

# Conservation

## Cleaning of *Areopagitica*, a sculpture by Norma Redpath

Kate Stanway

Since the opening of the Baillieu Library in 1959, the sculpture *Areopagitica* by Norma Redpath has hung in the building's foyer. Commissioned by the University of Melbourne, it was the winning design in the Baillieu Library mural competition of 1958.<sup>1</sup> After an exhibition of competition entries at the Museum of Modern Art,<sup>2</sup> Redpath's work was installed in its current location in 1959. In early 2009 the sculpture was cleaned by conservators from the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC), in preparation for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Baillieu Library.<sup>3</sup>

The subject matter is John Milton's *Areopagitica: A speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing* of 1644. This was recommended by the University to the ten invited competition entrants, 'since this contains many ideas and images which are directly concerned with the social importance of books and intellectual freedom of expression'.<sup>4</sup> In describing her design Redpath wrote:

The lower half of the panel depicts the scholar or seeker of knowledge. Involved in a turmoil of forms and figures symbolising knowledge of all types of things, he embraces books and points

upward towards a higher form of bird and book forms, symbolic of protection and freedom. A head turned in towards the centre of the composition symbolises knowledge and reflection symbolises the ultimate truth and wisdom towards which the true scholar must strive, but which he can only do with a foundation of all that has gone before.<sup>5</sup>

*Areopagitica* measures approximately 244 x 396 cm. The two-part sculpture is carved from an Australian timber known as silky oak, with details of the design highlighted by the application of red, black and white tempera. Before cleaning, a thick film of dust and particulate matter had accumulated on the surface of the sculpture, together with flyspecks scattered across the surface. Bird excreta had also accumulated, particularly on the horizontal edges where birds are able to perch. These accretions not only obscured the decorative design of the sculpture but were also sites of potential deterioration. Hygroscopic dust can absorb moisture from the atmosphere, leading to weakening and ultimate deterioration of wooden surfaces and the breakdown of fragile painted surfaces, while bird excreta can contain acidic products that damage



wooden and painted surfaces. Several cracks had begun to appear in the sculpture following the grain of the wood, but the mounting system in place ensures that all currently cracking areas of the artwork are firmly secured.

For those unfamiliar with the sculpture, it hangs high up on the right hand side of the library entrance foyer. It was positioned here in 1959 so that it could be viewed from an open balcony on level 1 of the library. However, because this balcony is now glassed in and the viewing windows are usually covered by blinds to protect the displays on level 1 from damaging sunlight, the mural is not as easily enjoyed as originally intended.

Hundreds of library patrons walk under the artwork daily. During the recent cleaning, this presented some



Opposite: Conservator Jordi Casasayas brush-vacuuming *Areopagitica*.

Left: Detail of *Areopagitica* during cleaning. The colours are brighter in the cleaned area in the upper left.

Right: *Areopagitica* after cleaning, February 2009. Norma Redpath, *Areopagitica*, 1958–1959, silky oak and tempera, 243.8 x 396.2 cm. Reg. no. 1958.0012, University of Melbourne Art Collection, commissioned 1958.

challenges, including physical access to the sculpture, safety of the staff involved, safety of the members of the public in the vicinity of the sculpture and the safety of the sculpture itself. The size, mounting technique and location of the sculpture placed limitations on the type of treatment that could be undertaken. After consultation it was decided to clean the sculpture in-situ, using an elevated working platform. Bollards and signage were erected to exclude members of the public from the working area directly below the sculpture, while still allowing access to the library entry, vending machines, public telephones, water fountain, and security and fire system controls.

Before treatment could begin, the condition of the artwork was assessed and documented. This documentation can be used to determine and track any future changes in the condition of the sculpture. Photographic documentation can be compared with the state of the sculpture in the future to determine when the artwork should be cleaned again. Mechanical testing was conducted in several discreet locations to determine the stability of the painted surfaces. This involved rubbing the surface with a firm filament paintbrush and the end of a bamboo skewer, while noting any

surface disturbances. An initial brush vacuum of the surface removed several layers of accumulated dust and particulate matter from the sculpture itself and the surrounding wall. The grey wall on which the sculpture is mounted was brush-vacuumed. This wall forms a backdrop for the sculpture and becomes part of the visual image of the artwork.

Solubility testing of the painted wooden surface was undertaken in several discreet areas to determine the solubility potentials of each of the tempera colours used. These tests indicated that the sculpture surface was stable and did not appear to be moisture sensitive. An overall wet clean of the surface was therefore undertaken, using controlled amounts of deionised water and a light mechanical action to remove greasy surface deposits. Localised applications of natural enzymes were then used to remove adhered surface accretions including flyspecks, adhered particulates and bird excreta residues. After cleaning, the vibrant colours of the mural are once again clearly visible.

Kate Stanway is an objects conservator with the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. Her qualifications include a Bachelor of Arts in archaeology and a Master of Arts in cultural materials conservation. Kate was responsible for managing this conservation project.

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#### Notes

- 1 For further information on the competition see Gillian McCarthy, 'Areopagitica: The Baillieu Library mural competition 1958', thesis for Postgraduate Diploma in Art Curatorial Studies, University of Melbourne, 1990.
- 2 Alan McCulloch, 'Mural mustn't be an afterthought', *Herald*, 4 March 1959. The Museum of Modern Art of Australia operated from 1958 to 1966. In 1959 it was located in Tavistock Place, in the premises of the former Gallery of Contemporary Art.
- 3 These celebrations included the exhibition *A storehouse of wisdom: Celebrating 50 years of the Baillieu Library*, held in the Baillieu Library from 20 March to 17 May 2009, a commemorative booklet of the same title, an anniversary website <http://baillieu50.unimelb.edu.au> including an electronic memory board, and a series of author talks.
- 4 The Office of John F.D. Scarborough [architects of the Baillieu Library], untitled document, [brief for entrants, Baillieu Library mural competition], undated typescript, from working file held by Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 5 [Norma Redpath], 'Proposed mural: New library building, University of Melbourne: Theme', undated typescript, from working file held by Special Collections, Baillieu Library.