

Studying Abroad: A Transformative Experience

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This year marks twenty since I studied abroad at ISI Florence when I was an undergraduate at the University of Connecticut. I would say that it feels like only yesterday, but in the intervening years I finished my BA, earned a certificate in painting restoration from l'Istituto per l'Arte e il Restauro, completed two master's degrees, and lived in two countries and three states where I held six positions at four institutions. I also got married and had three sons – two of whom, completely accidentally or at least only subconsciously, share names with Medici brothers. I was recently appointed Manager, House Collection at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, a role that is both the culmination of years of education and experience and the fortuitous outcome of being in the right place at the right time. It is my strongly held belief that anyone who does not acknowledge the part played by dumb luck in their success is being dishonest. Yet, among the decisions I did make, studying abroad in Florence was one of the best. My semester learning and living in Italy had a profound impact on my personal and professional life, a fact that I wrote about in the inaugural issue of *Beyond* in 2018.

From Palazzo Rucellai to Dumbarton Oaks

In the six years since then, I have had the privilege of finding myself in a series of other extraordinary places. Although my morning commute to Palazzo Rucellai through the historic heart of Florence remains unmatched, I currently work in a historic house built in 1801 and renovated in the 1920s with glowing Koa wood floors and wrought iron bannisters alive with sculptured foliage and woodland creatures. Sixteen acres of formal gardens designed by Beatrix Farrand erupt in a riot of color each year starting in early spring with a pathway of purple plums followed by a hillside of yellow forsythia and a glen of pale pink cherry trees be-

fore culminating in a profusion of multi-colored roses. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection is the Harvard University center for Byzantine, Pre-Columbian, and Garden and Landscape Studies located in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, DC. That eclectic mix of disciplines is in every way reflective of the interests of the founders, Mildred Barnes and Robert Woods Bliss, who donated their estate and all its contents to Harvard in 1940 as a home for the humanities. The timing, too, was no accident, hastened as it was by the looming global conflict now known as World War II. When I interviewed for the job, I asked the committee what they liked best about working at Dumbarton Oaks. The Director of Security answered first by gesturing around him. We were sitting in the Oval Salon, which is fully painted in trompe l'oeil decoration created by the French designer Armand Albert Rateau, where an antique mirror glinted above a marble fireplace and the verdant South Lawn was visible beyond the shimmering silk drapes. I later learned that the proportions of the room, which is an oval as the name implies, were based on a fantastic Savonnerie rug from the 18th century purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Bliss in 1926 still in the collection. It is one of my favorite rooms in a place full of favorite rooms. But this was not the first remarkable conference room in which I found myself in Washington DC. That distinction goes to the top floor of one of the towers in I. M. Pei's iconic East Building at the National Gallery of Art (NGA).

The Corcoran Legacy Collection: a career milestone

When I moved to Washington DC in 2018 to take a position at American University (AU) as Museum Registrar, I knew that I would be responsible for the collection and the robust exhibition schedule. I was also given the vague outlines of a much larger project, which I subsequently learned was the transfer of thousands of paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs, decorative objects, and site-specific installation components from the Corcoran Gallery of Art to the AU Museum. When the Corcoran closed in 2014, the NGA took custody of its collection, eventually accessioning about half the works and managing the distribution of the others

to DC institutions. Most of the participating museums made small selections, judiciously choosing objects based on precise collecting goals, but AU took a different approach. With whatever was still unclaimed, AU created the Corcoran Legacy Collection, more than doubling its overall collection and providing an unmatched resource for scholars and students. It was to finalize the details of the gift agreement and to make a plan for the physical transfer that I found myself in that first mythic conference room. As it would turn out, the Corcoran collection would take me to many amazing locations – a gallery converted to print storage, an off-site warehouse where a forklift hoisted art dozens of feet in the air, the Cabinet Room of the White House, and the residence of the United States Ambassador to Finland in Helsinki. One of my favorite memories, though, is of a December visit to the NGA days before Christmas to discuss shipping logistics for a group of objects still downtown. As I emerged from behind one staff-only door or another, I stood mesmerized beneath the massive dome of the West Building which was illuminated in purple with the silhouettes of flying reindeer soaring towards the central oculus through a smattering of stars.

Professional growth at Dumbarton Oaks

I started my tenure at Dumbarton Oaks as the Registrar and Collections Manager, a job that put me in charge of the care and documentation of all the objects in the museum collection. That interview in that fantastic Oval Salon was on Monday, March 2, 2020. By the time I received the call offering me the job, I was working from home and the world had shut down in what was supposed to be a temporary closure intended to halt a global pandemic. As we now know, the lockdown persisted in one way or another for years, and it had the effect of delaying my start date until June 1, 2020. For the first year or so in the position, I was not going much of anywhere. My office was my kitchen table which was also my oldest son's classroom. I shudder to remember onboarding video calls with my new colleagues conducted with Zoom physical education class in the background, balled up socks flying through the air into an empty laundry bin.

Once we started traveling again, it was my pleasure to retrieve a pair of exquisite silver objects from the Getty Villa in Malibu, California, where they had been on view in an exhibition on ancient Persia. The registrar apologized profusely for the schedule, which involved deinstalling one object on a Friday and the other on the following Monday, keeping me in beautiful, sunny California over the weekend in a Santa Monica hotel only steps from the beach. Needless to say, I did not see this as a hardship. I used the free days to wander the Villa, sink my toes in the sand, and meet a dear friend in Los Angeles where we visited the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and The Broad.

Closer to home, my oversight duties had me accompanying art across town to the Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute (MCI) in Suitland, Maryland. The MCI imaging and materials scientists were collaborating with us and conservators from Greece on the analysis of two micro-mosaic panels, so called because the tesserae that compose the images are so small as to be nearly microscopic. Over the course of two weeks, I watched over 3D scanning, x-radiography, and scanning electron microscopy enjoying the opportunity to chat with the experts as they did their fascinating work. Publications in various international journals are forthcoming, but this research already had its first public presentation at an interdisciplinary symposium, entitled “Piece by Piece: Mosaic Artifacts in Byzantium and the Ancient Americas,” that brought together art historians, archeologists, anthropologists, curators, conservators, and scientists studying the mosaic artform. In addition to the colloquium lectures, the symposium included object study sessions for working group members and speakers. It was my duty and privilege to don a pair of nitrile gloves and handle the objects for the participants delicately cradling them and turning them to reveal features of interest. Being a part of this project was one of the highlights of my professional career.

In my new role as Manager, House Collection, I have curatorial oversight of a diverse group of objects in assorted media from various cultures. The collection ranges from a painting by El Greco of the Visitation to a Degas preparatory sketch for the Bellelli Family Portrait. It includes Ital-

ian Renaissance furniture once owned by the Italian diplomat Giuseppe Brambilla and Flemish tapestries from the 15th and 16th centuries. Even the historic structures themselves are considered museum objects with records of their own in the collections management system, a relational database that I manage. The jewel in the collection is perhaps the Music Room, constructed from 1926 to 1928 with repurposed architectural elements and reproduction features including an elaborately painted wooden truss ceiling with faux cracks and wood checks among the arabesque curves and classical figures. Designed as a venue for concerts, which are still held there, the room also hosted the “Washington Conversations on International Organization, Dumbarton Oaks,” otherwise known as the Dumbarton Oaks Conversations in 1944. This series of meetings brought together American, Chinese, British, and Soviet delegations towards the end of World War II in discussions that eventually led to the founding of the United Nations. It is a most exceptional place. Indeed, I think I have the Music Room to thank for my new position. It was among the first things that I adopted, advocating for new draperies, regular conservation examinations of its marvelous tapestries, and UV-screening film for the windows. In between managing loans and collection access requests, essential duties of the registrar and collections manager, I started to research the ownership and conservation history of the objects. Through those investigations, I found the courage to suggest that perhaps I was the best one to steward this collection. This self-assurance, coupled with a supportive chief curator, led me to where I am today.

Conservation project: a return to Florence

My current project, which brings me back to Florence in the most wonderful way, is a scientific analysis in preparation for a conservation treatment on a portable altarpiece by the Florentine *trecento* painter Bernardo Daddi (c. 1280 – 1348). The central panel – the location of the wings is unknown – depicts the Madonna enthroned with Christ in her lap surrounded by saints and angels. The tenderness between mother and child is eloquently expressed in the way she gently cups his little foot as he

reaches his arm around her neck. Until recently and for quite some time, our panel sat on its own little easel in the corner of the Music Room.

When we had an unplanned interruption in climate control, an event particularly dangerous for tempera on wood, I removed the painting to storage where the conditions were more suitable. It seemed as good an excuse as any to call a conservator for an assessment. Here again I was aided by some incredible luck. The American Institute for Conservation “find a conservator” online tool led me to one of the few people with direct experience working on these types of objects, and during his visit he casually remarked how useful it would be to have some specialized imaging before undertaking conservation treatment. Fresh from our recent success collaborating with MCI on the micro-mosaics, one of our curators contacted a colleague at the NGA who invited us to submit a proposal which was readily accepted. The panel spent several weeks undergoing analytical imaging including infra-red and near infra-red photography to help reveal any underdrawings and identify the pigments. If the conference room at the top of the East Building at the NGA is special, the conservation studio flooded with natural light and filled with treasures in various stages of treatment is even more so. I was fortunate enough to visit twice for this project, and both times I was awed by the generosity of the conservation scientists with their time and expertise. I am excited to see where this investigation leads. For now, the Daddi is with the conservator who is planning on removing what is at least a century of grime with the hope of restoring some of the painting’s original vibrancy.

Career reflections: embracing opportunities

Since I work in an educational institution where we host recent graduates as fellows, I often find myself talking about my career path. The fact is that although I always wanted to work in a museum, I accidentally became a registrar. I had just finished my MA in art history at UCONN, the current registrar was leaving, and the museum director called me. Right place, right time. When I accepted the job, the only registrar I knew was the one who signed my university transcript. At a certain point, I

decided to ride the horse in the direction it was going (sage advice given to me long ago by an old friend). I joined professional organizations, located a few mentors, asked questions on Listservs, and read books. I took a small job in a big institution then a big job in a small institution, and finally, like Goldilocks, I found the right fit. If studying abroad played a role in any of this, and I think it certainly did, it was to force me to be more flexible, to adapt. There is an Italian expression that I love: *tutto fa brodo*. Literally translated, the phrase means “everything makes broth,” and the closest English equivalent is generally understood to be “every little bit helps.” I prefer a more philosophical reading, taking the saying to mean that we are all the product of our life experiences. Something may seem inconsequential on its own, but you toss it in the pot with everything else and the soup you get is you.