

Q & A with Conservator Ingrid Ford, Auckland Art Gallery re Flight into Egypt conservation treatment project 2017

Conservation treatment on the Sarjeant Gallery's largest painting, Frederick Goodall's *The Flight into Egypt* which measures a grand 2.62 x 4.13 metres, is now complete. The treatment was made possible via a generous grant from the Stout Trust and carried out by Auckland Art Gallery's Conservation Research Centre. The unframed painting, one of the largest historic paintings in New Zealand, is currently in storage until the redevelopment of the Queen's Park heritage building is complete, while conservation treatment on the ornate frame continues at Manawatū Museum Services.

Auckland Art Gallery's Painting Conservator Ingrid Ford was responsible for overseeing the treatment. Sarjeant Gallery's Curator of Collections Jennifer Taylor Moore interviewed Ingrid about her work on the painting.

When was the first time you encountered this painting and why was it so badly in need of treatment?

In 2010, fellow conservator, Nel Rol and myself, flew down to Whanganui to do an onsite stabilisation treatment of the painting. This involved working on scaffolding within the stairwell to access the painting. Needing a clean, the paint layer was also severely cracked and flaking in significant areas requiring local consolidation of these areas. The treatment at this point was stabilisation of the fragile paint layers, surface clean and retouching of the most obvious areas. It was unclear at this stage the reason behind such a fragile paint layer.

What did the recent treatment involve and what were the results of your work?

On arrival to the conservation labs in 2017 the true condition of the work was re-assessed. Prior to its arrival it was thought the stretcher may need to be replaced, however it was determined to be structurally sound and luckily it could remain.

So too, the discoloured varnish was examined. It was hoped this could be removed as it was quite discoloured. A number of solvent tests of various strengths and mixtures revealed this discolouration was not removable. In fact it was highly likely to be a linseed oil rub. Saturating a paint layer with linseed oil was not uncommon in the past, as it gave a painting a deeper saturation of colours, however this was a temporary effect and over time it discolours with age and light exposure, an irreversible process. Examination also revealed the extent of friable paint, particularly in the top quadrant through the sky and pyramids. The paint layer was riddled with tiny pin sized losses, not visible during the treatment in 2010.

Once the painting was cleaned, consolidated, areas of lost paint filled the painting was stable enough to be turned face down on the tables and the support and stretcher examined more thoroughly. This revealed the use of a double canvas. A technique often used by the pre Raphaelite painters. Custom made canvases and stretchers could be ordered by painters at Colourman houses such as W. Brown, Roberson and Winsor and Newton. The loose lining meant the canvas of such a size had extra support when stretching it over the stretcher.

The canvas lining as also primed and a ground layer applied, and was in good condition, it was secured to the stretcher on the tacking edges only, and trimmed at this point. The primary canvas support was also in overall a sound condition, with the exception of portions of the tacking edge, where it took the full brunt of the framing. These edges and corners were exposed had become

quite brittle, with nails, nail holes and abrasions from the frame rebate which had developed a number of tears and holes at these junctures. As the majority of the tacking edges were sound it was determined that local repairs and strengthening where needed at these points only.

How long did the treatment take to complete and how many staff were involved?

For the treatment: 2 conservators, with 1 part time. However due to its size, the safe manoeuvring of the work on and off the tables, required a further 4 people. Overall the work was in the lab for 5 months.

Is this one of the largest paintings you have worked on? What challenges did it pose due to its large scale and how did you overcome those challenges?

Not quite! But a close second, the largest has been the William Calderon 'On the Sea Beat' at another 2 metres longer.

Due to the 2 metre depth of the Goodall painting however, the centre of the work was always difficult to access – ironically the most damaged portion of the painting. The preference for dealing with consolidation of flaking paint is to have the work flat, face up, however this section could not be accessed and the work had to be treated upright.

Negotiating with other staff members for when we needed the extra hands, come moving the painting, this even came at a price of my baking for the Preparator staff to keep them sweet!

What did you learn about the painting and the artist that wasn't known before the treatment?

After the treatment in 2010, it came to light via a diary entry in his published book of *Reminiscences of Frederick Goodall*, that the work had been involved in a fire. The fire started in his studio and at a time he was away, his neighbours helped to save the painting by throwing water over it! It did save the painting, but at a cost. As although the damage may not have been noticeable after the dousing, the cracking and fragile painting over most of the painting is indicative of water damage. The fact that the primary damage is in the centre of the painting and in the top quadrant suggests these areas were targeted more as the bottom quadrant is relatively unscathed in comparison.

During the treatment the opportunity to take small samples of already broken paint for cross section and pigment analysis arose. This was a very interesting procedure and images of the cross sections through the microscope gave us a good idea of Goodall's technique by studying the paint and varnish layers. Further analysis with an SEM-EDS machine at the University of Auckland allowed us to identify a number of pigments that Goodall would have used, by determining the mineral content of the samples.

Any other comments?

It was a very rewarding painting to work on, as soon as the treatment moved to the retouching of the myriad of small losses, the work slowly came together and the image could be viewed without the distraction of the white spotting!