

Sydney Symposium 2004

## Fred Williams: an artist's material archive

Ruth Shervington

### ABSTRACT

*Investigations into the media used by Fred Williams for a specific group of works, led to the exciting discovery of a comprehensive archive of receipts and invoices for artist's materials in the care of Lyn Williams. The National Gallery of Victoria has been very fortunate to be able to make a complete copy of these documents and has entered the information into an electronic database. This paper will cover some of the types of materials purchased, briefly explain the layout of the database and discuss some preliminary analysis. It is hoped that this information may be useful to colleagues in the conservation profession and related fields.*

### INTRODUCTION

Several years ago a project was undertaken to treat a number of Fred Williams 'gouaches' in the National Gallery

of Victoria's (NGV) collection for the exhibition *The Enduring Landscape*. As is common with many of William's gouaches on paper, the more thickly applied areas of paint had begun to crack. It was necessary to examine the works thoroughly and consolidate areas where the paint was unstable. The works were reframed in more suitable frames with greater distance between media surface and glazing.

At the time of examining the works the assigned media description began to be questioned. It seemed that a generic classification of 'gouache' had been given to all works of art on paper that were not prints, with two exceptions where additional material was used and was of particular significance. In both cases the material had come from the actual painting site, charcoal from a bushfire that was depicted and sand from the beach at Sorrento.

While gouache did appear to be the correct media description for many works, there was a number that contained acrylic paint. In some cases there seemed to be a mix of acrylic and gouache, while in others there was acrylic only.

When investigations began into the media used in this group of works, a literature search revealed that Williams had begun to experiment with acrylics following the suggestion, in 1971, of his friend Albert Tucker (Mollison 1989). According to diary entries, Williams made the decision on 29 July 1971 to begin using acrylics, this being several weeks before he and his family visited Tucker's *Springbrook* property in South-East Queensland. The artist's thoughts on this new media were expressed in diary entries around this date and on occasion in the future.

As an aside, Williams had some interesting comments as he struggled with this new media. These observations come from Mollison's book *A Singular Vision: the Art of Fred Williams* and include comments from the artist's diaries. Two days after his arrival at Springbrook Williams wrote:

I carry my materials down to the 'Gooloomahra' Lookout & work there all day – I find the acrylics *very* hard to get used to – I almost give up but by tonight I'm glad I persevered, because they are obviously superior for outdoor work – and I can get a much fuller range of color glazing & scumbling, which is my real forte.

He noted that using acrylic enabled him to cover layers of paint without difficulty, and this allowed him to revise his painting out of doors – something he had never done with gouache.

By the 25 August, he was more confident working in the new medium and admitted:

I am getting more used to the acrylic & it is going to be very *useful* indeed – my only reservation is the dismal surface it is inclined to have.

His concern was that acrylic dries with a

non-reflective surface unless it has been mixed with gel to give it a gloss or to prepare it for glazing. ...on the 28 September the artist noted that he had come to regard the acrylics as a 'side-product' of gouaches

I feel that they are a natural extension – they will *never* replace oil paint – not for me anyway. They will allow me to do the work ever so much more quickly – I can simply start a picture in the morning and finish it the following one (I still cannot bring myself to work on it the same day.

The introduction and use of acrylic paint corresponded to the dates of a number of the works being examined for exhibition. The media details for these works were reviewed and 'acrylic' added to the media description where appropriate.

#### DISCOVERY OF THE MATERIAL

During investigations into the artist materials used by Williams, discussions were held with Kirsty Grant, Curator of Australian Prints and Drawings at the NGV. Kirsty was aware that Lyn Williams had a comprehensive archive of receipts and invoices for all of Williams' artist materials. Lyn had kept the receipts for tax and archival purposes and kindly allowed us to copy them. (See Image 1)

**Camden Art Centre**  
188-200 GERTRUDE ST.  
FITZROY, VIC. 3065  
TELEPHONE 41 7261  
200 Ruddle Street, Adelaide, 5000

MR. FRED WILLIAMS  
779 POORAKA ROAD (CRS. POORAK RD.)  
HAWTHORN EAST

DATE ORDER RECEIVED: 1-10-69  
YOUR ORDER NUMBER: 26174  
SALESMAN: J.H.G.  
SALES INSTRUCTIONS: PACKING NO. INVOICE NO. DATE: 37177 5-DAL-69

QUANTITY ORDERED AND DESCRIPTION	QUANTITY	UNIT PRICE	DISC. %	TAX	TOTAL PAYABLE	TAX %	TAX AMOUNT
20 x Board Fashion Arches Medium 22 x 30	20	0-82	10-00	2	14-76		
EXHIBITION/EXH 12 Tubes 1/2" Designers Color Gouache							
Each Naples Yellow	12	0-30	15-00	2	3-06		
Yellow Ochre	12	0-30	15-00	2	3-06		
Raw Sienna	12	0-30	15-00	2	3-06		
Raw Umber	12	0-30	15-00	2	3-06		
Chinese Orange	12	0-38	15-00	2	3-88		
6 x Studio Tubes 1/2" Artist Oil: Each Raw Umber	6	0-54		2	3-24		
Ivory Black	6	0-54		2	3-24		
					37-36		
					12-47		
					49-83		

NOTE:- Items not stocked are temporarily out of stock and will be forwarded on demand.  
CLAIMS for Non-delivery or Returns will not be recognised after 7 days from date of invoice.  
TERMS:- 20% 30 DAYS OTHERWISE STRICTLY NETT.

TAX GROUP EXPLANATION  
1. Tax Exempt  
2. Tax Exempt  
3. 1/2% Certificate Quota  
4. Plus Tax

Image 1: Photocopy of receipt for artist's materials purchased by Fred Williams 1969 © Fred Williams Estate

The receipts and invoices date from 1961 and continue for 21 years until the artist's death in 1982. The information contained in the documents includes materials such as media, supports such as paper and

canvas, coatings and additives, frames, tools and equipment. Of the media there are conte crayons, chalks, charcoal, watercolour, gouache, poster paint, acrylic paint, egg tempera paint, oil paint, dry pigment, pencil and printing ink.

The archive also provides information on who the suppliers were, what quantities were being bought, when certain materials were purchased, the choice of framing in some cases and included ancillary materials that related to the artist's technique (e.g. masking tape for the strip paintings and wire and thumb tacks that were used to construct a compositional device).

An added bonus of this archive is that it provides information about Melbourne artists' suppliers of the time that may be of interest to researchers.

#### THE ARCHIVE

The photocopies of the receipts and invoices have been filed chronologically and will remain in the conservation department at the NGV. To enable the material to be analysed and allow for easier access the information was entered into an electronic database. Two thousand one hundred and sixty-six items are listed and can be viewed in one of two formats. Each item purchased has an individual entry containing all the information from the original document (format 1) (See Image 2).

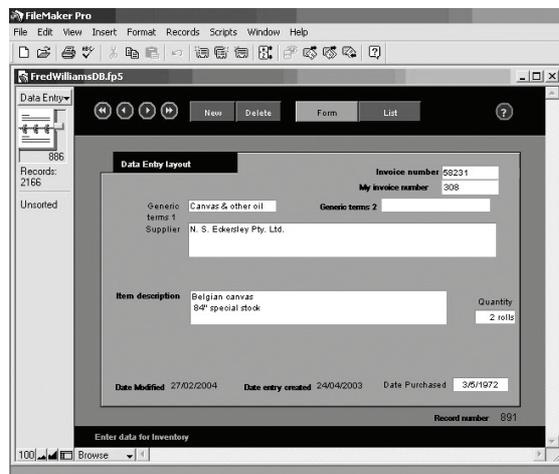


Image 2: Individual database entry © Fred Williams Estate

Then there is the list format (format 2) (See Image 3). The complete list includes the following information for each item,

- Item no.
- Item category (media, framing/stretcher, coating, etc.)
- Media type (a sub-group for media only)
- Date purchased
- Quantity
- Item description (full description, [eg. 'W&N Designer gouache ivory black']) and
- Supplier.

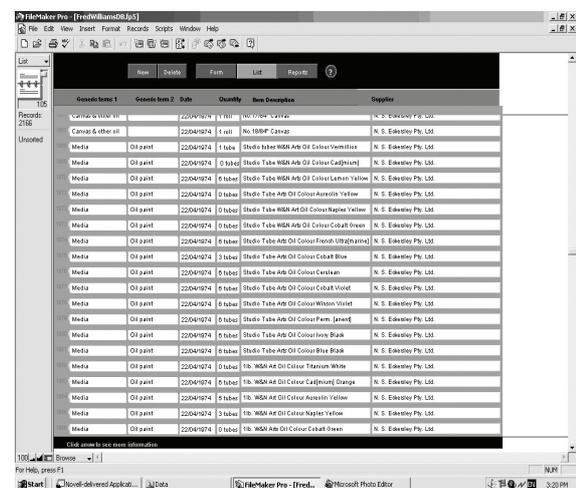


Image 3. List format in database © Fred Williams Estate

As with other databases it is possible to pull out specific information searching by category, (e.g. paper and board, printmaking materials and equipment). It is also possible to extract information from multiple categories at the same time. When viewing a list not all the information about the specific item is visible, as one would expect, but one can click onto the entry for all the hidden information.

The list format is particularly useful to see a broad amount of key information at once. In this way the data can be more easily compared and patterns revealed. Linking the list to the individual entry is a very useful tool as it means one can instantly retrieve all the information from the original receipt.

#### PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

Preliminary analysis of the information in the database reveals many interesting aspects, a number of which could be further researched.

In many cases the colour of media is described, for instance 'W&N Designers Color gouache tubes Naples Yellow' and one can therefore speculate that this particular colour is likely to have been used in William's work around this time. It is interesting to see which colours Williams chose, when they were used relating to specific series, if they fall from favour and when and if new colours were introduced to the artist's palette. Williams was interested in colour and colour theory throughout his life. Among the receipts and invoices were colour wheels made by the artist and a commercial 'Color Computer' purchased on 13/6/75. In diary entries Williams writes about his choice of colours for particular works relating to colour theory.

Robert Lindsay & Irena Zdanowicz (1980) note in their catalogue

He had always been interested in the colour theories of Chevreul and their possible application (he had been given a 1855 edition of Chevreul's *The Laws of Contrast of Colour and Their Application to the Arts*), and also felt 'I couldn't ignore the colourfield movement and continue to paint, I had to make a response to the most significant art movement of that time in Australia, and that was the New York Colourfield Movement.'

Returning to the database, it must be said that unfortunately many entries for media do not give the specific colour, but give the code and series. For example, 'W&N Artists Oil Colour series 1 no.14 tubes'. I assume this is all that was required to determine the price but perhaps it could be used to narrow down groups of colour he may have been using at a particular time.

At the same time acrylic paint was introduced in Williams' work, acrylic medium and coatings were also first purchased. There is a number of receipts that list 'Liquitex gel medium' and 'Liquitex

Matte medium'. Knowing that these specific mediums/coatings have been used, not only reinforces the importance of the surface characteristics, but also alerts us that these materials may have been used in the paintings and could have a bearing on the condition and treatment of individual works.

With regard to paper, a considerable amount is known about the papers Williams used. Mollison (1959) has catalogued all the etchings up until 1968 and the paper type is described for all. Graeme Brown, the paper merchant from whom Williams purchased a majority of his papers after 1971, has assisted in identifying the papers used for the prints. For the other works of art on paper where cataloguing has not yet been carried out, there is information in the receipts from Graeme Brown & Co. and from Camden Art Centre that describe the paper bought at various times. For researchers with a good knowledge of the specific artist's papers purchased, combined with their observations, it may be possible to correctly identify a paper Williams has used. It must be said though, that there are exceptions where papers (and probably other materials) came from other sources. For instance, it is known that Mollison brought back fine coloured artist papers from Europe and gave them to Williams.

There is some information on framing. In the earlier years G. H. Partos supplied many of William's frames and the receipts usually give the moulding code, length and on occasion, the colour, (eg, '200ft of 831 moulding, green/silver'). In 1976 William's also started ordering frames from Geometrics, a framing company that specialised in aluminium and acrylic frames. The Geometrics receipts also include a code for the frame type and often a finish. Gold appears to be a favoured finish for many works of art from 1976 onwards.

There are some receipts, from both G. H. Partos and Geometrics that include the name of the painting/subject matter for which the frame is made, but this is not

common.

Interestingly both G.H. Partos and Geometrics are both still in existence as framing businesses in Melbourne, although the later has changed owners.

An interesting receipt found amongst the collection of documents is a conservation quote from a Mr Matthew Moss of South Melbourne for the proposed treatment of an oil painting. The receipt is dated 14/9/1976. The document, which unfortunately doesn't give the title of the work, outlines the proposed treatment, which would undoubtedly be of interest to the present owner if further treatment became necessary.

#### CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to inform the conservation profession that this valuable body of information exists. I hope that it may prove useful to colleagues treating and studying works of art by Fred Williams. This has made me think that because this archive was compiled from documents kept for tax purposes perhaps other artist's or their estates may have similar caches of information.

#### REFERENCES

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Ruth Shervington graduated from Camberwell College of Arts, London in 1993 with a BA(Hons) degree in Paper Conservation. Ruth worked in London for three years as a Paper Conservator, before taking up a position as an Art Foundation of Victoria Development Conservator of Paper at the National Gallery of Victoria between 1996-99. Ruth continues to be employed as a Paper Conservator by the National Gallery of Victoria.

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