

# BEHIND, OVER AND UNDER THE SCENES..... THE CONSERVATION OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR DIORAMAS

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As part of the Australian War Memorial's commemorations for the First World War (FWW) centenary, the much-loved diorama battle scenes are receiving detailed attention from a team of dedicated conservators. The first time such extensive conservation has been conducted since their original creation in the 1920s and 30s, the diorama conservation project sits within the wider context of the Memorial's major redevelopment of its First World War galleries. As such, close collaboration with internal workshop, registration, curatorial and exhibition staff along with external builders and designers is required to facilitate substantial structural building works and layout changes, most notably the rearrangement of the dioramas into chronological order.

## THE FWW DIORAMAS....



Mont St Quentin - plaster and lathe sections from below; detail of figures; Bullecourt - previously 'propped up' on bricks

## STRUCTURE

The 10 large and 18 small FWW dioramas were constructed with plaster and lathe on sectioned timber framework, with various other elements including cast metal figures and horses, timber/plaster buildings and real twigs.

The backdrops of the small dioramas are the original plaster domes, however the larger backdrops are either fibreglass resin domes, plywood or curved fibrous plasterboard.

This project deals with objects that, despite being created by renowned artists such as Louis McCubbin, Wallace Anderson, Web Gilbert, Leslie Bowles and Frank Lynch, spent most of their life as un-accessioned non-collection, gallery 'fit-out' until the 1990s. This has meant that several modifications over the years, both structurally and aesthetically, held little regard for preservation of original materials and integrity.



Alana brush vacuuming Somme Winter; flaking paint on Transportation backdrops; Kasi's fill on crate loss on a Transportation diorama

## CONSERVATION CLEANING & REPAIR

Thanks to funding the Memorial has received to mark the centenary of the FWW, we have the opportunity to bring the dioramas and their backdrops to the best possible condition for display. Over a two year period conservators are carrying out intensive surface cleaning, consolidation of broken and loose pieces of plaster and flaking paint, filling and inpainting lost plaster, and repairing or replacing missing and broken components such as weapons.

The majority of our work is isolated from general building works by hoarding and is conducted on a scaffolding set-up with a counterweighted platform out over the diorama enabling us to lie in prone position to work on the surface.



Nick's repairs to a soldier's broken arm on Ypres - BT, DT and AT

## FWW GALLERIES REDEVELOPMENT....

### DESIGN AND CURATORIAL VISION

- Rearrangement into chronological order has required considerable structural improvements to reinforce base frameworks and protection for pre-demolition of brick walls to then allow movement as whole structures (as opposed to being cut up into individual sections as in the past). This will also enable alteration of the height of some for the new display facades.
- Decisions to no longer display some dioramas in the redeveloped galleries and another in an adjacent room, has regrettably required them to be cut-up to physically remove from the building or to fit through a structural doorway. Cuts have only been made along previous section joins but have been done with the largest possible combination of individual sections. Consolidation of material at these cuts has minimised damage.
- To avoid inevitable damage created in the removal of the curved fibrous plasterboard backdrops of two dioramas now relocated to storage, we insisted the backdrops remain insitu protected and 'stored' behind the new displays.



Additional reinforcement to base of dioramas; during demolition of non-structural 1970s walls; sectioning of Mont St Quentin to fit through doorway

### HERITAGE BUILDING

- Certain parts of the FWW galleries are part of the Memorial's original 1940s building which has had a bearing on the conservation work on the Transportation series which sits behind an original metal façade which could not be removed to allow closer access without damage, so work has been conducted insitu on 'diving board' style scaffolding.



Transportation Series and façade - whilst gallery open; insitu scaffolding; Jocelyn in working position for consolidating flaking paint on backdrop

### BUILDING SITE

- Whilst demolition and construction work is conducted in the FWW galleries between June and December 2013, the space is officially the builder's site, we have been required to obtain National Construction Induction cards; sign in at the site office daily and wear hardhats, high-vis vests and steel-cap boots and share the crowded space with multiple sub-contractors, building materials and numerous scissorlifts. Following requirements of a building site, our electrical equipment is tested and tagged every 3 months and we are restricted to the use of platforms greater than 425mm<sup>2</sup>.
- Additional movement of the dioramas to temporary positions within the space and close consultation in scheduling has been carried out to allow building works including new overhead air-conditioning and electrical work, demolition of existing brick walls and enable new niches to be built.

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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