

## Michaela Straub Internship Report October 2017 to March 2018

After completing a Fine Art and History of Art degree, I trained as a paintings conservator at the Hamilton Kerr Institute from 2014 to 2017. I completed the six month placement at the Guildhall Art Gallery directly after my studies.

My placement at the Guildhall Art Gallery's conservation studio has provided me with the basic skill set that is necessary to become a well-rounded conservator with museum experience. The Guildhall Art Gallery is one very few institutions in Great Britain that offers an early career internship in a museum environment. This is a unique opportunity for recent graduates to experience the day to day work of a museum conservator. With a permanent collection to care for, the role of a museum conservator differs greatly from one in a commercial setting which makes this placement unusual. I would like to thank the City of London's Education Trust, The Art Society and The Radcliffe Trust for their generous and vital support, which has allowed the Guildhall Art Gallery to offer such an internship and enabled me to benefit from this remarkable placement. I am also grateful to everyone at the Guildhall Art Gallery, especially Senior Paintings Conservator Alex Walker, Paintings Conservator Nancy Wade and Frame Conservator Mark Searle (funding alumni), from whom I have learnt invaluable over the past months.



*Figure 1 Borrowdale by William Collins during retouching.*

Throughout my internship I have been involved in a variety of tasks concerning the Guildhall's conservation work. Some of my duties included conservation treatment for paintings prior to exhibition, condition checking and preparing paintings for in-coming and outgoing loans, assisting with an exhibition installation and the general monitoring of the permanent collection.

## Treatment projects

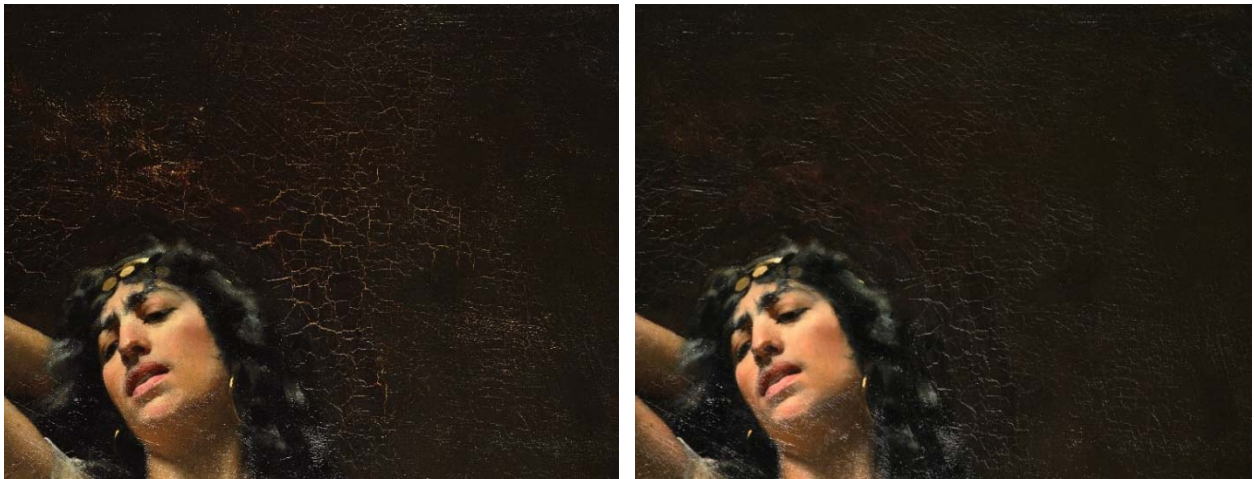


Figure 2 *The wife of Jeroboam and the blind prophet*, by Manton before and after retouching.

During the past six months my main project was the full treatment of a Victorian painting by George Henry Grenville Manton. *The wife of Jeroboam and the blind Prophet* was painted in 1888 and was given to the City's art collection in 1891, but it has not been on display to the public since the 1960s and has not received any restoration treatment since 1950. A reason for not displaying the painting was in part its condition with discoloured old retouchings, uneven surface gloss and considerably darkened varnish layers. Manton's painting was identified as replacement painting for a number of smaller paintings from the permanent hang in the Main Gallery, that will go on loan to another institution.

Although I found the painting structurally stable, the aesthetic value of the painting required much needed attention. Treatment involved the removal of the varnish and overpaint, removal of old fills, flattening of undulations in the canvas, re-varnishing, filling and retouching to visually reintegrate damaged areas into the composition. The painting's large size, measuring approximately 2 by 1.5 meters, posed a variety of issues, such as planning ahead and adjusting existing techniques to a larger format. Equally the large area of loss along the left side of the painting was an opportunity to learn new ways of filling and texturing. The opportunity to discuss such treatment difficulties and approaches with the guidance of the Guildhall paintings conservators was invaluable.



Figure 3 *Triassic Cliffs* by Cooke during varnish removal.

One of the tasks during my internship was to examine the condition of the paintings for the *Landscape*, and *Children in Art* exhibitions in 2018 before they went on display and determine the necessity for treatment. *Triassic cliffs* by Edward William Cooke, painted in 1866 stood out to me because it had an uneven layer of old discoloured varnish present that made the sky look grimy. The same was the case for two paintings by William Collins, *Borrowdale* (1821) and *The Kitten*

*Deceived* (1816), which received remedial treatment including varnish removal, filling, re-varnishing and retouching. The final stages of treatment on *Borrowdale* will be continued by the Guildhall Art Gallery's conservators after I complete my placement.

### Collections Care

Environmental monitoring of the Gallery and studio spaces, together with regular condition checks of the artworks on display, formed an important part of learning how to care for a consistent body of work. This included minor treatments and condition checks of paintings on display and the full condition survey of loaned objects for a temporary exhibition, with regular checks to monitor their condition during the exhibition period.

I was also preparing paintings for loan, which involved condition checks before paintings leave and return, and preparation of paintings for travel. This also included a courier trip and installation of a large painting by Cuneo to the Brynmore Jones Library in Hull, for which I had sole responsibility

Additionally, I was responsible for monitoring changes and damages of works that were on loan to us from other institutions in a temporary exhibition. This is an essential component of the museum conservator role, which I was able to learn and practice.

I have also been fortunate to learn from the frames conservator Mark Searle, who works in the adjacent studio, about conservation framing, micro climate enclosures, and general preventive care of frames.



*Figure 4 Mark and Michaela reframing Manton's painting.*



*Figure 5 During consolidation of a large scale in-situ treatment.*

Equally I had to respond quickly to an unforeseen environmental emergency, when the Air Conditioning in the Gallery malfunctioned. This is an example of the daily changing priorities in a museum required constant reassessing of the situation. Although I found this challenging to begin with, I was able to improve my time management and efficiently prioritise tasks.

The breadth of experiences I have had during this internship reflect the balance between practical conservation treatments and day-to-day routines of museum conservation work. The placement has been ideal in preparing me for my career as a paintings conservator in a museum environment. The funding of this internship by The Art Society, The Radcliffe Trust and the City of London Education Trust has been essential to the early stage of my career in this specialised field, and I am grateful for their generous support.

Michaela Straub 2018