

Unveiling the Apocalypse

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ABSTRACT

When *The Apocalypse of St John the Divine*, by Australian artist Donald Friend (1915–1989) was brought to the Paper Conservation Department, National Gallery of Australia (NGA), it was a composite work on paper attached to three sheets of Masonite protected by a narrow timber frame. The irregularity of the paper sheets created exposed areas of secondary support around the edges, which had been painted blue. But why had it been painted blue and by whom? If Donald Friend had designed its presentation, the NGA, according to its policy, would have documented and retained the framing materials – but there was no such record. Also, while the NGA may possibly have exhibited it in this way it looked fairly unprofessional so it was thought worthwhile to research the work's past with the hope of resolving the question. As Friend painted the *Apocalypse* 62 years ago the possibility of locating his contemporaries to discuss its history seemed remote. This paper discusses the conservation treatment and importance of investigating provenance.

KEYWORDS

framing, secondary support, composite sheets, provenance, backing removal.

BACKGROUND

When the NGA acquired *The Apocalypse of St John the Divine* by Donald Friend (see Figure 1) in 1972, the support was distorted.

The sheets, with several cuts across them, had been pasted onto a secondary support with its borders painted blue. Discussion was held with the paper conservation team and Roger Butler, the Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings at the NGA, regarding the loss in the top left corner and whether Donald Friend had mounted and framed the work as presented. If, after assessment, it was decided to remove the mural from the secondary support and provide another, the question remained if the loss should be in-filled and if the old support and its narrow wooden frame should be retained as historical information, taking into consideration its size and use of storage space. Knowing the work was completed in 1949 and that Donald Friend had died in 1989 the chance of resolving the questions of who had mounted the mural and painted the border seemed unlikely.

RESEARCH

Initial investigation convinced all parties to proceed with its removal. The earlier condition report documented some remedial treatment undertaken before it was exhibited in 1995. The decision was made to investigate its provenance. The first step was to read the NGA's files and Friend's detailed and sometimes

hilarious illustrated diaries that were transcribed edited and published first by Anne Gray from the NGA and later in volumes 2–4 by Paul Hetherington, National Library of Australia. The diaries are a rich resource not only about Friend with his satirical observations but about the many other artists he knew. The unveiling of the *Apocalypse* began.

The *Apocalypse* painted by Friend in his house at Hill End New South Wales in 1948, was based on the final book of the New Testament, *Revelation* or the 'Apocalypse'. There he pinned and re-pinned the sheets that comprise the work onto his bedroom wall. Friend unveiled a tumultuous interpretation of St John's iconographic allegory written in 95 AD when St John received through God a series of visions showing the cataclysmic end of the world and with it the possibility of redemption.

Friend's road to Hill End began when he encouraged Russell Drysdale to explore the old gold mining towns near Bathurst. In August 1947 they drove to Sofala in Drysdale's new Riley Tourer (Wilson 2001). Here they sketched the main street and then pressed on to Hill End. Friend wrote: '... A town character showed us round an old ruined village living in the memory of its former 50,000 inhabitants—fabulous tales of gold strikes. Now there are only a handful of rather sordid, jovial mad peasants who live by fossicking and rabbiting' (Hetherington 2003, p.538). By September and needing to escape the demands of family and the artistic community living at the boarding house, Merioola, in Woolahra, Friend and Donald Murray bought a leaking wattle and daub four room house on a couple of acres in Hill End for £70. The house provided a retreat for many artists including Drysdale, Jean Bellette and Paul Haefliger, Fred Jessup, Jeffrey Smart, David Strachan and Margaret Olley, who bravely faced the cold weather when painting the countryside around Hill End by strapping on a hot water bottle.



Figure 1: Donald Friend Australia 1915 – 1989 *The Apocalypse of St John the Divine* 1948 watercolour, gouache, pen and brush with black and coloured inks, wax crayon, graphite 151.2 x 442.3 cm National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1972 Reproduced with permission from the Estate of the Late Donald Friend

The *Apocalypse* was the most ambitious project Friend had undertaken but he had doubts that it would be saleable because of its size. By July 1948 Friend had almost completed the mural: 'I worked all day painting devils and hell scenes in the long-neglected *Apocalypse*—Bosch's influence I suppose'. Friend had just bought a 'fine book of Hieronymus Bosch's painting' in Sydney after he had helped Olley 'fix the frames' for her show (Hetherington 2003, p.602). And in a diary entry two days later: '... The sky was so overcast it was too dark to work for long on the *Apocalypse*. In any case, the picture is now really complete ... It contains absolutely nothing of belief in what purports to be the subject—no fear of the Hells, no hope of the Heavens, no credence in the prophecies. It is an exercise in a dozen styles ...' (Hetherington 2003, p.603).

Having received favourable comments from artists Haefliger and Jessup, Friend suggested to Robert Haines when offered a show at Georges Gallery, Melbourne from 29 March to 7 April 1949, that he include the *Apocalypse* as it should 'cause a sensation'.¹ He writes in his diary that he had tacked it to artist Peter Kaiser's wall at Merioola—where journalist Harry Tatlock Miller also saw it—so it was likely tacked to the Georges Gallery wall a few days later, the sheets having been previously pasted together, as there are no tack holes across the central image. Although the work has been irregularly trimmed some of the tack holes are still visible along the top edge. Friend was concerned how it could be mounted and framed but had faith that Haines 'might have an idea' (Hetherington 2003, p.642). Friend was delighted with the hang.

An NGA file note written by Daniel Thomas (NGA Senior Curator of Australian Art 1978–1984) on 3 April 1979 recorded a discussion with the gallery owner and collector Chandler Coventry. Thomas wrote, '...it was installed by Donald Friend himself at the Coventry's property Rockvale near Armidale in the large room which was then a music room. It was later stored at the Queensland Art Gallery and then installed in a living room of their sister's (to whom it had been bequeathed) living room [sic] on her property Garie [sic]. She then sold it to the Australian National Gallery...' (Thomas 1979). (David Coventry owned Rockvale Station when the *Apocalypse* was installed. Beatrice Hinchcliffe was the younger sister of David and Chandler.)

Other correspondence confirmed that Chandler Coventry had written to Brendon Kelson, Secretary, Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, that James Mollison had inspected the *Apocalypse* in January 1970. Chandler wrote '... Mrs. Hinchcliffe is prepared to sell the painting and the price is \$18,000. The painting is in need of some restoration for which she would be prepared to pay up to \$1000 ...' (Chandler 1970).² There are two Polaroid photographs of the *Apocalypse* in this condition on file at NGA, in situ in the dining room at Gowrie near Toowoomba, the property owned by Beatrice and her husband Gordon Hinchcliffe.

Another file note in 1975 by NGA Director James Mollison to Conservator Chris Payne, discussed a new narrow frame with no mention of an old one so the work was probably acquired unframed (Mollison 1975). This resolves the frame question but who mounted it and painted the blue?

Steven Miller, Archivist at the Research Library at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), checked their Donald Friend file, the clippings and the Coventry file for further information. Steven found a newspaper article and photograph of Friend in front of the work (probably when tacked to the wall at Merioola) published in *The Sun* (Miller 1949). Steven scanned it but it was too pixelated to gain much information except that the *Apocalypse* was unframed. The photograph was not clear enough to show whether the work was pasted or pinned together at that time.³

According to Daniel Thomas the work had been stored at the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) sometime before it was taken to Gowrie. Therefore, colleague Samantha Shellard and Research Curator Glenn Cooke were contacted to check QAG's Friend file regarding the framing, storage and possible exhibition of

the *Apocalypse*. There was nothing on record, so that line of investigation halted.

The Fairfax photo archive was contacted just in case they had scanned *The Sun*. Miraculously their picture researcher found the original photograph, but not the negative. This allowed NGA photographer Brenton McGeachie, to blow-up the top left corner, to try and extract detail for infilling the loss. It was still, however, difficult to see clearly.

At this stage the trail took another turn. It was necessary to find other installation photographs of the *Apocalypse* at Rockvale Station to answer the questions of the mounting system and the possibility of wall architecture that may have impacted on the lost top left corner. Dr John Farrell was contacted at the Armidale Historical Society with the hope they might have some photographs or know people in the area who once knew the Coventry family. At his suggestion, Ross and Peg Tully friends of the Coventry family, Patricia Coventry, the University of New England and Regional Archives were all contacted.

The New England Regional Art Museum (NERAM) was approached (no photographs were found), as was Barry Pearce, Curator of Australian Art at the AGNSW, who had curated the Donald Friend retrospective in 1990. It was hoped he might know if Beatrice Hinchcliffe was still alive. He didn't but he did know that the Hinchcliffe's house, Gowrie, no longer existed. Barry suggested contacting Christopher Hodges at Utopia Gallery, who knew the family, and Bryan Hooper, who worked with Chandler Coventry for many years. They were generous with background information, including that Beatrice Hinchcliffe was probably alive, as they hadn't heard otherwise (in fact, they found her phone number). They also revealed that there was a box of photographs of Rockvale Station at NERAM taken at a fundraiser. They suggested contacting Joe Eisenberg, former Director of NERAM, now Director Maitland Regional Museum and Art Gallery, who confirmed that, in his time at NERAM, there was a 'map drawer titled Coventry bits and pieces or something inane like that' (pers. comm., 15 May 2009). Fundraising was undertaken in the 1970s by the local community because Chandler Coventry had offered his private collection of contemporary art to Armidale on condition that a new gallery was built to house his and the Howard Hinton collection. Unfortunately the Director Caroline Downer could not locate the photographs of Rockvale Station.

Peg Tully in Armidale did not know of any photographs but suggested contacting Molly Anderson, who was once married to David Coventry. Patricia Coventry also had Beatrice Hinchcliffe's number in Sydney but did not have any photographs.

I had several discussions with Beatrice (Bea) Hinchcliffe and Molly Anderson in May 2009 and although they had to search back 60 years to answer questions, occasionally unsure of dates but with good humour, a few gaps have been filled concerning the *Apocalypse* that have now enriched its provenance.

When in London in 1949 Friend recorded in his diary: 'Harry Miller came with news that my *Apocalypse* had been sold to young Coventry' (Hetherington 2005, p.31). Friend's understanding at this stage must have been that it had been sold to Chandler Coventry. He had later confirmation from John Amory of David Jones' Gallery that the *Apocalypse* had been sold to 'Coventry' for £250 (Hetherington 2005, p.39). (The work must have been returned from George's Gallery in Melbourne, where it was for sale for 300 guineas, to Sydney.) It was sold to David Coventry from Rockvale Station. Because of its size the work was installed in the music room, with the Steinway piano, as David called it (or the ballroom, as his younger brother Chandler referred to it) and there David would lie on his long couch and listen to classical music looking at the mural, which dominated the space on a dark wall.⁴

On 10 September 1951 Friend writes in his diary when preparing to drive to Brisbane for the opening of his show at Marodian Galleries, 'I might stop in at Coventry's place at Armidale to have

a look at my *Apocalypse* mural, which is there, set, I have heard, more beautifully than any picture of mine has ever been set ...' (Hughes 1965, p.115; Hetherington 2005, p.120). This confirms that Friend didn't install it at Rockvale Station as noted in the NGA's file. Molly Anderson, David Coventry's wife, recalled Friend re-pasted a few lifting edges during his Armidale stopover.⁵

Bea recalled she and Chandler (Channy) travelled to England in 1952 for nearly a year. While they were away, David sold Rockvale Station, which upset Channy as he was not given the chance to buy it. It is assumed the *Apocalypse* was removed from the wall and sent to QAG for safe storage in 1952 where old friend Robert Haines was the Director. Bea married Gordon Hinchcliffe in 1954 and they moved to the property Gowrie in 1961. David reclaimed the *Apocalypse* from QAG in 1962 or 1963 with some difficulty, as they didn't want to relinquish it. It was then installed at Gowrie because it had a large enough room to accommodate it. Chandler, who was still estranged from David at that time, had bought back Rockvale Station around 1958. Chandler never owned the *Apocalypse*.

Bea confirmed that her husband Gordon built the support and mounted the work, against her better judgment, when it arrived at Gowrie and then painted the exposed Masonite in blue. She said she must have been away at the time, as she wouldn't have let it happen. Why the small top left corner is missing remains a mystery but could possibly have been lost during the de-installation when leaving Rockvale Station where the mural was rolled up by David, or in transport, or in storage at QAG.⁶

CONDITION

It appears further damage occurred when the work was stored at the Department of Manufacturing Industry Store, documented in a NGA file note by the Registrar, Warwick Reeder (1975). It is probably during this time before secure storage that the lower right corner with the majority of the signature was unfortunately lost. The mural had minor treatment in 1975 at the NGA, reattaching lifting paper edges and in-painting extensive silver fish damage, some of which is just visible in the photograph taken at Gowrie. The joins in the Masonite sheets expanded and contracted over time causing the paper to tear vertically in two places. There are many distortions and cuts to the sheets that may have been done to reduce air bubbles when the paper was pasted onto this secondary support.

STRUCTURE

The mural comprises 16 sheets of different but good quality papers. The two wove sheets on the far right, comprising the 'new Jerusalem', are countermarked 'J WHATMAN 1947 mould made', so it is apparent that Friend acquired the papers from England soon after they were produced. Other laid sheets have partial countermarks such as, 'Arnold'.

ARTIST'S TECHNIQUE

On 3 April 1944 Friend writes in his diary '... experiments in a new medium—coloured inks, white and black ink and watercolours all mixed. The result is very rich' (Hetherington 2003, p.54; Pearce 1990, p.24). However, the inks in many of his drawings, including the *Apocalypse*, have lost some of their intensity through fading but it was a medium that produced vibrant drawings and was a technique he used for many years.

The robust quality of the papers allowed Friend to experiment and physically attack the surface. The drawing was first lightly sketched in graphite and the process of drawing and the changes made are easily visible. White wax was also used to roughly sketch in shapes or to break up the resulting image as the wax rejects a watercolour or ink wash. Black and red inks were used predominantly but the relationship between the lines, the washes

and the cream colour of the papers has probably changed. The surface was also scraped back by Friend, another traditional watercolour technique that provides highlights as well as a disruption to the image—giving in this case the aged appearance of an old fresco.

There are several entries in Friend's diaries referring to the purchase of materials. The supplier is not identified but was likely Parker Galleries (M Olley 2009, pers. comm., 5 June) or WC Penfold, who imported a variety of Whatman papers into Sydney and Melbourne. He writes in his diary on 12 April 1948, '... I have most of the drawing pinned on my wall, which it almost covers, and, now that all the detailed work is in, work over it boldly ...' (Hetherington 2003, p.580). There are many three-pronged pinholes (upholstery pins) in corners and across several of the sheets from regular repositioning. It is apparent that Friend pinned the sheets along the top from left to right with the lower papers pinned over the upper layers. The majority of the paper sheets are overlapped and pasted together with little paint underneath the joins, suggesting the majority were pinned prior to painting. Whether Friend joined the sheets in this fashion before its first exhibition in 1949 is presently unknown.

CONSERVATION

The work was removed mechanically. Investigating the adhesive, once the work was free, it was found that there were two layers of starch, possibly wallpaper paste. The first was probably to attach it to the wall at Rockvale Station and the second to the Masonite at Gowrie. Both layers of starch were discoloured as a result of acid migration from the secondary support. The back of the work showed brown discoloured strips including rust from nails that did not relate to the Masonite construction but were probably transferred from battens attached to the wall at Rockvale Station. Molly Anderson recalled a wooden structure and Caneite (sugar cane bagasse) backing attached to the wall although she was away for the actual installation of the work (pers. comm., 16 & 22 May 2009).

The old paste was moistened and scraped away. Joins, tears and cuts were repaired, and losses filled and in-painted to unify the image including the top left and lower right corners. The distortions were reduced but it was considered unnecessary to separate each sheet and reattach. The present appearance reflects its rich history.

ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIUM

Small samples of the inks and paint were taken for FTIR (infrared spectroscopy) analysis. The inks were confirmed as dyes, probably aniline, as shellac was identified as the binder. All the waxes contained pigments—the white has a trace of chalk but the pigment samples from the watercolour and ink washes were not intense enough to identify specifically.

REOUNTING

Strips of Japanese paper were pasted around the edges. A hinged aluminium grid secondary support was designed in case the work ever travelled. It was covered with acid free multi-use board. The back of the work was lightly sprayed to relax the drawing with some fear that the inks might bleed, and then the strips were taped to the back of the new support so that the work was lightly stretched and could be easily removed in the future.

REFRAMING

Friend discussed his preference for gilded frames with paintings conservator, Anne Gaulton, and me at the AGNSW in 1988. Although he wrote in his diary that Parker Galleries provided simple wooden frames that could be coloured by the artist, which he occasionally did with Drysdale, Friend wrote also that the framer Styles in Sydney mounted his works with ready-made frames

(Hetherington 2003. P.345).⁷ Molly Anderson did not recall a frame when the work was mounted at Rockvale Station but said if there was one it would have been very narrow. A similar frame with a rounded profile was made in the NGA workshop, hand coloured blue/grey and highlighted with gold to protect the edges of the work and acknowledge Friend's preference for gilded frames.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes conservators are given the opportunity to research not only the physical and chemical aspects of a work but its provenance to gain further information—in this case call it providence or divine intervention. So, what happened to the old support? The curator sent it off to storage—just in case.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Robert Haines (1910–2005) was Director of Georges Gallery before being appointed Assistant Director at the National Gallery of Victoria (1947–1951) and then Director at the Queensland Art Gallery (1951–1960). He hung Friend's works at Georges Gallery in 1949.
- ² In reply to Chandler Coventry Kelson suggested, '...Perhaps Mrs. Hinchcliffe might enquire of Donald Friend whether he would be prepared to undertake the work'. Beatrice Hinchcliffe was paid \$1000 less than the \$18,000 sale price to cover restoration which was not undertaken at that time. Chandler used the \$17,000 to support his gallery in Sydney and repaid Hinchcliffe in paintings ten years later (Hinchcliffe, pers. comm., 15 May 2009).
- ³ Harry Tatlock Miller also lived at Merioola during the 1940s, including artists Loudon Sainthill, Justin O'Brien and Arthur Fleischmann.
- ⁴ David Coventry (1920–1966), Chandler Coventry (1924–1999). According to Beatrice Hinchcliffe, David stimulated Chandler's interest in art (pers.comm., 18 May 2009).
- ⁵ Molly Anderson reported that Friend stayed at Rockvale Station for a few days, and drew three sketches of her (pers.comm., 16 May 2009).
- ⁶ Because Robert Haines was Director of QAG at the time and had hung the work in 1949 at Georges Gallery it is assumed it was an unofficial agreement with David Coventry.
- ⁷ Friend writes in his diary in January 1946, 'Then today I went to town again, to see Parkers about frames. They produce, for terrific prices, careless knocked-up-affairs, with the nails showing. Raw wood unpainted. One has to take them home and work on them. There are no other framers in Sydney.'

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BIOGRAPHY

Rose Peel is presently on contract for the National Gallery of Australia 2009–2010. She was Senior Paper Conservator at the AGNSW from 1985–2008 having worked independently from 1979–1985. She was Head Conservator National Australian Archives ACT 1975, Assistant Conservator National Library of Australia 1973–74 and Exhibition and Conservation Assistant 1970–71. Rose contributed an essay 'Australian postwar photo-documentary' Photography Art Gallery of New South Wales collection handbook 2006, convened the Third National Symposium for Paper, Books and Photographic Materials—*collaboration & connections* 2004, co-curated the Margaret Preston exhibition and contributed catalogue essay 'Drawing Connections' 2004, produced *Zhuangbiao*—a CD on mounting a Chinese scroll with Conservator for Asian Art, Sun Yu 2003, and devised and coordinated a series of seminars and exhibition for the Bicentennial program, *Conservation on the Move*. Rose has a Bachelor of Arts (majoring in art history and theory) University of Sydney and is a member of the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material Inc. Awarded *Certificate of service to AICCM and the conservation profession* in 2008. Established the NSW division of AICCM in 1981 and served on various relevant committees.

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