentioned objects in the collection demonstrating the material to colleagues. Activists have learned how to adapt and politically weaponize this hatred of glitter (Mapstone 2021). 'Glitter-bombing' was a short-lived activist tactic of dumping glitter on politicians who endanger LGBT+ people all over the world, an arguably low-harm but visually striking form of protest (Izadi 2005).

Glitter is a democratised representation of jewels and wealth that has permeated arts and crafts around the world. It is therefore not shocking that glitter is a material seen more in modern and vernacular art collections.

Conservation

Glitter is a difficult material. Especially in the museum, it is prone to loss and is primarily associated with modern collections, limiting the attention granted to their care and conservation.

As the primary conservator for the *Gateway to Pride* exhibition, opening in June 2024 at the Missouri History Museum, St. Louis, it became very clear that glitter was going to become a problem for handling, display, and storage of objects in the future. Thankfully, my supervisor Crista Pack, and St. Louis Art Museum object conservator, Amaris Strum, were excellent in assisting in problem solving for glitter.

Three objects made with glitter were identified as in need of conservation for this exhibition: a pair of stiletto heels, a small compact mirror, and a sign from a local bar and club. The primary concern for these objects was the failure of adhesive, causing glitter to lift from surfaces during handling. Not only does this present a deterioration issue for the objects, but makes installation more difficult as well. It was therefore determined that readhesion and consolidation of glittery surfaces was necessary.

Condition

- Michelle McCausland's silver stilettos

These glittery stiletto heels were worn by a St. Louis drag star named Michelle McCausland. The shoes are made of a woven fabric covered in a polyurethane foam with glitter applied to it, with a silvery synthetic mesh textile overlay (Figure 1). Under microscopy, at least three different types of glitter were apparent: large hexagonal silver aluminium glitter, smaller rhomboid aluminium glitter, and small hexagonal aluminium glitter coloured red, blue, and gold (Figure 1). It is unclear if the latter glitter was an error in manufacture or a product of the shoes' use and life.

The loss of glitter was obvious on the object's storage mount, both the large hexagonal and the small rhomboid glitter appearing on the surfaces of the mount. The object also demonstrated deterioration of the polyurethane foam (which currently cannot be remedied), some loss in the mesh, particularly towards the sole of the shoe, and general soiling in the form of accretions and stains, likely from paint or cosmetics.

Figure 1: (Top) Before treatment photo of the proper left shoe, demonstrating loose glitter and surface accretions; photo courtesy of Gregory Niemann. (Bottom) Photo of the proper left shoe under 6x magnification, demonstrating varying sizes of glitter and the areas of loss in the surfaces due to age and wear.

- Michelle McCausland's compact mirror

This small compact was found within the makeup box of the aforementioned drag queen. The compact is a metal coated plastic (likely PVC) with two sizes of hexagonal pink glitter on the lid (Figure 2). Furthermore, the glass mirror inside the compact had come loose, causing concerns for broken glass if left untreated.

It was deemed important to consolidate the glitter on the top of the compact to limit the possibility of loss due to vibration and abrasion from other objects within the makeup box. Thankfully, the loss of glitter on this object was far less than that of either of the other two objects, thus the treatment was needed on a smaller, more localised scale compared to the shoes.

Figure 2: Michelle McCausland's compact mirror, with pink glitter on the exterior (top); the adhesive for the interior mirror (bottom) has also failed. Photos courtesy of Gregory Niemann.

- Sign for *The Complex*

The Complex was a large, popular LGBT+-oriented dance club, performance venue, and nightspot in St. Louis. It was in operation from 1989 to 2011. The sign is made of foam core board spray painted black with a rainbow assortment of both small hexagonal and rhomboid glitter adhered to the surface with an unknown adhesive (Figure 3). This object demonstrates a severe amount of loss in glitter, the majority of which was contained in the housing of the object. However, even minimal handling caused further loss. Furthermore, the object demonstrates severe soiling, on both black and glittery surfaces. The cleaning of this object could not be attempted without the consolidation of glitter as it would cause further loss to surface. Thankfully, the flat surface of the object allowed for a greater retention of the loose glitter, which was collected for re-adhesion.

Figure 3: Image of *The Complex* sign prior to conservation. Photo courtesy of Gregory Niemann.

Treatment

In order to properly conserve these objects, there had to be a balance between keeping the surfaces shiny and bright and reducing the risks of continued loss. Unfortunately, there was no formal research surrounding the consolidation of glitter, so research into the consolidation of other friable reflective surfaces was used as a starting point. A comparable material is nashiji, metal flakes that are embedded in some Japanese lacquers which demonstrate a similar cut and purpose to synthetic glitter (Coueignoux & Rivers 2015). The majority of treatments suggested for nashiji utilise urushi (which is mildly hazardous) or modern epoxies; both have limited reversibility (Coueignoux & Rivers 2015).

We determined that water-based adhesives were likely the most appropriate for both the glitter and the substrates, as they demonstrate the least risk to plastics compared to other solvents (Sturm 2023, pers. comm., November). Funori, an adhesive made from algae, has

been used previously in a nebuliser in order to consolidate reflective surfaces, as has Aquazol® in varying molecular weights and methylcellulose (Yang, Song & Jeong 2022). Isinglass has been used as a consolidant for iridescent feathers and scales without altering their reflective properties (Paulson 2018).

Application methods also had to be considered, due to the friable nature and static charge of the glitter. Both the stilettos and the sign required overall consolidation, but the compact required more localised applications. An airbrush and a nebuliser were discussed to provide a very thin layer of adhesive. However, the airbrush was discounted due to concerns regarding the pressure of air on the friable surfaces. Though the nebuliser was effective on other friable media, it was determined to deliver too little adhesive for the weight of the glitter. Thin, synthetic fibre brushes were therefore selected for application.

After a few trials on a small area of the stilettos, it was determined that 1% methylcellulose in deionised water was the most effective and aesthetically acceptable consolidant. The use of a brush allowed adhesive to flow under the glitter and adhere to the substrate instead of merely sitting on the surfaces. Working under the microscope allowed greater control over the flow of the consolidant, and allowed for the retention of as much glitter as possible, including the very small rhomboid pieces. This process was successfully repeated for the compact in areas that demonstrated obvious friable glitter.

However, this process proved less effective for the *The Complex* sign. When applying methylcellulose to the surfaces, the glitter would preferentially adhere to the brush as opposed to the surface. This was likely due to the tack of the methylcellulose, which caused it to not permeate in between the layers of glitter and smooth foam core board. Thus, other consolidants had to be considered. 20% Aquazol® 50 in deionised water and 20% isinglass in deionised water were trialed on a sample of foam core board. Isinglass proved to be the more effective of the two, but was reduced further to a 10% solution for better flow under material. The surfaces of the sign were flooded with ethanol using a glass pipette prior to applying the consolidant in order to reduce surface tension. A synthetic hairbrush was then utilised to carefully apply the isinglass around the edges of the glitter which limited movement.

The conservation work for much of the vernacular and modern materials in *Gateway to Pride* have been an incredible exercise in adaptability and glitter was no exception. However, being able to adjust and utilise materials and techniques that are common for other material types has been a central part of conservation for decades, and in general, I am so pleased with how successful the treatments were (Figures 4–6).

Figure 4: The proper left shoe following conservation. Photo courtesy of Gregory Niemann.

Figure 5: Michelle McCausland's compact following conservation, stabilising both the exterior glitter surface (left) and the glass mirror interior (right). Photos courtesy of Gregory Niemann.

Figure 6: *The Complex* sign after treatment. Photo courtesy of Gregory Niemann.

Conclusion

Synthetic, modern glitter is a great demonstration of modern culture and values. It presents an important material in vernacular art, used across cultures to evoke precious metals and jewels that have been used as symbols of wealth and power for millennia.

This material is relatively new in collections, and without proper knowledge and care it can be quickly lost due to its friability and the adhesives commonly used in vernacular art and crafts. However, the utilisation of water-based consolidants such as methylcellulose and isinglass can aid in the retention of glitter on a variety of mediums, without sacrificing their reflective surfaces. Therefore, glitter can be retained and presented for generations to come, telling the stories of glitz and glamour, especially when it comes to LGBT+ history.

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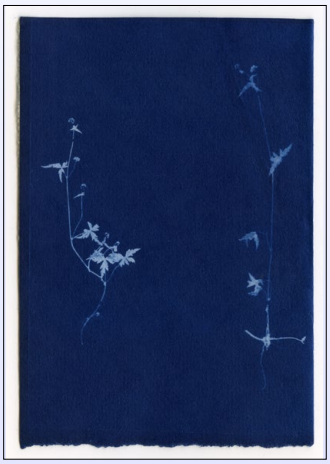
Herbarium of Australian flora:
Cyanotypes inspired by the history of photographic and botanic science

Emma Dacey

Emma is a conservator of photographs and works on paper. Emma is passionate about contributing to the conservation community, as demonstrated by her commitment to her role in establishing *Scroll*, as AICCM Bulletin Assistant Editorial team member, and more recently as AICCM Secretary.

Erithraea australis

Pteris incisa



Hydrocotyle geranifolia

Callistemon salignus

In 2022, I volunteered on a project with Grimwade Conservation Services to preserve herbaria volumes compiled by botanist Ferdinand von Mueller, now part of the Ballaarat Mechanics' Institute Heritage Collection.

The herbarium contains dried plant specimens collected in Australia during the 19th century. Each specimen retains the natural beauty and fragility of organic life, with added significance of their age and endurance despite their desiccated state, and educational purpose for which they were collected and meticulously labelled.

Inspired by Anna Atkins, an artist and scientist who applied early photographic techniques to produce botanic illustrations, I used a cyanotype process to resemble the aesthetic of Atkins' work and turn my images, taken while working on the von Mueller herbarium, into a secondary record.

My cyanotypes demonstrate that conservation can lead to enhanced engagement with heritage items and inspire new creations.

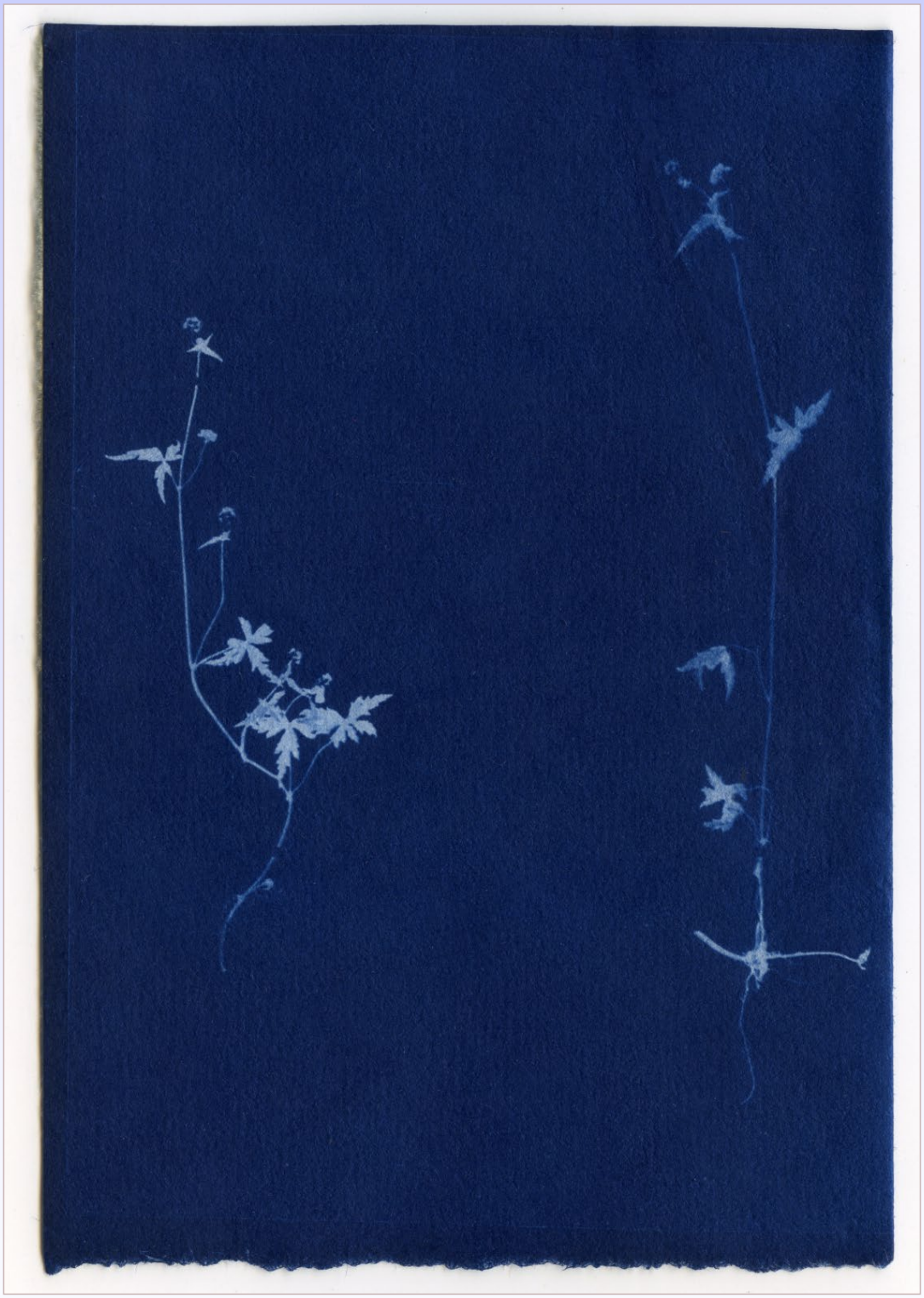
Erithraea australis

Emma Dacey, 2022
Cyanotype on Awagami Mitsumata (gampi fibre) paper

Pteris incisa

Emma Dacey, 2022

Cyanotype on Arches Aquarelle cold press natural white (cotton rag) paper



Hydrocotyle geranifolia

Emma Dacey, 2022
Cyanotype on Awagami Mitsumata (gampi fibre) paper

Callistemon salignus

Emma Dacey, 2022

Cyanotype on Arches Aquarelle cold press natural white (cotton rag) paper

Old problems, new solutions:
Conservation in rural Australia

by Fergus Patterson
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Fergus is pursuing a master's degree at the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Material Conservation. He graduated from the University of Melbourne with Honours in History, and specialises in book and paper conservation. Fergus is particularly passionate about historic preservation in regional Australia, which he discusses with the fervour of an evangelising prophet.

[Editors' note]
Fergus turns an eye towards issues in regional conservation in his minor thesis, submitted to the University of Melbourne. His ideas were substantially re-worked for publication in *Scroll*.

She had suggested a van. It was a frosty winter's day during my conservation internship, and my manager and I were taking a quick tea break before getting back to work. She asked me about my thesis topic, and I explained that I was discussing barriers to conservation within rural and regional communities. Without missing a beat, she immediately suggested a van, armed to the teeth with conservation tools and resources, which a conservator would drive to regional areas offering on-site preservation services. Excluding the idea that many rural folks would immediately presume anyone from the city driving to the middle of nowhere in an unmarked van was a Jehovah's Witness, this seemed like a fairly sound idea. Even a single van would represent a notable improvement to country conservation.

As it currently stands, conservation in rural and regional Australia is basically non-existent. Although there are a few brave, or more accurately stubborn, conservators single-handedly supporting conservation in rural museums, these efforts are erratic in schedule and limited by time and budget. This lack of attention, however, is not indicative of lack of worth. Much of Australia's cultural heritage is founded in a folk identity of "the bush", and the physical manifestation of this heritage is found within rural museums.

That is why I wrote this article, dear readers: to examine the limited state of conservation within rural Australia, to explore potential solutions to this crisis, and what more the industry can do to support regional museums.

Conservation's current country crisis

I grew up in the small country town of Yackandandah (population: 900), near other such exciting destinations as Tangambalanga, Porepunkah, and Mudgegonga. During my youth, local heritage was always something I was dimly aware of, but never really paid any attention to. There was one, however, notable exception. In 2006, four days before Christmas, the Yackandandah Museum burnt down (Doherty, Switzer & Bunn 2006). A technical fire had started in Rainbow Crystal, the shop next door, at 2 am, and both buildings were merrily ablaze not long

after. The fire was discovered by the town's resident insomniac, the baker, who quickly alerted the local fire brigade, and the fire was put out with minimal damage to the township. Nevertheless, both buildings had been burnt to a crisp, and there was little hope that they would be able to rebuild. Thus, it was to the town's mild shock that while Rainbow Crystal did not return, the museum was back up and running up again in 2008. Despite this rebirth, however, the museum had taken a huge blow, and much of its heritage material was considered lost forever.

Fast forward 14 years. I began studying my Masters of Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. Discussing previous examples of student work, I was astonished to discover that three students from the University had been in Yackandandah during 2021, and moreover, that they were treating damaged material from the fire 15 years prior (Rogers 2022). This was astonishing for a few reasons. Most notably, that my hometown, ***of 900 people***, was being brought up in my first university lecture. More subtly, however, that conservation work had been occurring in Yackandandah and ***I'd never heard of it***.

Asking around informally of family and friends, I discovered that this astonishment wasn't due to my living under a proverbial rock. No one I talked to had any idea that this work was occurring at all. All that I could discover written about this local conservation work was a small paragraph in local news bastion, *The Yackity Yack*, buried at page 23, thanking the students for the contribution they had made to the local museum (*Yackity Yack* 2022). This, however, was not even the top story for the local historical society, being sandwiched between the announcement of walking tours, and a man discovering that his 45-year-old school project was being used as historical documentation regarding gold deposits in the local bank.

Unfortunately, this lack of awareness of the often-precarious condition of community heritage is emblematic of regional attitudes to community heritage as a whole. While every community is undoubtedly aware of, and acknowledges the importance of, their heritage, they have considerably more difficulty identifying what is worthy of historic preservation. Regional town Albury-Wodonga, for instance, earmarked a local garage for demolition in the early 20th century, unaware that it was the town's first motor-garage, and had built one of Australia's only monoplanes to successfully fly (Spenneman 2006).[1]

Similar attitudes were displayed by NSW Fire Captains who, when asked to identify heritage places from a preselected list, universally only recognised historic houses and cemeteries as being sites worthy of conservation (Graham & Spennerman 2006). Other sites, such as streetscapes and industrial sites, were far more controversial, being recognised by only 55.2% and 15.4% of fire captains as heritage locations respectively (Graham & Spennerman 2006).

Figure 1: Exterior of Yackandandah Museum. Image by Fergus Patterson.

This is not to say, however, that country folk have no consideration for local heritage or conservation. On the contrary, despite their lack of formal training, most rural people are natural-born conservators. If one were to suggest that they may no longer need to hold onto their grandmother's second cousin's silverware, you would be met with a mixture of horror and revulsion akin to telling them you were going on a vegan diet. Indeed, many rural folk feel a distinct sense of pride for their local community, and will happily pitch in whenever local institutions are running fundraisers and bake sales.

1 Although Albury-Wodonga is technically a city, it is a city in the same way Antarctica is a desert. It is, but no one really considers it as such unless forced to at gunpoint.

Rather, this lack of awareness is not the result of civic disinterest, but instead lack of information. A 1975 commission into the status of Australian museums, for instance, noted that many rural communities believe that galleries and museums have 'adequate funds and that every care is taken of valuable objects' (Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections 1975, p. 20). Moreover, those within the museums themselves often lack information on historic preservation, being under the guidance of trustees who freely admit they are 'more experienced in the selection of a prize ram than a prize sculpture' (Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections 1975, p. 19). Consequently, even though there is pride in local heritage, historic preservation is founded in communities who are unaware of the depths of problems facing local museums, and staffed by volunteers who lack information on how to fix these issues.

Where did all the conservators go?

Therefore, we must ask ourselves why there are little to no conservators in rural and regional Australia. Does the prospect of living somewhere without mobile phone reception frighten our industry so? The rather mundane reason is the lack of job opportunities for professional conservators in regional Australia. A 2021 survey of conservation graduates revealed that 88% of respondents identified themselves as being urban-based, with 64% of employed graduates working in the public sector (i.e., major galleries and institutions) (Barbara et al. 2022, p. 128). If most of the employment opportunities are within major cities, it only stands to reason that conservators stay where the work is. Unfortunately, even if these conservators are interested in volunteering their time and expertise to assist with conservation in rural communities, their responsibilities to these public institutions often leave them bereft of time to do so.

Some of the more enterprising readers among you, however, may be wondering why rural and regional museums do not attempt to employ or contract a conservator to assist with their collections. Why are conservation opportunities so geographically limited?

Figure 2: Interior of Yackandandah Museum's historic timber slab cottage, constructed circa 1858. The objects on display in the cottage are recreations to evoke early settler life. Image by Fergus Patterson.

The honest answer to this question is that the majority of regional museums are perennially penniless. Most regional museums are grassroots affairs, being run and staffed by volunteers who do it for love of local history (Brophy et al. 2002, p. 86). The Yackandandah Museum, for instance, was founded in 1969 by a group of concerned citizens, who purchased the former Bank of Victoria building and transformed it into a community-owned and operated museum (Yackandandah Museum 2023).

Moreover, almost none of these museums ever expect to turn a profit. Notably, the Yackandandah Historical Society expected to incur a $4000 loss in 2019, solely from maintenance costs of running the museum (Morgan 2019). Indeed, the Yackandandah Museum makes the majority of its income not on donations from culturally appreciative visitors, but by its mafioso-style monopoly on the local jam trade.[2] To secure funding, many regional museums therefore have to rely on funding secured from either local governments or grant applications. The reliability of these measures, however, is ineffectual at best. For many local governments, the preservation of local heritage is regarded as a secondary concern, with many regional historical societies believing that assistance and support from the local council to be non-existent.[3]

2 Rather than breaking your kneecaps, they use a far more effective weapon: the guilt trip.

3 See comments made by local societies in Royal Historical Society of Victoria, 'Report on Survey of Victorian Historical Societies' (Heritage Council of Victoria, 2019), pp. 34–39.

This is to say nothing either of the deeply ingrained tendency for rural Australians to regard any government as: (a) apathetic; or (b) run by incompetent baboons.[4] On the other hand, grant applications also present an enormous area of difficulty for the enthusiastic volunteer. The process for successfully securing grants is difficult to understand even within the industry itself, with academics Grimwade and Carter (2000, p. 41) noting that 'applying for funds is almost an art form'. For those outside of the industry, the process for securing a successful grant is even less understood and may be regarded as something akin to an act of modern-day black magic. Indeed, of the total grants given by the National Library of Australia to community museums, only 13% were given to outer regional areas, suggesting a lack of understanding on how to secure grant applications by volunteers (Meredith, Sloggett & Scott 2019, p. 1309).

Even if these regional societies and museums were to secure funding, however, it is unlikely that they would spend the money contracting a professional conservator. Of the projects funded by the National Library of Australia, only 31% were conservation focused, and of these projects, 50% were focused on the purchase of materials, such as archival material and equipment (Meredith, Sloggett & Scott 2019, pp. 1307–1308). By contrast, treatments only registered as 26% of projects funded (Meredith, Sloggett & Scott 2019, pp. 1307–1308). Moreover, even if these museums did contract a professional conservator, funding is not unlimited, and a conservator will typically only be able to be employed for a limited period of time before being forced to leave. For all of these reasons, rural conservation faces enormous monetary barriers to securing conservation assistance.

Figure 3: Interior of Yackandandah Museum's historic timber slab cottage, constructed circa 1858. The objects on display in the cottage are recreations to evoke early settler life. Image by Fergus Patterson.

All of this analysis, however, has focused on the ability of regional museums to employ conservation staff. What about the ability of private conservators to contribute to historic preservation? The answer once again comes back to money. Many country folk take an approach to saving and spending money that would make a modern-day version of the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future throw in the towel. It's difficult enough to get country people to go to the hospital, and they don't even have to pay for that!

While many would be willing to pay for conservation work, they aren't willing to pay fees between $85 to $250 an hour.[5] And just like with a broken bone, if there are too many impediments they'll eventually get fed up and decide there's nothing a set of power tools and a glass of alcohol can't fix. Even excluding these Scrooge-like spending patterns, the fact of the matter is that income inequality means that rural Australians overall have far less disposable income to spend on conservation treatment than urban Australians (National Rural Health Alliance 2017). Were the cost measured in time and muscle, rural Australians would have no trouble paying the fees, but circumstances force them to be more careful with how they spend their money. Consequently, many of them cannot afford to pay the traditional prices offered by private conservation laboratories.

4 For legal reasons, this is a joke. I would like to apologise to any and all baboons I have offended.

5 Sample cost taken from 'Cost of Your Art Collection: Installation and Conservation', *Artwork Archive*, June 2018, https://www.artworkarchive.com/blog/cost-of-your-art-collection-installation-and-conservation

Figure 4: Yackandandah Museum's collection of historical objects, on display in the museum's main building, reconstructed following the 2006 fire. Image by Fergus Patterson.

And thus, we return to the van

And that is the state of affairs for rural conservation as it stands. They are geographically isolated from urban conservation hubs and lack the funding to employ any form of conservation staff full-time. They're reliant on funding from ambivalent local governments, and a system of grant applications which is little understood at the best of times.

Furthermore, income inequality causes many country folk to be unable to afford the costs of private conservation laboratories. So what can be done to resolve these issues? Many solutions have been proposed but none as of yet have achieved widespread success. Sentiment during the late 20th century recommended the establishment of a national conservation framework, employing curators and conservators to manage the cultural heritage of multiple townships (Sloggett 2016; Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections 1975). Unfortunately, however, the demise of organisations such as the Collection Council of Australia in 2010 has ensured that federal government support for national coordination of museums has gone the way of a disco-loving dodo (Sloggett 2016, p. 120). Major institutions have also attempted to provide support to regional Australia, but as a 2006 report by Deakin University noted, the demand for these programs has far outstripped the capacity of the university to provide them (Brophy et al. 2002, p. 85).

Several programs, however, have had far more success than these earlier initiatives. Most notably, a 2017 program run in concert between the Bathurst Regional Council, AICCM, and the Grimwade Centre at the University of Melbourne aimed at linking conservation students and graduates with local volunteers (Scott & O'Connell 2020, p. 28). Student-led initiatives were delivered across Bathurst, including public events, workshops, rehousing of the collections from the local historical society, and assessment of outdoor public artworks (Scott & O'Connell 2020, p. 28). While highly successful, this program was reliant on professional conservators taking an interest in the historic preservation of local communities, many of whom would likely be unable to assist these collections on a regular basis. Consequently, it cannot be considered viable as a long-term model.

Nevertheless, it is evident that something more must be done to support regional conservation. Regional collections are reliant on volunteer teams which may be described as "being of a fine vintage" if we are feeling charitable, or "old" if we're feeling less so. While they do excellent work, burnout is a real issue, and we cannot rely on them to hold down the fort forever.

Even if it is just a van, any help we can provide would be better than nothing.

NOTE

Please note that details regarding the Yackandandah Museum fire and elements of its recent history are largely drawn from the author's own memory of events. It has, however, been supported with newspaper reports where possible.

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Long live the dragons of Big Gold Mountain:

Negotiating reflexive care of Chinese living heritage in Bendigo

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[Editors' note]
Emma discussed the conservation of Bendigo's processional dragons in her minor thesis at the University of Melbourne. Her ideas were substantially re-worked for publication in *Scroll*.

Bendigo's Chinese Australian community has established a rich heritage legacy within a hostile colonial Australian landscape. Contemporary stewardship of living heritage is complex but can be enjoyable; contrary to conservation approaches of previous decades, it necessitates transparent and reflexive relationships with a core community. For the community represented by the Bendigo Chinese Association (BCA), it was the establishment of the Golden Dragon Museum (GDM) in 1991 — and the implementation of access restrictions — that preserved their vulnerable material heritage. However, while this institutionalisation helped to conserve material heritage, it also restricted intangible and living practices. This has resulted in a loss of vital points in cultural knowledge transfer.

Figure 1: Dai Gum Loong on his inaugural procession at the Bendigo Easter Festival, 21 April 2019.
Image courtesy of the Golden Dragon Museum.

As part of a diasporic community, the BCA cares deeply about all of their material heritage; their magnificent and unique processional dragons have become a focal point of generational conservation efforts. Last year, I researched the GDM for my Master of Cultural Material Conservation minor thesis, 'Caring for Bendigo's imperial processional dragons: A proposed strategy for living heritage care within an institutional context' (Ward 2022). It struck me that this institution could provide an interesting case study for the necessity of *reflexive care* when dealing with living heritage. My thesis research showed that current values-based conservation approaches are not suitable in spaces with intangible and evolving qualities. Instead, utilising the living heritage approach proposed by Ioannis Poulios (2011; 2014) and Gamini Wijesuriya (2018), I put forward conservation strategies that recognised the significance of this community's ties to their dragons, and proposed a conservation plan that aimed toward ensuring their continued activation.[1] I believe it is by analysing unique case studies like the GDM that emerging conservators can learn practical, reflexive strategies to best support communities.

Research context

Megan Hall from the GDM reached out to Dr Nicole Tse of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation in early 2022 and requested assistance in researching and formulating a conservation strategy for Dai Gum Loong, the newest imperial processional dragon acquired by the Bendigo Council for the BCA and the Bendigo community.

Hall had recently begun a newly-defined Collections Manager role at the GDM and wanted to implement a best-practice approach to collection care as the museum transitioned into the National Chinese Museum of Australia (NCMA) (Leschen 2022). The institution was family- and community-run from the 1990s to 2018, with the previous General Manager, Anita Jack, overseeing the collection. The technical aspects of the museum's management had become challenging due to growth in the collection. The A$ 39 million redevelopment of the GDM into the NCMA (Leschen 2022) provides an exciting opportunity to also transform into an institution with preventive, community-supported conservation.

I utilised interviews as a primary research method, believing this to be a great way for an outsider to sympathetically approach a community and understand it more broadly. Speaking with Doug Lougoon (GDM Chairperson and BCA President), Hugo Leschen (GDM Chief Executive Officer), Leigh McKinnon (Research Officer) and Megan Hall, I was immediately struck by the intimate environment of the organisation. It is an institution constructed by Chinese Australian families for a specific purpose. Its assets are inherently linked to the community and its geographic location. It functions as a multipurpose museum with spaces for exhibitions, community activities, and ritual practice, with regularly maintained altars throughout the building.

The GDM has a dedicated community caring for its collection, including members who took it upon themselves to care for Sun Loong — the previous processional dragon, purchased in the 1960s — over the years (McKinnon 2022; Lougoon 2022). However, treatments currently conducted by the community are not documented or overseen, which can be challenging to the GDM as institutional stewards of the collection. Hall is trying to formalise documentation and handling approaches, as well as implement a collective institutional strategy (2022, pers. comm., 26 May). Her goal is to create a handling network where the core stakeholders involved with Dai Gum Loong — BCA, GDM and Bendigo Council — can work collaboratively without mixed messaging or miscommunication (2022, pers. comm., 26 May). This is a conundrum: whilst tighter museum procedures needed to be implemented, I also wanted to suggest a functional strategy for Dai Gum Loong that would not feel forced or restrictive.

1 *Activation* is a term used in the conservation of living heritage and time-based or durational art. It refers to the process whereby an object or concept is taken from its dormant to active state; for example, a choreographic work is activated when it is performed for an audience.

Bendigo's Chinese cultural context

Bendigo is still known as Dai Gum San (大金山) in Chinese, which translates to 'Big Gold Mountain' (Bendigo Heritage Attractions 2016). Bendigo's Chinese population grew from the 1840s due to the introduction of indentured labour forces from China[2] (Jones 2008; Damir-Geildsdorf et al 2016). From the 1850s, the Chinese diaspora began in earnest with the gold rush (Yan 1971, pp. 34–40). By the late 1850s, there were approximately 40,000 free Chinese miners in Victoria. Bendigo has become a strong cultural hub for Chinese Australians and is one of the largest dragon cities[3] outside of China (Lougoon 2022).

The White Australia Policy in 1901 solidified an environment of racism in Australia for settled migrants and new immigrants alike (Potts 2018a; Shen 2001). Despite this, the turn of the century saw Chinese Australians contributing to many professions including medicine, law, furniture trading and domestic services. By the 1930s, second generation Chinese Australians were settling and starting their own families within Australia. However, a period of economic stagnation from 1915 to 1950 meant that little development occurred in Bendigo's central areas (Bendigo City Centre 2020). As a result, most of the Chinese Australian population had moved to metropolitan areas, with only a small number remaining in regional areas (Tsai 2016).

Chinese Australians now make up only 1.4% of the population in Bendigo with a 2021 survey recording 1,662 persons with Chinese ancestry (.id Demographic Resources 2021). Bendigo is a diasporic space; racial prejudice and western social pressures were forced upon the community since the beginning. This hostility was due to their multilocality[4] as well as a lack of understanding of their cultural practices (Agnew 2005). The dragons and the Easter Fair was a way that the Chinese community was able to forge safe community relationships in regional Victoria.

2 Indentured labour forces consisted of mostly men who were sold by creditors into labour to pay off their debt.

3 Dragon cities outside of China are places that are known for their processional dragon culture (for example, San Francisco, Toronto, Bendigo). Within China, dragon cities are known to produce objects and costumes relating to the parades.

4 *Multilocality* is characterised by individuals or social groups pursuing their basic and/or economic interests concurrently or alternately at several places. It can also be thought of as the socio-cultural connection to more than one place at a time.

- The Easter Fair

The Bendigo Easter Fair began in 1871 to raise money for the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum and Bendigo Hospital. It is Australia's oldest, continuously running festival (Rasmussen 2004; Tsai 2016; Boord 2011). The Bendigo Chinese community began formal participation in response to diminishing community donations (BCA 2022b; Bendigo Art Gallery 2022). Doug Lougoon (2022) spoke of a historic desire to repay the support Chinese men had received from the region's medical institutions. As was common in diasporic spaces, there was an absence of women in the colony — this meant that Chinese men in Bendigo had relied heavily on the asylum and hospital to care for them over the decades (Lougoon 2022). The commitment to the community and the repaying of this early debt has become inherent to the values of the Chinese community in Bendigo (Lougoon 2022).

Today, the Fair is no longer a fundraising event; instead, it is held by the city council as a tradition, enriching community life (D'Agostino 2019; Croxon 2019; Tsai 2016, p.104). The BCA's procession has become a crucial component, with their participation weighing heavily on the overall success of the Fair (Boord 2011; Rasmussen 2004). I attended the parade last year and felt the people's deep love for the dragons.

The 'Dragon Parade' is a unique melding of Chinese and Anglo-Christian cultural practices, as it takes place during the Christian Easter long weekend — but it had always been a fundraiser rather than religious event. The Chinese cultural practices which surround dragon parading were brought over from the Taishan region in China, and are imperative to the activation of the dragons (Boord 2011). This creates a true juxtaposition of cultures for a common community goal, further emphasising Bendigo as a successful example of multiculturalism (Lougoon 2022; Leschen & Hall 2022).

While the White Australia Policy and the assimilationist policies of the 1900s have been removed, their impact still flows through to today (Shen 2001). For example, despite the significant role of Chinese immigration during this period of Australia's colonisation, it was not until the 1980s that this role was reflected in collections of public institutions (GDM 2021). This lack of national recognition underscores the importance of conserving the collection at GDM. Its maintenance and display recognise the commitment Chinese Australians have made to putting down roots here. Furthermore, it presents a unique example of blended cultural heritage practices in diaspora.

Figure 2: Paraders in Chinese regalia, Bendigo Easter Fair 1985. Image credited to David Syme & Co. From the collection of State Library Victoria (Record ID: 9939665699307636).

Figure 3: Paraders in Chinese regalia, Bendigo Easter Parade 1974. Image courtesy of Rhonda and Tony Spurling, dedicated members of the broader Bendigo community.

Figure 4: Loong, seen here in front of Parliament House (Spring Street), joined the parade welcoming the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York to Melbourne in 1901. From the collection of State Library Victoria (Accession Number: H27418).

- The processional dragons

GDM's oldest extant dragon, Loong, was crafted in China in the late 1890s, appearing in Australia for the first time in the 1901 Easter procession (McKinnon 2019; Boord 2011). The addition of the bold vibrant dragon and accompanying lion[5] dances gathered great crowds and raised awareness of Chinese migrant culture (Potts 2019; BCA 2022a). The contemporary Easter Parade is a 'focal point for Chinese Australian communities nationally' and the activation of the dragons is integral to Bendigo's cultural landscape (GDM 2021). Bendigo's Chinese community keeps their dragons after each parade, unlike in Mainland China, where dragons are usually cannibalised[6] year-to-year, or burnt in offering.

However, the difficulty of replacing these dragons in Bendigo has meant that they are retained and cared for. In caring for the dragon's material and spiritual bodies, they set a precedent for cultural conservation in diasporic space. Each new dragon commissioned over the years has been designed to revive older styles and readily exhibit those heritage elements (McKinnon 2019; Lougoon 2022).

Today, the GDM houses Loong (龍, 'Dragon', 1901–1960), Yar Loong (夜龍, 'Night Dragon', 1940s), Sun Loong (新龍, 'New Dragon', 1960s), and the new Dai Gum Loong (大金龍, 'Big Gold Dragon', 2019), along with several smaller dragons acquired over the past 27 years (McKinnon 2019). Bendigo's dragons sit atop wooden pedestals inside the museum for 364 days of the year. The dragons are activated one day a year for the parade, and then they lay to rest and protect the community for the remainder of the year. The dragons are in use for roughly 50 to 60 years.

5 Lions are used to accompany and lead the dragons in the parade. Each lion is usually worn by two dancers, and they are often seen performing acrobatic displays.

6 *Cannibalised* in this instance refers to the reuse of components of a dragon's body, frame, or head, for the creation of a new dragon.

Dai Gum Loong

Dai Gum Loong, the focus of my thesis, was commissioned in 2018 by the City of Greater Bendigo. The Council lobbied for the funding for over 12 months, ultimately receiving contributions totalling A$ 750,000 from the Commonwealth and Victorian governments, and private donor Richard Allen (Potts 2019; Holmes 2017). This sum went towards the commissioning of the new dragon, its accompanying parade costumes and accessories, as well as restoration work on Sun Loong (Potts 2019). GDM Research Officer, Leigh McKinnon (2022), noted that considerable effort was put into the continuity of design of these garments, and a desire to 'bring older details back to the parade'. Dai Gum Loong is enormous, measuring 125 metres long, making him the largest dragon in the world. His head weighs 27 kilograms, and his body is adorned with approximately 7,000 reflective handmade mirrored scales (Potts 2018c; SBS News 2019). It takes 65 people acting as Dai Gum Loong's legs (with replacements needed to relieve the carriers) to carry him through the streets (McKinnon 2019).

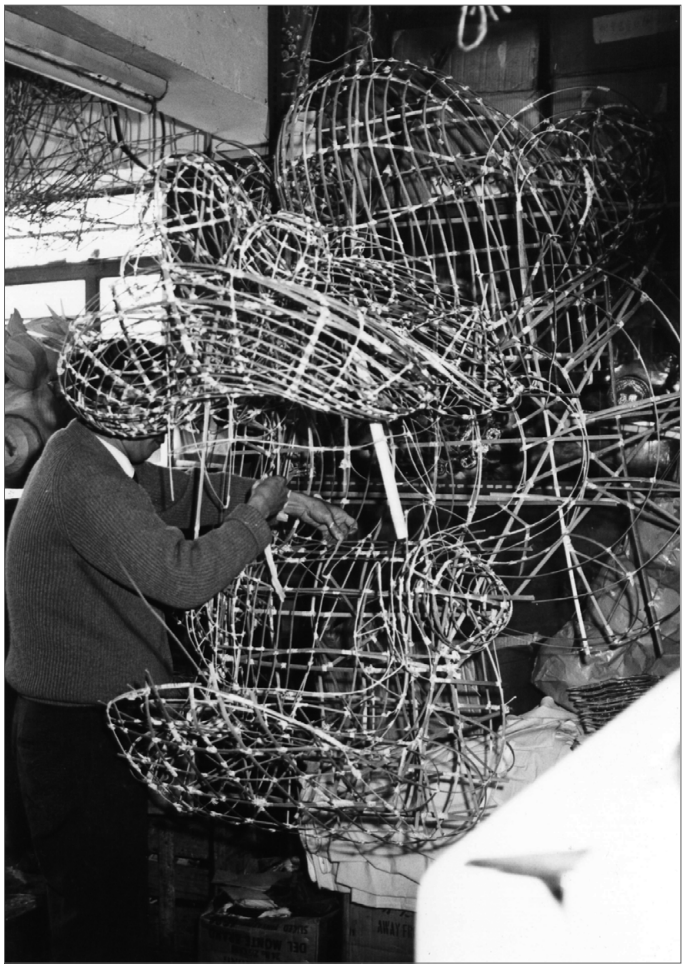

Figure 5: Master Lo On constructing the frame of Sun Loong's head, 1969. Image courtesy of the Golden Dragon Museum.

Figure 6: Master Hui Ka-Hung (right) and his apprentice, Hui Siu-Kei (left), applying the first layer of cloth on Dai Gum Loong, 2018. Photograph by Cheung Ho Lam, as featured on Garland Magazine.

Since the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, there has been a decline in traditional craftsmanship and production of these heritage-style dragons (Lougoon 2022). While dragon performances have continued, traditional practices in Mainland China have needed to adapt to restrictions imposed by its government (Dallwitz 2007, p.15). In Bendigo however, traditions have remained true to their 19th century origins; contemporary processions during Easter directly mimic the historic events associated with that period (Boord 2011). During the commissioning process for Dai Gum Loong, the previous GDM General Manager, Anita Jack, met with several artisans in Hong Kong, who were not aware of Qing-style processional dragons like the GDM's, and their shared history (Potts 2018a). Wonderfully, the ligation masters have since established a community who now collectively keep the art alive (McKinnon 2019). Dai Gum Loong was created by Master Hui Ka-Hung (許嘉雄) and his family, including his nephew and apprentice, "Tiger Boy" Hui Siu-Kei (許兆基). The Huis are world-famous for their lion heads which 'can be found in every country where the Chinese diaspora has spread' (Potts 2018b).

The Bendigo Chinese Association

The BCA oversees cultural care of the dragon, and transfer their heritage knowledge via rituals and oral traditions. The Wong Loong ('blessing of the dragon'), led by BCA elders, have been adapted from traditional Chinese ceremonies over the decades. These blessings are considered the most important role of the community elders (Lougoon 2022).

> 'We have a huge responsibility to make sure the dragons are preserved and conserved so they are available for display into the future… The cultural lineage has been continuous, our actions have been influenced by the people who came before us, and we will continue to pass down the melded traditions we have in Bendigo.'
>
> — Lougoon 2022

While Dai Gum Loong is housed in the GDM with his predecessors, his material body belongs to Bendigo Council, and the BCA advise and make recommendations for the care and handling of the dragons' tangible and intangible bodies during ceremony (Hall, pers. comm., 18 April). The GDM was established by the BCA in 1991 to display and maintain their heritage, being the 'largest collection of Chinese textiles and ceremonial regalia in the world' (Langan 2009). Prior to this, these items were housed in private homes and at the BCA headquarters in Bendigo's Dai Gum San precinct.

There was a community effort to restore Loong in 2000–2001 to prepare him for the parade; he was repainted in several sections, and parts of his skirt were removed and sent to Grimwade Conservation Services for repair (McKinnon 2022). Generally, there is a lack of institutional documentation in this space; however, this work specifically was well-documented with photographs (McKinnon 2022). Annually, the BCA dust the dragon and clean the mirrors in the lead-up to the parades (Lougoon 2022). Since GDM's opening, the dragons have not been disassembled (except for sections of Dai Gum Loong, to accommodate storage).

Prior to GDM's establishment, the active dragon would be constructed on Sundays in the weeks before each parade, and then deconstructed and stored until the following year. These "Sunday working bees" were critical for cultural education, as community elders would teach the new and youngest members how to put the dragon together. Lougoon has been involved in the Easter rituals for around forty years and remembers taking part in the working bees in his youth.

> 'All I have learnt has been passed down not necessarily verbally, but by participation. The building of the museum in 1991 changed things around a bit… It (Sun Loong) was built in the museum and so the ritual was done with a built dragon.'
>
> — Lougoon 2022

When asked whether the community missed this tradition, Lougoon conceded that the dragons are a "centrepiece" for the museum and therefore the BCA understood that annual handling could result in damage. However, he also expressed that documenting the reconstruction should be considered. Lougoon recalled that in 2018, Sun Loong was disassembled for transport to Melbourne Museum, and then reassembled for parading. However, after 27 years without practice, there were now only a handful of people who remembered how to reconstruct the dragon when he arrived in the city. This loss of knowledge was made more apparent when Dai Gum Loong arrived from Hong Kong the following year. The BCA had to come together and use their knowledge of Sun Loong to assemble him (Hall 2022, pers. comm., 23 October). Although the construction is not complex, the knotwork can be challenging, and dragon's movement requires cohesive teamwork and precision that only comes through intimate material handling (Lougoon 2022). Discontinuing the working bees was detrimental to the BCA's intangible heritage. As a group born from a diaspora, moments of traditional cultural exchange are imperative.

> 'As custodians of the culture, we can't be flippant with the use and treatment of any of the dragons. We want to get the most use out of [them]. We want this tradition to carry on. Loong lasted 70 years, Sun Loong lasted 50 years, and we want Dai Gum Loong to have the same type of life as the others.'
>
> — Lougoon 2022

Stakeholders in diasporic spaces

The values-based approach is the primary conservation approach taught globally, and reflexive training is being provided to emerging conservation students in Australia. Our training emphasises consistent communication with key stakeholders, and requires a consistent critique of choices from ethical standpoints. Students are taught that meaning and value cannot be derived from one source, that institutions assign value to objects, that heritage has evolving values, and that authenticity is nurtured in the present. However, while this approach emphases involving local communities, these stakeholders are often defined and assessed by heritage authority bodies and removed from key decision-making (Poulios 2011, p.145).

Diagram 1: Key stakeholders for Dai Gum Loong.
Diagram by Emma Ward, reproduced by *Scroll.*

There are many stakeholders involved who value and care for the processional dragons in Bendigo. Diagram 1 uses the values-based paradigm to define key stakeholders for conservation decisions regarding Dai Gum Loong: the staff of the GDM, the Bendigo City Council (Heritage Advisory Board) and the BCA. So, who would hold the authority for decisions in this complex environment? As we can see, the usual values-based methodologies would not be sufficient in this case due to the complex network that is present.

- The living heritage approach

However, within a living heritage approach, the identification of a 'core community' is essential. The core community should be considered as 'inseparable' from the heritage (Poulios 2011, p.125). This approach is usually applied for immovable heritage and is summarised as follows (Wijesuriya 2018, p.52):

As a ***philosophy***, it: Emphasises continuity, with change as the primary driver in the conservation and management of heritage. A core community is emphasised as essential in these spaces, and subsequently, a hierarchy of values and stakeholders is determined (Poulios 2011, p.125).

> Bendigo's contemporary community is always changing. Over the years, the broader population's approach to the dragons and the Bendigo Easter parades has evolved. However, the BCA descendants' connection to the proceedings are determined to be continuous — we see this in the ritual expression of the dragon dance each year.

As a ***process***, it: Facilitates a community-led, interactive approach to conservation and management by emphasising a core community and its values. Change is deemed to be inevitable; traditional or established management systems (knowledge, practices, and materials) are utilised for the long-term reciprocal care of heritage.

> The GDM evolved out of the BCA's direct need to conserve its heritage, but it is now managed externally. Staff are currently supported by a strong volunteer community. There are procedures in place regarding the physical management of the dragon; however, they favour the material body and consequently, restrict cultural handling outside of the parade.

As a ***product***, it: Focuses on long-term sustainability in safeguarding heritage, with an empowered community engaged in decisions made for them and their heritage.

> The BCA is committed to supporting the traditions of the parade; volunteer community members dedicate their time to supporting the objects inside the space as an act of community care.

In GDM's case, the land that the building occupies is culturally significant to the BCA. Spiritual connections are also linked to the objects and ritual altars housed within the museum. Therefore, living heritage in this context relates to the location of the altars, as well as the intangible ties between the BCA community and Dai Gum Loong. Implementing protocols in line with the living heritage approach would support the strong foundations present at the GDM and engender productive collaboration. Diagram 2 illustrates the interactions between the core and broader stakeholder groups following the living heritage approach.

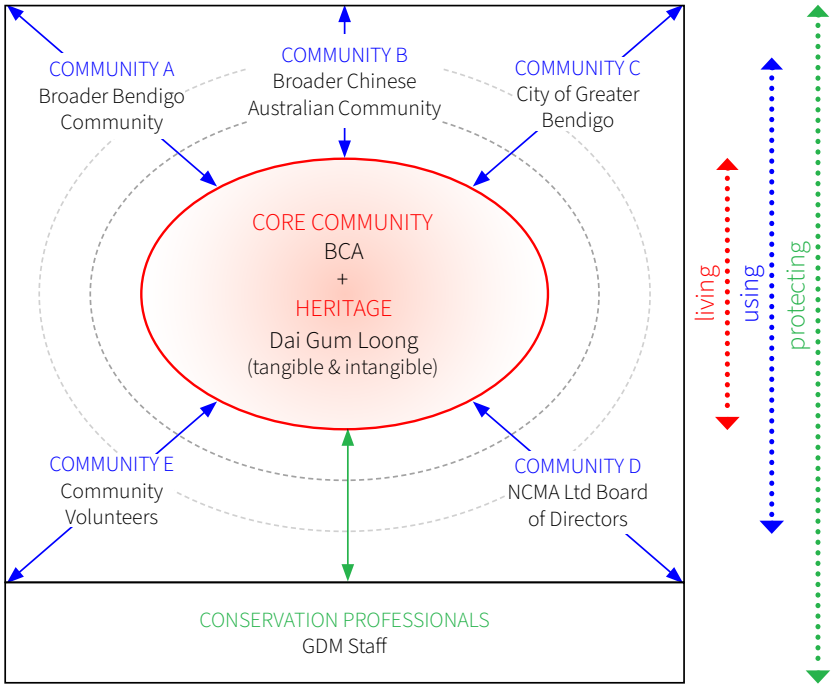

Diagram 2: Interactions between heritage and communities, as applicable to Dai Gum Loong, based on the living heritage apprach by Poulios (2011). Diagram by Emma Ward, reproduced by *Scroll*.

Proposed conservation strategy

Driven by their concerns for the dragons' material longevity, the BCA has for a considerable time adjusted their cultural practices to suit the GDM. I suggested that it was now the museum's role to facilitate a re-engagement of tradittional knowledge exchange so that their unique community can carry forward its intangible heritage into future generations. A key component involved in *carrying forward* is the shared responsibility of transmitting conservation material knowledge and documentation procedures to the community. I proposed that employing full-time trained conservation staff, guided by a permanent Collections Manager, would be necessary as the GDM transitions into the NCMA. The team conducting work at the NCMA would, in turn, need to recognise the institution's ethos and community-forwardness.

Conservators cannot directly "conserve" intangible heritage. Instead, they need to support its preservation by 'providing, or assisting with, opportunities for it to be performed' (Wain 2014, p. 53). The primary conservation facilitator would be the GDM's Collections Manager, Megan Hall. I suggested that the BCA should become responsible for Dai Gum Loong's condition reporting before and after the parade; as the group who oversees his handling, they should be aware of any material concerns. The condition reports would then be handed to the Collections Manager to update the institution's collection management system and compile an annual report to Bendigo Council. I recommended that this report should include material concerns facing Dai Gum Loong, as well as any proposed treatments. From this, discussions could commence to determine whether the treatments can be completed in-house by the GDM (with BCA's support), or if Council funding is required to supplement the work. A sample "quick" style condition report was provided, along with a glossary of possible damage patterns that could be provided to the community.

Finally, I recommended that BCA family members and elders should receive support to reinstate the Sunday working bees in the weeks leading up to the parade. These educational Sunday sessions could be used to conduct the condition reports, dust the dragons, and share knowledge on how the dragon is assembled, as well as their design evolution and iconography. Knot-tying could be shown to inexperienced members so that they can learn and practice each year. The first few condition reporting sessions would need to be attended by Megan Hall, who would transfer material conservation knowledge to the family members and elders.

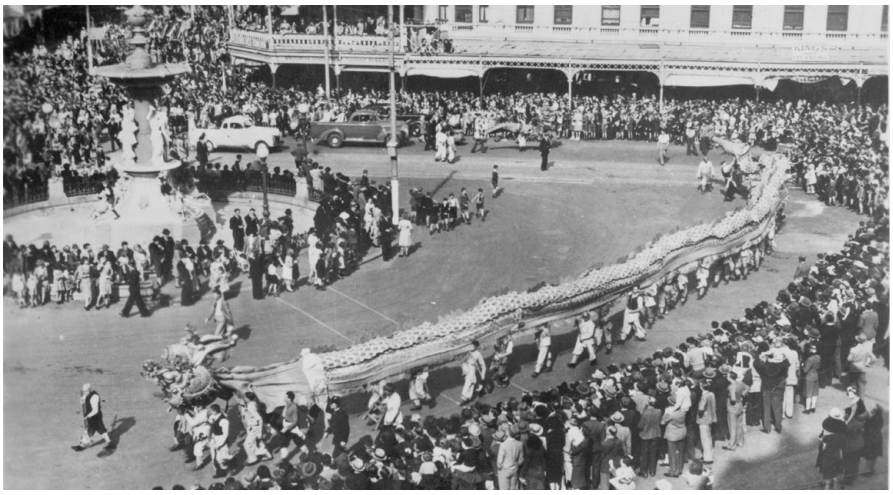

Figure 7: Loong, encircling Alexandra Fountain at the Bendigo Easter Fair, circa 1914–1941. From the collection of State Library Victoria (Accession Number: H23096).

Figure 8: Two dragons, Sun Loong (left) and Loong (right), passing each other at the Bendigo Easter Parade, 1974. Image courtesy of Rhonda and Tony Spurling, dedicated members of the broader Bendigo community.

Figure 9: Four generations of dragons (from left to right) — Yar Loong, Loong, Sun Loong, and Dai Gum Loong — at their customary meeting at Alexandra Fountain during Bendigo Easter Festival, 21 April 2019. Image courtesy of the Golden Dragon Museum.

Epilogue

I took the writing of this article as an opportunity to contact Megan Hall to find out how my thesis research was received, and how her work was progressing at the GDM. As I had now been working at an institution for the past six months, we discussed the curious nature of study. As students, we spend a great deal of time in theoretical spaces, yet the practical application of said research requires a completely different type of critical thinking and problem solving. Megan noted that, often, due to time constraints, decisions are made much faster, and the timelines are ever-changing. We lamented that thorough research is generally unfeasible in practice, and the implementation of theory is more nuanced. We both agreed that the theory-heavy focus of academia often needs to be unlearned as we move into careers as conservators. For example, at university, we are trained to produce full-length, in-depth documentation, but in institutions, it is object-specific and context-dependent.

Megan spoke to the current moment at the GDM; she observed that attitudes within the community were shifting toward becoming more sympathetic to her professional collection care strategy, albeit slowly. Megan believes the best community-centred approach must come from being invited in. From there, it should stem into strengthening relationships and adopting best practice procedures. So, for now, Megan is focusing her efforts on building ties and demonstrating that she is there to help protect, and not to restrict.

An example of collaborative strategy she has been able to implement are the new "Easter loan agreements". Last Easter, as was apparently usual, the BCA's dragon dance troupe arrived a few days before the parade to retrieve the ceremonial lions — without Megan having any knowledge of this regularity. This incident was concerning as the lions are collection items, and therefore keeping track of them was Megan's responsibility. So, this year she enacted the use of a loan agreement with the BCA; the objects were signed in and out of the GDM, and this meant that their location was trackable. Furthermore, BCA volunteers recently helped with rearranging large and heavy collection pieces during the changeover of lighting in the exhibition space. They deferred to Megan when necessary and also collaborated on manual lifting strategies, and the job was completed without damage or injury. The combination of personal and professional care is what was being established here, but change does not happen overnight.

Megan felt that my proposal was great in many ways but also not actionable for several years; the current reality at the GDM is one overlaid with politics, layered relationships, and resource constraints. She said the research is a great tool to justify conservation decisions, and has already helped to back her actions. Megan highlighted that facilitating student research projects can have an enormous impact for small institutions like the GDM — they help to balance resources within a dynamic environment and are a mutually beneficial arrangement. I concurred that a research project within an institution is wonderful for professional development; I am now better able to understand how complex issues can be navigated and how they are applied in practice.

POSTSCRIPT

For those reading this article who have not yet started their thesis, the best is ahead of you — spending eight months researching a topic of interest is a true privilege! Words of advice: read broadly, and don't be afraid to start writing early.

If you would like to get involved with this awesome collection, there are exciting opportunities for ongoing collection volunteering at the GDM. Please contact the museum via [info@goldendragonmuseum.com.au].

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I need to thank Josh and the *Scroll* team for assisting me in compiling this essay whilst I travelled and worked! It has been great to revisit this research and the fantastic heritage context of Bendigo.

Further thanks to Leigh McKinnon who remains a great help and source of knowledge on the GDM.

I am very appreciative of Tony and Rhonda Spurling, who made me feel very welcome when I attended my first Easter Parade in 2022, and who also shared with us fantastic images to be used in this article!

Finally, a big thank you to Megan Hall, who has been so accommodating in discussing her work with me, and who has been pivotal in helping me evolve my practice within an institutional context.

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80 people, 7 sites, 3 days:
Reflecting on APTCCARN 6 with the minds behind the ambitious program

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Madeline is a first-year Master of Cultural Materials Conservation student and communications professional at the Mitchell Institute. She is passionate about empowering self-determination with accessible communications and policy approaches. Drawing on these interests, she hopes to pursue conservation research and practices that champion inclusivity and cultural wellbeing.

In July 2023, I flew to the beautiful island of Bali, Indonesia, to attend APTCCARN 6. Hosted by the Asia Pacific Tropical Climate Conservation Art Research Network (APTCCARN) in collaboration with Institut Konservasi and the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, this event was the first APTCCARN meeting since it was last held in the Philippines in 2017.

The program saw us travel to seven cultural sites from Ubud to Denpasar over a jam-packed three days — and an optional fourth for those wanting to squeeze as much in as possible. Focusing on the theme *Creative Conservation Initiatives: Collective Approaches for Material Culture and Living Heritage*, more than 80 participants from nine countries came together to share knowledge and learn from heritage professionals, artists, makers, and knowledge holders of the region.

Figure 1: APTCCARN 6 participants at CushCush Gallery, Denpasar, with its co-founders Suriawati Qiu and Jindee Chua. Image by Jofel Malonda, 2023, courtesy of Institut Konservasi.

Throughout the program, attendees were granted a level of access to sites and people that felt very special, affording us an experience and insight we likely would not have achieved on our own. It also provided us with the opportunity to meet and connect with each other. As a first-year Master of Cultural Materials Conservation student, I was grateful that a handful of the inspiring people that I met were past students. These past students — Saiful Bakhri, Lia Sumichan, Laila Nurul Fitrani, and Dr Diana Tay — also happened to be some of the minds that made APTCCARN 6 such a success.

Still reeling from the event three months on, I sat down with Saiful, Lia and Diana to reflect on their experiences, celebrate their successes, and chat about the challenges in planning and delivering such an ambitious program. We also spoke about their career journeys and what they have achieved since completing their degrees, sharing with me some words of wisdom for current students and emerging conservators.

Spanning four countries, we met via Zoom on 27 September 2023. The following is a transcription of our discussion which has been edited for clarity.

Saiful Bakhri joined us from the United States where he is a current graduate student at UCLA's PhD Program in the Conservation of Material Culture. An objects conservator, he is also a conservation consultant for a number of museums in Indonesia, and the founding president of Institut Konservasi.

Calling in from Indonesia was independent paintings conservator, **Lia Sumichan**. Lia is a founding member of Institut Konservasi and its current Treasurer. She graduated from the University of Melbourne in 2019 with a Master's degree in Cultural Materials Conservation, specialising in paintings conservation. Her interests include conservation in tropical climates, science in conservation and technical art study, particularly of Indonesian artists. Her minor thesis explored the preliminary technical art study of Affandi paintings from the 1950s.

Rounding out our international catch-up was **Dr Diana Tay**. Diana is the founder of BARC Labs, a fine arts conservation studio proudly established in Singapore, specialising in modern and contemporary South East Asian paintings. Her research interests are on Singaporean modern artists, the investigation of their materials and techniques, and the development of better collection care of Singaporean art collections. Her PhD from the University of Melbourne explored the use of machine learning models in technical and material analysis of paintings by Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen.

Figure 2: Lia Sumichan, Madeline Davies, Saiful Bakhri, and Dr Diana Tay meeting via Zoom in September 2023. Screenshot courtesy of Madeline Davies.

MD You have all achieved a great deal since completing your master's degrees, including your recent contributions to the success of APTCCARN 6. Saiful and Lia, Institut Konservasi was a co-organiser of this year's forum, can you tell us a little about Institut Konservasi and how it came to be?

SB Institut Konservasi stemmed from a student-led working group I founded during my master's called Konservaction. In 2017, there was an imminent eruption of Mount Agung in Bali. The panic among the people was also felt by museums fearing for their collections. So, when Professor Robyn Sloggett[1] introduced us to various grants, including the Student Engagement Grant, a group of us applied for and received it in order to assist museums in Bali. After I finished my degree, I started something more formal, Institut Konservasi. With conservation professional practice not well-considered or well-governed in Indonesia, Institut Konservasi aims to advocate for conservation education and practice in the country so we can properly and responsibly care for our culture and collections.

LS Having Institut Konservasi co-organise APTCCARN this year was great because it allowed more people to get to know the organisation and the work we do.

MD Diana, your company BARC Labs has similar goals to Institut Konservasi in that it also focuses on advocating for the importance of conservation. Can you tell us what led you to founding your own conservation start-up?

DT I was an artist before I started my conservation practice in 2009. There were no conservation courses in Singapore then, and there still aren't now. Similar to other South East Asian countries, conservators in Singapore are trained through apprenticeships. This gives you the practical skills but not necessarily the theoretical understandings behind the actions. I pursued my master's in Melbourne in 2013, and later returned to do my PhD. It was during my PhD that I was working more with private collections, which is rather different from working with and in institutions. Private conservation in Singapore is yet to have an established regulation in terms of our practice. For instance, not all offering conservation services require a formal education. One of the objectives for BARC Labs is to provide quality private conservation services in Singapore that meet an international standard — which is to be accountable and ethical — and to emphasise that conservation is a profession and not a hobby.

I founded BARC Labs with the goal to empower better collection care through knowledge sharing and community outreach beyond institutions. We cannot solely rely on institutions or grants to keep the profession running, so we hope to use our networks with private collectors and cultural workers to create a demand for jobs in the region. We also support young and emerging conservation professionals, having recently hosted two interns. It's important they have the space and opportunity to practice and gain a working understanding of what the industry is like outside of institutions.

1 Professor Robyn Sloggett is the Cripps Foundation Chair of Cultural Materials Conservation and Director of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation. Learn more at: https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/profile/16486-robyn-sloggett#

MD And does BARC Labs have interesting projects in the works at the moment?

DT We're currently working on an exciting project coming up in April next year where we are producing conservation research and taking the knowledge to a public platform. We are hoping this will give an insight into what conservation is and can be, while making technical research more accessible.

MD That does sound exciting!

Turning to APTCCARN 6 now, Lia, can you provide some insight into your initial involvement and the idea to host in Indonesia?

LS Similar to what Diana mentioned with the case in Singapore, conservation standards and regulations are still non-existent in Indonesia. When I started the master's, I unexpectedly met another Indonesian student, Saiful. In talking to him and our lecturer, APTCCARN co-founder Dr Nicole Tse,[2] we realised that there was a real need to bring this conversation to Indonesia in order to foster a greater understanding of the profession within its people, and especially its practitioners. It was just a matter of timing and planning. So, the idea to host APTCCARN 6 in Indonesia had existed long before we were able to deliver it.

Figure 3: APTCCARN 6 participants at the Bali Cultural Preservation Office after opening lectures from Mr Abi Kusno, Head of Office, and Dr Nicole Tse, APTCCARN Co-Founder. Image by Jofel Malonda, 2023, courtesy of Institut Konservasi.

2 Dr Nicole Tse is a researcher and lecturer at the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne. Also a co-founder of APTCCARN, her research focuses on active citizenship to develop regionally relevant and inclusive conservation actions for works of art in tropical South East Asia. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5009-9817

Figure 4: APTCCARN 6 participants were treated to a gamelan music and dance performance at a site visit to the Tampaksiring Presidential Palace, one of Indonesia's six presidential palaces. Attendees were then walked through the palace grounds and toured the culturally and historically significant collection it houses: pieces acquired by Sukarno, the first President of the Republic of Indonesia, art lover and connoisseur (Zweers 2014). Image by Jofel Malonda, 2023, courtesy of Institut Konservasi.

MD And why Bali specifically? Saiful, I know that you were the key driver in this choice. What did you think Bali could offer forum participants in terms of unique strengths or conservation challenges for discussion?

SB I worked as a civil servant at the Bali Cultural Preservation Office for three years and one of the things I learned during my time there is how closely linked conservation is with the communities, and how engaged they are with conservation-related activities. That's not necessarily the case in Indonesia in general. In places like Java, there has been a lot of change, whereas in Bali you can still see people praying in millennium old temples. Art and creativity are still embedded in Balinese people's daily activities. You can see it in their carvings, paintings and civil work. That living heritage aspect helped me a lot in understanding how conservation needs to include voices from the communities, and from the owners and custodians of the heritage. Hosting in Bali meant we could focus on and showcase those important aspects.

Logistically, the hospitality industry in the area was an important consideration as well. When organising international meetings like this, that infrastructure is a real advantage. It was also the region I had the most connections in and felt most confident in planning, a large part of which was done remotely.

MD I can only imagine how challenging remotely planning a face-to-face forum would have been. With over 80 participants and so many moving parts, I assume you faced a few other challenges as well.

SB We were originally only expecting 30 or so attendees.

DT Yes, controlling the international registrations was a lot. We didn't call for papers or do any large marketing campaigns, it was mostly promoted over email and word of mouth.

MD That's amazing. You really pulled off an incredible logistical feat, especially considering the unexpected size of the group. What kind of feedback have you received from those that attended?

LS Speaking with the international participants I've heard that they enjoyed the program and found that it exceeded their expectations. This is really great, but we also noticed that the locals who attended experienced language barrier issues. A number of the locals that participated aren't used to speaking and listening in English, so they weren't able to get the full essence of what was being discussed. We did think about having an interpreter during the sessions, but unfortunately due to budget constraints, it was not possible.

SB It would have cost participants a lot more had we got interpreters.

MD So the accessibility of the event in terms of language and cost were at odds with each other. That is difficult to navigate.

LS Yes, overcoming language barrier issues is definitely something that should be considered for the next APTCCARN forum so it can be more inclusive.

Figure 5: During the visit to CushCush Gallery, co-founders Suriawati Qiu and Jindee Chu introduced participants to the Colours of Bali project, a short documentary platforming the voices of artists and artisans and their 'concerns for their current practices and hopes for the future of their crafts' (CushCush Gallery 2021). Participants were then encouraged to get involved in an interactive session with traditional materials and techniques. Image by Jofel Malonda, 2023, courtesy of Institut Konservasi.

MD What were some of the other successes you were particularly pleased with?

DT The food!

MD Oh yes, the food was so good — a highlight for me too.

DT Besides the number of people that took part, I think for me one of its greatest successes was the access to special places it provided participants. At Museum Pasifika for example, we were really lucky to have Susanne Erhards[3] present a lecture on Museum Pasifika's conservation activities in the museum itself. It really added that extra dimension for people.

Conferences are usually set in one location, but this was a kind of travelling conference. I was initially worried about the logistics of transportation. With the number of guests across two buses, travelling to two locations a day and the unknown of Bali traffic, I was worried we would run into issues, but everything worked out. The travelling format of this conference is unique, and I think that is part of what made it very special.

MD I agree, the movement meant it never felt stagnant and made it all the more immersive. The bus trips also felt nostalgic in a way, like an exciting school excursion.

DT Yes, and it meant that you were likely to sit next to someone new for each bus ride. I'm sure a few of us had meaningful conversations with new and old friends about our experiences and shared thoughts about the discussions. Although Lia and I did have a good sleep on the bus too *laughs*.

SB I agree with Diana, the number of participants exceeding our expectations and the transportation were great successes. My initial worry as the local coordinator was making sure we could properly fund the program considering the low cost of the registration. We were lucky to have a lot of institutions support and sponsor us, like the final dinner at Ayana Estate hosted by SAKA Museum. In the end, we were able to cover the whole thing and keep the registration fee affordable, so I see that as a great success also.

MD That really speaks to the importance of building mutually beneficial relationships with institutions that have shared goals and interests. The price of the registration for what we received was unbelievable and it made attendance more financially possible for those of us needing to travel internationally.

3 Susanne Erhards is a paintings and objects conservator at Museum Pasifika, with a wealth of conservation experience across both Europe and Indonesia. Susanne pursued a Diplom Restauratorin, Zeitgenössische Kunst und Alte Meister (Gemälde und Skulpturen) at Cologne University of Applied Science.

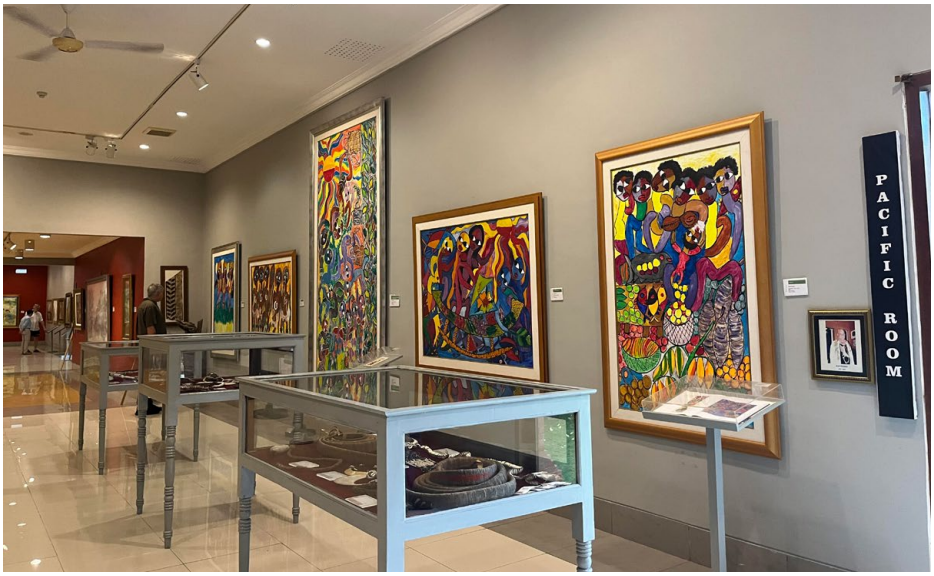

Figure 6: Site visit to Museum Pasifika, Nusa Dua. An important cultural centre for the region, Museum Pasifika showcases art from across the Asia Pacific, drawing in international tourists. It also provides great local value, facilitating social and educational activities (Museum Pasifika n.d.). Image courtesy of Madeline Davies, 2023.

MD Lia, what was your favourite aspect of the forum?

LS For me I think it was connecting with and meeting people whom I've never met before or only spoken with online. That was special — seeing everyone coming together and just being in the one space, listening, participating in conversations and getting to know each other. I see this meeting as one that will open doors for future collaborations on other projects, so having the space to build relationships and connections face-to-face was really beneficial for participants. It also served as a great opportunity for people to meet experts that they can reach out to in the future with their questions.

It was also a great activity for building trust. With the working culture in Indonesia, I understand it can be hard to open up and rely on someone, especially if you have never met them in person or spoken to them. International forums like APTCCARN 6 facilitate these meetings and help participants to build a level of trust, creating opportunities for potential partnerships. I'm looking forward to seeing what things come from these new connections in the future!

MD With a publication in the works I'm sure we'll see the product of these new relationships soon. Again, I just want to acknowledge the incredible work the three of you, along with Dr Nicole Tse, Gadis Fitriana Putri,[4] Seka Seneviratne,[5] and Laila Nurul Fitrani[6] put into this event, congratulate you on making it a real success, and thank you for facilitating an experience I will never forget. I will be (and have already been) encouraging all aspiring conservators and students to jump at opportunities like these in the future if they are lucky enough to have the means.

4 Gadis (Adis) Fitriana Putri is a paintings conservator based in the Netherlands. From 2021 to 2022, she was a Research Associate at the Netherlands Institute for Conservation+Art+Science+ (NICAS+). She has a Master of Cultural Materials Conservation from the University of Melbourne, specialising in paintings conservation.

5 Seka Binaramali Seneviratne is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne; her research is titled 'Conservation treatments: Biodeterioration methodologies and their effect on acrylic paintings on canvas in topical climate'. Seka previously worked with the Department of Food, Environmental and Nutritional Sciences (University of Milan, Italy) to study microbiology in cultural heritage as a visiting PhD student. She graduated from the Department of Chemistry (University of Bologna, Italy) in 2019 with a Master's degree in Science for Conservation-Restoration of Cultural Heritage.

6 Laila Nurul Fitrani is a founding member of Institut Konservasi and a conservator at the Bogor Presidential Palace, Indonesia, where she is the caretaker of the Presidential Art Collection. She graduated from the University of Melbourne in 2021 with a Master's in Cultural Materials Conservation. Her aim is to reform conservation practices in Indonesia, primarily in museums managed by the Indonesian Government.

Figure 7: APTCCARN 6 participants discussed their conservation problems during a sharing session at Museum Pasifika. Image by Jofel Malonda, 2023, courtesy of Institute Konservasi.

MD To finish, I'd love to pick your brains for some pearls of wisdom that current students, who are now in the shoes you once were, may benefit from. What is important to value during this stage of our education and career that you think has contributed to your success thus far?

DT I think the most important thing beyond all the studies is to make friends, have dinners, and make it meaningful and real. Your peers now form part of your network and community. Outside of learning conservation skills, I think there is great value in learning how to build and maintain relationships. Conservation is never done entirely alone.

SB I completely agree with Diana. I remember that my first professional work after graduation actually came from a referral from someone that I interviewed during my studies. Even being willing to speak to the second-years or to alumni is really valuable. I was not the first Indonesian to take the master's study, so I reached out to her. She had been in the industry for quite some time and was quite senior, and now she actually sits on the Institut Konservasi advisory board.

LS I still find all the subjects that were taught relevant and useful in my work today. My advice would be to really make use of all the resources available because they definitely help you into the future, especially if you do a lot of conservation work. I find myself always going back to the books and my references.

I would also encourage students to seek out opportunities to be involved in things outside of their studies and find occasions to contribute. Take APTCCARN for example, having more people contribute would be great for its impact, and it would also provide more emerging professionals with a rewarding learning experience. There are also a lot of other opportunities and areas of need in South East Asia that perhaps they aren't aware of, so I would definitely encourage students to look into these areas and see if there is something that sparks their interest.

MD Thank you all so much for sharing this advice and for chatting with me today. It has been really interesting to draw back the curtain on APTCCARN 6 and get a behind the scenes look at the truly ambitious yet wildly successful and inspiring event. I look forward to seeing its impact stretch into the future, and hope to see you all at APTCCARN 7!

Figure 8: On an optional fourth day, attendees were taken to Museum Pustaka Lontar, a museum built to help preserve and save the lontars (palm-leaf manuscripts) of local people. Participants learnt about the cultural and historical significance of lontars, as well as how they are made and cared for. Image by Jofel Malonda, 2023, courtesy of Institut Konservasi.

Figure 9: Madeline Davies and new friend Alissa Putri during the lontar workshop at Museum Pustaka Lontar. Alisa is a Museum Registrar at SAKA Museum, Jimbaran, Bali. Image courtesy of Madeline Davies, 2023.

Figure 10: Devotees at Tirta Empul temple and holy spring, Tampaksiring. Image by Jofel Malonda, 2023, courtesy of Institut Konservasi.

Reflections

Attending APTCCARN 6 as a conservation student was as eye-opening as it was exciting. In speaking with heritage professionals, listening to knowledge holders, and learning from the lived experiences of others, I was able to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the realities of conservation practice, not only in Indonesia, but in the various nations of other attendees.

Meeting with Saiful, Lia, and Diana to reflect on the event provided an even greater insight into the immense value in facilitating knowledge-sharing forums such as APTCCARN 6. The open discussion we were able to have about the event's logistic underbelly, its challenges, and the difficulties in reconciling accessibility requirements, was another valuable form of knowledge sharing — one that will benefit future APTCCARN committees and participants.

I feel exceptionally lucky to have been able to attend this event and to have connected with the incredible network of people that I did. Building a network is building a knowledge base, and when people put effort into fostering these networks through forums like APTCCARN 6, everyone benefits — and so too does the living heritage and cultural materials that we are working to conserve.

Figure 11: Admiring Tirta Gangga royal palace in Karangasem. Image by Lia Sumichan, 2023. Courtesy of Madeline Davies.

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On exhibitionary silences:
Museums and conserving sexual heritage

by Isabella Wessel
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Isabella is a second-year student at the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne. Coming from a background in history, she has a keen interest in interrogating the social and cultural contexts that have shaped the care of material culture.

Sex, in every form, has always been of central significance to human beings, providing a means for the interpretation of oneself and one's place within a community (Cassidy, Lock and Voss, p. 218). Its centrality to identity construction has historically and continues to draw controversy. These disputes hold 'immense symbolic weight… becom[ing] the vehicle for displacing social anxieties and discharging their attendant emotional intensit[ies]' (Rubin 1999, p. 143). As we exist in a social climate that appears to be increasingly concerned with the policing of peoples' bodies and expressions of identity, it is important to scrutinise how such conflicts have, and continue to, affect museum practice surrounding the care of sexual heritage, and how conservation can respond to promote representation of marginalised identities.

Origins of collecting sexual histories

Although sexual objects have been passed amongst private collectors and in the halls of the Wunderkammer (also known as a cabinet of wonder or a cabinet of curiosities), it was not until the archaeological excavation of sexually explicit materials at Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1795 that the issue of sex began to be considered a theme of research and display (Frost 2020, p. 30; Tyburczy 2016; Simmons 2020, p. 2). Determined to be too perverse for public access, a Cabinet of Obscene Objects was created, evolving into the first Secret Museum at the beginning of the 19th century (Frost 2008, p. 3). From the formation of this space at the Museo Bornico (now the Museo Archeologica Nazionale di Napoli), a collection management strategy was implemented to restrict access to groups believed to be vulnerable to the influence of sexual immorality. This included women, children, people of colour, and the poor (Tyburczy 2016, p. 26). The perceived depravity held within these sites was evident in their naming conventions, including Napoli's Raccolta Pornographica (pornographic cabinet) and the Biblotheque Nationale's dramatically titled L'enfer (Hell) (Tyburczy 2016, p. 26).

From the 1830s, the British Museum began to segregate obscene materials, before formally establishing the closely guarded Secretum in 1865 following the acquisition of 400 phallic-related objects from George Witt (Frost 2008, p. 31; Wickstead 2018, p. 351). Although the era of Secret Museums saw its official end in the 1950s, the impact of this practice of division is significant (Frost 2008, p. 29). Stuart Frost, the British Museum's Head of Interpretation & Volunteers, argues it has left 'an enduring legacy' on materials, which have consequently received reduced curatorial attention and are 'still underrepresented and under interpreted in permanent displays' (Frost 2020, p. 47).

For work to move forward, it is important that museum practitioners identify and contextualise the role of museums in defining normative sexual practice, and assess the cyclical relationship this has regarding the care of museum heritage.

Communication and development of sexual knowledge

Whilst sex has existed within collections for as long as museums have existed, the experiences of women, LGBTQIA+ people, and the kink community have been omitted or underrepresented in display, collection management, and conservation research (Tyburczy 2016). As spaces of public education, museums offer the opportunity to explore the interactions of sex, gender identity, and sexuality across time and culture. However, the communication of knowledge and values within public museums and collections has traditionally been held as the privilege of wealthy white men. This in turn has resulted in reserved attitudes regarding the display and meaningful interpretation of objects that challenge heteronormative practice (Frost 2020, pp. 46–47; Tyburczy 2016 p. 14; Liddiard 2004, p. 2). The structure of museological methodology was influenced by Enlightenment philosophy that cast an understanding of the world as an "objective" truth that could be discovered through scientific knowledge (Clavir 1998, pp. 3–4). In this context, museums became the sites to communicate this reality which disregarded other knowledge systems, including those of women and Indigenous people (Clavir 1998, pp. 3–4). Here, museum practitioners were cast as arbiters of truth, rather than functioning as reflections of 'the cultural and moral attitudes of successive generations' (Gaimster 2000; Clavir 1998, p. 2).

This practice aligns with Tyburczy's analysis of museum history, where ideas of acceptable bodies and sexualities were 'dispersed and strengthened', and 'perversions' were constructed in contrast to normalcy in what Michel Foucault described as 'perverse implantation' (Tyburczy 2016, p. 3). Construction of the perverse/normative dichotomy has propagated an 'erotophobic examination of sex in Western culture', influenced by the concurrent emergence of a 'sexual epistemology' in the 19th and 20th centuries (Tyburczy 2016, p. 11, 22). Here, museums and other institutes of public education were able to invent taxonomical definitions of sex, where 'sexuality was no longer simply a question of particular acts, but was expressed in appearance, personality, and even bodily structure' (Felski 1998, p. 4). The confinement of materials and their classification as "obscene" ignored how materials were 'used or understood in their own culture or period… [hindering] serious study, and the omissions from displays distorted the way members of the public perceived and interpreted different cultures' (Frost 2020, p. 46).

It is in these conditions that 'exhibitionary silences' are created, where objects and themes categorised as significant continue to prioritise the Western, heterosexual, and masculine gaze (Tyburczy 2016). In these silences, museums perpetuate a rhetoric

that alienates those whose lives, identities, and histories contest cis-heteropatriarchical 'structures of intimacy and gender performance' (Tyburczy 2016, p. 2; Vanegas 2002, p. 98; Fuentes 2023, p. 127). This is evident in the challenges faced by the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum's LGBTQ Working Group in addressing gaps to increase explicit queer information in their catalogue tags (Clayton and Hoskin, 2020, pp. 59–61). Prior to 2015, only three glossary terms related to the LGBTQIA+ community were present in the V&A's collection management system, all of which featured outdated or inaccurate definitions (Clayton and Hoskin 2020, p. 59). Here, the system defined lesbian as 'a cornice where two edges meet' and cross-dressing as 'an abnormal desire to dress in clothes of the opposite gender' (Clayton and Hoskin, 2020, p. 59).

As the subjectivity of museums is increasingly acknowledged, it is crucial for museum practitioners to consider how current collection management, classification and conservation strategies inherit the biases and flaws of past practitioners (Gaimster 2000; Clavir 1998, p. 2). This should be of particular concern to conservators, as threats to material culture threaten those with marginalised histories, whose lives may not be acknowledged or represented within the written canon of the dominant group (Gaskell and Carter 2020, p. 2).

What to do going forward?

Where places of public education have failed to acknowledge the sexual histories represented within their collections, it has become the responsibility of advocacy groups, community archives (such as Chicago Leather Archives and Museum), and for-profit museums, like the Museum of Sex (MoSex) and Sexmuseum Amsterdam, to fill these exhibitionary silences. In line with the International Council of Museums' Code of Ethics (2004) recommendation for a 'close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate', conservators and heritage professionals should consider a 'bottom-up, participatory approach' to increase equity in representation and knowledge production throughout the museum (ICOM 2004, p. 33; Peters et al. 2020, p. 7). Whilst this is by no means a revolutionary consideration for the modern conservator, it is necessary to consider this point in relation to the history of sex and gender. Allowing stakeholders with marginalised sexual and gender identities to communicate their realities and experiences is critical to collaborative decision-making processes with conservators, who have typically held the power in 'defining how objects can be accessed, interpreted and used… [and] are able to facilitate or even trigger these engagements' (Peters et al. 2020, p. 7). This thought process is of particular relevance to discussions and interpretations of sex acts, and their associated materials, which are ironically left out of discussions of sexual histories (Harris 2010, p. 1104; Wickstead 2018, pp. 351–352). Through a framework of exhibition and omission, the materials of the history of sex and gender have been manipulated to perpetuate the cis-heterosexual power structure of the Western museum. As conservators, we have the ability to rework this power structure to amplify marginalised people within the museum sector and have their own histories told with their own voices. This is critical if we hope to repair the damage done through many years of misrepresentations and obfuscations.

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What does an ecofeminist mount look like?

Implications of ecofeminism in contemporary collection management

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Kirralee is an artist working in sculpture and is the Collections Technician at the Museum of Brisbane. She is currently studying Cultural Materials Conservation to enrich her skills in mountmaking and has a particular interest in the conservation of metals.

[Editors' note]
Kirralee advocated for the intentional integration of ecofeminist principles in mountmaking and collection management practices in an assignment submitted to the University of Melbourne. Her ideas were substantially re-worked for publication in *Scroll*.

Contemporary collection management strategies contain ecofeminist foundations. This can be traced back to the mid 1980s, when conservators instigated a paradigm shift for the profession to become increasingly people-focused (ICOM-CC 1984). In collecting institutions it is evidenced more recently through the intentional incorporation of sustainable practices (Lelyveld n.d.). Both ecofeminism and cultural materials conservation foster an imperative of care for people and the planet (ICCROM 2017; Plumwood 1998). Today, those working in collection management roles such as conservator, registrar and mountmaker are responsible for the care of tangible and intangible cultural materials which manifests as roles that delicately balance object protection with accessibility. Although the presence of ecofeminism in collection management is largely unrecognised and/or unintentional, there is much to be gained by continuing to include its theories in museum practices. If ecofeminism is intentionally integrated as foundational and allowed to inform attitudes and structures, collecting institutions can grow in cultural sustainability, environmental sustainability, and therefore accessibility.

Mountmaking can, as an extension of the ICOM paradigm shift in conservation, be understood as an integral aspect of collection care and preventive conservation. In this essay I will elaborate on the importance of including ecofeminist principles and practices within collection management strategies by focusing on the role of mountmakers and reviewing the development of mounts made for Australian painted bark artworks. As an emerging conservation mountmaker who is eager to see ecofeminist principles filter through museum structures and practices, this paper includes a manifesto which envisions what an ideal object mount can "look" like.

Much research has been published on the positive outcomes of introducing feminism into hierarchical structures, including *Ecofeminism and systems thinking* (Stephens 2013) and *Let's imagine a new museum staff structure* (Tanga 2021). Feminist concepts are important to include in hierarchical structures as necessary ingredients to create balance. It should also be noted that some Western institutions have negated the

accumulated knowledge that First Peoples have been practising for thousands of years. True sustainability necessarily integrates a deep inclusion of all people. This idea is discussed in 'Sustainability concepts in Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures', (Throsby and Petetskaya 2016).

> While the paradigm of sustainability can be seen as a universal concept that can be applied irrespective of social, political, or cultural context, it is argued that a fully realized model of sustainability for application in non-Indigenous societies will only be possible if it acknowledges the importance of culture and incorporates the insights that have been accumulated over generations in indigenous knowledge systems.

About ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a school of thought and practice which has grown out of feminism. Feminism as a political movement can be understood to have a structure like a tree: the foundational concept, or "trunk" is, 'to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression' (Hooks 2015). In practice, feminism works 'for the eradication of domination and elitism in all human relationships' (Ware 2000, p. 98). Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism which affirms that the subjugation of women and minorities under the patriarchy also extends to the "natural world" (Mills 1991). Ecofeminism is a school of thought which, by its own principles, cannot exist without practice. The outworking of ecofeminism is often modelled from instances in nature and holds tightly to a concept of reciprocity: if we can take care of the planet, it will take care of us. The structures that come from ecofeminist thought are usually circular in form, or often resemble a web or net. These structures can be used in the creation of foundations for organisations looking to become more sustainable. Ecofeminist frameworks are developing in collection management. For instance, Dr Nicole Tse, senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne, encouraged students to consider an access-oriented approach to collection management. Tse suggested that a cyclical model may be useful between objects, people, time, and place (Tse 2023). Mary E Phillips (2020) comments on the practices of ecofeminism — here it is within the context of environmental management protocols, but the principles remain the same for museum contexts.

> Ecofeminist philosophy offers a set of principles to challenge those [capitalist] conceptions and to build a different relationship with nature: first, by developing eco-centric connections where humanity is seen as part of the web of life; second, by revaluing epistemological frameworks to include what is currently denied by hyper-rationalism; and, finally, by focusing on an ethic of care as a moral imperative and call for action.

The integration of nature-guided protocols and structures creates balance when introduced into capitalist, patriarchal systems (Phillips 2020) including museum institutions and collection management strategies. Museums are hierarchically structured institutions and still exist under the 'legacy of modernity' where 'our reasoned and rational scientific approach has caused a chasm between human experience and ways of valuing the natural world' (Stephens 2013). The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has laid a new foundation to address some of the issues caused by modernity through publishing a new definition of the museum (PGAV 2022). The definition states:

> A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.

This definition is both a recognition of the trajectory the conservation profession has been on since the 1980s and inclusive of new goals for the future. ICOM states, 'the definition is aligned with some of the major changes in the role of museums, recognising the importance of inclusivity, community participation and sustainability' (ICOM 2022). These changes are a focus on equity and environmental and cultural sustainability, or, to summarise, it is ecofeminism taking its place in practice.

Mountmaking

A mountmaker is someone with a specialised skill set who works to create safe, bespoke pieces of armature to house or display objects. The armatures serve as safety measures to prevent breakage and theft while displayed or during movement from one place to another. A well-designed mount gives the artwork greater stability and the form itself is as non-invasive as possible. Contemporary mountmaking requires technicians to have broad and adaptable hand skills, an understanding of engineering principles, physics, and material science as well as a flexible, problem-solving attitude. Mountmaking work is varied: it can be as delicate as stitching near-invisible thread into discreet places of an object as well as the fabrication of very large, intricate, connected forms for dinosaur bones which take years to complete. While mountmaking is in itself an action of care, there is scope for the job to be integrated into a holistic collection management strategy.

Painted bark artworks

Many Australian museums are custodians of painted bark artworks (Ellersdorfer et al. 2012) which require specialist mounting, handling and conditions in order to be accessible. This is due to their susceptibility to relative humidity, their inherent propensity for movement, and fragile nature (Nolan 2018). Collection managers, registrars and mount makers are first-in-line and responsible for their physical care. There has been much documentation around best practice for mounting a bark artwork written by those caring for them, making it a suitable case study in tracking their development.

- Painted bark mounts prior to the 1980s

The treatment actions recorded in 'Conservation of Australian Aboriginal bark paintings' (Boustead 1966) provide an insight into the way attitudes informed practice prior to ICOM's paradigm shift. The language William Boustead uses to describe Indigenous Australians and the artwork they make reveals a problematic attitude which contributed toward an inability to complete appropriate conservation on the painted bark artworks. Boustead (1966, p. 197) comments,

> In recent years aborigine [sic] bark paintings and sculpture have attracted the attention of many private collectors and art museum curators, who have come to realize that not only are these artefacts important anthropological records of a very primitive people, but also creations of undoubted aesthetic value.

This attitude is seen to affect Boustead's work when it is noted that he found it difficult to use the 'primitive' materials provided to retouch the artworks. He subsequently attempted using 'modern' brushes and when they also 'failed', he chose to 'accept the areas of missing paint' (Boustead 1966, p. 200). The document then describes the method used to flatten the barks by force which also required the addition of a PVA consolidant, so they did not crack during flattening.

Ecofeminist writer Patricia Jagentowicz Mills posits that attitudes like this could be due to a pervasive frame of thinking where, 'we develop an anthropocentric view in which we see ourselves as "the measure for all things"' (Mills 1991, p. 162). It is apparent that Boustead had considered himself and his peers "the measure" for this task. In contrast, contemporary practices encourage a people-focused approach where treatments do not begin without collaboration and consultation with the maker or their approved representative.

The conservation treatments attempted by Boustead were likely to have been considered appropriate by conservators at the time. The actions were primarily object-focused and neglected to involve original artists, communities, and local knowledge.

- Painted bark mounts after the 1980s

It is evidenced in the bark mount cases discussed by Lisa Nolan (2018), that an inclusive, people- and planet-focused foundation, which hands over determination of the outcome to traditional knowledge, leads to an improved treatment and a safer, more accessible object. Nolan's paper documents historical display techniques of bark mounting and notes their evolution. The ideal harmony focuses on preventive measures, a mount that integrates an appropriate system with Indigenous Australian knowledge as well as the life cycle of the *Eucalyptus tetrodonta*, the tree the bark comes from (Nolan 2018, p. 97). Nolan accounts six different kinds of bark mounts and discusses how they have progressively become more suitable to the objects with the inclusion of traditional knowledge through collaboration. Initial attempts at mounting (including those attempted by Boustead) caused significant damage to the bark as it curled over time. Some of these techniques included completely gluing the bark to a backing board and others involved the use of highly toxic materials which were unsafe to the environment and the technicians.

In one case, the mount design made the objects accessible and acquirable, which led to self-determined financial income (Nolan 2018, p. 103).[1] This is the design that many bark mounts are modelled after today. The recipe for an ideal bark mount is described as a custom-made aluminium cross-frame which is rigid enough to support the bark being displayed on a wall and to protect it from physical forces. The addition of a sliding hook mechanism to this framework allows the bark to change shape over time without requiring an entirely new mount. This mount design was made possible through collaboration, inclusion of traditional knowledge as foundational and an understanding of the gum tree.

Figure 1: Photograph of the aluminium mount used to display a painted bark artwork from the City of Brisbane Collection, Museum of Brisbane. The mount was made specifically for this work, and it was exhibited in *Perspectives of Brisbane* at the Museum of Brisbane in 2022. Each component of the mount is labelled, and direction arrows indicate the mount's orientation. Two D-rings have been attached at the top for hanging on a wall. Components labelled A and B, left and right, can extend by sliding outward for placement of the work into the mount and to accommodate movement of the bark over time.

The artist and date of this painted bark are unknown.
Photo credit: Liz Pullar, Collection Manager, 18 October 2023.
Mountmaker: Kenzee Patterson.

Image provided with permission from the Collections team at the Museum of Brisbane.

1 The 'Bush Strap' bark mount was made by people at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre and was designed and made on Country. This mounting system meant that bark artworks could be displayed at the centre and subsequently sold, contributing approximately $2 million to the business in 2017.

What an ecofeminist mount looks like: A mountyfesto

When considering the evolution of mounts made for bark artworks, it can be seen that the attitudes prevalent in the mid 1900s led to limited ways of thinking about objects and their care. This self centring position caused mountmakers to only consider the tangible object in front of them and not the community or the environment it came from. When attitudes changed, local, artist-led knowledge was considered significant, and this collaboration created new possibilities. The flexible and adaptable framework for displaying painted barks is now achievable by the local communities they are born of. This deceptively insignificant, auxiliary armature created avenues for self-determination for these communities.

As heritage professionals, we should not consider ourselves immune to the effects of modernity, particularly within hierarchical institutions such as museums. We still have tendencies to complete object care tasks with speed and efficiency as the goal. These one-size-fits-all practices neglect the core values initiated by ICOM. Through the incorporation of foundational structures and attitudes made of ecofeminist theories (people-first approaches, sharing of knowledge, and deep connection to the planet), mountmakers, registrars, and collection managers can create accessible pathways to objects for the public.

An ecofeminist mount is a supportive, bespoke piece of armature, finely crafted by attentive makers who are compensated and resourced appropriately. The mount is materially sustainable because it is made from holistically considered materials. It exists in the past by considering the objects' initial creation, it acknowledges the present with responsiveness to the object and it accounts for the future by being reusable and/or adaptable. With its strength and stability, an ecofeminist mount gently carries items of cultural significance, providing open access for many generations.

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Golden fields and azure skies:
Dedications to a faraway homeland

by Melanie Melnychuk
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Melanie is in her first year of the Master of Cultural Materials Conservation degree at the University of Melbourne. What inspired Mel to pursue conservation also inspires much of her artwork, and that is her Ukrainian heritage. See more of Mel's art on Instagram: @melsboredom.

My paintings are strongly influenced by Ukrainian nature, traditions, and symbolism. These are the things I try to keep alive and celebrate despite living across the world. Nature plays a big role in our storytelling and folklore, evident in our celebration of the summer solstice. Wheat also holds a lot of meaning regarding health and prosperity to people in Ukraine.

In the Wheat Field

Inspired by a trip to a wheat paddock late last year, this painting represents the symbolism of the Ukrainian flag, showing blue skies over golden wheat fields.

Ivanna Kupala

Ivanna Kupala is a popular summer solstice tradition in Ukraine. During the festival, people would dress up, and girls would weave flower crowns, and jump and dance around a fire.

Burning

Ukraine is one of the largest global exporters of wheat. As a result of the constant shelling and attacks, wheat fields have been set ablaze. Farmers' livelihoods have been put at risk and the world has been plunged into a food shortage crisis.

In the Wheat Field

Melanie Melnychuk, 2022
Gouache on 300 gsm paper

Ivanna Kupala

Melanie Melnychuk, 2022
Gouache on 300 gsm paper

Burning

Melanie Melnychuk, 2022
Acrylic paint on canvas paper

Treating artworks by living artists:
The precariousness of co-creating legacies

by Anthi Soulioti
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Anthi obtained her master's degree in Contemporary Art Conservation from the University of Amsterdam in 2021, in addition to her training in Greece and Spain. Anthi has worked as a conservator of artworks and archives in public and private institutions and collections in England, Greece, the Netherlands, and Germany, where she currently resides.

[Editors' note]
This article originated as an assignment submitted to the University of Amsterdam in 2019. Anthi has re-worked the essay by responding to assessment feedback and editorial input from *Scroll*, as well as incorporating recent developments in academia.

The field of contemporary art conservation is constantly faced with hitherto unprecedented ethical challenges. Arguably the most profound characteristic of contemporary art is its very unique element of contemporaneity, due to the close proximity between an artwork's moment of creation and the present day. This gives rise to an array of new challenges for contemporary art conservators, most prominent amongst them being the artworks' precarious materiality, rapidly obsolescing technologies, and components that need constant reinterpretation.

Alongside and intertwined with these elements exists a strong emphasis on the *concept* of the artwork; this is in contrast with their art-historical predecessors, whose aesthetic qualities often dictate their perceived value. The aforementioned challenges present a particular complexity when the artists are alive, since their input can be at odds with established conservation practices. The artist interview, whilst a useful tool, is often loaded with ethical conundrums and pitfalls, some of which will be presented in this essay.

The value of contemporary artworks, both in terms of the art market and art history, can be influenced by a perceived lack of fixity, especially considering the inherent variability that many of the works seem to exhibit. Although at first glance these characteristics do not seem to be explicitly linked to conservation practice, they indeed operate as circumstantial actants that conservators often need to consider, especially when contextualising complex artworks for documentation (van Saaze 2009, p. 24). This can have substantial consequences for their 'narrative value', which is an intrinsic element of conservation objects (Muñoz-Viñas 2005, p. 63). These ideas will be elaborated further in the analysis of the following case studies.

Challenges of contemporary artworks, illustrated with examples

There is a noticeable tendency among contemporary artists to incorporate an ever-expanding list of materials and technologies untested by time. This is by no means extraordinary since artists have been experimenting with new (relative to their lifetimes) methods of creation throughout the ages. However, materials used in the last few decades, such as plastic, ice, and blood, are in many cases, intentionally chosen because of their very short life expectancy or ephemerality. Contemporary art conservation can feel like a race-against-the-clock mission, which requires quick action to either hinder the deterioration of these materials, or try to circumvent the obsolescence of quickly-outdated technologies and prevent the loss of information. Fortunately, a growing number of new tools, both physical and conceptual,[1] can provide some degree of confidence in dealing with contemporary artworks, even if the research in this field is somewhat still growing out of its infancy.

Incorporating ephemeral elements — such as fruits and fungi — in artworks is as much a material-oriented decision as it is a conceptual decision. This inherently fast process of decay is more often than not a key point of contention between different stakeholders, regardless of whether the artwork is entering a public or a private collection. From a conservator's perspective, allowing or even facilitating the deterioration of the object-aspect of an artwork can seem no less than an oxymoron. Remaining faithful to the artist's wishes but acting on behalf of an institution with the implied aspiration of freezing artworks in time can create a level of anxiety and cognitive dissonance. In my personal experience, having spoken with many of them in private practice, conservators often try to keep direct interactions with artists to a minimum and rarely opt for long-format interviews.

An artist's memories, and any person's memories for that matter, are not always accurate. This means that an artist might overlook the fact that their latter interventions on an artwork may impact its authenticity (Mancusi-Ungaro 2016). This could also lead to possible depreciation of the artwork's value. Then, there are cases of artists who consider their artworks more like a process, with the different iterations of their sculptures or installations having different physical manifestations. Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors (The Large Glass)*[2] is one of the most characteristic examples of an artist working, mentally and physically, on an artwork for years after the moment of the artwork's acquisition (Mink 2004, pp. 84–89).

This is also the case with *Modern Indoor Gardening* (2009–2011)[3] by Marianne Vierø (Figure 1 & Figure 2). According to Wharton (2015, pp. 4–5), the artist was 'working out problems in her mind with each iteration. By the fourth installation, she had resolved her questions and decided that it could now be re-presented with less variability'. Presumably, unacquired artworks can enjoy a certain level of freedom to evolve. However, in most instances, an artwork's evolution is heavily influenced by the institutional filter. This is notwithstanding cases where an artist's voice over the future of their work can have an impact on institutional practices. An example of this is when the Philadelphia Museum of Art acquired Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit (for David)*.[4] The artist, who had been collaborating with conservator Christian Schneidemann for years to preserve the fruit and vegetable peels that comprise most of the artwork's material aspect, eventually decided that the peels would have to decay naturally. This posed many interesting questions regarding the artwork's future as part of the museum's collection. In the end, a middle-ground

1 Physical tools developed recently include the use of 3D printing and rapid prototyping to create fills for loss compensation (Delidow & Meier 2011), or the innovative application of monoatomic oxygen to remove deposits from the surfaces of artworks (Markevičius et al. 2018). Examples of novel conceptual tools, or theories proposed by conservation scholars, include the casuistic approach (Van de Vall 2009; Ashley-Smith 2017; Wharton 2018), the evolutive conservation theory (Morales 2022), the philosophical reflection (Verbeeck 2016), and theories highlighting the importance of the archive of contemporary artworks (Hölling 2017; Wielocha 2021; Castriota 2021).

2 Marcel Duchamp, 1915–1923, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1952-98-1). Access the artwork here.

3 Marianne Vierø, 2009–2011, *Modern Indoor Gardening*. Access the artwork here.

4 Zoe Leonard, 1992–1997, *Strange Fruit*. Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1998-2-1). Access the artwork here.

was found to satisfy all parties; preservation while in storage, and evolution through decay — with a strong emphasis on documentation — while on display (Temkin 1999).

At the heart of the contemporary art conservator's practice lies the search for the artwork's 'authentic self'. In order to avoid future fiascos like the "crimes against the Cubists"[5] (Hummelen & Scholte 2012, p. 39), the ontological framework in which the work resides needs to be examined. One method of achieving this is by identifying the artwork's 'work-defining properties'[6] (Laurenson 2006). By doing so, the conservator can draw upon a more respectful methodology towards safeguarding for posterity all of the potential life trajectories of an artwork entrusted to their care (Castriota 2019, p. 45).

It will come as no surprise that the definition of an artwork's authenticity is far from being a fixed concept, since the interpretation of the work-defining properties relies on different stakeholders — be it the artist, institutional administrators, or a diverse audience. As soon as the work is subjected to musealisation, the authority over its future inevitably shifts from the decisive voice of the previous owner, whether the artist or sometimes the collector, to the institution's practices (Irvin 2006). Thereby, a more pluralistic approach is engaged. This can often have, as Van de Vall (2015, p. 299) aptly points out, a profound effect in the conservation decision-making process. Moreover, it would be remiss not to mention the conservator's contribution in the various versions or manifestations of an artwork, as well as their control through documentation (Kemp 2023). This can feel at odds with the common view that conservators should not insert themselves into their work. Ultimately, by manipulating the material aspect of a work, conservators intervene in its legacy and potentially, by extent, to the legacy of their makers.

However, there are cases where the level — or even existence — of documentation is unable to completely escape an artist's control, say a performance artwork by Tino Sehgal.[7] Sanctioning his works for acquisition by a collector or museum is highly dependent upon the new owner's compliance with the various oral instructions they have been given. Although recorded documentation of the artwork is strictly prohibited, Sehgal's artworks persist because they continually evolve, ever so slightly, through the collective memory of the performers, museum administrators and the audience alike (van Saaze 2015). Moreover, Sehgal does not relinquish his rights with regards to loaning or exhibition even after the transfer in ownership is completed (Fasol 2018, pp. 104–105). In the event that Sehgal's and the collector's interests stop being in alignment, or if there is a lack of communication or flexibility between the parties involved (Lane & Wdowin-McGregor 2016), a potential conflict could leave the conservator swimming in murky waters.

Some artists have notoriously retouched their artworks years after their creation, at times with non-original materials and often without considering these artworks to be 'reworked' and consequently in need of double-dating. Such is the case of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Doppelgarage* (2002)[8] with the artist's wish to replace the heavily degraded adhesive tape — an intrinsic yet precarious element of the work — contradicting traditional notions of keeping as much of the original material elements as possible (Grun 2011, p. 222). These acts often push against conservators' ethical boundaries. While usually occurring with the best of intentions, they inadvertently test the relationship between authorship and authority.[9]

5 "Crimes against the Cubists" refers to interventions, such as varnishing and wax lining, that were performed by conservators on Picasso and Braque paintings, but were unauthorised and disapproved by their makers. It is described in John Richardson's seminal essay of the same name, in the *New York Review* (Richardson 1983; 1996).

6 In *Tate Papers*, Pip Laurenson (2006) introduced the concept of 'work-defining' properties to help define the identity of time-based and media art. Such properties can include 'the artist's instructions, artist approved installations intended to act as models, an understanding of the context in which they were made and the willingness and ability of those acting as custodians of the work to be sensitive in the realisation of a good installation'.

7 Tino Sehgal's performances or situations include: interpreters dressed as museum workers, performing exaggerated and unexpected actions such as singing (*This is propaganda*, 2002), moving their arms in circles while jumping from one leg to the other (*This is good*, 2001), or shouting rhythmically as soon as a visitor enters the room (*This is so contemporary*, 2005). They turn visitors from passive observers to engaged and responsible contributors to the artwork's shape and form.

8 Thomas Hirschhorn, 2002, *Doppelgarage*. Access the artwork here.

9 Even if the artist is the artwork's original creator, they do not always maintain the authority over its future presentation or preservation.

Figure 1: Installation view of Marianne Vierø's *Modern Indoor Gardening* (2010), at Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam. Image courtesy of Marianne Vierø.

Figure 2: Installation view of Marianne Vierø's *Modern Indoor Gardening* (2011), at Peter Lav Gallery, Copenhagen. Image courtesy of Marianne Vierø.

Compounding the challenge is the use of replicas or emulation as an approach for preserving highly unstable artworks. This strategy brings about an array of new ethical and philosophical quandaries in contemporary conservation practice, with the artist's voice as a crucial element in the development of relevant strategies (Lerner 2016). In fact, there are many artists whose solutions are so radical that conservators thirty years ago could not fathom attempting to justify them within the ethical framework of their profession. A recurring theme amongst time-based media artists is the openness towards replacing or upgrading obsolete hardware; a well-known artwork in this category being Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* (Magnin 2015–2016, p. 9). This work was created with the expectation that it would co-exist in two worlds: the collectable editions of five[10] (Figure 3), and the freely distributed version[11] that serves as an instructional piece on the internet. Indeed, according to the artist, no version is more important or authentic than the other (Forsberg 2012). Nevertheless, it is the installed versions, which include CRT monitors and projectors — incredibly precarious due to their impending obsolescence — that will have to be cared for by conservators, by upgrading to the latest technology, replication, and emulation.

Artist interview

Alongside various other documentation strategies, the artist interview was developed and is currently considered to be an indispensable tool for contemporary art conservation (eds Beerkens et al. 2012). Its aim is threefold: to extract technical information about the artworks, such as materials used and methods of production; to define the purpose of the artistic creation, or in other words, the artist's intention; and to explore conservation processes that could be employed and contribute to possible futures of the artwork.

Interviewing living artists has some notable advantages over collecting information from archives or from artists' estates entrusted with authenticating artworks on behalf of the artists (Calzolari 2018, p. 47). Since the act of creation is undisputedly linked to its creator, their opinion when it comes to understanding the ontology of the artwork has long been perceived as the authoritative voice in defining the intention behind the work. Hidden behind the choice of methods and materials, the artist's intention provides a sensory result that, consequently, creates an aesthetic and intellectual experience.

One important consideration which should not be overlooked is the intrinsic pitfalls of the interview as a tool. If not prepared adequately and executed appropriately, by taking into consideration as many of the possible factors at play and orchestrating them accordingly, the risks are ever-present. This can be caused by inadvertently forcing an answer, by posing questions that are not 'open-ended' enough, or through poor communication amongst all the parties involved. In discussing the artist interview as an invaluable source of information, Wielocha reveals several factors that can have a negative impact on establishing a connection between the artist and the museum representative for the same goal. Furthermore, she reflects on the ethics of using the artist interview as a tool in order to affirm a preconceived course of action, with the risk of a certain 'instrumentalisation' of the artist looming large (Wielocha 2017, pp. 39–40). Another concern is the artist's reliability; they may conceal or beautify information related to the identity of the artwork. Artists might do this to increase publicity, or to gain the favour of a curator to re-exhibit their artworks in future (Wharton 2015, p. 9).

Devoting sufficient time for archival research prior to the interview is essential to become fully acquainted with the project at hand. A good example is presented in detail by Sheesley (2007) in her interview process with Siri Berg. However, taking too long could have some worrying consequences. In interviews with emerging artists, questions regarding the future of their artworks might confront the artists with existential issues they have yet to explore, especially if they are young. That is not to say that more mature artists always perceive questions about mortality, either their own or their works', as a joyful conversation topic. It is important to keep in mind the delicate issues we as conservators deal with, and the respect required to approach them.

10 Cory Arcangel, 2002, *Super Mario Clouds*, edition 2 of 5. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art (2005.10). Access the artwork here.

11 Cory Arcangel, 2002, *Super Mario Clouds*, downloadable source code. Access the artwork here.

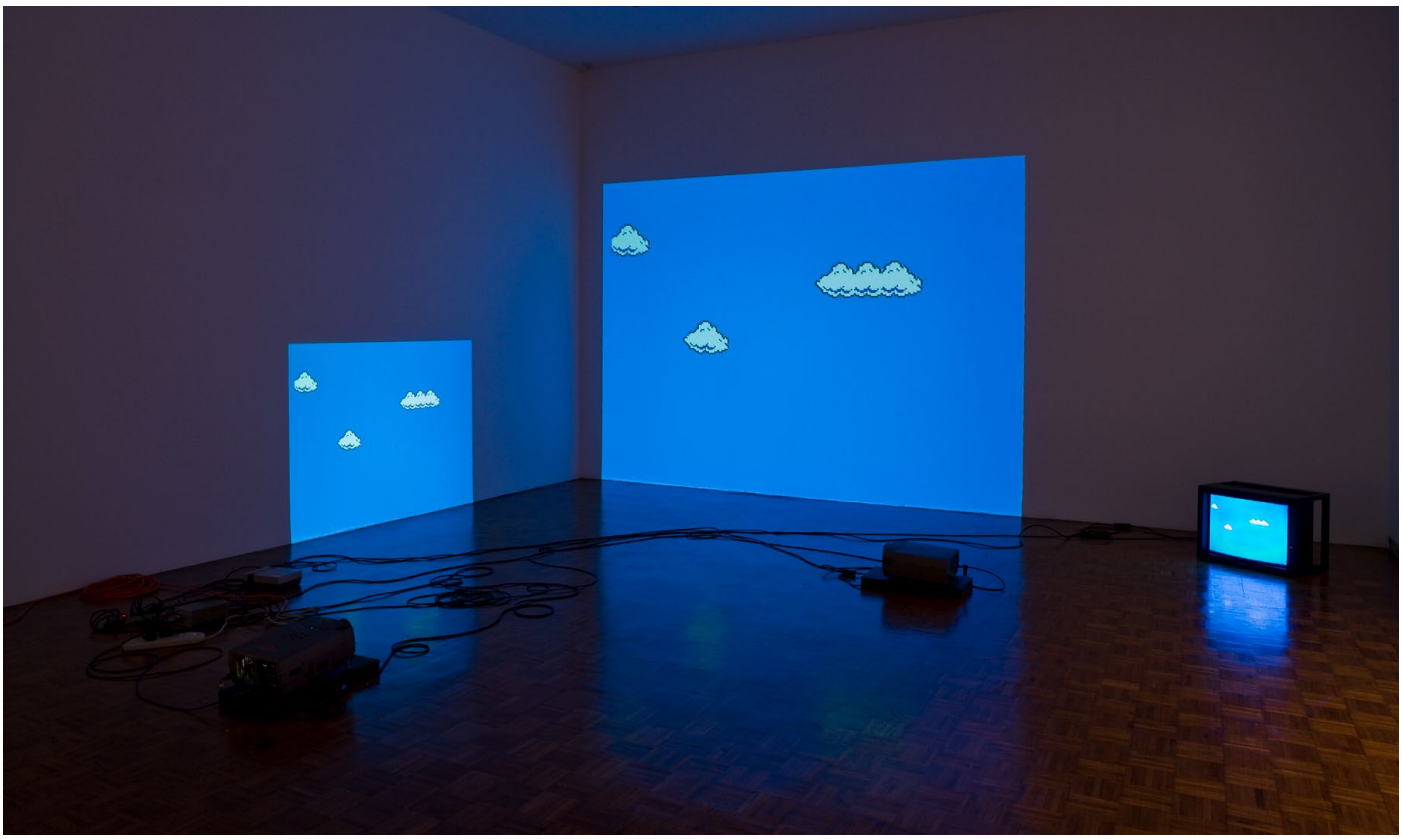

Figure 3: Cory Arcangel. *Super Mario Clouds*, 2002. Handmade hacked Super Mario Bros. cartridge, Nintendo NES video game system, artist software. (Installation view: *Synthetic*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA, January, 2009 - April, 2009) Photo: Sheldan C. Collins.

Subjectivity and bias

Notwithstanding, there is an important caveat one needs to remember: the interpretation of the information extracted by conservators when interviewing living artists can be highly subjective. The changing contextual notions of a cultural, social, political, and historical nature can profoundly impact the understanding of the artistic intention ingrained in the artworks (Wharton 2015, p. 8). Unfortunately, deviating from a fully accurate identification and description of the "true" artistic intention, whatever may be purported, is an inescapable challenge that conservators face constantly (Dykstra 1996). As such, they risk failing to faithfully safeguard all the elements of a complex contemporary artwork into the future. Undoubtedly, escaping subjectivity can be a futile and onerous task so perhaps the answer is to acknowledge, accept it, and course-correct as necessary (Marçal, Macedo & Duarte 2014).

Subjectivity can be also linked to the artists themselves. Most major modern and contemporary art institutions' documentation practices include the artist's interview, with an emphasis on conducting it as close to the point of acquisition as possible (Guggenheim n.d.; Matters in Media Art 2015). However, the time of acquisition does not always coincide with the time of creation. Between these two events, there can be a number of different milestones in the artwork's biographies, such as exhibitions, auctions, acquisitions by collectors, and deterioration. These can result in alteration, visual or experiential. In other words, how something might have looked near the time of its creation, can later have many more layers of meaning due to its passage through time.

Conclusion

Conservators today are increasingly being designated the role of mediating change over time, rather than inhibiting this change. In many cases, artists seek conservators' expert opinion when considering the best materials to use to realise their project, appearing to be more engaged in the discourse over their artworks' future (Davies & Heuman 2004). This can also develop the feeling of trust, leading to a more respectful and faithful adherence by the conservator to the artist's voice. It is this trust which fosters an interaction capable of refining and crystallising aspects of the artwork that could affect its conservation, manifestation, and appreciation.

Interviewing artists as soon as their artworks enter into collections is a widely-applied practice nowadays. Nevertheless, this comes with certain consequences that conservators need to take into consideration. Insufficient time devoted for research, drawbacks related to the inadequacy of the artist interview as a tool, artworks with no predetermined completion state, and the inherent subjectivity filtering every interpretation and decision made are merely some of the risky aspects of information collection mentioned in this essay.

The conservator's role is shaping into that of a steward of authenticity by balancing institutional and artistic expectations with reality, while remaining truthful to the artwork. In order to satisfy the wishes of all the actors involved, present and future stakeholders alike, conservators need to strive towards identifying, supporting, and serving an artwork's material and immaterial aspects. Assuming that the proverbial umbilical cord between the artist and their creation is present at least for the duration of their lifetime, any conservation activity is likely to have an impact on the artist's legacy.

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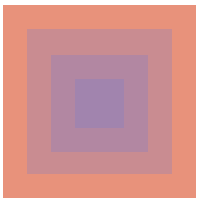
Five methods for matting works on paper:
A brief introduction



by Yuhong Zhang

Yuhong graduated in 2022 from the University of Melbourne with a master's degree in Cultural Materials Conservation. Following an internship opportunity at Book Conservation Services, Yuhong worked at the State Library of South Australia as a project conservator. She is now a paper conservator at Artlab Australia.

Paper conservators working at institutions often help prepare for exhibitions by matting works on paper. In the *AIC Book and Paper Wiki*,[1] matting and framing is referred to as an effective method to '[protect] works of art and artifacts on paper and provides physically secure and aesthetically sympathetic housing for display, handling, transportation, storage, and support' (AIC 2023).

Matting an artwork may not sound as glamourous as treating a 100-year-old print; often, the practice falls more into the category of preventive conservation. However, this does not necessarily make the task any less important or challenging. In choosing between different matting methods, conservators must delicately balance conveying the artist's intention while ensuring the artwork is safely displayed. This topic is worth exploring in greater detail, especially when it comes to contemporary art.

When I started working at Artlab Australia early this year, I began matting works on paper regularly. Through this experience, I came across techniques that were completely new to me. My motivation for this article is to share these methods with other emerging conservators, framers, and artists who might need to undertake such tasks themselves — especially if they are overwhelmed by the numerous techniques available, and unsure of where to begin.

This paper focuses on five different matting methods for display purposes, and it is by no means exhaustive. The dimensions provided in this article are indicative only, since the sizes of hinges and corners are determined by the artwork's size, weight, and how it will be framed. In other words, the methods featured here should be adapted according to the individual work. I also recommend consulting with senior conservators when working with unfamiliar matting methods or artworks.

I hope that this article will be helpful to other emerging conservators embarking on their own journeys. Happy matting!

1 AIC 2023, *Book and Paper Group Wiki*, American Institute for Conservation, viewed October 2023, <https://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/BPG_Matting_and_Framing>.

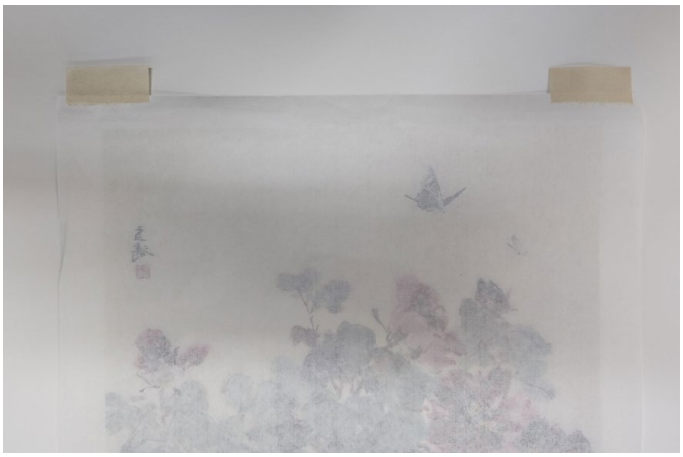


Figure 1a: An example of T-bar hinges on the verso of the artwork. Image courtesy of Yuhong Zhang.

Figure 1b: T-bar hinges viewed from the recto of the artwork. Image courtesy of Yuhong Zhang.

Figure 1c: The final result of an artwork matted using T-bar hinges. Image courtesy of Yuhong Zhang.

1. T-bar hinges

A T-bar hinge is perhaps the most common and standard method for matting works on paper. Hinges are adhered to the work using Japanese repair paper and, once the position of the work is determined, another piece of repair paper or tape can be placed on top of the hinge. This gives the hinge a "T" shape, hence the name. There is no definitive rule for applying T-bar hinges; the weight, size, and sometimes the colour of the tissue is determined by the artwork. However, there are a few aspects to consider regarding choice of materials and application techniques.

- **The selection of Japanese tissue paper:** It should be lighter — in both weight and colour — than the artwork. The edge that is attached to the back of the work should be feathered.[2]

- **The number of hinges:** For small works, two hinges along the upper edge should be sufficient, with each hinge measuring approximately 35–45 mm wide. The hinges should be close to the left and right edges, as these are the areas that tend to curl. An additional third or fourth hinge may be required for medium and heavy works.

- **Use different types of paper:** I tend to use Japanese repair paper to adhere to the artwork, and archival tape to adhere the tissue paper to the backing board. The reason for this is that, if you need to re-do your mat, it is easier to distinguish and then separate the tape from the paper artwork. I would also advise not to use wheat starch paste to stick the tissue paper to the backing board, as you can still use the same hinges, while only changing the tape, if repositioning is required.

2 A feathered edge is created when the Japanese tissue paper is wet-cut, leaving the long fibres protruding out.

2. Invisible hinges

Figure 2a: An artwork matted using invisible hinges. Image courtesy of Yuhong Zhang. Artwork: *Jack* by Nora Heysen.

Figure 2b: Close up showing the deckle edge. Image courtesy of Yuhong Zhang.

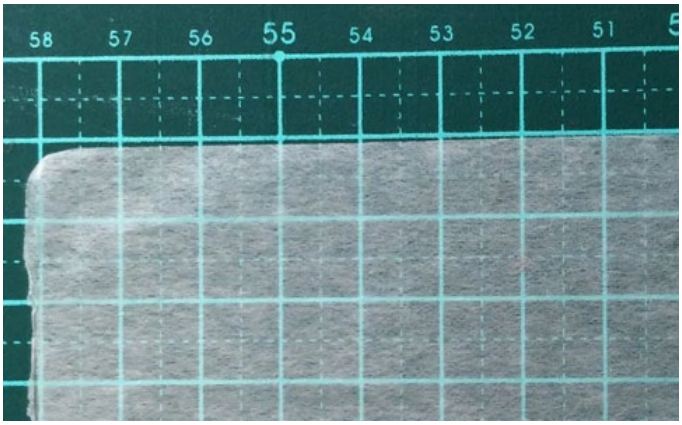


Figure 2c: Sample of Japanese tissue used. Image courtesy of Yuhong Zhang.

Invisible hinges are commonly used to present an artwork with deckle edges. To prepare an artwork for invisible hinges is quite a simple process.

The repair tissue needs to be quite thin and translucent, such as 5 gsm Tengujo. Cut the tissue into strips around 15×50 mm. The actual size for your tissue strips depends on the thickness and condition of the artwork. Since the tissue is very lightweight, multiple strips need to be adhered to the artwork to ensure it can hold the work and remain at an ideal position. Take the work in Figure 2a for example; there are ~8–10 hinges for each border that are pasted onto the verso of the paper. To attach the work to the backing board, you can simply brush the paste through the tissue strips since they are very thin.

Two things to be mindful of are:

- Fibres from your clothes or floating in the air can be accidentally pasted onto your strip. If this happens, you can sometimes pick the fibre up with fine tweezers. If the fibre is very visible, you may need to redo the hinge.
- Leave a 1–2 mm gap between the paper edge and the starting point for your paste (see Figure 2d). This will make the paste easier to apply and cause less damage to the paper if the hinges need to be removed.

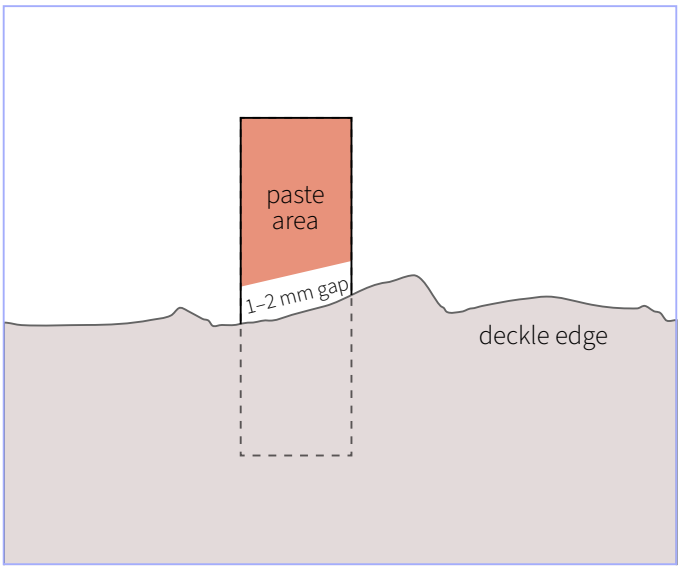


Figure 2d: Sketch indicating where to paste down hinges onto backing board. Diagram by Yuhong Zhang, reproduced by *Scroll*.

3. Mylar® tags

The need for Mylar® tags is quite similar to that of invisible hinges, used in cases where the edges of the work are to be displayed. However, sometimes the works can be too large and heavy, and it is preferable for them to remain unframed. In this scenario, Mylar® tags present an alternative option.

Here is an example of how to make Mylar® tags. Please note that the length and width are adjustable based on the actual size of the artwork. Heavier Japanese paper should be used than for invisible hinges.

- **Mylar®:** Cut a strip of Mylar® (40 mm width) and fold it in the centre.
- **Paper:** Prepare a strip of heavy Japanese tissue paper (40 mm width). One edge should be straight, and the other edge, attached to the back of the work at a later stage, needs to be feathered. The folding position should be 10 mm from the straight edge.
- **Sewing:** Insert the paper into the folded Mylar® strip and sew through both using white cotton thread.
- **Tag:** Cut the strip into small tags based on the template, and seal the end with Evacon-R™ .

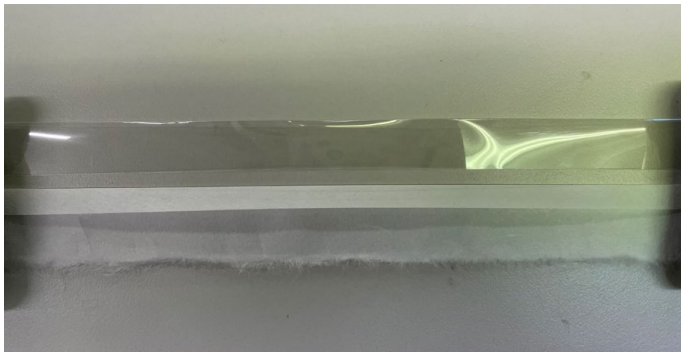


Figure 3a: Prepare Mylar® and paper strip. Image by Yuhong Zhang.

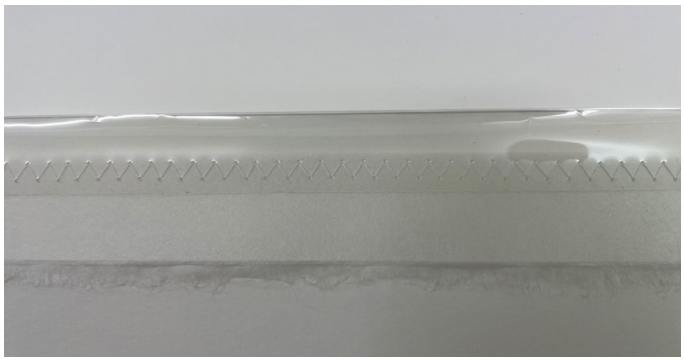


Figure 3b: Sewing two strips together. Image by Yuhong Zhang.

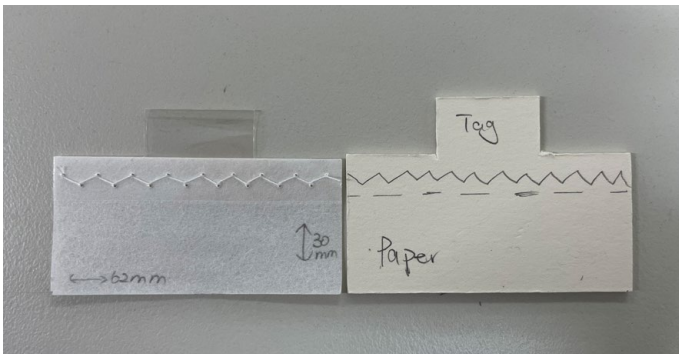


Figure 3c: Cut the tags based on template. Image by Yuhong Zhang.

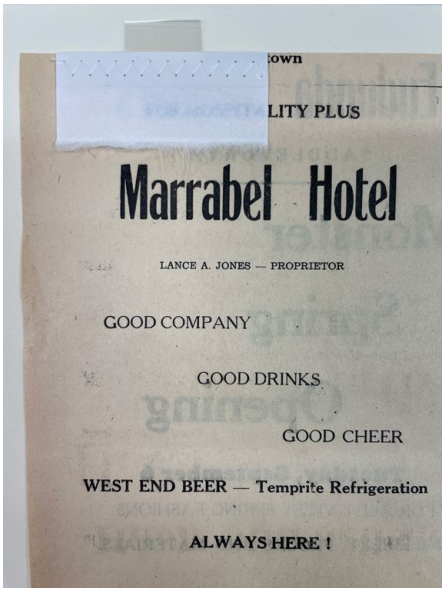


Figure 3d: The position of a Mylar® tag when adhered on the verso of an artwork. Image by Yuhong Zhang.

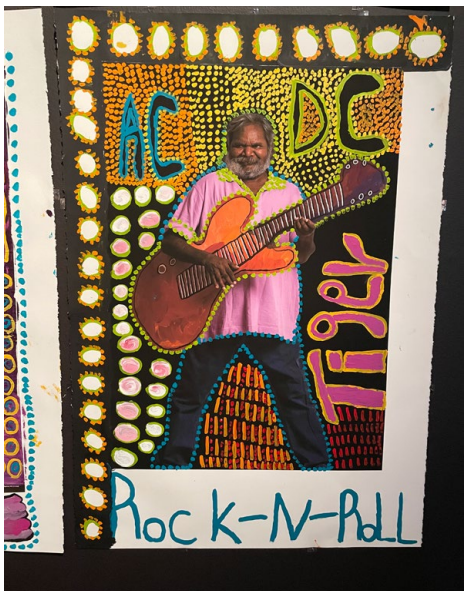


Figure 3e: Artwork on display using Mylar® tags. Image by Yuhong Zhang. Artwork: *Rock n Roll*, by Tiger Yaltangki, exhibited at *Tarnanthi 2023*, Art Gallery of South Australia

Figure 3f: Close-up of a Mylar® tag that is nailed to the wall to display *Rock n Roll*. Image by Yuhong Zhang.

4. Magnets

Another common method to display contemporary artworks is using magnets, particularly rare earth magnets. There are two ways of applying magnets: either by applying the treated[3] magnets directly to the surface of the work (Figures 4a & 4b), or preparing a paper pocket that will be adhered to the back of the work and house the magnets (Figures 4c & 4d). Magnets can be extremely strong and can cause accidental damage, both to the artwork and a conservators' hands. Emerging conservators are strongly advised to consult with the institution and line manager if unfamiliar with this method.

Figure 4a: A very large artwork that is being displayed using magnets. Image by Yuhong Zhang. Artwork: *Athumu Paypa Adthinhuunamu (My Birth Certificate)*, by Teho Ropeyarn, exhibited at the *2023 QAGOMA Foundation Appeal*, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art.

Figure 4b: Close-up of the magnets on the recto of the artwork. Image by Yuhong Zhang.

Figure 4c: An example of magnets on the verso of an object. Image by Yuhong Zhang.

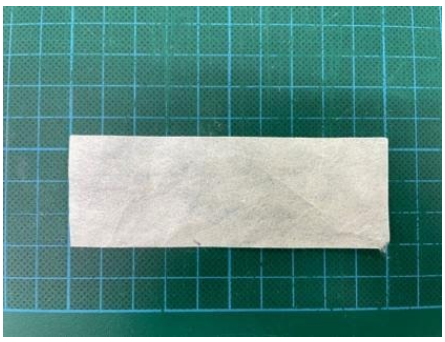
Figure 4d: Close-up of a paper pocket housing a magnet. Image by Yuhong Zhang.

3 Treating in this case refers to degreasing and cleaning the magnets. The magnets are sometimes also colour-matched to the artwork.

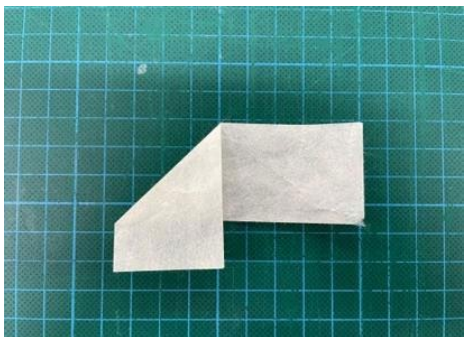
5. Photo corners

Unlike the methods previously mentioned, photo corners can be considered as non-invasive since they do not require any use of adhesives on the work. This method is preferable to use on loaned objects or materials that are highly sensitive to water. The methods to create the two most common types of photo corners are illustrated as follows.

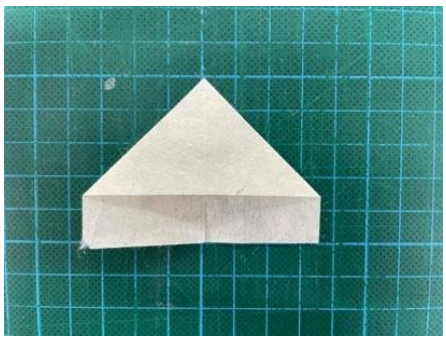
- Type 1 photo corner:



Step 1: Prepare a strip of Japanese tissue paper (35×100 mm).



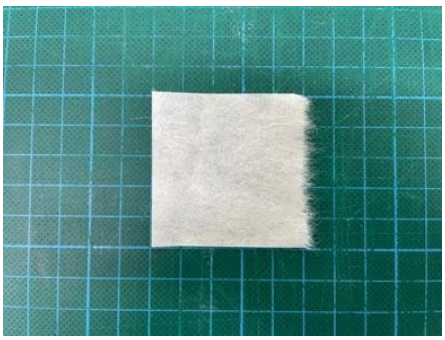
Step 2: Fold one side diagonally at the centre.



Step 3: Fold down the other side along the same line.

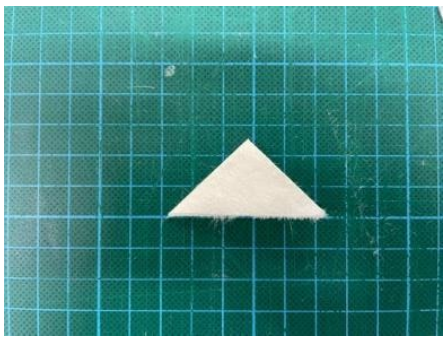
Figure 5a: Instructions to make Type 1 photo corners. Images by Yuhong Zhang.

- Type 2 photo corner:



Step 1: Cut two squares of Japanese repair tissue (70×70 mm).

Step 2: Fold diagonally in half.



Step 3: Fold diagonally in half again.

Figure 5b: Instructions to make Type 2 photo corners. Images by Yuhong Zhang.

There is a great variety of photo corners to choose from, as illustrated in Figure 5c. For example, the Type 2 photo corner can be easily re-opened in situ, as illustrated in Figure 5d. Because of this, the photo corner can be used to secure the upper two edges of the object to the mat, while also allowing fragile objects to be removed and replaced easily without being bent. Another thing to note for both photo corners is that when marking the position of the objects on the matboard, that the object should fit snugly and flatly in the paper corners.

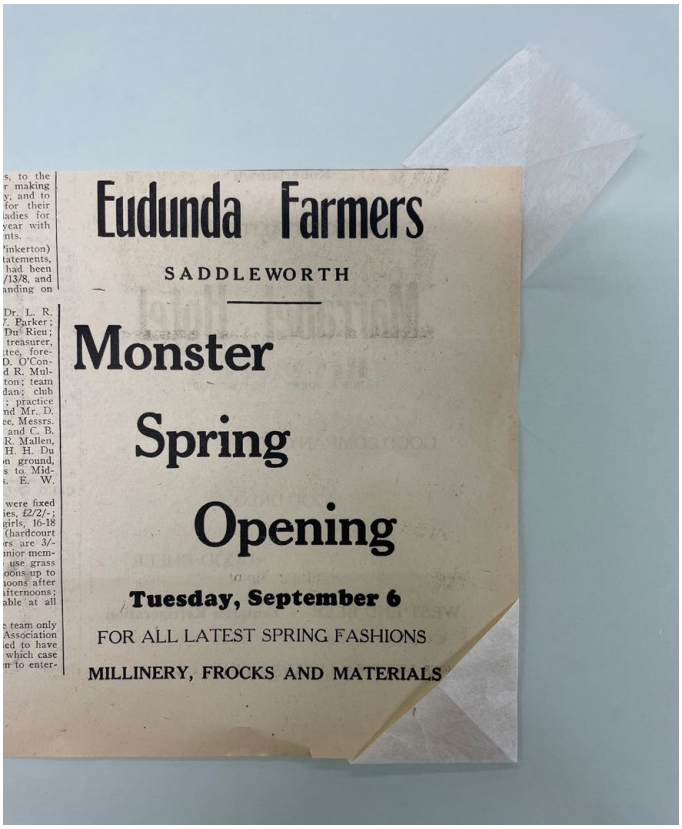


Figure 5d: Example of using two different types of photo corners: openable corner at the top (Type 2), and standard corner at the bottom (Type 1). Image by Yuhong Zhang.

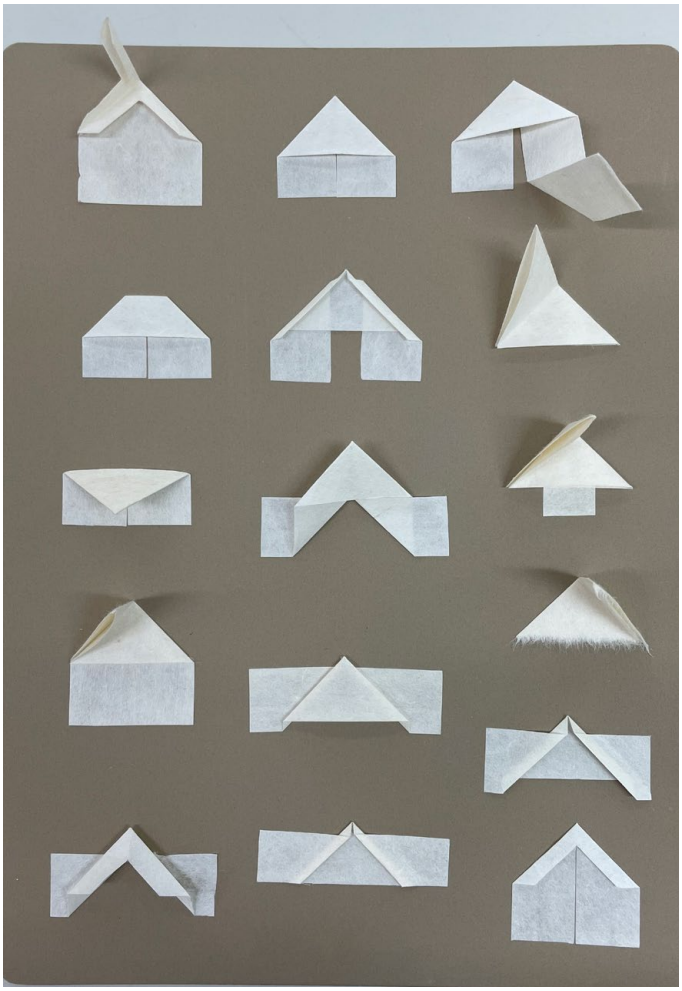


Figure 5c: Variations of photo corners. The template here was made by Laura Daenke, former paper conservator at Artlab Australia. Image by Yuhong Zhang.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the paper team at Artlab Australia: Andrew Cuch, Jodie Scott and especially our principal conservator, Aquila Evill. They are incredibly supportive and keen on showing and teaching me how to mat as well as treat different types of works on paper.

I would also like to show my appreciation to Laura Daenke, who gifted the paper lab with an amazing photo corner template. I can always refer back to this whenever I encounter challenging matting work.

Secrets of the mountains:
Reflections on family heritage, personal identity, project management and mummies

by Fen Reyes
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Fen is an emerging objects conservator based in Naarm (Melbourne, Australia). A first-generation Filipino migrant with Ibaloi roots, Fen is currently head researcher for the project 'Preventive Conservation of the Kabayan Mummies' which is being supported by National Geographic's 2023 Explorers program.

At the end of this year, I will be visiting mummy burial sites at Kabayan, in the Philippines, alongside fellow University of Melbourne students Camille Calanno and Sarah Soltis on a research expedition funded by the National Geographic Explorers program. This research expedition began as a humble university assignment but now, after months of planning, we stand at the proverbial precipice: fieldwork is due to start in a few weeks time.

This incredible opportunity feels surreal, as I reflect on all the events leading to this point. This story didn't really start in a classroom, library or lab. Nor did it start with journal articles or research papers. It started with my great-grandmother.

Figure 1: The view of the hillside from the Kabayan branch of the National Museum of the Philippines. Kabayan is nestled in a valley surrounded by beautiful green ridges on all sides. Many locals create terraced farms on these hills. It's hard to capture just how sprawling the hills are in photographs. Image by the author, 16 June 2023.

My great-grandmother was many things: half Indigenous Ibaloi and half Chinese in heritage, a shrewd and successful businesswoman, and a proud matriarch to her large family. Her name was Lilia Lee Narvaez, but her parents called her Ayiw. I simply knew her as 'Mama Lilia'. When I think of her, I remember a woman who was sharp, smart, and witty, with a smile that spoke of a certain sage knowingness. Mama Lilia grew orchids in her front garden and loved a pair of Ugg boots we sent her from Australia. She was almost mythical in her age, yet never seemed particularly "old" to me, as she bustled me on errands about town or teased me lovingly. She passed away in 2021, due to complications from COVID-19. We knew she was in her 90s by then, but not her exact age — she never gave a straight answer when asked in life.

When I received the news, I was in Melbourne, stuck in another lockdown, and had just begun my first semester at the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (GCCMC). The last time I saw Mama Lilia was almost a decade ago, and in that time, I'd spent a lot of time reflecting on my identity as a Filipino migrant, and my Ibaloi blood. I think it was because I missed her, this woman who had been such a bright figure in my life. I wanted to feel connected to my country, my past, but also to her: my Ibaloi great-grandmother, who held just as many secrets as the mountains.

Figure 2: Three generations of Ibaloi women from my family: starting from the bottom left is Kong-eh, to the right is her daughter Laguinia, and directly behind her is my great grandmother Lilia. Image from the Narvaez family collection, circa 1950s.

Figure 3: Kong-eh with one of her granddaughters, Auntie Petra, my Mama Lilia's younger sister. Note Kong-eh wearing the traditional tapis in the pattern of the Ibaloi tribe. Each tribe has its own unique woven pattern — the Ibaloi continue to wear garments like this even today. Image from the Narvaez family collection, circa 1950s.

The Ibaloi people are one of the distinct ethnocultural groups that reside in the mountainous Cordillera region, several hours north of the capital city of Manila. Many of them are considered to be Indigenous groups and have historically been treated as an “other” by mainstream colonial Filipino society (Salvador-Amores 2020, pp.381–382). There is a distinct awareness amongst the Ibaloi of their Indigenous identity, and, in more recent years, a growing pride in it. There is a budding movement for Indigenous pride and advocacy in the North as a new appreciation for its rich and distinct tribal history and culture develops. Each region has its own pre-colonial traditions, such as textile weaving, music-making, or ceremonial dancing. Many of these interesting and valuable practices have become rare over the last few decades, in the face of increasing modernisation and Christianisation. These faded practices include traditional funerary rituals, like the process of mummifying the dead.

The Ibaloi mummies are sometimes called ‘fire mummies’, an association given for their unique method of preservation. Once deceased, the body would be placed in a seated position over a low flame for an extended period of time, usually a few months. The photochemical and physical processes associated with the heat and smoke would help to dry out and preserve the body. Oftentimes, a variety of local flora was involved as well, either as a poultice or added into the fire to imbue certain properties to the smoke (Beckett et al. 2017, pp.28–29; Carascal, Fontanilla & De Ungria 2021, pp.198–200). This process is unique amongst international examples of mummification and, in some cases, was so effective that examinations have sometimes found tattooed skin, hair and internal organs that were still intact (Becket et al. 2017, pp.18–21).

Despite this ingenuity, the exact process is lost — most of the information we have is limited to anecdotes and oral tradition as the actual practice of ritual preservation died out over the last few generations. We have been left with the stories passed down from the elders and what remains of the mummies themselves. Many were found across Benguet in certain rock shelters or caves, some by accident or through community knowledge. They are usually interred in unique wooden coffins alongside other grave goods, most commonly funerary blanket textiles, and are thought to range in age from 500 to 1000 years old (Becket et al. 2017 pp.16–27).

Traditional Ibaloi beliefs closely connect the living, natural world with the spirits of the ancestors. This relationship with death is reflected in everyday life, as the Ibaloi continue to speak with the deceased, appease them, and, through these actions, seek guidance and good fortune. Any interactions with the mummies require the appropriate rituals: prayers, offerings, and an active dialogue no different to when they were alive (Becket 2017, p.33). There is a belief that failure to adhere to custom and properly respect these ancestors can have real-world consequences such as illness, crop failure, or natural disaster. The mummies aren’t just the remains of the long gone past; many Ibaloi people consider them to still contain the revered and active spirits of their forebears.

The mummies aren't only significant to the Ibaloi peoples, they were also designated as National Cultural Treasures of the Philippines by Presidential decree in 1973. In more recent years, there has also been international interest in academic research. Many of these studies focus on uncovering the secrets of the mummies' past: who the individuals were, how the mummification process worked, and what certain symbols, items, or artefacts meant. However, not much of this research is focused on the future of the mummies, especially against modern threats. Looting and vandalism, increased urbanisation, logging activity, and climate change are all jeopardising their continued preservation (Balangcod 2018, p.308; Beckett 2020, pp.13–14). In particular, issues of biodeterioration, such as increasing rates of decay, discolouration, and active mould growth, are noticeable threats to the mummies. Some researchers (Datar, Paz-Tauro & Robis 2014, pp. 1–3; Datar, Paz-Tauro & Robis 2016, pp. 10–11; Abadier, Gogolin & Cruz 2017) have deduced that this is most likely due to changes in environmental conditions, but without any long-term environmental data, this cannot be confirmed.

Figure 4: Kong-eh with her daughter Laguinia, two full-blooded Ibaloi women from my family. This picture is one of my favourites because of how candid it is. Image from the Narvaez family collection, circa 1950s.

From a conservation standpoint, the importance of environmental monitoring is widely accepted: factors like temperature, relative humidity, and storage conditions all play a major role in the care and preservation of heritage objects. We all know how susceptible objects — especially organic objects — can be to fluctuations in moisture and temperature. And so, we also understand how important a stable environment at the rock shelters can be to the continued preservation of the Ibaloi mummies. There is a real concern amongst the elders of the associated communities about the mummies' deteriorating condition. They fear that the loss will not only impact their ongoing relationship with the spirits, but also risk depriving future generations from the opportunity to learn, experience, and connect with ancestors as well.

It was in the face of this poor outlook that our research proposal began to take shape. As part of the Respect subject within GCCMC's Masters program, students were given the option of either responding to an essay prompt, or developing a theoretical grant application. By this point, I had grown tired of essays and was intrigued by the opportunity to try a different writing style, one that could have more practical use in future. And so, working with Camille and Sarah, I formulated a project in response to the dire need in the Philippines. When the assignment was completed, we thought to ourselves, 'Why not? We have a finished proposal here, let's submit it and see what happens'. None of us really expected that National Geographic would select our project to fund for its 2023 Explorer Program! It's still a bit of a shock today.

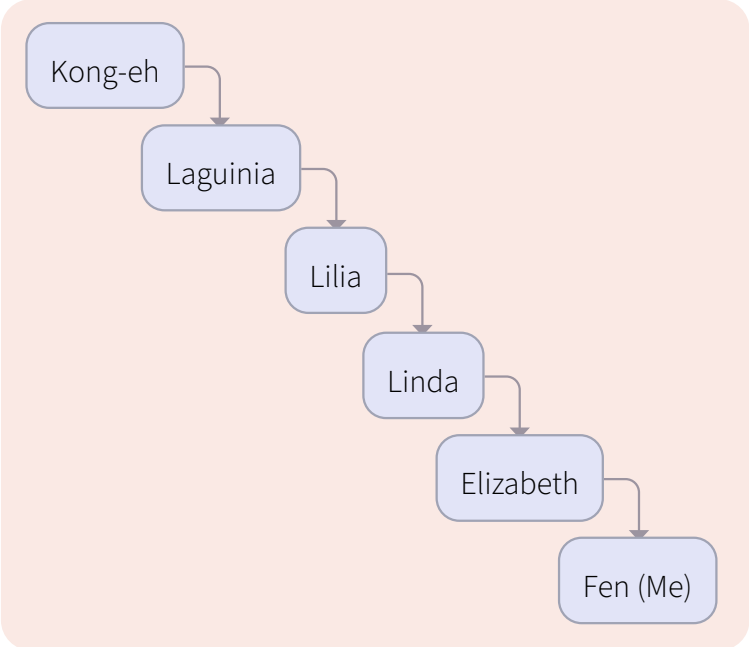

Figure 5: A handy family tree, in case you're starting to lose track of all the grandmothers… My connection to Kong-eh follows through my matrilineal line.

As this was all happening, my grandmother Lola Linda Narvaez Dela Paz — Mama Lilia's daughter — sent me something amazing: pictures from our family's collection depicting Kong-eh, a woman from five generations back who, in the 1950s, was the last in our line to undergo the beginnings of Ibaloi mummification. Lola Linda remembers Kong-eh, her own great-grandmother. When Kong-eh passed, the community began to take steps towards mummifying her, but were stopped by her children, who had embraced modernity and adopted a new religion, and wanted her buried in accordance with Christian beliefs.

The idea that there is evidence of this historical practice within my own family's living memory is incredible and feels surreal. Suddenly, the theoretical became much more personal. It is one thing to learn about the mummies and speculate that maybe someone in our lineage, long forgotten, had undergone the process; it is another to have a name, a face, and stories to hear and to connect to. To look at these pictures of Kong-eh, suddenly so tangible, and to connect them to the mosaic of findings I'd collated through research.

In June of this year, I made a trip to Baguio, the capital of the Benguet region, to present the project to the National Commission for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), a major step of many in organising this project. In my childhood, we would visit a few times each year to see Mama Lilia in her home, but I'd never been to the ancestral home, where Kong-eh is buried: a small village called Taba-ao, about a three-hour drive from the main city. We took the opportunity to visit after our business in the capital, especially in light of the nature of my research.

Figure 6: Me and Lola Linda during the pre-conference at the National Commission for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) office in La Trinidad, June of 2023. This pre-conference was one crucial step in organising approval for Free and Prior Informed Consent for working with Indigenous cultural heritage. I was invited to present my research project, and we discussed the next administrative steps to make it happen. Image by Susie Teo, 15 June 2023.

The mountains of Benguet are beautiful with lush, green, rolling landscapes. At moments, the clouds billow over to kiss the tops of the mountains, coating the streets in fog. The nights are darker, the forests wilder, the roads long and winding. As we make the journey up, I cannot help but think of Filipino folk stories of duwende, fairy creatures and tree spirits. GCCMC lecturer Dr Nicole Tse (2018) talks about the interplay of space and place, people, and objects within a conservation context — this resonates particularly deeply as we drive through the highland passes. The steepness of the twisting roads, the mythical quality of the mountain ridges, the unavoidable heat and humidity of the tropics, it all makes so much more sense in person. There is something that suddenly clicks into place, an understanding that goes beyond the speculative and abstract.

Later, I am sitting in a church and community centre in Taba-ao; I'm told its construction was funded by Mama Lilia. Surrounding me are family and community members who express interest in my project. We eat kamote — locally grown sweet potatoes, and drink a traditional purple rice wine called tapuy — it is unexpectedly sweet and refreshing in the heat of the afternoon.

Figure 7: Clouds rolling onto the mountain — the view from outside the Capitol building in La Trinidad after our NCIP meeting. I watched the cloud roll over the landscape until everything was cast in fog. It is always beautiful to see. Image by the author, 15 June 2023.

I am introduced to some of the community elders, some dressed in the traditional tapis. They speak, and I listen — the sounds and syllables of the Ibaloi dialect are familiar, similar to Tagalog at times, but I don't understand any of the words. My Tito Jimmy[1] translates the stories to me, relaying my questions and asking his own, interjecting with his own comments to contextualise the culture, or explaining a certain turn of phrase. They share stories of their childhood, of growing up in the village, and a rich system of ceremonies, rituals, and beliefs.

Behind the elders, I see the great mountains that cradle the town — dense with trees and greenery and proud against the horizon. 'They say there's gold in those hills' someone tells me, adding to the mystique of it all. But as I sit, listening to these elders breathe life back into stories I had only understood as vague conjecture and second-hand articles, I feel there couldn't possibly be anything more valuable than this, right here at this moment. The lifeblood of a community that continues to beat in the fringes, tucked away in between mountain ranges rich with secrets and treasure.

1 Dr. Jimmy Fong is the Dean of Arts and Communication at the University of the Philippines, Baguio.

At the end of the year, the team and I will leave for the Philippines to undertake the vital fieldwork component of this project, 'Preventive Conservation of the Kabayan Mummies'. The project objective is simple in its premise: there is a need for long-term environmental data, and we seek to fill it. This is especially crucial now, as the mummies are noticeably deteriorating rapidly, and climate change continues to impact environments in new and unforeseen ways. With vital support from the National Geographic and the University of Melbourne, we will be working in Kabayan, one of the regions in the Cordilleras with known mummy burial sites. We aim to install outdoor data loggers in these sites, which will regularly collect relative humidity and temperature, with assistance from staff of the National Museum of the Philippines for onsite management and data upload. This project's scope covers ten months of data analysis, but afterwards, we wish to continue the monitoring to gain more complex data sets. We are hopeful that analysing, publishing and sharing this data will lead to increased discussion and practical solutions to address the deterioration observed with the mummies.

Figure 8: The Amburyan River that flows through the village of Taba-ao. There's an old Ibaloi folk tale associated with this river, they say it was the site for a huge battle between two neighbouring tribes. The water is incredibly clear and blue — we took a small detour to dip our feet in! Image by the author, 17 June 2023.

My aspiration is that the project becomes a step forward in advocating for these communities and their unique cultural heritage. So far, there have already been incredible opportunities to speak about the mummies and the obstacles we face in regard to their continued preservation. The project has also allowed me to reflect quite deeply on my identity, place, and privilege as an international researcher entering this space.

During some of these trips out into the countryside, I feel out of place. It would be dishonest to say I didn't miss the creature comforts of home in the suburbs of Melbourne. I would be lying if I said I didn't feel self-conscious wearing the traditional tapis, speaking to these communities about their own culture, listening to them joke in Ibaloi and not understanding the language. I still feel those moments of doubt, and worry about whether I'm the right person to drive this project. At every step, I want to make sure I do right by my family, community, and ancestors.

But Ibaloi blood runs through my veins, a legacy from a long line of strong native women; the narratives resonate with something deeper within me. I will make sure this opportunity to elevate the stories and the songs of our Ibaloi past and present is not wasted. If nothing else, I can hope somewhere, Mama Lilia sees what I'm doing and smiles one of her knowing smiles.

POSTSCRIPT

This article was written before our fieldwork took place at the end of September 2023.
You can see how we went by checking my Linkedin profile (Fen Reyes) or professional Instagram (@paraloidb72)

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[interviews]
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- Is the content relevant to conservation or cultural materials?
- Does the writing present a clear argument and aim?
- Is the work engaging to a knowledgeable but casual audience?
- Are the author's claims verifiable?

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- Have comments from the assessment been incorporated?

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- Has the author understood the requirement and declared that the submission is original and contains appropriate references and attributions?

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