

THE ZIBBY GARNETT TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP

Report by Gabriella Macaro



Easel Paintings Conservation

At The Metropolitan Museum, New York, USA

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Introduction

My name is Gabriella Macaro and I am a 26 year old postgraduate student studying Easel Paintings Conservation at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. I am British and grew up in Oxford but my father is Italian so I have always had strong connections with Italy and consider it to be my second home.

I chose to specialise in the conservation of easel paintings, namely those on wood or canvas support, whilst I was studying for my first degree at the University of Bristol. At Bristol I read History of Art and Italian. One module of the course which I found particularly interesting was the history of paintings conservation and restoration and it was this module that sparked my interest in the discipline. As a keen painter I have always been fascinated in the making of art and the finer details of artists' materials and techniques. The preservation of our artistic heritage is of extreme importance to me and during my year abroad in Italy, in 2004-5, my eyes were opened to the possibility of pursuing conservation as a profession.

Having graduated from Bristol in 2006 with a 2:1, I spent the following academic year gaining some invaluable work experience in paintings conservation. The experience further confirmed my passion for the field and encouraged me to apply to two institutes in the UK which were taking students in October 2007, Northumbria University and the Courtauld Institute of Art.

I am now beginning my third, and final, year at the Courtauld Institute. I will graduate with a Post-Graduate Diploma in the Conservation of Easel Paintings. Throughout the academic year I will be on the lookout for jobs and/or internships in paintings conservation either here in the UK or in the United States.

Ideally I will be able to work in a museum or gallery to begin with, as an intern or fellow. Having recently gained experience in a museum I am aware that museum work provides an excellent environment in which to continue an education in paintings conservation. This is due to the wealth of knowledge, expertise and facilities available in these institutes. One career possibility that I am considering is working in a private studio and, perhaps, even setting up a private practice with a team of colleagues.

I heard about the Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship through the Courtauld Institute. A former student received the scholarship a few years ago and this encouraged me to apply.

Study Trip Summary

My study trip, funded by the Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship, consisted of a month's work experience at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, USA. I worked in the Paintings Conservation Department.

The majority of my time at the museum was spent working alongside George Bisacca and Alan Miller in the studios designated specifically for the structural treatment of panel paintings (paintings on a wood support). In addition, I spent a few days carrying out technical analysis on three paintings in the collection by the late 19th century French painter, Paul Cézanne.

Work at the Met was supervised, for the most part, by George Bisacca, panel paintings conservator. Work carried out specifically on the Cézanne paintings was supervised by Charlotte Hale, paintings conservator. Both aspects of the work undertaken at the Museum will be discussed in more detail in the main body of this report.

During the month I spent in the US I also visited Washington DC and Philadelphia.

The total cost of my trip was just under £2000 of which £1800 was awarded to me by the Fellowship. I raised additional funds for this trip working on a painting for English Heritage at the beginning of my summer holiday in London.

My impressions of New York City and the USA

This study trip to New York took me onto American soil for the first time. New York City is the largest city in the state of New York which is situated in the Mid-Atlantic and North-eastern regions of the United States.

In New York I worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Paintings Conservation Department. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) is situated in Manhattan on the Upper East Side and sits directly on the eastern edge of Central Park.



Fig. 1. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.

I was living on Canal St which is in downtown Manhattan near China Town, Little Italy and SoHo. I rented a shared apartment on the fifth floor of a commercial building with two architects. The large converted loft space was also used as an exhibition space for the work of contemporary artists living in New York. This, of course, made it a fascinating place to live in for one month.

Manhattan is actually relatively small and therefore in one month I felt I could really get to know most of the different areas and their individual characteristics.



Fig.2. Map of Manhattan, New York City (www.michellehenry.fr/map_manhattan)

On my arrival I was quite overwhelmed by a feeling of culture shock. I have travelled to many different parts of the world in the past, experiencing a vast range of diverse cultures. However, because this trip was to a Western country, like the UK, where the language was the same, I was convinced that it would seem just like home. This was not the case. Instead I was surprised to encounter vast differences amongst the people, the food, the way of life and the climate.

New York is an unusual place as it has been the destination of millions of immigrants for centuries. I was fortunate enough even to find the ship manifests of my own Italian ancestors who came to the country arriving in New York in 1910. Like so many others they came in search of a better life.

The effects of years of immigration have led to a totally unique city in which nearly everyone you meet has an interesting and unusual multi-cultural background. It is a true melting pot. Furthermore, New York City is full of tourists as well as hosting foreigners who are working in the city for just a few years or so.

For this reason I believe I got to know a unique city but I had little experience of the 'stereotypical' American city and American people. My visits to Washington DC and Philadelphia only accentuated the extent to which New York City is one of a kind.

Being able to spend four weeks in a city which has so much to see was fantastic. I spent my evenings and weekends sightseeing, visiting museums and experiencing the nightlife with its incredible food and live music.

I was extremely lucky to be granted free admission when visiting all museums in the city. There is a scheme for all museum workers which enables them to visit all other museums in the city with up to four guests without paying the entrance fee. This meant I could visit some of the museums and galleries on a number of occasions during my stay.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

I arrived in New York on Saturday 22nd August allowing me a couple of days to find my feet and adjust to the time difference. I began work at the Met on Monday when the museum was closed to the public. On my arrival I met up with George Bisacca for the first time and he gave me a fascinating tour of the museum and the paintings conservation department.

The Metropolitan Museum is one of the largest museums in the world holding a permanent collection of more than two million works of art. Paintings, sculptures and objects in the museum span 6000 years of art.

The Paintings Conservation Department has one large main studio, a structural studio, a framing restoration studio and a number of smaller studios for photography, varnishing, lining etc. There are nine full time conservators in the department and one frames conservator. There are usually also up to three paid interns who work at the Met for one to two years.



Fig. 3. The Paintings Conservation Studio at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The tour of the Met's extensive collection was breathtaking. I was particularly impressed by the incredible attention to detail in the display of art objects and the high level of finish of the architecture and installations.

Panel Paintings

Since a major project that I am working on at the Courtauld is the restoration of a large 17th century Northern panel painting, practical work experience with an expert in the field of panel paintings is extremely insightful and useful both theoretically and practically.

In order to treat the 17th century panel painting, which requires major structural work, I need to build up a framework of knowledge about the structural behaviour of wood as well as the successes and failures of past and present restoration treatments.

In my opinion, in addition to understanding the theory and ethics involved in the conservation field, the most successful way to truly learn how best to treat these paintings is to obtain hands-on practical experience under the supervision of experts. For this reason, I am extremely grateful that the Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship was awarded to me. Without it, I would not have been able to gain this experience.



Figs 4 and 5. *Two Excisemen*, Copy after Marinus van Reymerswaele, 1617-21. English Heritage painting being treated at the Courtauld Institute of Art. (Recto and verso of painting shown).

Work in the Panel Paintings Studio at the Met

In the afternoon of my first day I got straight to work with Alan Miller in the structural conservation studio. Alan Miller is an ex-Courtauld student who has done a two year fellowship with George Bisacca and this year he has began a full time job working alongside him.

A painting by Pablo Picasso, *Girl in Profile*, 1901 had been brought to the panel paintings studio to be looked at. The small painting, which was executed directly on a wood-based support (masonite), had been cradled in a past treatment, like so many panel paintings.

A cradle consists of a lattice of wooden battens fitted to the back of panel paintings as a preventive measure to keep them flat and in plane. However, the nature of wood is such that it continues to move and change its form over time. It takes in and loses moisture as the humidity levels in its external environment rise and fall.

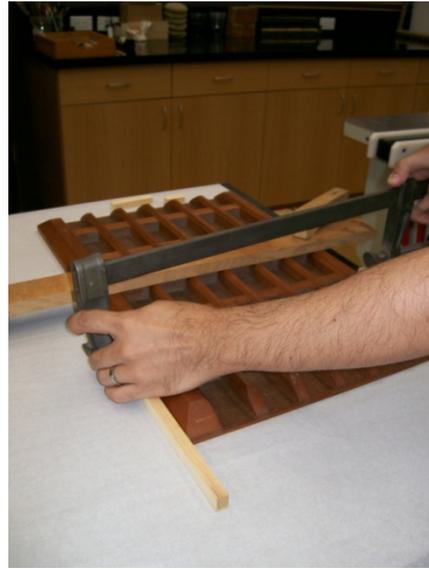
A wood panel which is free to move will, over time, develop a natural warp, usually convex. The painted surface is generally flexible enough to move with the wood so long as the environmental fluctuations are not too dramatic. However, when the external environment is too dry, moisture from the wood panel is sucked into the air around it causing the wood to dry out and subsequently split or fracture.

When cradles were attached to the back of a panel painting, the battens positioned along the grain were usually fixed with glue whereas the cross-battens were free to move. The reason for this was to allow for some natural movement of the panel. However, the problem with cradles is that when the panel moves, the cross-battens frequently become locked in position. Tension builds up in the wood panel which leads to too much stress in certain areas of the wood. These areas become weak and will eventually fracture and split causing a great deal of damage to the painting.

The cross battens of the Picasso painting had become blocked and were no longer free to move with the panel's natural movement. The painting was therefore restricted and although, fortunately, no damage had occurred to the painting it was important to prevent future damage.

Releasing the cross battens was carried out by holding the panel to a fixed object with cam clamps and then carefully applying small amounts of pressure to one end of a batten using sash clamps until it was released and the batten could be slid out. We then sanded down the bottom edge of the battens so they would slide in and out of the cradle lattice smoothly.

This is a very common preventive measure carried out on panel paintings which have a cradle attached. In some cases the cradle should be removed but this is generally only done if it is causing direct damage to the painting. The process of removing the cradle involves a highly complex treatment.



Figs. 6 and 7. Structural work carried out on Picasso's *Girl in Profile*, 1901. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.

Among other minor treatments that I carried out, such as adjusting a frame for a Velásquez portrait (see figure 8), the majority of my time at the Met was taken up on beginning a major treatment on a large 16th century German panel painting.



Fig. 8. Velasquez portrait

The 16th century German panel painting is the central painting of the Calenberg altarpiece and belongs to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The two side wings of the altarpiece will also be treated at the Met in due course. Although Boston Museum of Fine Arts does have a Paintings Conservation department, the work was being carried out at the Met as Boston does not have a conservator who specialises in panel paintings.



Fig. 9. Central panel of the *Calenberg Altarpiece*, 16th Century, Boston Museum of Fine Art. Before Structural Treatment.

The painting, like the Picasso picture, also had a cradle attached to the back of the wood support. The wood support, consisting of 6 planks of wood butt-joined together, had been thinned (meaning the panel had been planed down to make the panel thinner) considerably on the back before attachment of the cradle. Much of the panel is riddled with wood-worm flight holes and is therefore very weak in places. The cradle had clearly caused most of the numerous splits and fractures seen from both the front and back of the painting.



Fig. 10. Verso of the central panel of the *Calenberg Altarpeice*, 16th Century, Boston Museum of Fine Art. Before Structural Treatment.



Fig.11. Detail of the verso of the panel showing a split and extensive wood worm damage.



Figs. 12 and 13 show the extent of the damage caused to the paint surface by the wood splitting and fracturing. Both images are details from the face of the painting.

The first task was to ‘face’ the painting in vulnerable areas where splits were causing the paint to flake off. Facing these areas would help prevent any further paint loss during structural treatment. Facing the paint surface simply means adhering strips of tissue paper over the vulnerable areas so that if any paint is loosened during treatment it will remain in position and can easily be consolidated once the facing paper is removed. We used Japanese tissue paper and cod fish glue in deionised water. This fish glue can be used cold and is reversible being soluble in cold water.



Fig. 14. Facing the vulnerable areas of paint with Japanese tissue paper and fish glue. (*Same as frontpiece image*)

Once the front of the painting was protected we then turned the painting over to begin work from the back. The panel was clamped to the table so that removal of the cross battens and fixed restraints could begin.



Fig. 15. The panel is face down on a protective padded surface and clamped to the table.

The cross battens which, as with the Picasso, were at one time free to move but had now become blocked, were removed by carefully cutting away the fixed restraints with a Japanese saw. Once released the cross battens could be slid out and removed.



Fig. 16. A Japanese saw being used to carefully cut away the fixed restraints.



Fig.17. The fixed restraints have been cut away on the right-hand side giving access to the cross battens.



Fig.18. Having been released, the cross batten could be slid out.

What remained of the fixed restraints was then carefully carved away with a gouge.



Figs. 19 and 20. Fixed restraints being carefully carved away with a gouge.

The left-hand edge of the panel was pulled over the table top and supported by a bridge in order to provide access to both sides of the painting while carrying out the treatment that followed.

There were remnants of old animal hide glue in the splits and joins as well as excess saw dust. In order to ensure a good bond between two faces it is important that the surfaces are as clean as possible. Therefore any surplus material was removed carefully with a scalpel from all cracks and splits which were to be treated.

Masking tape was then placed over the areas around the splits in order to isolate the sections to be filled with glue. This way no excess glue would adhere to the surface of the wood on the back.



Figs. 21 and 22. Application of protective masking tape



Re-gluing of the splits was carried out using an epoxy resin adhesive in liquid or paste form depending on the size and the degree of access to the splits. This was fed into the splits with spatulas until a sufficient bond between the two surfaces was ensured.

The glue used was a mixture of 1:1 w/w Araldite 2011 Resin (High Strength Epoxy Adhesive) and Araldite 2011 Hardener (High Strength Epoxy Adhesive) The Araldite has a 16 hour curing time so it has very good handling properties and there was no need to rush the procedure.



Figs. 23 and 24. Feeding glue into the splits and fractures.



Whilst feeding in the glue it is important to keep contact with the front of the split on the painted surface to make sure the glue reaches the depth of the split but does not pool on the face of the painting.

At this stage any facings should be removed so that if any glue has come through it does not permanently adhere the facing to the surface.

Then the two sides of the splits were aligned at the front of the painting and clamped in position, usually left over night. The clamps maintain alignment and hold the adhered section under pressure whilst the glue cures.

This procedure was repeated numerous times treating up to three splits and/or fractures at a time.



Fig. 25. Alignment of the panel on the recto.



Fig. 26. The panel is clamped in position.

Once this side of the painting was secure it became clear that the panel was taking on a natural convex warp.



Fig. 27. The panel is beginning to adopt its natural convex warp.

At this stage of the treatment we had discussions with a conservator and curator from the Boston museum who visited the studio. They came to the conclusion that they could accept this overall warp and that this would need to be addressed in the reframing. A new frame would need to be made to fit the new shape of the painting whilst still remaining in keeping with the two side-wings of the altarpiece. The treatment of this panel painting meant that I engaged in highly complex procedures. Unfortunately I was not there long enough to work on this project through to the end but it has been extremely helpful and interesting and I have gained a great deal of confidence which will allow me to successfully treat and care for the English Heritage painting back at the Courtauld in January. I intend to maintain contact with George Bisacca so that I can learn about the progress of this treatment.

Examination of the Cézanne Paintings at the Met

As mentioned before, during my time at the Metropolitan Museum I was also able to spend a few days carrying out technical analysis on three paintings by Paul Cézanne. My findings will contribute towards my third year project at the Courtauld, which subsequently will contribute towards the exhibition catalogue for the Cézanne 'Card Players' show at the Courtauld Gallery in Autumn 2010.

My project investigates the materials and techniques of Cézanne's *Card Players* series in order to understand the progression of this group of paintings and drawings. There are five large scale paintings depicting men playing cards all with varying compositions. Cézanne made numerous preliminary studies and watercolours as well as oil sketches of individual figures which all contributed to this seminal group of paintings. In particular I am going to be focusing on the relationship between drawing and painting. Underdrawing, in both dry graphite medium as well as paint applied wet, before the painting process began, can be seen below the painted surface using Infrared Reflectography Imaging. Looking at the underdrawing will form a major part of my project.



Fig. 28. Examination of Cézanne's *Cardplayers*, c. 1890-92.



Fig. 29. Examination of Cézanne's *Madame Cézanne*, c. 1891.



Fig. 30. Detail of face in ordinary light.

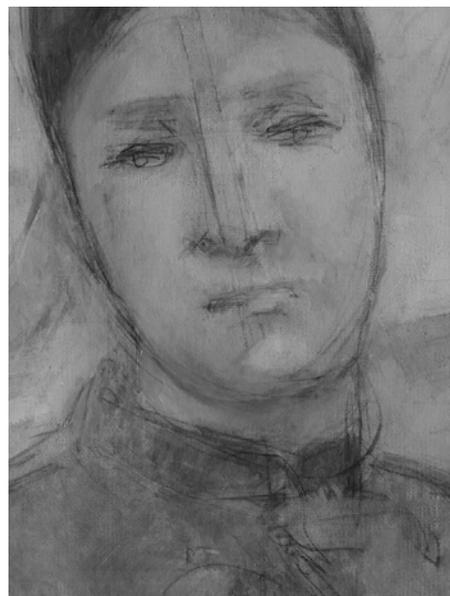


Fig. 31. Detail of face in infrared.

Visits Outside of New York

Although I spent the majority of my time in New York City I did also visit Washington DC for one of my weekends as well as making a trip to Philadelphia to visit the Barnes Foundation. Here I was able to see and examine one of the five extant *Card Players* paintings by Paul Cézanne.



Fig. 32. Cézanne's *Cardplayers* (c. 1890-92) at the Barnes Foundation, Merion, Philadelphia.

Conclusion

To conclude, my study trip to New York has been fascinating and extremely motivating. I was exceptionally fortunate to be given the opportunity to work alongside a world expert in the conservation of panel paintings in an institute such as the Metropolitan Museum. Without the generous scholarship awarded to me by the Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship this trip would not have been possible and a great opportunity may have been missed.

One month is a short period of time when we consider the lengthy and meticulous work that is involved in paintings conservation. However, in this time I learned a great deal about the materials and techniques of panel paintings and their restorative treatments. Simply working with wood and learning first-hand about its material behaviour has provided me with much greater confidence when it comes to treating my own panel back at the Courtauld.

I believe that gaining practical experience in an institute with experts in the field plays a crucial role in conservation training. Not only does it allow for a broadening of theoretical and ethical knowledge but also it enables confidence to build in essential practical skills.