

An Interview with the Paintings Conservation Interns

<http://famsfconservation.wordpress.com/>

Name: Erin Stephenson **Email:** estephenson@famsf.org **Date:** December 17, 2010

Dates of internship: September 2010 - September 2011

Undergraduate university: Oregon State University

Degree: Bachelor of Fine Arts, minor in art history **Date of completion:** 2004

Post-graduate education (for grad school prep): Portland Community College

Degree: Associate of Science **Date of Completion:** 2006

Graduate university: SUNY Buffalo State College

Degree: Master of Arts and Certificate of Advanced Study **Date of completion:** Expected 2011

Q: How did you decide on conservation as a career and what steps did you take before applying to conservation programs?

A: *My introduction to conservation as a career possibility came in the form of an “a ha!” moment during a commercial for Rembrandt whitening toothpaste. The woman in the commercial claimed to have knowledge of stains, and how to remove them, because she was an art restorer. At that moment I knew that was what I wanted to do. That was almost ten years ago. In order to prepare for application to graduate programs I think it is necessary to adopt a gracious no-fear approach, recognize that all experience is valuable, and accept that rejection is just part of the process. It is also important to understand that most pre-program experience is unpaid. I was on the west coast in an area where conservation is relatively isolated so finding experience was difficult at first. But I was determined and had a good support system. My first experience involved working with an art collection owned by my university. After I graduated I focused on fulfilling my chemistry requirements and included additional classes in art history and foreign language. Eventually I found internships with conservators in private practice and at the local art museum. I also volunteered my time and ultimately found a paid position at a regional art and culture center. Not all of those experiences were directly related to conservation but they were all vital to my preparation for graduate school and I believe they will have a positive influence on the rest of my career.*

Q: What attracted you to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco?

A: *At this point in my career I think it is important to keep myself open to varied experiences. I was attracted to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco because it encompasses the collections at the de Young Museum and the Legion of Honor, which promised exposure to an expansive range of paintings. In addition, the conservation staff has a reputation for providing a great internship environment. I was eager to work with these great collections under the supervision of this diverse and positive group of conservators.*

Q: What challenges did you face in coming to San Francisco for your internship?

A: *There were obvious challenges, such as finding a place to live while I was still in Buffalo and dealing with all of the related expenses that come with moving across the country. I was also moving with a cat and I am still amazed at how difficult it is to have a pet in this city. I saw so many people with animals and I kept wondering, "Where do they live?!" The cost of living is much higher here, too. Then there were the less obvious challenges such as the fact that my husband and I made the difficult decision that he would stay in Buffalo for the year to keep his job while I moved out here.*

Q: Compare and contrast your experience at FAMSF to your previous museum experience.

A: *My previous experience at a museum was very different than my experience at FAMSF because that museum was much smaller and did not have the level of support for conservation, both financial and administrative, that is provided for the paintings conservation lab at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Funding can also vary as much between labs within an institution as it does between different museums, as is the case at FAMSF. Unfortunately, such disadvantages are common in most museums throughout the United States. My participation in these contrasting situations gave me an understanding of how a well-supported conservation lab functions, as well a realistic view of the success through ingenuity and inevitable limitations of a less supported museum.*

Q: What projects are you focusing on during your internship?

A: *My internship gives me the opportunity to work on a variety of projects. Right now I am in the process of treating a sixteenth century European painting by Jakob Seisenegger that came into the FAMSF collections from the Kress Collection. It is a complicated and time consuming treatment and I think the final results will be very rewarding. I am also working on a technical study of a painting ascribed to William Merritt Chase, which gives me the opportunity to exercise my research skills and acquaint myself with an important figure in American painting. I am enjoying the challenges and contrasting strengths of these projects.*

Q: What is one interesting or surprising thing you have discovered about doing conservation in a museum setting?

A: *The pace, or rather how the pace is determined. Conservation work in graduate school is very fast and very stressful because we only have a limited time to learn everything we can to prepare for a career in conservation. We learn documentation skills, become familiar with and practice scientific analysis, and conduct multiple treatments and research all at once. Conservation in a regional center or private practice is influenced by the amount of work available and a careful balance of time versus funding. A museum lab is guided by the exhibition schedules and curatorial objectives, so sometimes there is a lot of time to work on a project and at other times it is necessary to work very quickly and efficiently to ensure the project will be completed by a fast-approaching deadline. Conservators in museum labs also have responsibilities outside of the lab that are inherent to the successful daily function of a museum.*

Q: What do you find rewarding about working in conservation?

A: *I remember going into museums in the past and resenting the signs that read, “Do Not Touch.” I knew someone out there had the honor of caring for and touching those wonderful works of art—after all, they did not end up on the walls and in the vitrines all by themselves. I always loved creating art, studying art history, and found science intriguing but distanced from the art world. Conservation is the perfect blend and balance of all three. Conservation allows an intimacy with the artwork and artists, as well as a connection with history, that is unique to this profession. It also comes with great responsibility and wonderful variety. I love it.*

Q: What do you plan to do after your internship?

A: *The most common course for a young conservator is to search and apply for the limited number of post-graduate fellowship positions offered each year at museums and institutions throughout the country. The hope is that the fellowships will strengthen the foundation we gained during our graduate studies and improve our qualifications for a permanent position if and when one becomes available. Unfortunately funding is limited and the available positions, both in fellowships and permanent employment, do not meet the demand. It is common to go through a long series of fellowships or other provisional positions before finding long-term employment. This leads some new conservators to open a private practice but I know that is not the best course for me. I have applied for several fellowships and I hope I will have the opportunity to take one of them next year.*

Q: In the future, do you hope to continue working at a museum, or do you plan to have an independent practice?

A: *I would like to continue working in a museum because I enjoy the daily interaction with other conservators and people from other departments who work closely with conservation. That said, I would not be opposed to working in private practice, or joining an established independent lab, where I would have more direct interaction with the public and see a variety of different work. I think there can be benefits to both options but in either situation I hope I will continue collaborating with fellow conservators because I think that is the best way to continue growing in this profession.*