

THE ZIBBY GARNETT TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP

Report by Hannah Sutherland



Textile Conservation at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

1<sup>st</sup> June – 7<sup>th</sup> August 2015

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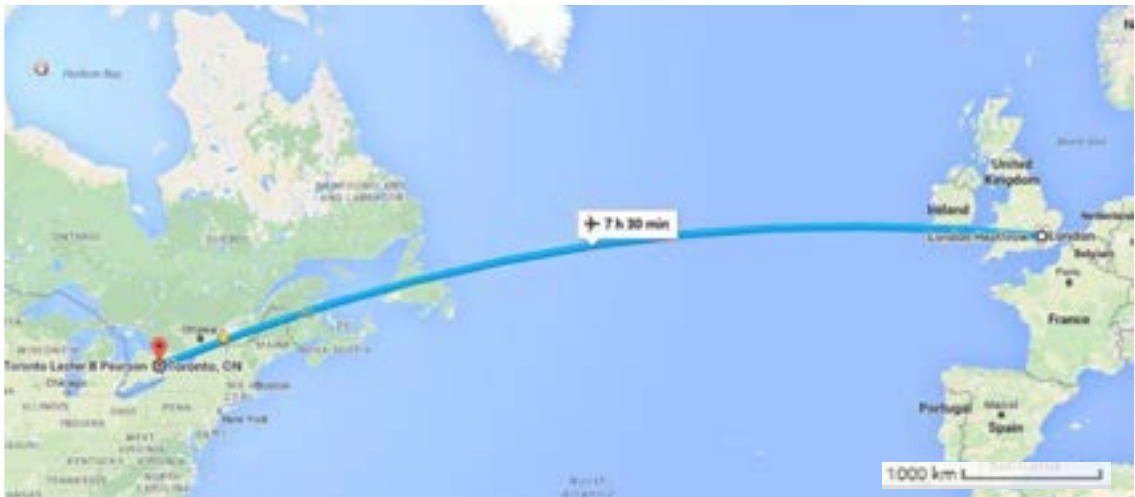
## **Introduction**

My name is Hannah Sutherland and I am a 24 year old student from Derby, England. Having previously studied the cut and construction of historic costume I am now enrolled at The University of Glasgow's MPhil in Textile Conservation, at The Centre for Textile Conservation (CTC). I chose to study the conservation of textiles in particular as I have always been a very creative, practical person, learning to sew and knit at a very young age. Understanding how things are made helps me preserve them now. I decided to study in Glasgow as it was the only course in the UK where I could specialise straight away.

My decision to head to Canada for my placement was impacted by many things. Before embarking on my postgraduate programme I had been working in the Exhibitions Department at The Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Therefore I knew that I wanted to work in a fairly large institution with the potential to be working on both exhibitions and permanent collections. During the first year of the course at Glasgow we followed a lecture series called "Material Culture". Part of this course got us to look into the ethical issues behind who "owned" objects that were in museum collections, with particular emphasis on items belonging to Indigenous or First Nation Communities, such as those in Canada, America and Australia. I have always been interested in public interaction with collections, so seeing how Canadian institutions managed relationships with these communities fascinated me.

I contacted the Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship upon the advice of my tutors in Glasgow. Several students from the programme have previously had the generous support of the ZGTF to help with their placements.

Figure 1: The Heathrow to Toronto flight path.



### **Study Trip**

The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) is based at the heart of Toronto’s “Discovery District” – the area where most of Toronto’s museums are situated. Founded in 1912 the ROM’s collections cover a wide variety of subject matter within 8 “centres of discovery” – Ancient Cultures, Biodiversity, Canada, Contemporary Culture, Earth & Space, Fossils and Evolution, Textiles & Fashion and World Art & Culture. This breadth of collection means a walk around the museum can bring you face to face with Egyptian Mummies, contemporary photography, 1950s fashion and living insects. The mission statement of the ROM outlines the museum’s role as a place of discovery, discussion and development; all areas where the conservation department are involved.

As part of my placement I focused on three main learning objectives:

- Stitching - I was keen to continue learning about the different ways of stitching objects to create support and how to tackle objects of varying size, construction and material.
- Leathers, Feathers and Furs – These items are particularly prevalent in North American collections of First Nation objects, but made very differently to the typical leather goods in western collections.
- Institutional Visits – There are many wonderful museums situation in Toronto and surrounding areas. Visiting other sites, and meeting their conservators, was really important to me to see how my experience in Toronto compared with other institutions' methods.

My placement supervisor was able to arrange visits for me to other institutions in Eastern Canada including The McCord in Montreal and The Canadian Conservation Institute and Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa, during the week of July 4<sup>th</sup> to July 10<sup>th</sup>.

## **Budget**

My total spend for the trip was \$7134.35 which converts to around £3573.13. This was around £300 over my initial budget. The trip to Montreal, on top of Ottawa, was not taken into account initially as this wasn't suggested until I was in Canada. I was able to take additional money from my savings to cover this expenditure.

The Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship generously gave me £1500 towards my trip.

The cost of the flights were covered by my Grandparents and the remainder came from money saved whilst working the previous year.

## Placement Report

### Toronto and surrounding area

Toronto is Canada's largest city, being home to around 2.5 million people. It lies to the south of the country, right on the edge of Lake Ontario, in the province of Ontario. It is one of the most multicultural cities in the world, with 50% of its inhabitant not being originally from there. Although Toronto is not the capital it is home to some of the country's major financial businesses, much as New York is for the USA. Canada is famous for its cold and snowy winters, but the summers can be just as extreme, with temperatures in Toronto regularly sitting around the 30°C mark for days at a time. It can also be very humid, with summer thunderstorms a regular occurrence. Toronto is similar to New York and London in many ways; skyscrapers, subways and lots of tourists. What I really liked about Toronto is that it has everything, just on a slightly smaller, much calmer, scale. Toronto is



Figure 2 (above). Location of Toronto within North America. The yellow star marks Montréal and the red pin Toronto. Ottawa can be seen between the two. Figure 3 (right) shows the area which Toronto takes up. My apartment and The ROM are both within the blue oval.

predominantly an English speaking city, but much of the signage is given in French and English. At the ROM all exhibition text is given in both French and English.

### **Royal Ontario Museum**

The conservation department at The ROM is comprised of five departments: Textiles, Paper, Paintings, Ceramics & Stone and Preventive Conservation. Each department has a specialist member of senior staff, occasionally supported by students and interns. Short term contracts are also posted when assistance is required for particular projects or exhibitions. There are also studios for Wood Conservation and Ethnographic Conservation. There are currently no permanent staff within these studios. Almost all work undertaken by the conservation department is dictated by the current exhibition and loans programme, ie. items which are to be shown will always get priority over items which are not going to be shown. The bench conservators are supported by a Conservation Manager and an Administrative Assistant. Textile Technicians work out of the curatorial department assisting with the collections management side of the operation, but also making mounts for flat textiles and mounting costume onto mannequins.

### **Work**

In Textile Conservation I worked under the supervision of Chris Paulocik. Chris has previously worked for CCI and The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, so has many years of experience in the conservation of both flat and three-dimensional textiles. During the first few days I was able to meet almost all the other conservators (one was on an ICCROM stone conservation course in Rome). Most days all the staff would have lunch together so I was able to chat



about work and hobbies with them and get their opinions on the current position of conservation within Canada. The Preventive Conservator, Helen Coxon, moved to Canada from the UK so we had a lot to talk about also. My usual daily routine involved arriving at the studio at 8.30am, where Chris and I would then discuss the work for the day. This would also lead into conversations regarding previous projects and Chris was able to talk me through some of her prior treatments with the help of photographs. Sometimes objects would need moving around the studio or unwrapping so that visitors could see them. Showing visitors around the studio was a fairly regular occurrence. Learning how to adapt my tour depending on the prior knowledge of the visitor was a good thing to get some practice at. Chris and I also spent a couple of days taking a selection of X-rays from various objects in the collection. Three of my main projects are discussed below.



Figures 4 & 5: Chris and I preparing objects for X-Ray

### The Conservation of Two 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghanaian Flags

My main project for the summer was assisting in the preparation of items for an upcoming exhibition of textiles and costumes from Ghana. I conserved two flags and mounted three costumes for this show. Flags are a common feature in textile collections around the world and were some of the earliest items to be conserved for posterity due to their military relations. Unfortunately, due to their large size, it is difficult for us to treat them at the CTC, so it was a good experience to be able to work on them as part of my placement. Although both flags came from the same area and were of a similar age they had different problems, so I was able to utilize different skills in their treatment. The first flag had a couple of small holes in the border but the main problem was an area of the decoration which has lost its wefts – the horizontal yarns within a weave. This left the warps – the vertical yarns- loose and tangled. The method of treatment for this area involved untangling, realigning and then protecting these loose threads. The method for protecting the warps was a technique which I had not used before. My supervisor set up a sample for me to try and explained all the processes before I treated the object. The process involves stitching the outline of the shape you want to protect, cutting this out using a heated pen tool and then stitching the shape over the damaged area. Although fairly simple the process requires some trial and error to work out the best speed vs. heat to ensure the support fabric is melted. It is this melted edge which helps the patch keep its shape.



Figure 6: Cutting out Stabiltex® patches with a heated pen tool.



Figure 7: Detail of flag before treatment. Permission to share image given by Textile Conservation, Royal Ontario Museum.



Figure 8: Detail of flag after treatment. Permission to share image given by Textile Conservation, Royal Ontario Museum.



Figure 9: Caitlyn, a fellow CTC student based in Ottawa, came to tour the ROM's conservation labs towards the end of my placement so I was able to show her my work on these flags. Permission given to share image by Textile Conservation, Royal Ontario Museum.

### **Mounting of a piece of Tirāz**

As part of a loan agreement with the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, the ROM is currently conserving and mounting several pieces of Tirāz (coptic Egyptian grave clothes from the 9<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> centuries) for a gallery rotation in October 2015.

Fragments were stitched, with laid thread couching, straight onto padded boards. The main substrate of these Tirāz pieces is linen, but one fragment also had bands of silk tapestry worked at the edges. This object was the smallest I worked on but provided the steepest learning curve. The fragility of the fibres meant that I had to take a long time ensuring each of my stitches was perfectly parallel with the warp of the fabric, as undoing and redoing stitches could have damaged the piece.



Figure 10: Detail of completed mounting treatment. Permission to share image given by Textile Conservation, Royal Ontario Museum.

### **Taking a pattern from a 1924 gown**

Another exciting opportunity presented by my time at the ROM was the chance to work with their curatorial team. Alexandra Palmer, Senior Curator of Fashion and Textiles asked me to take a pattern off a new acquisition – a 1924 beaded gown by major Parisian Haute Couture label Madeleine Vionnet. Taking a pattern allowed me to study in depth how the garment was made and then make suggestions as to how it had been altered since. I was then able to digitize my paper pattern, which Alexandra Palmer intends to publish on the ROM website as a resource for researchers all over the world. Alexandra and I then discussed my findings as part of a short film to be published on the ROM's blog. To allow for safe display of the gown during filming I was tasked with making an underdress for the gown out of



silk habotai. Both elements of this task used my knowledge from my first degree in the construction of costume as well as my textile conservation programme.



Figures 11 and 12: Preparing an underdress for the gown and taking a pattern. Permission to share images given by Textile Conservation, Royal Ontario Museum.



Being based in Toronto made it easy for me to visit other leading Canadian institutions and museums. I took a week in the middle of my placement as a week of research trips. I started in Ottawa where I was able to stay with a friend from my course in Glasgow. We spent a couple of days visiting The Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) and the Canadian Museum of History, where she was undertaking her placement. The visit to CCI offered a view on conservation which I hadn't experienced before. The CCI is a government body, offering conservation services to museums across Canada, especially smaller museums who don't have any onsite

con Figure 13: Map of location of Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal. I took the train between the three cities.

researching objects and techniques, but separates the conservators from the context in which the objects are to be stored or displayed. The Canadian Museum of History has a very large collection of First Nation objects and I found their galleries very interesting; the option to allow items to be on open display or covered was, in many cases, left to various community representative, rather than the conservators. Some of the objects are lent back to their communities for use in

ceremonies, so they are less concerned about their open display. I was also able to spend the weekend exploring the historic areas of Ottawa such as their Parliament buildings. After Ottawa I travelled across to Montreal where I met with Object Conservator at The McCord, Anne Mackay. There I spent a couple of wonderful hours being shown their collection of First Nation material and textile objects. It was here, in the galleries, I was able to watch a video showing how moose skin is smoked. Within Toronto I met with Ada Hopkins, Conservator at the Bata Shoe Museum. She gave me and several other interns a tour of their storage facilities and discussed their most common treatments and collection needs. Here I learnt that the term “Moccasins” actually covers a very wide range of styles of footwear, something I really hadn’t thought about before. The construction, decoration and material of the shoes can point quite specifically to the community which produced the shoe. I found that every museum tended to work within the exhibition schedule, with very little, if any, time allowed for treating new acquisitions which weren’t for display.



Figure 14: Inuit clothing on display at the Canadian Museum of History.



## Other Activities

My placement lasted from June 1<sup>st</sup> until August 7<sup>th</sup>, but I was fortunate enough to be able to have an extra week in Toronto at either end of the placement. Arriving on May 22<sup>nd</sup> I spent a week completing all the “to do” things in Toronto and the surrounding area. By allowing myself “holiday” time before and after the work-placement I was able to make sure I saw many of the sites which Ontario is famous for. These included Niagara Falls, The Hockey Hall of Fame and The CN Tower. I also made a day trip up to The Black Creek Pioneer Village, a living history museum producing traditional loom woven blankets made from hand-spun, hand-dyed wool. My placement supervisor encouraged me to spend an extra day in Montreal which allowed me time to explore the Old Port area of the city and stumble across The Quebec Museum of Costume and Textiles, something that I didn’t know existed before.

Toronto is home to many galleries and places of historical interest, many of which were walkable from my apartment. I made a point of visiting a range of places to get a feel of how the different museums presented their collections: (colour of point on map)

- Casa Loma (pink) – An Edwardian mansion, labelled as the only castle in North America.
- Spadina House (blue) – Previous home to a Gas power magnate.
- Bata Shoe Museum (yellow) – The collection of Sonja Bata with collections of shoes and feet related items dating back to Ancient Rome.

- Royal Ontario Museum (red) – Strange as it sounds being back of house meant that I didn't get much chance to see the non-textile galleries until I had finished my work placement.
- Art Gallery of Ontario (Green) – beautiful collection of paintings and sculpture, with several galleries dedicated to the famous Canadian landscape artists “The Group of Seven”.
- Textile Museum of Canada (Beige) – I was fortunate enough to visit this museum twice! Once to see a collection of artists prints on textiles and the second time to see an exhibition on Mexican clothing.
- Fort York (Grey) – Although largely reconstructed this small fort is home to some of Canada's oldest buildings. Dating from the war of 1812 they cover the events of that war and the daily life of Canadian soldiers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Figure 15: Location of some of the places of cultural interest I was able to visit.

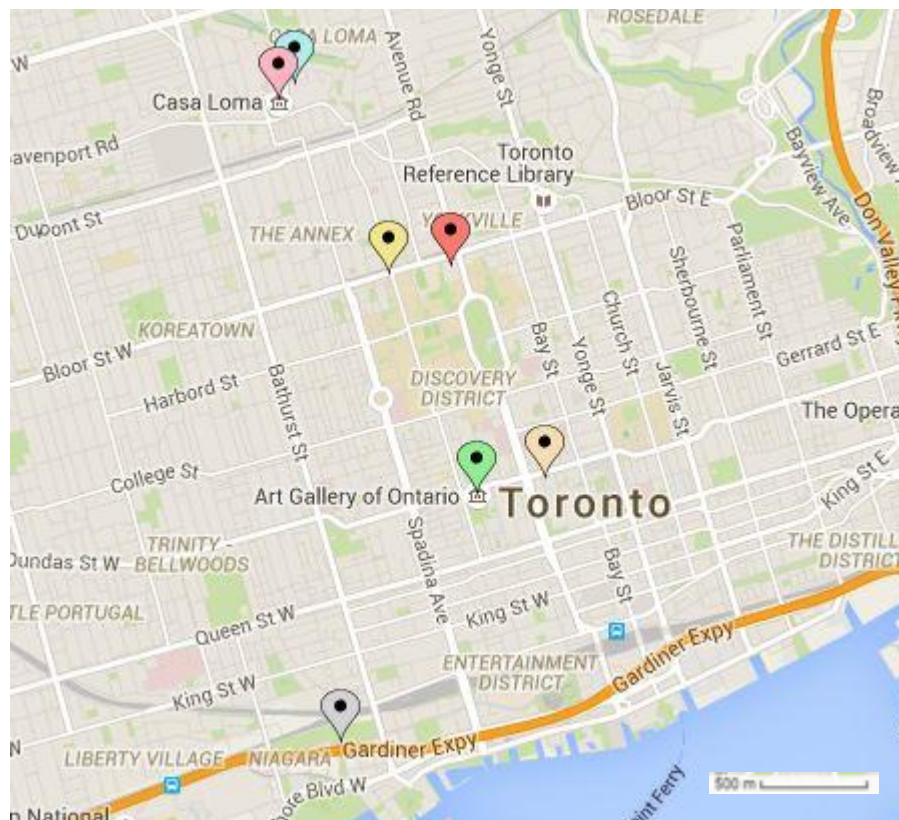




Figure 16: Hands-on learning at The Textile Museum of Canada. Looms set up for visitors to experiment on.

Figure 17: The view of the CN Tower from the Historical Fort York site, with 19<sup>th</sup> century bunkers in the foreground.



One of the activities that I had arranged prior to heading to Toronto was taking a leatherwork class. Having always been an avid sewer and knitter I like knowing how things are made and I think this really benefits my practice as a conservator.

Leather is something that does crop up in collections but is something that I really didn't know much about. During my leatherwork classes I was introduced to the different types of leather commonly used today and traditional techniques of cutting, dyeing and stitching leather. After picking up a leaflet at The Bata Shoe Museum I discovered that they were running a Moccasin making workshop as part of "Planet IndigenUS" – a festival exploring and celebrating traditional First Nation culture. The course was run by a specialist from one of the James Bay, Cree, communities. This workshop covered how to make a pattern from scratch for a pair of basic moccasins, how to apply beads in a tradition manner and how to stitch the leather together. From a conservation point of view this was particularly interesting

as we used paper behind the beaded panels to aid their stability – something I will be sure to look out for should I ever be required to conserve a similar object.

### **Life in Toronto**

It was recommended to me by staff at the ROM that I investigated staying in University of Toronto Halls of Residence during my 3 month stay. After researching some options this did indeed appear to be the easier to arrange long-distance and also the closest to the museum once I arrived. The Halls were set up in apartments, with 6 bedrooms sharing living, kitchen and bathroom facilities. Everyone else staying there was also completing summer internships in the city, so I was able to meet people from all over Canada, many of whom were also new to Toronto. This balance of knowing people who both knew and didn't know the city meant I could find out what I needed to know really quickly, but also have people to do the "touristy" stuff with. Being in self-catering accommodation allowed me to explore the local markets and shop for locally grown produce – Ontario is well known for its soft fruits such as peaches. The public transport is very good in downtown Toronto, but the location of my accommodation meant that I was able to walk to most places I wanted to go to. This meant I could change up my route to see more of the city.

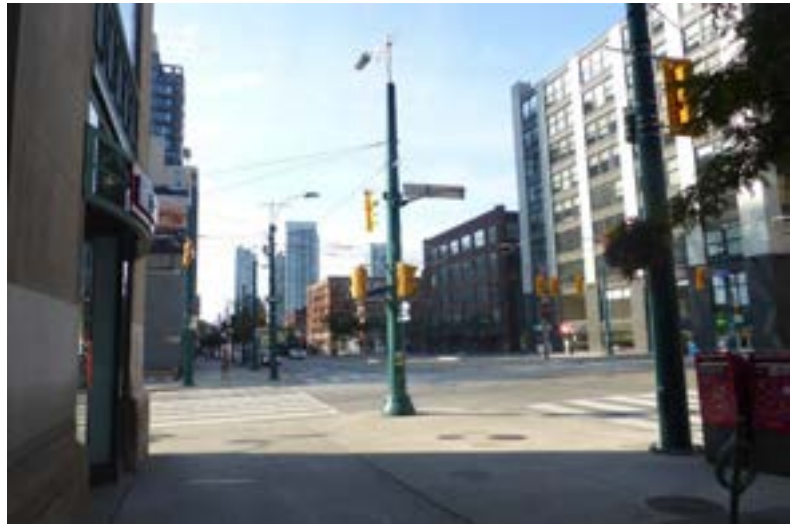


Figure 18, left: My home for the summer, Woodsworth Halls of Residence. A 3 minute walk to the ROM.

Figure 19: My walk to work down the side of the ROM through this beautiful small park.



Figures 20, 21 &22:  
Views around Toronto.





## Conclusions

This placement had a positive impact on my development as a professional in many areas. Being able to work within an existing team, for a short period of time, with the certain degree of security which being an intern gives, is a very privileged position. I believe I was useful during the summer; learning whilst also being a functioning member of the wider team. The quality of my coaching has gone up dramatically, mainly due to the sheer volume of coaching I completed over the summer. Disappointed (slightly) as I was at “only” getting some flags to work on, my opinion has been changed completely. Working out a systematic approach to that large number of losses, with limited materials and limited time was a challenge that I enjoyed getting my teeth into. I greatly enjoyed the opportunity to gain new skills in leatherwork, something which I’m sure will be of benefit should I ever get the chance to work with a collection of leather objects, whether they be of Western or First Nation origin. The greatest benefit for my future has been the connections made within the international community of Textile Conservators. Knowledge of various people’s specialisms provides me with a wider circle of contacts should I have a query. They renewed in me an assurance of something I already knew; there is not a hard and fast way of dealing with any object. Keeping your mind open to options to new ideas, especially in this fast paced world, is crucial. Ten weeks of one-to-one discussion with Chris and assisting her on projects has left me with fresh confidence in my ability, an increased passion for the work that we do and reinforced in me that this is definitely what I want to be doing with my career.



Figure 23: The Toronto Island Ferry coming into the island docks. Photo taken from the Island back towards the classic Toronto skyline.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Zibby Garnet Travelling Fellowship for supporting my time abroad.

I would also like to offer my thanks to all the staff at the Centre for Textile Conservation, University of Glasgow, who allowed this placement to take place.

Also to all the staff at the Royal Ontario Museum for being so welcoming and encouraging during my time with them.