

ARTLAB AUSTRALIA: where the nation's treasures are preserved

The Mayor of Ballarat gasps in awe then beams with satisfaction as the five metre tyvek cover is lifted back to reveal the Eureka Flag, which looks magnificent after 300 hours of painstaking sewing with curved needles and thread so fine it is almost impossible to see with the naked eye. He has flown to Adelaide to survey the result of the skilful work of Artlab's textile conservators who have wrought a transformation on this 160 year old symbol of Australian democracy and such an important part of the tangible evidence of our nation's history.

"To see it now, restored and resplendent," he enthuses, "is just breathtaking."

Following detailed examination, forensic research and analysis, the flag has been reinstated to its original dimensions and supported on a new light-weight panel of aluminium honeycomb. The thousands of loose fibres were carefully couched onto a backing cloth of dyed polyester, and although the large areas of missing pieces – the result of many years of "souveniring" – will not be replaced, it is now more robust and better placed to face the next century and a half when it returns home to Victoria and to the public's gaze.

Elsewhere in Artlab, in the paintings studios next door, a conservator is cleaning grime and graffiti from the Yuendumu doors; dating from the 1980s they are some of the first paintings from the rebirth of indigenous art and the beginnings of the Western Desert school of painting. They are now in the collections of the South Australian Museum and were recently sent on loan with other aboriginal artefacts to an exhibition in Leiden in the Netherlands. Another colleague is removing the darkened varnish and discoloured re-touchings from George Frederick Watts' 19th Century masterpiece *Love and Death* which belongs to the Art Gallery of South Australia, and in the corridor, a canvas by contemporary German artist Gerhard Richter waits for attention like a patient waiting to see their surgeon.

In other studios conservators are repairing majolica ceramics, and regilding and restoring the damaged sgraffito on a 16th Century Spanish polychrome carving of St John the Baptist which also belong to the Art Gallery, whilst in the paper studio old-master drawings, mezzotint prints and copper engravings are being washed or are having their acidic card backings removed to be replaced with benign acid-free materials which will improve their longevity.

All this activity reflects what is needed to keep the art works and historic objects which make up our cultural heritage in good condition and on display for all to enjoy in public galleries and museums. And this is Artlab's purpose - to look after the collections of South Australia's heritage institutions; the Art Gallery and the South Australia Museum; History SA's several repositories of social, maritime and motoring history; the State Library's rare books collection and its media and sound archives, and the delightful and idiosyncratic art and chattels at Carrick Hill, a delightful historic house in the Adelaide suburbs.

The huge diversity of objects and works of art represented in these collections demands the skills and expertise of a wide range of conservation professionals: the

textile conservators who treat magnificent verdure tapestries and more mundane immigrants' costumes as well as petit-point embroidery and samplers from the Migration Museum, William Morris curtains at Carrick Hill, and beautiful silks and ikats from South East Asia which were prepared for a recent exhibition of Islamic Art from SE Asia; paintings experts who work on canvases and panel paintings, gilded and carved frames; and conservators specialising in paper, books and photographs; metals, ceramic and glass; ethnographic and natural history specimens; and sculpture conservators whose skills are required not only for cleaning marble statues and bronzes, but also for problem-solving and project management when several-ton sculptures have to be erected or moved, like Sir Alfred Gilbert's *Eros* for example, which had to be relocated before the hundreds of works from the Saatchi Collection in London arrived in Adelaide last month.

This great breadth of expertise and knowledge is Artlab's major asset and what makes Artlab a very special resource, but it is not just the Adelaide and South Australian collections which benefit from this wealth of knowledge and skills; institutions from all over Australia avail themselves of Artlab's expertise.

The Eureka Flag has been conserved on a commercial basis for the City of Ballarat; upstairs Edgar Degas' *Femme a la Baignoire se Coiffant* a sublime pastel work from the Elliott Collection in Mildura is receiving gentle treatment in the paper laboratory, and just a few years ago another national treasure, the hand-written log-books of Captain Bligh which relate the voyages and mutiny on HMS Bounty off Tahiti in 1789, were meticulously resown and rebound on behalf of the Mitchell Library in Sydney.

Our paintings conservators have recently returned from working on the mural decorations in the chapel at Fremantle Gaol in Western Australia, and at Port Arthur, historic convict colony in Tasmania they consolidated and restored the wall-paintings in the Commandants House. For our practice extends to historic interiors and outdoor heritage sites as well as museum collections, and a major client is the City of Adelaide where many of its grand and imposing monuments have been cleaned and conserved, such as Queen Victoria, Edward VII and the Boer War Memorial, the well-loved Robbie Burns and Ross Smith statues. (In 1919 Ross Smith was the first man to fly from Britain to Australia; his aircraft the Vickers Vimy has also received conservation treatment by Artlab).

Nor is our work restricted to Australian shores; we have undertaken projects in China, restoring the furniture and decorations at the Ohel Leah Synagogue in Hong Kong and mural paintings at the Bao-An Temple in Taipei, in India at New Delhi and Kolkata, and at Yogyakarta in Indonesia we carried out extensive conservation treatment on a richly gilded and decorated manuscript, the *Serat Ambiya*, for the Sonobudoyo Museum; this work was generously funded by the Australia Indonesia Institute and the Gordon Darling Foundation.

We also conduct training workshops overseas in all aspects of practical and preventative conservation, the most recent of which was held at the National Museum of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, and back in Australia two conservators have just returned from Alice Springs where they were delivering a 3 day program of collections management workshops for the benefit of local curators and collectors.

Regional collections can also benefit from advice on some of the schemes which operate nationally to support conservation projects

What makes Artlab unique however, and distinct from our sister conservation institutions in the other Australian capitals is the fact that we give advice and carry out practical treatments on the collections and personal treasures of anyone who cares to bring them along for advice. They might be a family heirloom or a recent acquisition to your art collection, an important document or an irreplaceable souvenir.

Consultation days are held every fortnight and the public can make an appointment to see the appropriate conservator – if you bring along your great grandmother's wedding dress, the family bible or your favourite oil painting you will receive the same expert advice and benefit from the same expert skills as do the curators and librarians who are the guardians of the states' and nation's treasures, and of course, the good citizens of Ballarat!