



# CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF CERAMICS:

A Year at West Dean College in the UK

An International Specialised Skills Institute Fellowship.

**AMY WALSH**

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# 1. Acknowledgements

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Amy Walsh would like to thank the following organisations and individuals who have generously given their time and expertise to advise and guide her during this Fellowship program.

## Awarding Body – International Specialised Skills Institute (ISS Institute)

The ISS Institute plays a pivotal role in creating value and opportunity, encouraging new thinking and early adoption of ideas and practice by investing in individuals.

The overarching aim of the ISS Institute is to support the development of a 'Better Skilled Australia'. The Institute does this via the provision of Fellowships that provide the opportunity for Australians to undertake international skills development and applied research that will have a positive impact on Australian industry and the broader community.

The International Specialised Skills Institute was founded 29 years ago, by a small group of innovators including Sir James Gobbo AC, CVO, QC, and former Governor of Victoria, who had a vision of building a community of industry specialists who would lead the up-skilling of the Australian workforce. The Fellowship program builds shared learning, leadership and innovation across the broad range of industry sectors worked with. Fellows are supported to disseminate learning's and ideas, facilitate change and advocate for best practice through the sharing of their Fellowship learnings with peers, colleagues, government, industry and community. Since its establishment, ISS Institute has supported over 450 Fellows to undertake skill and knowledge enhancement across a wide range of sectors

which has led to positive change, the adoption of best practice approaches and new ways of working in Australia.

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## Fellowship Supporters

### **Employer support:**

Amy would like to acknowledge the support of her former employer, the State Library of New South Wales, in encouraging her to apply for and attend this program of study.

### **Supporters:**

Amy would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for providing assistance throughout her Fellowship:

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- » The Marlborough House Conservation Branch, Royal Collection Trust
- » The Britain-Australia Society Education Trust, London
- » The Australia-Britain Society Foundation, Canberra
- » Felicity Corkill, Senior Conservator, State Library of NSW
- » Lang Ngo, Senior Conservator, State Library of NSW
- » The Collection Care Branch, State Library of NSW
- » Nicholas Flood, Secretary, Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material
- » My West Dean College friends and peers
- » My family

## 2. Executive Summary

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From September 2018 to July 2019 Amy Walsh, with the assistance of the International Specialised Skills Institute, had the opportunity to undertake a Postgraduate Diploma in the Conservation of Ceramics and Related Materials at West Dean College in the United Kingdom. The aim of attending this program was for the Fellow to gain extensive specialised experience in the conservation of ceramic objects, which is not currently possible in Australia.

Prior to completing this course, Amy was employed at the State Library of New South Wales for two years and worked on archaeological excavations in Greece and Italy. The Fellow's previous qualifications include a Masters of Cultural Materials Conservation (Objects) and a Bachelor of Arts (Ancient History/Art History), both from the University of Melbourne, and experience working in objects conservation in cultural institutions in Australia and the UK.

While there are two institutions in Australia that offer degree programs in various aspects of the conservation of cultural materials, neither offer specific training in ceramics conservation. Institutions and private owners in Australia hold significant pieces of Australian and international ceramics. Therefore, it is vital that Australian conservators seek this experience overseas in order to provide best practice care for the ceramic objects in our collections.

West Dean College of Arts and Conservation is an internationally renowned conservation education provider and delivers one of very few dedicated ceramics conservation courses in the world. Graduates of the College are well respected within the field and go on to work at prominent institutions within the UK and internationally. This report will outline the practical and theoretical conservation experience that the Fellow gained during her time at West Dean, including overviews of her work placement with the Royal Collection Trust and numerous study trips.

While it is possible to engage in excellent generalist conservation training in Australia, the Fellow would recommend pursuing a program at West Dean College to anyone interested in obtaining specialist experience in the conservation field. This offers an invaluable opportunity to bring specialist knowledge back to Australia for the benefit of the conservation sector.

Upon her return to Australia, Amy has taken up a position as an Objects Conservator with International Conservation Services in Sydney. She is looking forward to sharing her newly acquired skills and knowledge with her colleagues locally and nationally, while also learning from their expertise.

## 3. Fellowship Background

### Abbreviations

<b>AICCM</b>	Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials
<b>ICON</b>	Institute for Conservation
<b>ICOM-CC</b>	International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation

### About the Fellow

**Name:** Amy Walsh

**Qualifications:**

- » Bachelor of Arts (Ancient History/Art History) - University of Melbourne, completed December 2013.
- » Master of Cultural Materials Conservation (Objects) - University of Melbourne, completed July 2016.
- » Postgraduate Diploma (Conservation of Ceramics and Related Materials) - West Dean College of Arts and Conservation, completed July 2019.

Amy Walsh is an emerging Australian objects conservator with a passion for the conservation of ceramics. Since 2015 she has gained experience in the examination and treatment of objects at a number of cultural institutions in Australia and the UK, including the State Library of New South Wales, National Gallery of Victoria, Royal Collection Trust, and British Museum. Additionally, Amy has worked as a conservator on archaeological excavations in Italy, Greece, and Australia, and was the recipient of the Etruscan Foundation's Archaeological Conservation Fellowship in 2018.

Amy first learnt about conservation while on an archaeological excavation in Israel, and went on to complete the Masters of Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne in 2016. As her father is a master ceramicist, Amy has always been passionate about ceramics, so she decided to further her education by undertaking a Postgraduate Diploma in the Conservation of Ceramics and Related Materials at West Dean College in England in 2019.

Upon her return to Australia, Amy has taken up a position as an Objects Conservator with International Conservation Services in Sydney. She is looking forward to sharing her newly acquired ceramics conservation skills and knowledge with her immediate colleagues and those in the wider field, while also learning from their expertise.





*Above: The Fellow undertaking surface cleaning on a terra sigillata vessel at the British Museum in 2015*

*Right: Working on 16th century Italian majolica pharmacy jar.*



## Fellowship Context

The aim of this Fellowship was to engage in specialist skills development in the field of ceramics conservation, in order to enhance knowledge in this area upon returning to Australia.

It is not currently possible to undertake specialised conservation training in Australia. The bachelors course at the University of Canberra and the masters course at the University of Melbourne provide excellent generalist education in objects conservation but do not have the capacity to provide material-specific specialisations. In a survey carried out by the Heritage Collections Council in 2000, many respondents indicated that 'it was difficult to undertake advanced training in this country [Australia]' (p.77), a fact that remains true today.

This is further emphasised in a recent survey of international training programs undertaken by UK-based conservator Emily Williams, who indicated that a number of recent Australian graduates felt that ‘courses [in Australia] did not spend enough time specialising on one material’ (2017, p.206). Williams highlights that ‘specialists are necessary when particularly complex treatments demand a higher level of skill or knowledge “because there are times where generalists don’t have the skill set to be able to take it to the next level of treatment or investigation”’ (p.206). These statements clearly indicate the need for specialised conservation training opportunities for Australian conservators. Objects conservation has been identified as ‘an area of particular need’ for further specialist development (Heritage Collections Council 2000, p.83).

Australia’s recent colonial history means that vast amounts of English and European glazed ceramics are represented in our archaeological record and cultural collections. Additionally, due to Australia’s position in the Australasian region, local institutions possess excellent examples of high-fired Asian porcelains, including from China, Japan and Korea. When works by Australian ceramic artists are also taken into account, it is clear that Australia possesses a wonderful range of valuable high-fired ceramic artefacts and their preservation for future generations is dependent on the work of specialised conservators. Ceramics conservation demands a unique skill set with a deep understanding of the complex and varied materials that make up ceramic objects. Additionally, conservation is a constantly evolving field that requires up-to-date knowledge in order to provide best-practice care. With this in mind, the Fellowship was proposed as an opportunity to engage in dedicated ceramics conservation training overseas and bring this knowledge back to Australia, in order to start addressing the current skills gap and to contribute to the diffusion of specialist knowledge within the profession.

West Dean College of Arts and Conservation, located in West Sussex’s South Downs National Park in the United Kingdom, was selected for the Fellowship program for a number of reasons. It is a prestigious institution that provides one of very few dedicated ceramics conservation courses in the world and produces well

respected ceramics conservators. Additionally, the West Dean ceramics program not only teaches ceramics conservation skills but also promotes ethical treatment decision-making, emphasises group work, and provides expert mentorship. Finally, the program offers both classroom-based learning and workplace immersion, which provides a full spectrum of academic and professional experience.

## Fellowship Methodology

The Fellow undertook a Postgraduate Diploma (Conservation of Ceramics and Related Materials) at West Dean College of Arts and Conservation from the 30th of September 2018 to the 14th of July 2019.

In order to develop specialist ceramics conservation skills, this Fellowship focussed on an immersive hands-on methodology, drawing on West Dean’s comprehensive classroom tuition. Through the treatment of real objects for private and institutional clients, Amy had the opportunity to learn about ceramic materials and gain experience in the broad range of techniques required to repair such objects. Weekly evening classes in ceramic making, which included glazing and firing techniques, gave greater insight into the materiality of historic ceramic objects.

As part of the course, the Fellow completed an eight-week work placement with the conservation department at the Royal Collection Trust in London. This allowed Amy to further develop her practical ceramics treatment skills, while also participating in the activities of a busy conservation team and interacting with colleagues from diverse conservation disciplines.

West Dean College also arranged a number of invaluable site visits to museums and conservation workshops both within the UK and Europe, which gave students the opportunity to learn about conservation ‘in action’. Amy complemented these visits with a program of self-directed study trips and participation in events run by the ICON Ceramics and Glass working group.



## 4. Fellowship Learnings

The Fellow travelled to West Dean College of Arts and Conservation in West Sussex, UK, to undertake a 36-week Postgraduate Diploma in the Conservation of Ceramics and Related Materials. The aim of attending this program was for the Fellow to immerse herself in a range of ceramics conservation projects in order to gain specialist practical skills. Classroom learning at West Dean College was also complemented with a professional work placement, ceramic making classes, lectures on conservation science and ethics, and a varied program of site visits to museums and conservation workshops.

### Practical conservation work

The main component of the Postgraduate Diploma program, and the major draw card for students at West Dean College, is the strong focus on project-driven practical work. The equivalent of at least four full days per week is spent in the workshop undertaking hands-on treatment work or receiving lectures or tuition in aspects of ceramics conservation.

Students are allocated damaged ceramic objects that have been brought to the College by private collectors or local museums. Treatment techniques introduced throughout the year are adapted by students to suit the specific needs of the ceramic objects they are working on. Based on their learning and research, students propose a conservation treatment plan and are then guided through the ethical and practical components by tutors.

Prior to attending West Dean, the Fellow identified a number of areas in which she hoped to gain or improve skills during her studies: These included:

- » Examining and identifying high-fired ceramic materials
- » Thorough cleaning, including with poultices and a range of chemicals
- » Bonding high-fired ceramic objects
- » Filling losses with plaster or tinted epoxy resin
- » Retouching and gilding

This section of the report will provide an overview of the practical experience gained by the Fellow, through the treatment of a range of ceramic and glass objects.



*The Fellow's end of year exhibition, showcasing a range of pieces she worked on while at West Dean.*

## Examination and identification of high-fired ceramic bodies

As most of the Fellow's previous experience in the conservation of ceramics lay with low-fired archaeological objects, she endeavoured to learn more about high-fired porcelainous materials during her studies.

The Fellow was introduced to the use of microscopy to examine the broken edges of ceramic objects in order to aid material identification. She learnt that hard-paste porcelain will appear to have a 'glassy' texture, while soft-paste porcelain (such as bone china) looks granular and 'sugary'.

Tutors emphasised the importance of identifying the ceramic body prior to undertaking any further conservation treatment steps, as the ceramic material can determine which cleaning and bonding methods are used.



*A Wedgwood bone china plate before treatment.*



*The Wedgwood plate after treatment.*

## Cleaning

The Fellow was introduced to a range of cleaning options for ceramic objects. These included:

- » Using steam to dislodge surface dirt
- » Employing a range of detergents and solvents to remove more stubborn dirt or old adhesives
- » Applying hydrogen peroxide solutions to reduce the appearance of organic stains
- » Utilising poultice materials to selectively deliver cleaning solutions.

Drawing on experience from the examination and identification modules, the Fellow learnt that caution should be taken when cleaning soft-paste porcelain objects; due to their slight porosity, testing should be carried out to ensure the cleaning solution will not penetrate into and potentially stain the object.

The Fellow is aware that these cleaning techniques are currently used in Australia but it was valuable to gain in-depth experience in their application.

*Applying a Laponite poultice gel to a stained area on a small bowl.*



## Bonding

Through the treatment of a range of objects, the Fellow received instruction in how to bond broken ceramics back together. Once again, drawing on observations of ceramic body type, different materials required different bonding methods.

The first method introduced was 'edge-to-edge' bonding, whereby the object is joined back together piece by piece. This is suitable for low-fired ceramics, where an acrylic resin is used as the adhesive, or for soft-paste porcelain objects, utilising a thickened epoxy to ensure it does not penetrate into the porous substrate.

The second method involved applying a low-viscosity epoxy to a hard-paste porcelain object that has already been taped together. Taping the pieces prior

to bonding ensures the best possible fit, and drops of epoxy applied along the cracks are then pulled in by capillary action.

The Fellow was not previously aware of the importance of correctly identifying high-fired bodies prior to selecting an adhesive application method. Given the material diversity of ceramic collections in Australia, this constitutes valuable knowledge for conservators undertaking treatment on such objects.



*Pieces of a large porcelain umbrella stand before treatment*



*Left: Utilising large 'zip tie'-style clamps and a reversed bar clamp to tension the sherds of a large umbrella stand, to which epoxy was applied by capillary action.*



*Middle: The umbrella stand after treatment.*



*Right: A practice plate taped together dry, with drops of epoxy resin then applied to the surface to penetrate by capillary action.*



## Filling and modelling

The Fellow learnt how to select and use appropriate fill materials and became proficient in a range of application techniques.

The Fellow had previously used plaster to fill losses on low-fired ceramic objects but, while at West Dean, she learnt how to execute detachable plaster fills. These types of fills are created by casting the fill while the surrounding ceramic is protected by plastic film, removing the cured plaster and refining it away from the object, and reattaching it with adhesive. Detachable fills reduce the possibility of causing damage to the porous surrounding ceramic, either through moisture ingress from the plaster or from refining the surface of the fill.

The Fellow had limited previous experience with using epoxy resin as a fill material. Epoxy is typically used to fill losses on porcelain ceramic objects as it offers the ability to match the colour, translucency and shine of the original material. Executing these kinds of fills on a range of porcelain objects also allowed the Fellow to hone her colour matching skills, through the addition of small amounts of powdered pigments to tint the resin. The Fellow learnt how to apply epoxy fills in-situ and through casting in silicone moulds.

*Detachable plaster fills cast for an archaeological ancient Roman beaker.*



*An example of a tinted epoxy fill on an area of loss.*



*A reconstructed archaeological Anglo-Saxon glass bowl with supportive cast epoxy fills.*



## Retouching and gilding

While the Fellow had previously undertaken retouching with acrylic paints, the course at West Dean introduced her to a range of different inpainting media. One standout material was Primal WS24; the Fellow aware of its use in Australia as a consolidant but not as an inpainting material. This acrylic dispersion medium could be tinted with the addition of acrylic paints and offered the ability to create thin, hard layers that could then be further polished. The Fellow is looking forward to introducing this material as an inpainting medium to her colleagues in Australia.

Studying at West Dean also offered the opportunity to gain experience in using gold powder and leaf to recreate areas of gilding on ceramic objects. The Fellow had not previously undertaken gilding in any form, so this was a valuable techniques to learn. Learning about re-gilding ceramic objects during conservation was complemented with a short course on verre églomisé, during which students had the opportunity to undertake reverse glass gilding. Details of this course are elaborated on in a subsequent section of this report.

*A Italian Renaissance albarello (pharmacy jar), before retouching.*



*After retouching with acrylic pigments dispersed in Primal WS24.*





*Re-gilded areas on a small bowl, achieved by using gold powder applied over Japanese size.*

## Client interaction

A vital part of the West Dean course that the Fellow particularly enjoyed was the opportunity to interact directly with the private and institutional clients. Students were often responsible for communicating treatment options directly with the owners of the objects. This required the development of clear writing skills to produce accessible proposals, and the ability to carefully negotiate best-practice conservation outcomes. Frequent interaction with clients offered students the chance to build their self-confidence and public speaking skills.

Client interaction or ways to communicate conservation options to people from outside the field are not currently taught to students in Australia. The Fellow feels this would be a particularly beneficial addition to the local curriculum, as such

skills vital for working in private practice and communicating with stakeholders in government positions. She has found that, since returning home and taking up a position with a private conservation company, the communication skills she learnt at West Dean have been invaluable and are put to use every day.



*Examining an object as a group with the clients.*

## Work placement

The Fellow also had the invaluable opportunity to undertake an eight-week work placement with the Royal Collection Trust in January and February of 2019, as part of her West Dean studies.

Under the supervision of the Trust's Senior Decorative Arts Conservator David Wheeler, she undertook conservation treatments on a range of porcelain objects, including a large Chinese vase, the lid and foot of a highly decorative Meissen vase, a small gilded saucer, and a French porcelain clock case with gilt bronze mounts. The Fellow was responsible for all aspects of their conservation, including submitting treatment proposals for approval by the Surveyor of the Queen's Works of Art.

The Fellow was able to draw on and further develop the skills she was learning at West Dean, which encompassed cleaning, reconstruction of broken vessels, filling losses with epoxy resin, and retouching. She also had the opportunity to learn about modelling fine decorative elements with Milliput® epoxy putty, which required deft work to shape before it cured and subsequent refining with a scalpel and cushioned abrasive cloth. The Fellow was then able to apply this new skill to a project upon her return to the College.

In addition to her practical ceramic conservation experience, the Fellow was immersed in the day-to-day activities of the department, such as team meetings, moving large objects within the workshop, and transporting pieces to the storage facility at Windsor Castle. The Fellow was also responsible for assisting her supervisor to decant ceramic objects from private apartments in Buckingham Palace into storage, due to upcoming renovations. This involved working with collection managers to locate the pieces and to supervise contractors who were undertaking the packing. By participating in these additional tasks, as well as interacting with other conservation staff within the department, the Fellow found the placement experience highly enjoyable and very engaging.



*New leaves modelled in Milliput and retouched to match the originals, on a large Meissen vase.*



*A project undertaken upon returning to West Dean, whereby Milliput was used to model the missing leaves (before, during and after treatment).*



## Making classes and workshops

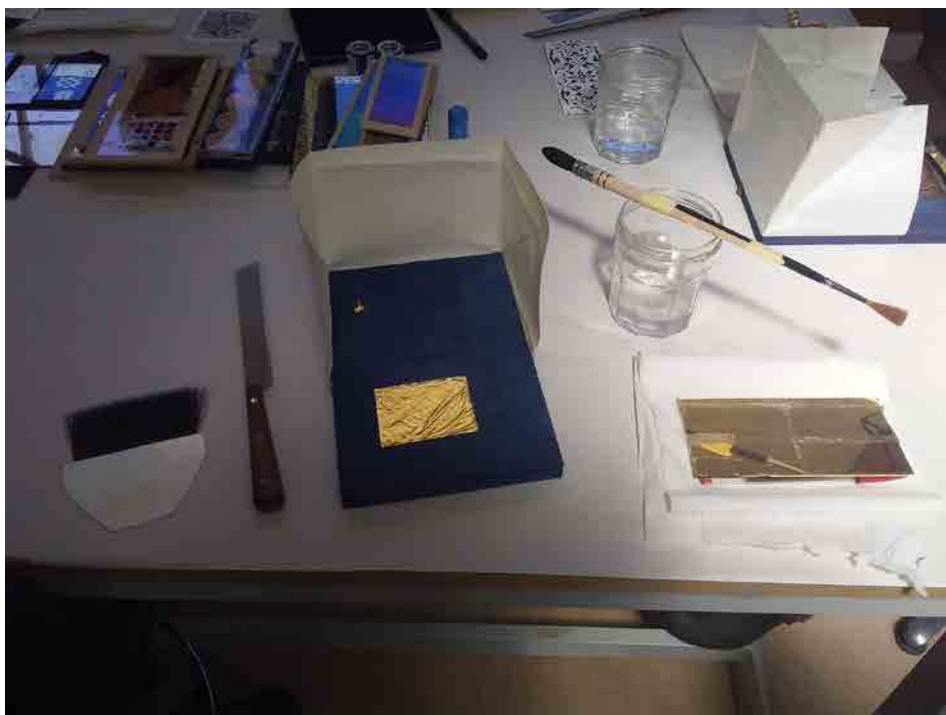
To complement West Dean's conservation classes, the Fellow also had the opportunity to undertake classes and workshops on a range of craft techniques. This promoted a better understanding of the materials the Fellow will encounter while working as a ceramics conservator.

Each week, ceramics conservation students participated in ceramics making evening classes. Taught by master potter Alison Sandeman, students learnt a range of throwing and hand-building techniques and worked with a diverse selection of clay bodies. Students also had the opportunity to glaze their own pieces and assist with stacking the kilns. Highlights of the year included a pit firing, held on the grounds of the adjacent Weald and Downland Living Museum, and a rake firing at the College.

The Fellow also completed a one day workshop on a reverse-glass gilding technique called *verre églomisé*, with master gilder Judy Wetherall. Under her guidance, Judy's students learnt how to apply water size to the glass and manoeuvre the extremely delicate gold leaf into place with a squirrel hair brush. Finally, they scratched their design into the thin gold leaf with skewers and other fine tools, replicating patterns and shading. In addition to being an enjoyable workshop, it offered the Fellow an opportunity to develop her gilding skills, which is often required in the conservation of ceramics and other decorative objects.



*The raku firing day, which included students from all departments across the College.*



*Reverse glass gilding in progress.*



*The Fellow's completed verre églomisé panel.*

## Site visits

Another important component of the Fellowship program was scheduled visits to museums and conservations studios. West Dean College arranged a considerable number of site visits both within the UK and Europe, which gave students the opportunity to learn about conservation 'in action'. The Fellow also complemented these visits with a program of self-directed study trips and participation in events run by the Institute of Conservation's Ceramics and Glass working group.

## Site visits arranged by West Dean College

### Weald and Downland Living Museum

An open-air museum with over 50 preserved historic buildings from South East England, located next to West Dean College. Students viewed a number of the buildings and learned about the challenges faced by staff when dismantling them at their original sites, then relocating, conserving and rebuilding them at the museum.

**Allen Gallery**

A small but very impressive ceramics collection located in Alton, not far from West Dean. Students had the opportunity to select pieces from the collection that they could then handle and inspect closely, helping them to learn about clay bodies and production techniques.



*The Fellow holding a bowl by renowned ceramicist Lucie Rie.*

**Victoria and Albert Museum**

A prominent decorative arts museum in London, with a dedicated ceramics conservation department. Students had the opportunity to meet with the department's staff, who are leaders in the field of ceramics conservation, and to learn about the day-to-day activities of a ceramics conservator in such a large institution.



*The ceramics conservation workshop at the Victoria and Albert Museum.*



### Southampton Archaeological Unit

Southampton Council's archaeological consultancy and finds processing site. Students were able to handle and closely examine sherds and whole ceramic objects from the Iron Age up to recent history.



*Examining a fragment of an ancient Roman terra sigillata vessel under a microscope.*

### Sarah Peek Conservation

A leading private ceramics conservation studio, based in Brighton. Students had the chance to speak with owner Sarah Peek and conservator Jasmina Vučković (who is also the tutor for the West Dean ceramics program) about current projects and considerations for working as a private practitioner. This provided valuable insight into starting and running a conservation business.

### A week-long whole-school study trip to Vienna, Austria

#### Augarten Porcelain Manufactory

A working porcelain production factory, which gave insight into the mould making and casting methods required to produce complex porcelain figurines. Students also had the opportunity to learn about the training program for staff who decorated the figures with enamel glazes.



*An unpainted figurine accompanying a completed one, one display at Augarten.*

### **Institute for Conservation and Restoration at the University of Applied Arts**

Vienna's centre for conservation training, offering five-year programs in the conservation of objects, stone, paintings, and textiles. West Dean students were able to visit the workshops, and meet students from each of the courses. It was a fantastic opportunity to learn about international conservation training and to network with fellow emerging conservators.

### **Museum of Applied Arts**

A leading Viennese museum with collections focussing on decorative arts, craft and design. Students had the chance to view works from across Europe and Asia. Highlights were the strong collection of pieces from the Vienna Porcelain Manufactory and the 'Dubsky Room', a preserved room from the Palais Dubsky at Brno, which incorporated chandeliers, wall sconces and plaques, and other decorative elements all made from porcelain.

*The 'Dubsky' room at the Museum of Applied Arts.*



### **Kunsthistorisches Museum**

Vienna's leading fine art museum. Students were able to view an amazing collection of ancient ceramic and glass objects from Egypt, the Near East, Greece and Rome.

*Examining a display of ancient Greek vases.*



### **The Hofburg Palace Silberkammer**

Students had the opportunity to view the Hofburg Palace's extensive porcelain service collections, made by a range of German and other European manufactories.

### **J & L Lobmeyr Glass Shop**

A purveyor of fine glassware founded in 1823, with a shop on Vienna's Kärntner Straße. Students were able to view the shop's displays of historic porcelain and glass on the upper levels.

### **Personal program of professional events and site visits**

#### **ICON Ceramics and Glass Study Day - Crafts Study Centre at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham**

In combination with the group's AGM, the Fellow attended the Icon Ceramics and Glass Study Day. Professor Simon Olding, Director of the Crafts Study Centre, gave an introductory talk about the collection and then members were able to view ceramic objects from storage and explore an exhibition of Richard Slee's wall-mounted ceramics. Afterwards, attendees visited the nearby Art In Clay Festival, which showcased work by local ceramic makers.

### **A week-long self-directed study trip to Limoges, France**

#### **Le Four des Casseaux**

The Casseaux Porcelain Kiln was France's last reverse flame kiln, built in 1902 and ceasing production in 1957. The Fellow was able to explore the large kiln and view the machinery associated with mass porcelain production. There were also a number of contemporary ceramic artworks displayed within the old factory space.

#### **Royal Limoges Porcelain Factory**

Adjacent to the Four des Casseaux was the Royal Limoges factory, where

porcelain has been in production since 1816 (although the company has been running since 1797). The Fellow was able to view a selection of modern pieces in the factory shop.

### **Musée National Adrien Dubouché**

The Adrien Dubouché Museum is France's national ceramics museum. It holds the largest collection of Limoges porcelain in the world and also contains representative works from the key stages in the history of ceramics. The Fellow was able to learn about porcelain production methods utilised in Limoges and to view an incredible international collection, which was presented chronologically in two parts: from antiquity to the 18th century, and from the 19th century to the present day.



*A collection of glaze test plates from local manufactories.*





*A miniature model of the nearby Four des Casseaux.*



*The hall of Limoges porcelain.*

### **Musée des Beaux-Arts**

Limoges' fine arts museum, with a diverse collection of objects and artworks spanning Ancient Egypt antiquities to pieces by contemporary French artists. Of particular interest to the Fellow was its extensive collection of enamelled objects, ranging from Medieval champlevé pieces to modern enamel artworks. Many of the pieces were produced in the Limousin area around Limoges, but international examples were also present.

**ICON/ICOM-CC 'Recent Advances in Glass and Ceramics Conservation' Interim Meeting Conference, London**

This conference was the final event that the Fellow attended prior to returning to Australia, and it was a fitting conclusion to her year abroad. The conference, which was a joint meeting of the Institute of Conservation (a UK-based organisation) and the International Council of Museums Committee for Conservation (a worldwide organisation), constituted what was possibly the largest professional gathering of

specialist ceramics conservators, with approximately 200 attendees. Presenters from around the world gave insight into challenging treatment projects and outlined new research into materials and techniques, and students from a range of degree programs exhibited insightful posters. The conference offered an invaluable opportunity to keep abreast of developments in the field and network with other ceramics conservators.

*Attendees at the conference.*



## 5. Personal, Professional and Sectoral Impact

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The Fellow has found that undertaking specialist study at an international school has boosted her personal confidence significantly. By working alongside her tutors and placement supervisor, as well as with her peers, she has been able to identify her strengths and areas of her practice that require further development. As a result, she has learnt to trust more in her abilities as a conservator and, most importantly, has realised the importance of engaging in ongoing learning in this area throughout her career.

Another aspect of studying at West Dean that the Fellow did not expect but particularly enjoyed was the opportunity for students to interact directly with clients regarding the treatment of their objects. This required the Fellow to develop her communication and negotiation skills, which will be invaluable for helping her to discuss conservation treatment options with a range of people in the future. Thanks to this opportunity, the Fellow has felt confident to take up a position with a private conservation firm upon her return to Australia, which will require her to frequently interact with clients.

The ceramics conservation knowledge and practical hand skills the Fellow has developed over the course of her year abroad are invaluable to her practice as an emerging conservator and will serve her well as she returns to employment in her field. She has already had opportunities to share ceramic conservation techniques with her colleagues and make recommendations on equipment purchases to her employer. As one of few specialist-trained ceramics conservators in Australia, the Fellow is particularly looking forward to sharing her experiences with the wider conservation sector through publication and presentation in the near future.

In addition to her practical learning, the Fellow has been able to develop a truly international network of fellow conservators, ranging from other emerging practitioners to highly regarded senior professionals. In such a small field (both the ceramics conservation specialty and the Australian conservation sector), a far reaching and diverse network is invaluable for maintaining currency of practice and a sense of community.

As a confident emerging conservator bringing current ceramics conservation knowledge and practices back to Australia, the Fellow anticipates that she will be able to draw on her experiences for the benefit of the sector in the years to come.



## 6. Recommendations and Considerations

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The training opportunity afforded by spending a year at West Dean College emphasised to the Fellow that practical skills-based training is essential for emerging conservators of ceramic objects. As the same level of hands-on learning may not be achievable in the Australian courses, it is vital that Australian conservators are able to access international training programs. Given the extremely high cost of studying overseas, it is heartening to know that the International Specialised Skills Institute and a few other local cultural organisations are supportive of the development of knowledge and skills specific to the conservation of a wide range of materials, including ceramics. Until government funding is available to complete training of this kind, such philanthropic organisations will remain vital for sustaining the specialised education of Australian conservation professionals. The Fellow recommends that Australian conservators explore all possible avenues to fund overseas training and, if possible, advocate for increased government financial support.

The Australian conservation sector, while passionate and supportive, is also small and comparatively isolated. Participating in international conferences and short courses not only provides conservators with up-to-date knowledge but it also allows them to interact with their colleagues from around the world, all of which promotes best practice that can then be applied in an Australian setting. While the Fellow's experience at West Dean has highlighted the importance of international training for emerging conservators, her engagement with conservation events in the UK has also emphasised that continuing interaction with international colleagues is vital throughout a conservator's career. As such, the Fellow recommends that Australian conservators pursue international engagement and collaboration with overseas colleagues, and push for ongoing emphasis on such professional development opportunities for the wider Australian conservation community.

Finally, the Fellow acknowledges the importance of mentorship in the conservation field. Having had the privilege to learn from tutors and supervisors who were generous with their knowledge and time, she encourages Australian conservators to share their experiences with students and emerging professionals where possible. The Fellow certainly looks forward to passing on her own ceramics conservation knowledge and teaching specialised skills to future Australian ceramics conservators.

## 7. References

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