

FEATURE

# Museum Workshop

Join the Museum's conservators to learn about what goes on behind the scenes of an exhibition.

BY VICKI HUMPHREY,  
HEAD OF CONSERVATION

MANNEQUIN AND COTTON THREADS USED IN TEXTILE CONSERVATION.  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEE GRANT.



An exhibition is really just the tip of an iceberg – a visible product presented to audiences to explore themes and tell stories about the objects on display. However, as with any iceberg, there is a great deal below the surface that visitors don't see. The *Museum Workshop* provides a glimpse of what takes place behind the scenes.

The *Museum Workshop* highlights the work of conservators in preparing collection items for exhibition and maintaining the Museum's collection as a whole. The exhibition space mirrors the three main conservation labs in the Museum – paper and textiles, large technology and objects – as well as showing some preventive measures used to reduce the risk of damage to collections.

This is a very different experience for Museum visitors, who will enter a space equipped for conservation work, where conservators are actively working on collection items. Some pieces of equipment provide spectacular backdrops – with the largest and most noticeable in use in the large technology lab. Visitors will be able to witness major conservation milestones in the preservation of important objects, such as when conservators lift the body of Queen Elizabeth II's Royal Daimler off its chassis.



With a collection as diverse as the Museum's, it is rare that any two treatments are identical. It may surprise some people to discover that the conservation decision-making process is not just about repairing damage. It is often very complex, with the need to take into account the significance of the object in question, its physical state and its intended use.

Significance refers to the historic, aesthetic, scientific, cultural and social values that make objects meaningful to people. These are very important considerations in terms of conservation treatments as some processes might obliterate or minimise specific features that make objects significant. In this exhibition, a good example of this is the EJ Holden. It is dilapidated and in pieces and has had many makeshift repairs, but – as one of the cars featured in the ABC television program *The Bush Mechanics* – its poor condition is an integral part of its significance as an example of ingenuity and use of available resources. If this vehicle were taken back to its original condition, the greater part of its significance would be lost.

In the majority of cases conservators aim to slow deterioration or return objects to agreed previous states of significance. In the *Museum Workshop* you will see conservators treat two photograph albums. Although they can't reverse the chemically induced deterioration of

the pages, they can stabilise and repair damaged pages. They can also repair the album structures, making the albums much easier to access and use.

Another aspect that influences decision-making is the preservation of functional objects in their working order. For example, a pianola needs to be able to play music, so conservators maintain and exercise it regularly to ensure that it continues to work. Preserving function requires more ongoing treatment than if function was not considered.

Whatever the purpose of objects in a museum setting, they will be handled, moved and stored and will require different levels of protection depending on their exposure to risk. This will influence decisions about treatment, packing and support. Such decisions cannot be made without cooperation between curators, conservators and other areas across the Museum. The involvement of many different experts enriches the process and results in more imaginative solutions. It can also increase the complexity of decision-making because we all see the objects differently. Typically, curators see history and context, conservators see history, deterioration and problems to solve, and registrars see items to be documented, transported and stored appropriately.

Visitors to the *Museum Workshop* have opportunities to learn about different approaches to objects by talking

to Museum staff or by participating in the variety of programs designed to accompany the exhibition.

The range of objects on display reflects the diversity of the Museum's collection and makes it apparent that conservators need both a broad knowledge of materials and very specific skills in order to treat and care for the collection. On the following pages conservators share their stories about conserving some of the objects featured in *Museum Workshop* – Francis Birtles' Bean car, Grace Milne's silk costume and a bark painting from Oenpelli in West Arnhem Land.

*Museum Workshop* is on display from October 2012 to January 2013.

**'ENTER A SPACE  
EQUIPPED FOR  
CONSERVATION WORK,  
WHERE CONSERVATORS  
ARE ACTIVELY WORKING  
ON COLLECTION ITEMS'**

## VEHICLES

BY DAVID HALLAM,  
SENIOR CONSERVATOR

In 1926 an Australian adventurer named Francis Birtles used a four cylinder car manufactured by the British Bean Car Company to break the Darwin to Melbourne land travel time record. The same vehicle was used to make the first car journey from London to Sydney. The nine-month endurance trial across the English Channel, down through Europe, the Middle East, India and South East Asia is one of the epic adventure stories from early motoring history. At the conclusion of the journey the Bean company donated the vehicle to the Australian Government for display in a yet to be built national museum.

Many of the world's record-breaking vehicles are displayed in museums in lovingly restored conditions. This Bean car is one of the very few examples left to tell its own story. In conserving the Francis Birtles' Bean car for display conservators were conscious of avoiding the mistake of treating the object and losing the history it represented. It was the journey it undertook that gave it a place in history and its significance.

Our conservation processes were intended to preserve the limitations and

failings of the car's design, as much as its success stories. The car tells a more accurate story by showing its faults, and for many people provides an entirely new experience of what motoring was like in the 1920s. It retains its leather, felt and slinger seals and leaks oil from its haphazardly machined gasket faces, and when it runs it drips oil and water in ways that offend modern car owners.

The polymerized oil, mud and grass adhered to the underside of the engine and gearbox were not something we wanted to remove, but a feature we wanted to preserve. We also kept the spots of red paint on the engine mechanicals, as they provided clues to the authenticity of the car's mechanical components. The by-product of paint application gave us a method of identifying which parts of the vehicle had made the trip, and which were the result of later repair attempts. Potentially the seeds and soil grains still adhered to the car's underside will be able to validate stories about the route Birtles took on his journey.

It is these tiny specks of information on an object that combine to validate it as an item of significance.



## TEXTILES

BY CARMELA MOLLIKA,  
TEXTILE CONSERVATOR

Grace Milne's costume is part of the Museum's Elizabeth Oates Collection and dates back to the 1880s. Milne (nee Bray) arrived in Australia in the early 1850s and married the Reverend David Milne in 1862 at the age of 20. She looked after four stepchildren and 13 of her own. Energetic and resourceful, Mrs Milne often assisted her neighbours in the Bordertown district of South Australia with everything from delivering babies to helping make children's clothes. By the time of her death in 1928 she was known as 'The Mother of the District'.

When deciding how to treat the costume, it was evident that some areas of the garment required extra support, but this led to a dilemma about whether to unstash the garment in order to do this. Conservators try to minimise the degree to which they deconstruct a garment, however, it was clear that more damage may have occurred if the bustle was not unstitched and fully lined.

The treatment was complex and involved, requiring a significant amount of unstitching. After over 100 hours

of treatment, Milne's garment was reconstructed, well supported and ready for display.

When it was donated to the Museum, Mrs Milne's day dress was described as a riding habit, however it shows few signs of wear of a garment of this type. It has some typical detailing of a riding habit in the high round neck and cravat neckerchief and the waisted bodice, but the cravat is in a different and contrasting fabric to the dress and may not be part of the original design. Further detailed conservation research of the garment's construction and condition indicated that it is not a true riding habit, although Mrs Milne may have worn it when travelling around the district.

Accuracy of description of objects in the Museum's collection is important as our perceptions of our shared past are influenced by how we describe and classify objects from those times. The examination and research carried out in preparation for treating this dress are fine examples of the ways in which conservators can contribute to a greater understanding of objects.

CONSERVATOR CARMELA MOLLIKA EXAMINES THE BROWN SILK RIDING HABIT JACKET AND SKIRT WORN BY GRACE MILNE IN THE 1880S. GRACE MILNE, RIGHT. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN.

## BARK PAINTINGS

BY MARK HENDERSON,  
OBJECT CONSERVATOR

The conservation of Aboriginal bark paintings requires both respect for cultural traditions and an understanding of the material structure of bark paintings.

Bark painting styles are particular to different regions. This painting, collected by the Reverend A Dyer in about 1930 and painted at Oenpelli in West Arnhem Land, depicts a kangaroo on one side and a turtle on the other. The x-ray style of the painting, typical of the region, clearly shows the internal anatomy and organs of the creatures. The paint has red ochre outlines with white clay infill. The binder for the paint would probably have been the sap from native orchids or the yolk of eggs.

Bark is generally prepared by cutting and peeling it from a eucalypt common in the north of the Northern Territory, placing it on a fire then flattening it under a weight until dry. Traditionally bark paintings were made using natural ochres mixed with natural binders taken from a variety of sources. Since the mid-1970s artists have combined

natural ochres with PVA (white glue) as the binder.

Conservation problems with bark paintings can be very complex to deal with. Bark reacts to change in relative humidity and natural binders break down over time requiring consolidation (remedial work to prevent peeling paint and ensure the paint is stuck down on the bark). Treatments vary because natural ochres often react differently to the consolidant adhesives used as a binder. This can cause colour change and staining to the painting.

Some of the paint on this work has been extensively worn down, while the remaining paint is partially stable. Therefore, a consolidant will be applied in selected areas where the paint appears to be lifting or crumbling – a very delicate, time-consuming process.

Display of bark paintings is relatively straightforward, but requires care and sensitivity to minimise the risk of further damage.

DOUBLE-SIDED BARK PAINTING DEPICTING A KANGAROO ON ONE SIDE AND A LARGE TURTLE ON THE OTHER, COLLECTED BY REVEREND A DYER IN ABOUT 1930. COURTESY ISIAH NAGURRGURRBA, GABRIEL MARALNGURRA AND BOARD MEMBERS OF INJALAK ARTS. CONSERVATOR AT WORK ON BARK PAINTINGS FROM THE COLLECTION.