

A collection, a print and an intern: a story of the unique opportunities provided through collection research internships

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Abstract

In 2010, Stacie Bobele became the inaugural recipient of the Ursula Hoff Internship. Established by the art historian and curator with a view to assisting emerging scholars, the intern's purview must involve prints in the collections of the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Victoria. The paper is a personal reflection on the lessons learned and valuable experience that the internship has offered.

Paper

In January of this year I commenced the Ursula Hoff internship at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. I am the inaugural recipient of this internship – a bequest made by Dr Hoff to promote scholarship in the area of prints and print collecting. The focus of my internship was to be a specific area of the collections of either (or both) Ian Potter Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Victoria.

I wanted to discover, uncover. Unearth something great, something unique, something exciting. I was excited at the prospect of working so closely with a collection and spend time with beautiful objects rarely seen by many others. At the end of my internship, I had experienced the exhilaration of new discoveries, the doldrums of writers block, made friendships and professional relationships and learned to trust my own instincts. I had weeks where ideas flowed easily and readily and when I doubted I would have enough time to pursue all of the possibilities. And then there were days when I was convinced that there was nothing I could write that would be of the remotest interest to anyone. This, I came to discover, is the very essence of research and which, on reflection, makes the pursuit so captivating.

Even before my internship began, access to the collection was a necessity. The online catalogue of the Potter helped me track down the prints that would become the focus of my research, and I was able to visit and view part of the collection prior to completing my internship proposal and application. This visit was both inspiring and enervating. After all, being in direct contact with works of art is one of the main reasons I chose to pursue art history and curatorship.

My internship proposal was to examine the monotypes, or oil transfer drawings of Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack. Much has been made of the absence of Mack from Australia's art history, but over the past few years this has changed somewhat, with Mack's work being championed both directly and indirectly through scholarship into Australian modernism and exhibitions of his work. The oil transfer technique was unusual, and the Potter's collection of them substantial. His Bauhaus associations were compelling, and his life story seemed to me a fascinating backdrop to his art – how could I not unearth something of great historical significance? Interestingly, over the course of my internship these two main starting points (Mack's absence from Australia's art history and his Bauhaus associations) became back stories rather than the main focus of my writing.

Mack was born in Germany before the turn of the 20th century. By the time he enrolled at the Bauhaus, he had witnessed the horrors of the first world war, studied art at the famed Stuttgart Academy, married, and become a father. He was one of the first students at the new and controversial art school – the early years of the power struggles between the spiritual ideals of Johannes Itten and the more practical yet no less radical architectural focus of Walter Gropius. Mack's studio at the Bauhaus adjoined Paul Klee's, and it was the discovery of this, and Klee's use of the oil transfer technique that became the first obsessional focus of my internship, forming the first (of many) obsessional blockages to scholarly flow. I was determined to find a connection between Mack, Klee and the origins of the technique. Encouraged by curator Nicholas Draffin's notes where he had posited the very same question – that is, had Mack in fact introduced the technique to Klee – I embarked upon several

weeks of ultimately unfruitful searching for evidence of such. Established research concentrated almost entirely upon Klee and his use of the technique (think his *Twittering Machine*), and tracing the earliest use of it was made difficult as the technique emerged from lithography, and while may have been used by earlier artists, would not have made it to the forefront of any artist's output. Ultimately, I was forced to concede that the technique was not exclusively Mack's after discovering several works by Klee pre-dating his time at the Bauhaus. I was disappointed, and felt I had wasted several weeks on this singular pursuit (which, in the end, would have only really delivered a single paragraph in the annals of art history).

Of course, it would be hopelessly optimistic to think that my very first hunch or focus would result in a new earth shattering find for art history. My emergence on the other side of this devastation was the first sensible light bulb moment, and a true learning experience of the emerging scholar. For out of the disappointment of this singular point, several important and unique aspects of Mack's work began to dawn on me. From this position it became clear that Mack's technique was 1) quite different to Klee's – Mack had obviously adjusted it to suit his own pictorial and technical means and 2) he aesthetically applied in a drastically different way to Klee's. Mack emerged from this, my first and most crippling roadbump, as an artist of original imagery and of singular focus. From this position, I was able to form the basis from which I would write my two journal articles. Rather than wonder or search for parallels between Mack's work and any of his Australian contemporaries, I came to the conclusion that these associations were of little importance if they distracted from Mack the artist, and his work.

Eventually it occurred to me to think a little obliquely. Mack was well into his 40s by the time he arrived in Australia, and his artistic and aesthetic ideals probably firmly shaped and friendships established. This (and not the deliberate shunning by Australian art circles) was more than likely the reason for his seeming isolation. And I say seeming, as Mack did establish firm friendships and associations with more

mature art circles – as I discovered through his personal correspondence with Joseph Burke. The handwritten letters from friends and colleagues in and out of Europe included those of Josef and Anni Albers, Walter Gropius and Oskar Schlemmer, and were a fascinating insight into the private lives of artists I had read about in textbooks for years, yet also showed me the dedication of Mack to his artistic ideals, and the respect that he commanded from these already established greats of art history.

The lack of published scholarly research on Mack formed another mental block for me at times. The enormity and responsibility of producing an informed and well-researched body of work on Mack loomed as a task that seemingly outweighed my experience. The internship helped me trust my own instincts about art and its history, and I was challenged to balance my subjective analysis of his work with the objective source of my own art historical knowledge. To focus almost entirely upon a single artist and his artistic output was, strangely, a relatively new experience. Until this point in my career, I had not noticed the high emphasis I had placed upon established art theory in my writing on art and artists. To have the opportunity to focus exclusively upon the art and the artist has (ironically) provided me with experience that I had been seriously lacking as an art historian.

As for many other “emerging” scholars, the opportunity to unearth rarely seen artworks, to source the background to their creation and elements of the lives of the artists that created them is both an exciting and daunting task. My Masters thesis, undertaken on a contemporary, yet Columbian-born artist was based almost entirely upon secondary sources. The only primary source was the opportunity to be in physical contact with some of her works. My internship presented a new challenge in that much of the detail of my research came the substantial Hirschfeld Mack collection at the Potter, and the Hirschfeld Mack collection held at University of Melbourne archives – which includes his personal notes, correspondence, book collection and photographs. As for much research, other things revealed themselves from people's memories, colleagues' own interests and previous research, photocopier discussions and my monthly

debrief sessions with Chris McAuliffe. I gained much from short discussions with other Potter staff and many of these discussions formed many moments of clarity of my internship.

Indeed, collegial and generous discussions with art historians, curators, those working in collection management and artists formed the singularly most helpful factors in my research. I have been fortunate to collaborate with colleagues undertaking their own projects relating to my research, providing a further example of the wider value to this kind of internship. Working closely with several collections at the University of Melbourne put me in touch with others who had interests in Mack himself, his colleagues and modernism in Australia. These included:

- Two very gracious, generous and dedicated women, Resi Schwarzbauer and Felicity Renowden – former teachers themselves, who have both dedicated several years to researching Mack’s autobiography. Both of them were only too happy to help, always providing me with more information than I had initially requested;
- Co-authors of *Modern Times*, the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Ann Stephen and Andrew McNamara kindly met with me over a Chinese lunch in Sydney. I initially arrived with a set of very specific questions, but in the end only two of these were asked, as the conversation took a very different turn. The ensuing discussion made me think a little more laterally about Mack, his influence and place in art’s history. This lateral thinking has directly informed the topic of the conference paper I will be delivering at the AAANZ conference in December.
- Correspondence with Daniel Thomas was helpful and encouraging, and reading through the personal and curatorial notes of Nicholas Draffin felt both a privilege and a little like spying.
- In addition to these personal associations, I have been able to contribute to a University of Melbourne archives exhibition on Joseph Burke, and shared

ideas with artists and a master printmaker as we experimented with Mack’s oil transfer technique in his studio.

And while the outcomes from my internship have resulted in many personal benefits and experiences, it has also opened up parts of a collection for more public exposure through different and new eyes. Being engaged with the life of a single artist has brought with it a kind of association that at times has felt like a kind of friendship. For on many levels, working with a collection such as this has allowed access to a life and mind on a sometimes intimate level. These intimacies included personal notebooks written during his Bauhaus years, letters from colleagues and associates that divulge personal as well as artistic aspirations, to all the revelations available within the artworks themselves.

This personal association was brought home to me when listening to an oral history recording from the National Library of Australia. This recording was by Mack’s wife Olive, and in it she divulged occasions and landmarks of Mack’s life as **she** saw them – not necessarily those of historical or even art historical significance, but what made the man a unique human being. The moments remembered by Olive were not only those of an artist, but a man, husband and father. Somehow the sound of this woman’s voice made me feel closer to the artist than ever.

In her strong, yet fragile voice of the elderly, Olive recounted Mack’s death in Sydney on an afternoon in 1965. Earlier that day, he had spent several hours and much photographic film taking images of the nearly complete construction taking place on the harbour. This new construction was the Sydney Opera House. Intrigued with its pelagic form and the way it reflected the light, he turned apologetically to his wife as he admitted sheepishly that he had used yet another roll of film. Olive smiled as she replied “That’s okay – we can always get more later.” That afternoon at the Quaker conference they had travelled to Sydney to attend, without a word Mack slumped against his wife and never woke up. “Later’ never came, but Mack had spent his final hours immersed in the visual – his enduring passion.

It has been a privilege to engage so deeply with a single artist, an experience that every art historian should have at least once in their careers, and one that I feel very fortunate to have participated in. An internship such as that established by Dr Hoff has enabled just such an envious and cherished opportunity. Thank you.

About the Author

Stacie Bobele graduated with her Master of Arts from the Australian National University in 2008. As the inaugural recipient of the Ursula Hoff Internship for emerging scholars, she spent several months of early 2010 researching the substantial Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack collection at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne. Her art historical research involves a search for moments that point to, or herald, the shift in focus from artist to spectator.

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