

THE ZIBBY GARNETT TRAVEL FELLOWSHIP

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**Textile Conservation Placement at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
14th May – 29th July 2016**

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Introduction

My name is Ruby and I am a 28 year old British student studying for a Masters of Philosophy in Textile Conservation at the Centre for Textile Conservation (CTC) at the University of Glasgow. This report is an account of my experience on a 10 week work placement in the textile conservation department at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam from May to July in 2016.

Towards the end of the first year of the MPhil programme all students are required to undertake a full-time work placement of 6 weeks or more. The work placement is an opportunity for students to gain hands on experience in a conservation studio at a major museum and to help students consolidate and develop their knowledge and understanding of conservation theory and practice. Whilst it gives students the opportunity to travel abroad and to experience working in a different culture.

My interest in travelling to Amsterdam for my placement was first sparked by a former 2nd year student's presentation of a work placement at the Rijksmuseum the previous year. I was particularly interested in her description of the conservation studios in the AtelierGebouw and its links with the University of Amsterdam's conservation school. Having previously gained experience in conservation departments at two London museums, a placement outside of the UK was an important opportunity for me to gain a European perspective and to get another picture of the conservation profession as well as to build on my previous experience. In addition, by undertaking my placement in the Netherlands I would have the opportunity to build connections with conservation professionals abroad.

I was first informed about the Zibby Garnett Travel Fellowship by my placement course convenor in Glasgow who recommended I apply to the Fellowship. After confirming my placement and travel plans I had calculated the total cost of my placement would be £2,515. The actual full cost would eventually rise to over £3,000 so I was very grateful that the Zibby Garnett Travel Fellowship generously awarded me £800 towards the cost of my trip.

Study Trip



Figure 1. Map of the Netherlands.

Image source: LonelyPlanet.com

During the Dutch Golden Age Amsterdam rose to prominence as a world centre for trade and commerce amassing vast wealth and power. The golden age was also a significant for art production and the Rijksmuseum holds arguably the foremost collection of artworks representing this period in history. Most people go to see the Vermeer and Rembrandt works but the Rijksmuseum holds a vast and beautiful collection of textile objects.

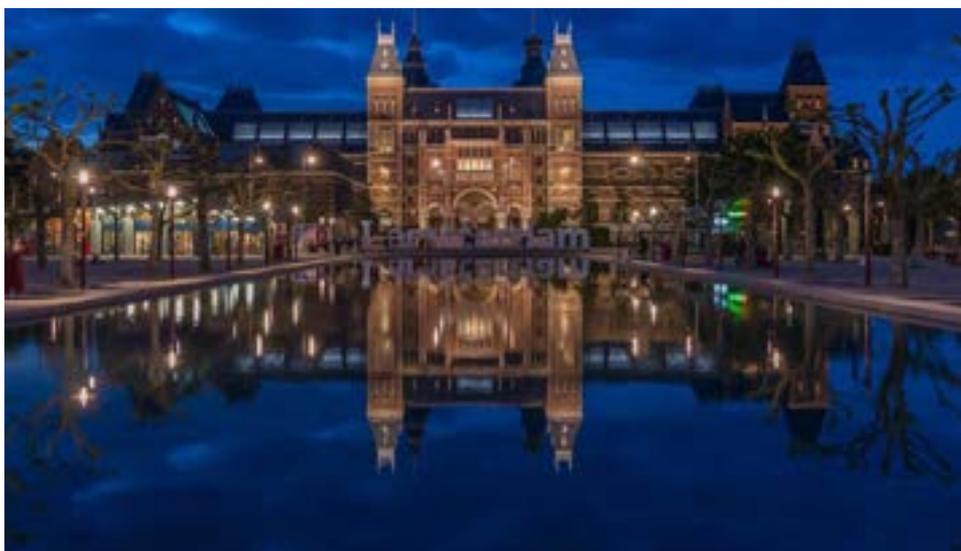


Figure 2. View of the Rijksmuseum from Museumplein.

Image source: Rijksmuseum 2014 John Lewis Marshall. <http://www.iamsterdam.com>

The collections comprise some 10,000 flat textiles including silk fabrics, embroidery, lace, tapestries and interior furnishing dating from the 3rd century AD up to the 20th century, and a costume collection of 4,000 items of men's, women's and children's clothing dating between the early 18th century to the mid-20th century.

In 2013, the museum reopened its doors after a ten-year closure for a major redevelopment project. This included the new high-tech Ateliergebouw located just across the road from the main museum at 22 Hobbemastraat. The new Atelier, designed by Seville-based architects Cruz y Ortiz, was commissioned to house all the conservation departments together with the University of Amsterdam (UvA) conservation and restoration programme and the Netherlands Institute for Conservation Art and Science (NICAS). The inclusive environment of Atelier means that there is an exciting dialogue and interaction between a range of disciplines.

The main studio for textile conservation is located on the top floor of the AtelierGebouw across the hall from metals and ceramics conservation studios. The workroom is modern, bright and spacious with room for large rollers to accommodate tapestries, as well as several work benches and an adjoining office. A further textile conservation studio is located two floors below, which is primarily used for wet cleaning and dyeing purposes and is shared with the UvA conservation students.

There are four textile conservators at the Rijksmuseum, Suzan Meijer who is head of the department (and my placement supervisor for the 10 weeks) and conservators Mieke Albers, Carola Holz and Marjolein Koek. The conservation studio space in the AtelierGebouw is also shared with the Curator of Costume and Fashion, Bianca du Mortier.

Beginning the Placement



Figure 3. My Dutch bicycle outside the apartment in Westerpark.

I arrived in Amsterdam on the 14th of May 2016, travelling by train from London via Brussels. I had 3 days to familiarize myself with the city, settle into my accommodation in the Westerpark area of Amsterdam and also catch the last day of the fashion exhibition *Catwalk* at the Rijksmuseum.

Beginning my placement on the 17th of May, I was introduced to the conservation team and a plan was outlined for the weeks ahead. During the first few days I was given a variety of tasks: I helped to pack delicate Coptic textiles for storage; I filled in a condition report for a purse which was going on international loan; and was introduced to the ongoing tapestry conservation project. I was beginning to get to know the team and become familiar with the running of the department and museum.

Towards the end of this first week I was assigned a project: to construct a new storage mount for an early 20th century hat. The object had temporarily been stored on a polystyrene head, which was too tall for the storage box and was not supporting the crown of the hat fully, causing it to become misshapen. On examination it was apparent that the red silk flowers decorating the hat brim were in a poor condition. The papery thin silk had shattered and was beginning to desiccate. In addition to this, the green stems on the silk flowers, which were

constructed from metal wire wound with green yarn, had bent out of shape and dropped from their original position, which was forcing the flowers further down under the brim. Taking this into consideration, the new mount needed to neatly fit the shape of the crown, give enough height so that the flowers were not further crushed under the brim, whilst fitting the size specifications of the storage box.

I took extensive measurements, carved out a basic form from ethafoam, and added layers of polyester wadding to build up the correct shape. Getting the perfect fit proved to be challenging, as it was essential to ensure that the hat could be placed or removed from the mount without force. Once the shape was achieved, the head needed to be covered. My first option was to use a stretch jersey but the fabric surface was too rough for the hat lining. In discussions with conservator Carola Holz, she suggested I try using Tyvek® as it would have a smoother finish and be easier to manipulate into the right shape around the form. This proved to be very successful, as the smooth surface allowed the hat to be placed on with ease. Afterwards, I manipulated the wire flower stem back into shape and repositioned it in its original place with a few stitches. The fragments of silk from the flowers which had already been lost were placed in a sample bag to be stored in the box. Once the mount was complete, it was attached to a base and cotton handling tapes were fixed on for accessibility without the need to remove the hat from its stand.



Figure 4. The new mount with fixed base and handling ties. Figure 5. Hat and new mount inside the storage box. Images courtesy of the Rijksmuseum.

Getting the right shape proved to be a challenge and as a result took longer than expected. With helpful suggestions and try alternative materials meant the finished construction was successful and the hat can now safely be stored whilst it can still be easily accessed for study. The success of the mount was really satisfying and it gave me confidence for the projects that followed.

Curtain Down on ‘*Catwalk*’: Deinstallation of a fashion exhibition

My placement began the week after the closing of a major fashion exhibition at the museum. ‘*Catwalk*’, which was designed by the renowned Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf, had a record numbers of visitors. It had been a huge undertaking for the textile conservation department, and the decision to exhibit all but the most sensitive items on open display required the conservation team’s ongoing attention to monitor dust levels over the 3 month period. Over the next 10 weeks many of my projects were related to the end of this exhibition.



Figures 6. & 7. Surface cleaning costumes in the gallery. Images courtesy of the Rijksmuseum

The first major task was to surface clean all of the open display costumes in situ, whilst costumes with hard to clean elements such as beading would get further attention back in the studio. It was fascinating to see such a range of costumes in close detail and this was my first opportunity to see how surface cleaning was done in a gallery. Not being able to surface clean an object laid flat on a workbench but instead around the curves of the mannequins

made the task more challenging, and as the costumes were displayed on high platforms to limit the dust levels we had to work at a height and in tight spaces, which became quite a balancing act.

After surface cleaning, we undressed the mannequins and packed the costumes. The more robust items were stored on padded hangers, whilst the mannequins' underpinnings and padding were removed. To get a close look at the range of underpinnings on the mannequins as well as the skill that goes into adapting the mannequins to create the historically accurate silhouettes (which is usually unknown to the exhibition goers) was invaluable.

Conservation Project 1: Mending a 19th century dress



Fig. 8. Brown silk moiré costume (back right) in the *Catwalk* exhibition.

Later on my placement I began a treatment on a watered silk costume (1868-1872) from the *Catwalk* exhibition. The full outfit comprised several components but it was the belt and top skirt which were initially prioritised for treatment. As the two objects had very different requirements, the treatment would be a good opportunity for me to further develop my hand sewing skills as the lace trim needed a full stitched support. Secondly, I would have the chance to learn a new technique, as the splits in the silk moiré required an adhesive treatment to stabilise the area.

The first stage of the treatment was to carry out the stitch support for the lace. The condition assessment showed that the cotton lace was extremely weak and



Fig. 9. 19th-century black lace detail.

degraded, and there were several areas where the cotton had begun to desiccate. To prevent further loss it was important to stabilise the lace and it was decided that it would be appropriate to give a full support. A fine nylon net was selected as it would give strength but would not obstruct the visual appearance of the lace.

First I pinned out the lace onto a net support fabric and secured small sections at a time with vertical lines of stitching in a black cotton thread. Then the net could be trimmed back to the shape of the lace.



Fig. 10. Silk 19th-century costume belt

The second part of the treatment was to stabilise the areas of the splits in the silk moiré fabric. These were concentrated around the waist line and at the fastening points, as this would have been where the fabric sustained the most strain when worn.

Before beginning this next phase, which was a new technique for me, I was given a tutorial on the application of adhesives and then I was able to spend a few hours testing the process.



Fig. 11, 12. Testing adhesives, silk crepeline support fixed to the moiré substrate.

Tapestry Conservation in the Rijksmuseum

Tapestry conservation was something I was particularly interested in doing as on my programme we only get a one week introduction to it. I was lucky to be given the opportunity to work on such a rare tapestry in the new studio. The Rijksmuseum holds a collection of around 200 European tapestries and currently the textile conservation department is working to conserve a fine silk and wool 17th century Delft tapestry, *Alexander & Jaddua*. The 436 x 523 cm tapestry was woven between 1617 and 1619, after a design by Karel van Mander II depicting the story of Alexander the Great.

The tapestry currently occupies a huge roller in the studio at the AtelierGebouw. The roller allows access to both the front and reverse and it can be wound on to reveal a new section. Over the 10 weeks I worked regularly side by side with the conservators, who taught me a variety of conservation techniques: removing failed previous repairs, closing up slits and re-incorporating missing areas of the image.

In the 17th century galleries in the Rijksmuseum, a set of three tapestries by the François Spierinx studio, woven between ca 1593 and ca. 1600, had to be taken down from display temporarily. This meant there was an opportunity for the textile conservators to surface clean them. The textiles were transferred to a space in the vast network of



Fig. 13. Rehanging the tapestries

rooms beneath the museum where there would be enough space to unroll for cleaning. Once the tapestries had been moved I helped the team with the surface cleaning operation. It was great to have the chance to work on such large textiles and was surprised by the speed of the task as we were able to clean two in under two hours.

Afterwards, I had the opportunity to observe the team rehangng the tapestries one evening after the museum had closed to the public. This was really interesting as I got to witness the logistics, planning and teamwork involved in the process and it was also special to have the privilege of special access to the galleries away from the crowds.



Fig. 14. Rehangng the tapestries.

Costume storage solutions

Over the ten weeks I carried out several small projects which were focused on adapting some of the storage methods in the costume store such as finding methods to distribute weight across a skirt waistband, supporting the shoulders of a bodice by adding hanging loops, adapting padded hangers and replacing old cotton dress bags with new size-specific Tyvek covers. To see how the garments benefitted from improved storage through simple but effective solutions was really valuable, whilst it gave me insight into the importance of preventative conservation. as improving the storage would help to give stability and prevent damage from occurring to the garments.



Fig. 15, 16, 17. Dress (1850-1856), with new padded hanger, the costume store

Conservation Project 2: washing an 18th century linen shirt

In week 8 of my placement I was assigned a wet cleaning project for an unusually large linen shirt which was prompted by recent renewed interest in the object's history (not yet accessioned) as well as investigations into its original use.

The object arrived at the Rijksmuseum with a paper label attached which suggested it was an eighteenth century bath towel once owned by Henrik Van Loon of the wealthy Dutch



merchant family, whose ancestors had been founders of the Dutch East India Company.

Fig. 18. Linen gown before unfolding

The limited information on the history of the object in the Van Loon family meant it had remained a mystery but recently the Rijksmuseum Curator of Costume, Bianca du Mortier, had reconsidered the bath towel label and suggested that it might actually have been a wig powdering gown, which would be fitting for the object's 18th century dating.



Fig. 19. Linen gown unfolded.

The first task for the project was to unfold the gown on the workbench in the studio to get a better idea of its scale, as to get a close look at the level of creasing and staining. Once unfolded, it measured almost 2 metres in length and over 1.5 metres wide.

After consultation with the curator and the head of textile conservation, it was decided that wet cleaning would be carried out as this would reduce the level of staining and creasing, making it safe for long-term storage and enabling a better interpretation of the object.

I first fully immersed the object in tap water and left it to soak overnight. The following day the bath water was replaced with fresh tap water combined with a detergent, and a sample of the water from the initial soak was retained. I observed a distinct yellow colour in the water, which showed that much of the degradation product had been released during this initial phase. This was interesting as it highlighted how powerful and effective water can be as a cleaning agent. Then I gently sponged the whole object and left it again to soak for one hour. It was then thoroughly rinsed in tap water to remove all the detergent and any dissolved degradation product, and finally it was left to soak in deionized water for 30 minutes before the bath was drained completely.



Fig. 20. Detail of staining.

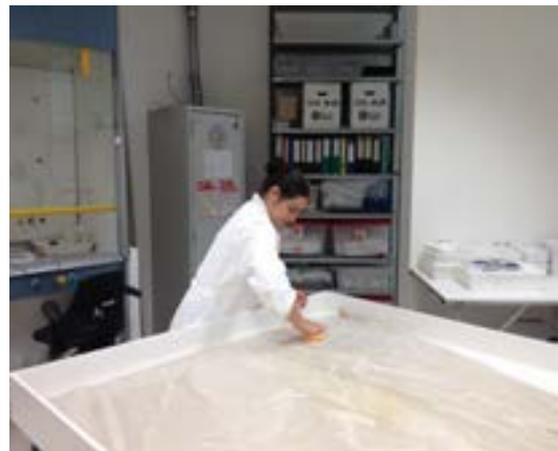


Fig. 21. Washing in the wet lab.

A frame was set up in the studio in order to hang the object to dry, so that the weight would help to ease out the creasing. After it was completely dry, I used a steamer to soften the linen which had become stiff. The treatment was very successful as there was a clear reduction in the level of staining and creasing, which has resulted in a noticeably brighter appearance and the object can now be safely stored and made accessible for future study and research.

It was satisfying to see how much the appearance of it improved just through simple methods. It was invaluable to get a chance to carry out this treatment as it is an important skill to have in your conservation tool kit. I hope that in the future it will attract some interest and be the subject of research because It would be fascinating to confirm its former usage and history.



Fig. 22. Drying in the studio.

Opportunities and External Visits

During my placement I took up several opportunities to attend events within the Rijksmuseum including a conservation conference and lecture, the exhibition opening of *Japan Modern* and the Rijksmuseum summer party, which was particularly special as it was the farewell to outgoing general director, Wim Pijbes.



Fig. 23. Rijksmuseum summer party.

Around Amsterdam I visited lots of museums and cultural and heritage sites, such as the Tassen Museum of Bags and Purses, the Jewish Historical Museum, Hortus Botanicus and the Eye Film Museum.



Fig. 24. Tassen Museum of Bags and Purses

A particular highlight was the Museum Van Loon which I managed to visit on two occasions. The former private residence of the famous Van Loon family is an exceptional example of a late 16th-century canal house on the Keizersgracht. The first time I visited was to help Mieke Albers with a courier job. The costume to be collected was a 1900s silk satin dress designed by Jeanne Paquin, which had been on temporary loan to the museum for the exhibition *Mode Bij Van Loon (Fashion at Van Loon)*. The dress was particularly significant as it had been donated to the Rijksmuseum by Thora



Fig. 25. Hortus Botanicus.

Van Loon, who had worn the dress to the wedding of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands in 1901.

The fragile state of the silk satin meant that it was necessary to display the outfit flat in the exhibition case. On the day, I assisted Mieke with the de-installing, packing and couriering of the costume back to the Rijksmuseum. I found this to be really valuable as it was my first experience of couriering. It was also fascinating to learn more about the dress which had been the subject of an



Fig. 26. Museum Van Loon. Image source: mikestravelguide.com.

exhibition about the work of textile conservation at the Rijksmuseum titled, *The Ravages of Time: Deterioration and Preservation of Textiles*. I was so impressed by the Museum that I returned for a second visit and to also visit its impressive garden and coach house.

Another interesting day was a trip to the conservation studios and collection store of the Amsterdam Museum to meet the textile conservator, Lisca Wurfbain, who gave me a tour of the Museum's vast and diverse collection. Afterwards, I helped Lisca and the metals conservator Paul Born with carpets in the collection. While in the studio I was also able to talk with the textile conservation students from the UvA, who were there working on collection objects as part of their training programme.

Leisure and Excursions

In my free time I made sure to take in as much of the local culture as possible. At weekends I made day trips to towns and cities including Delft, Utrecht and Zandvoort aan Zee and to the countryside for picturesque walks.

A particularly special excursion was with the textile conservation team on a bicycle ride to the island of Marken. The 14 mile route from the Rijksmuseum takes us north out of the city, following the Markermeer lake up to the postcard perfect Island of Marken where we stopped for a well earned rest and a slice of Dutch apple pie.



Fig. 29. Traditional house on Marken island.



Fig. 27, 28. Marken harbour, Cycling in the countryside.

In Amsterdam I enjoined living like a local: cycling around the city, taking in the atmosphere and picking up my fresh groceries at the bustling markets. I became a regular visitor to Amsterdam's largest market, the Albert Cuyp in De Pijp and the Saturday Noordermarkt in the Jordaan, where I could pick up seasonal fruit and vegetables, delicious Dutch cheeses and the freshest seafood including the famous herring.



Clockwise from top right: Fig. 30, 31, 32, 33. Herring in the Albert Cuyp market (image source: TripAdvisor). Model of the Rijksmuseum in antique shop window, Dutch cheese in the Noordermarkt (image source: tomostyle.wordpress.com), Shop window in the Jordaan.

Over the 11 weeks I stayed in a total of four separate locations: Westerpark, Haarlem, Centrum and Amsterdam Zuid. Moving house so many times was on the one hand inconvenient, and at times stressful, but I was able to embrace the adventure and make the most of the opportunity to experience all sides of the city.

Berlin Trip

After completing my placement I had the opportunity to travel to Berlin to visit conservation studios kindly arranged by Carola Holz at the Rijksmuseum. After talking to Carola about my interest in travelling to Berlin she offered to put me in contact with textile conservator friends and colleagues in the German city.



Fig. 34. Amsterdam to Berlin Map. Image source: b-europe.com/

Two days after completing my placement I made the six hour train journey from Amsterdam Centraal station across Germany to Berlin, where, in the city I was kindly hosted in the home of Dr. Barbara Schröter, textile conservator and curator of the costume and textile collections of the Deutsche Kinemathek (the German Film Archive and Museum of Film and Television Berlin).

On my first full day I was invited to visit the textile conservation studios of the Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM) and meet with Josephine Brand, head of textile conservation. During my visit Josephine gave me a tour of the workshops and I was introduced to colleagues and saw some of the conservation work on a plague doctor's mask for the 2017 exhibition *The Luther Effect*, which I had previously seen in the British Museum's *Germany: Memories of a Nation* exhibition in 2014. After my morning with Josephine, I spent the afternoon visiting the DHM which was just a short walk from the conservation studios.

The following days I travelled with my host Barbara to the archives of the Deutsche Kinemathek which are located just outside of the city centre in Berlin-Marienfelde. Barbara gave me a tour of the archive, which holds over 3000 textile objects in addition to the Marlene Dietrich Collection Berlin, which includes her iconic costumes from stage and

screen, as well as hundreds of the star's personal items. Afterwards I visited the main museum in Potsdamer Platz to see the temporary exhibition *Things to Come*, which focused on the theme of science fiction in cinema.

During my visit to Berlin I managed to sample a vast amount of the city's culture including visits to the Bauhaus archive, Charlottenburg Palace and Garden, Treptow park and live jazz music. Thanks to the wonderful summer weather, I was even able to enjoy a swim at the well known Sommerbad lido in Kreuzberg.

Conclusion

Over the 10 weeks of my placement at the Rijksmuseum I was involved in the conservation and display of a fascinating and diverse range of textiles. In particular, having the opportunity to work on tapestries was invaluable as I would not have had the chance to do this on my programme in Glasgow.

Working in the AtelierGebouw I gained invaluable insight into the role of the conservator within a large institution and was inspired by the teamwork and collaboration and the many conservation disciplines in actions. The location of the University of Amsterdam conservation programme within the Atelier meant I was able to meet the textile conservation students and learn more about their training programme and as a result found much commonality between our individual courses.

The one-to-one training I received from the textile conservators was invaluable as I benefitted greatly from learning new skills such as adhesive support treatments and getting to know the the conservation team and working alongside them on projects was one of the most rewarding aspects.