

Ballarat Mechanics Institute Heritage Library Conservation Project

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The BMI acknowledges the Wadawurrung people as the first inhabitants and traditional custodians of the land on which the BMI building stands.

GCS acknowledge that we are on the lands of the Wurundjeri people who have been custodians of this land for thousands of years, and acknowledge and pay our respects to their Elders past and present.



The Ballarat Mechanics Institute Heritage Library Conservation project is supported by the Victorian Government through the Living Heritage Grants Program.

Heritage Library Conservation Projects underway



Image 1: L-R: Conservator Camille Fitzmaurice, BMI Heritage Library long-term staff member Rex Bridges, and student intern conservators Sunita Lewis, Monica Connors and Eleanor Zeitz assessing the condition of the Von Muller herbaria (Nov 2021).

In late 2020 project planning commenced between Ballarat Mechanics Institute (BMI), Grimwade Conservation Services (GCS) and Heritage Victoria for the conservation of three at-risk components of the BMI Heritage Library collection:

- Four volumes of Baron Ferdinand von Muller's *Education Collections of Australia Plants under the Auspices of the Australian Government* (1873-1876) – which hold over 200 individual herbaria specimens
- A selection of significant bound volumes from the Rare Book Collection
- The oil painting *Bonneted Girl with Dog* – a long-term resident of the Heritage Library walls

The BMI Heritage Library Collection is the largest and most intact collection of material relating to in Victoria. It offers insight into the activities of the Institute as research hubs from their beginnings in the mid-19th century. This collection is significant in its strong association with the intellectual, cultural and social development of Victorians.

Conservation works will focus on stabilising the library material to provide for its preservation through custom archival storage and housing, and to permit safe handling and access. The painting and its frame will be cleaned and repaired with the discoloured varnish removed to reveal the original colour and detail. The project will also assess physical environment of the Heritage Library to ensure to best possible conditions for the long-term care of the collection.

Collection Assessment by Grimwade Conservation Services

In November 2021, Book and Paper Conservators Peter Mitchelson and Camielle Fitzmaurice, accompanied by three student interns, travelled to Ballarat to visit the Heritage Library to assess the collection prior to conservation. They met with Mechanics Institute staff and volunteers, who shared their insight into the history and scope of the collection. The library material was assessed to understand what would be required to safely transport it to the GCS laboratories in Melbourne.



Image 2: Camielle, Monica and Peter make observations about a leather binding



Image 3: Eleanor and Sunita record condition data relating to the von Mueller herbaria



Image 4: Camielle and BMI staff volunteer Marion Blythman discussing the curatorial details of a rare bound volume



Image 5 & 6: Casey Jurgens, NHV Senior Curation Assistant, demonstrates how to contain loose specimen material, and associated documents

Grimwade Conservators visit National Herbarium of Victoria for research trip

The conservation works on the Von Mueller specimens will focus on stabilisation of the herbaria in line with the Royal Botanical Gardens National Herbarium of Victoria (NHF) guidelines for mounting specimens. This will allow safe access of these items into the future.

Von Mueller was a leading Australian botanist and was the government botanist for the colony of Victoria, appointed by Charles La Trobe in 1853. He went on to become the director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, and founded of the NHV.

In November 2021, the GCS Book and Paper Conservators embarked on a field trip to the NHV to understand more about the process of handling and working with Herbaria specimens. They observed specimen mounters at work and discussed practical outcomes for the BMI von Mueller specimens. This visit will be reciprocated when the Herbaria reach Melbourne, to the excitement of both NHV and GCS staff.

Ready to move! Permit approval and packing for transport

Project planning and preparation paid off in early January 2022, when Grimwade Conservation Services received approval from Heritage Victoria to return to BMI and pack the items for transport.

Permit approval from HV has allowed these items of great significance to be transported to GCS labs for specialist technical treatment that cannot be carried out onsite.

There were several steps to packing including documentation, wrapping, and labelling of all items. This process was completed over two separate days, with the oil painting movement supervised by GCS Principal Paintings Conservator Caroline Fry (images 9-11).



Image 7 Project Manager Libby Melzer conducting in-situ documentation prior to packing

Now packed, the collection material will be couriered by specialist art couriers in climate-controlled vehicles fitted with custom suspension for the transport of fragile works.

Documentation is an important part of the packing process. This records the condition of the item, so the rare event that any changes in condition resulting from transport can be identified upon delivery. This process also helps to identify and condition issues, so these can be mitigated for the transport process.



Image 8: Peter Mitchelson measures support board for the von Mueller volumes



Images 9, 10 & 11: (L-R) Paintings conservator Caroline Fry on-site in the Heritage Library assessing the large oil painting; testing to check strength; and stabilising and packing for safe transport to the Melbourne laboratory.

Environmental Monitoring

Paper Conservator Noni Zachri was on-site to install data loggers in various locations in the BMI building where the Heritage Collection is stored and displayed. These loggers will continuously record the temperature and relative humidity over the upcoming months to determine whether the environmental conditions are appropriate for the long-term care of the collection. GCS will work with the BMI team to introduce and assess a range of strategies to stabilise the environmental at levels appropriate to heritage material.



Image 12: Noni set up the data loggers and configured them to work via the BMI wifi. This will allow data to be transmitted to GCS in Melbourne.

What next? Transport and arrival of works in Melbourne!



Image 13: Herbaria and rare books packed and ready for transport

Get in touch



<https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/grimwade-centre-for-cultural-materials-conservation/conservation-services>



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