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New Ma At The NHM - Melissa Gunter

The conservation of Natural History Collections is a new and developing field. In the last 20 years, the increasing awareness of the limited life of these collections has drawn a great deal of attention to the care of natural history specimens. Environmental monitoring, pest management and the ethics surrounding restoration are all important topics that are now constantly considered in storage and display in the museum environment. It only makes sense, as these issues will continue to grow with the collections, that formal training at a graduate level should be offered in the conservation of these collections.

My name is Melissa Gunter and I am currently pursuing a Masters degree in the Conservation of Natural History Collections with the Royal College of Art (RCA) on the joint RCA/Victoria & Albert Museum Conservation Programme. I graduated from the University of Texas at Austin in 2001 with a BA in Geological Sciences and soon realized that I would need an advanced degree to work in a museum. Fortunately, around the time I decided to commit to an MA, the RCA/V&A programme was offering a degree in conservation working directly with the Natural History Museum (NHM) in London. I began my studies in September 2003 and hope to finish my degree in July 2005. This is the first time this course has been offered at the RCA and is currently the only MA programme of its kind in the world.

The design of the RCA/V&A conservation program allows students 2 days a week for lectures, seminars and other elements of the taught curriculum and 3 days a week for practice-based studio/laboratory work in a capacity somewhere between student and a member of staff (for more information on this course, see Lindsay, this issue). Students are taught conservation science and encouraged to discuss ethics while also learning about conservation on a wide variety of materials during the two-day lecture periods. Laboratory time is spent in the student's designated studio working on projects assigned by their supervisor. Unlike other MA students on the RCA/V&A course, who have one supervisor, I am supervised by many of the Museum's staff, as well as having Chris Collins, Head of the Palaeontology Conservation Unit, as my nominal supervisor. I have worked in six different areas during my laboratory time including Botany, Mineralogy, Entomology, Zoology, Palaeontology, and Library & Information Services (LIS). As with all things that are new, the direction of this program is still being developed, but the results of this project so far have yielded positive feedback from curators and museum staff. My experiences have been wonderful with opportunities to see and work with amazing materials and staff and I am often told that when I finish, I will be the only one who knows the whole of the museum!

My work on the collections at the NHM involves the completion of small projects that are pre-selected for me with my consent. These projects, although specific to the department in which I am working, may cover a variety of topics that I can relate to other departments as well. For example, when I worked with the paper conservator in LIS and the Botany curator, my job involved the conservation of a Hans Sloane bound book of botany specimens. Not only did I learn the practical work of cleaning and repairing paper, but I also learned how to work with and around delicate specimens and how to approach a situation involving a variety of factors to be considered before starting the actual work. My next project involves the creation of a survey and the development of a manual illustrating a variety of problems found in the zoological collections. Again, this project offers a valuable tool that can be used in all of the departments and an opportunity to practice developing the system myself.

I hope to use all of my experiences while working at the NHM to build a solid understanding of conservation in natural history collections and to use this information to develop new ideas and techniques for museums. Although each department works with individual specimens, I have found that they do often share common materials and a widespread need to maintain their collections. I hope the introduction of this degree will encourage others to study the conservation of natural history collections and emphasize the importance of maintaining these collections for future generations.