

The Arts Society Sussex
West Dean College Graduate Diploma in Conservation of Ceramics
Spring term report for Rosie Blay
2018

Tutor Report

Rosie has proved to be a conscientious and hard-working student who demonstrates natural talent in our discipline, is open to considering options for treatment and is able to apply neat hand skills. Essays, science assignments and contextual studies are approached with equal dedication, meeting all deadlines.

Our range of exercises across various body types (low-fired/high-fired objects) are completed efficiently and a range of live projects (objects owned by individuals and collections) are being handled carefully and treated with appropriate materials and techniques. Rosie is supportive of her peer group and a welcome addition to the department.

Lorna Calcutt, Ceramics Programme Leader

Student Report

I have thoroughly enjoyed my time so far at West Dean College, studying a Graduate Diploma in Conservation of Ceramics. I feel privileged to be attending such a prestigious college that has such a unique learning environment. The course is mentally stimulating and fulfilling, I have achieved a lot in a very short time. Reporting on my progress so far, I can reflect on the extent of my development.

I enjoy the practical emphasis, whilst at the same time studying the theory underpinning practice. I have already found myself applying what I have learnt about ethics when treating objects, I am aware of my decision-making, and what is best for an object. I have begun to build upon practical, theoretical and professional aspects of my practice and this is undoubtedly providing me with the building blocks to prosper in ceramic conservation.

The greatest aspect of the course is the opportunity to work on live projects; it reinstates the feeling of already being prepared for life after West Dean and working at a professional level. Professional and contextual studies help me understand the bigger picture of conservation, identifying where as individuals we sit within that context. I am also fortunate to have heard excellent guest speakers such as Patrick Whife from Icon who provided advice on working towards PACR: Professional Accreditation of Conservator – Restorers.

In the workshop, topics such as cleaning, bonding, filling, polishing and retouching have been introduced. Treatments and materials used for both porous and non-porous body types have been covered using practice objects. I have applied these skills to live projects: objects belonging to clients. Alongside treatments I carry out tests and analysis when required: tape tests, casting, consolidation sand tests and desalination. My science lessons complement and strengthen my knowledge of the materials and treatments that are used in the workshop. I have access to specialised science equipment such as the PXRf: portable X-ray fluorescence spectrometer and the FTIR: Fourier transform infrared spectrometer, which informs me of the best way to treat objects. Not only have I learnt the theory, I have been able to improve my skills in conserving objects through practical experience.

Even at this early stage in the course we are provided with the tools we need to build a career in this sector. Our subjects for written work often are self-directed. This means I can research themes that are relevant to objects that I am working on, or subjects that I would like to explore more. We are fortunate to have a low student: staff ratio therefore guidance is available when we need it, visiting tutors provide us with different approaches to treatments. An aspect of the course that I particularly like is that even though we have extensive tuition, we are also encouraged to have a big say in the way we treat the objects. This means that I am developing the ability to make my own decisions, and have the confidence and understanding to justify my actions.

Examples of my work

I have worked on a range of body types such as porcelain, stoneware and earthenware, as well as different glaze finishes, enamels and gilding. The objects have each been unique in their provenance and form, varying in their conservation needs, and treatment methods.

One object is a blue and white, hard paste porcelain Chinese cylinder vase. It had large areas of loss, and thick surface residue of dust and dirt that was concealing its decorative nature, and affecting the reading of the object as a whole. I decided to partially clean the sherds, which involves removing most of the dirt, whilst retaining an aged appearance that had built up over the years. The sherds were surface cleaned using warm water, solvent, steam cleaning and warm water submersion. As the dirt had become so ingrained, particularly along the break edges, I needed to repeat the cleaning methods several times. I stopped cleaning once the sherds showed no sign of shadowing or discolouration when keyed together. However, it was only upon bonding that it was evident that the sherds still had discolouration on the edges in places. I discussed the situation with my tutor, which enabled me to make the decision to dismantle the object to carry out further cleaning. I am enjoying working on this object as I have had ethical considerations to take into account, such as levels of cleaning, whilst also understanding the processes such of desiccation to dismantle freshly bonded objects.



Blue and white, hard paste porcelain Chinese cylinder vase. Before and after cleaning.

I am also working on an earthenware loving cup, featuring lustre and gilding. Although this cup was broken into many pieces, it is the rim that received most of the impact, so there were particularly small sherds from this section. I carried out a dry run of the bonding to ensure no sherds would be locked out, it became evident that some sherds had become sprung on impact, making the break edges misaligned in places. I was unsure whether all the sherds would be able to be included in the rim area, due to the nature of the break, which naturally raised ethical concerns. I was pleased as I managed to include all the sherds in the rim section when bonding. It is a challenging task but thoroughly enjoyable.



Earthenware loving cup. Before and after bonding.

Visits and volunteering work

A highlight of the course was a visit to the Allen Gallery, Alton, where we participated in a day of object handling. I was very interested in the salt glaze collection, particularly a bellarmine and a character jug. Having researched the topic for an essay and gained knowledge of production methods, I was able to identify with the finish of the glaze on the objects. After previously watching a BBC documentary on Wedgwood, I was also interested in a Jasper-ware teapot, I felt privileged to witness the decorative sprigs that had been created and applied with great care and attention. My appreciation of the objects accelerated through being able to handle them. The craftsmanship put into the individual pieces was far more apparent through the sense of touch as opposed to viewing the objects behind glass.



Object handling at Allen Gallery

Another great opportunity was the three-day visit to Fishbourne Roman Palace, Chichester. As volunteers, we were able to have hands on experience of object handling assessment, and contribute towards re-boxing the collection from St. Pancras Roman Cemetery. I was particularly fond of this task, as I am drawn to the history of archaeological wares, and the aesthetics particularly appeal to my taste. Through studying the objects in close proximity we were able to recommend pieces for future conservation. I gained valuable experience in a work setting, including the process of archiving a collection.



Fishbourne Roman Palace

I am very grateful to The Arts Society Sussex for providing me with the funding to enable me to study conservation of ceramics. This has given me the fantastic opportunity to achieve the first step in my career goal, which is to work in conservation. It has enabled me to go to an amazing college and receive outstanding tuition, as well as the opportunity to develop my knowledge and skills. I plan to continue learning by undertaking work experience in the summer to contribute to my personal development. Conserving intriguing and important objects for the future is something that I love doing, and the course has confirmed my passion for this career path. After completion of the course I aim to progress onto the postgraduate, and the MA at West Dean. I hope to secure an internship on completing my education, and I would love to work in either a museum, or in the private sector, because this will enable me to achieve my aim of working in conservation.