

# Presentation Abstracts

(in order of program)

# revivify

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# revivify 2016

14<sup>th</sup> AICCM Paintings Special Interest Group Symposium

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# The rediscovery and restoration of artworks by T.R Pridgeon (1885-1942)

Full presentation

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In 2012, after the death of a reclusive uncle, the Pridgeon family of Maryborough, Victoria, unearthed a large collection of early 20th Century paintings by their ancestor T.R Pridgeon (1885-1942). A number of these artworks had never been displayed before, others not for 100 years, and required extensive restoration in preparation for a retrospective exhibition "The Discovered Life Works of T.R Pridgeon" at the Victorian Artist's Society (VAS) in October 2015.

*"...when Uncle Stan died, our journey began. My family had always known of the paintings stored in this old dilapidated house, but just how many we had no idea of. The last 4 years has been a process of discovery, sifting through the clutter accumulated over a century to discover the artistic creations of T.R.PRIDGEON. Room by room of this dark, dingy old house, beneath seven decades of dust and cobwebs, artworks including oil paintings from the early 1900s, were gradually unearthed. My father's premonition of a blaze of destruction had never eventuated, yet many paintings were still on the brink of irreparable decay. And so came the long haul of art conservation..." (Pridgeon 2016)*

- Sally Pridgeon, granddaughter of the artist

This presentation discusses the major treatments undertaken in order to rehabilitate and *revivify* two important paintings from this collection which were brought to a private conservation studio in Melbourne in early 2014 by the artist's granddaughter. The project is discussed in the context of private practice, highlighting the rewarding process of working closely with clients, hearing their stories, and seeing their family treasures restored, and in this case, on display and being appreciated by the public for the first time.



*T.R.Pridgeon, 'The beginning of wool growing in Australia...', after treatment*

The painting which was later to become the centrepiece for the 'Discovered Life Works' exhibition came into the studio a billowing, cobwebbed 2 x 2 metre canvas, loosely fixed to a makeshift stretcher for transport, its original frame dismantled and tucked in behind the painting in a closed trailer. *The beginning of wool growing in Australia, Macarthur landing Merino sheep near Sydney* is an accomplished oil on canvas, painted c.1910. The hand of a proficient watercolourist is evident in the thin, wash application of oil paint, the artist appearing to consciously utilise the highly textured and absorbent canvas support as he would a sheet of watercolour paper. A series of metal and cardboard eyelets running around the margins of the canvas, and the herringbone twill pattern and cotton ticking type fabric, indicate the

support may in fact be a piece of wool sacking for baling and storing wool. Between the canvas and lower stretcher bar, a 1943 Australian shilling was found, bearing the head of a merino sheep.

The paint layer was extensively cracked and flaking in many areas and there were substantial losses associated with this damage. The large canvas was scattered with splits and punctures both around the margins and within the composition and a new custom stretcher was required. The attachment of a strip-lining and subsequent restretching of a canvas this size posed many challenges to a solo conservator working in a 3.5 x 4m studio.

The second painting discussed, an unstretched oil on canvas, came into the studio rolled with the paint layer on the inside. Having not been unrolled for decades nor sighted by the family, it was unrolled for the first time in the studio with the artist's granddaughter present. What was discovered was an atmospheric coastal landscape (characteristic of Victoria's western coast), which was in poor, but salvageable condition.

Prior to extensive aesthetic repairs, the painting required substantial consolidation, flattening, strip-lining and restretching on a custom stretcher, in order to bring it from unsighted and barely viewable up to a displayable level. This painting was ultimately framed and hung in the VAS exhibition in 2015, possibly on public display for the first time in its history.



*T.R.Pridgeon, 'Untitled' [Beach landscape], before and after treatment*

## Reference:

Pridgeon, S, 2016, 'Story of discovery of artist's life body of work', *T.R Pridgeon Victorian Landscapes by Watercolour*, <<http://trpridgeon.com.au/index.php/about/>>

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Helen Gill has been working as a Conservator of Paintings for 8 years both within Australia and internationally. She has worked with the National Gallery of Victoria as H.D.T Williamson Foundation Fellow, the CCMC, QAG/GOMA and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, as well as the National Gallery of Denmark. Since setting up in private practice in 2013, she has completed projects for a number of large institutions, regional gallery and council collections, private collectors and in collaboration with other private studios both in Australia and in Denmark.