

Saving Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer

The conservation of a 20th century painting

Catherine Nunn and Vanessa Kowalski

In preparation for the National Portrait Gallery's inaugural exhibition in its new premises on King Edward Terrace in Canberra, which opened in December 2008, the University of Melbourne's Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC) completed a large conservation and restoration project of *Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer*, painted in 1924 by William Beckwith McInnes.¹ This imposing portrait is a significant painting within the University of Melbourne Art Collection, as the sitter, Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929), was an important figure in the history of the University of Melbourne. His talents encompassed teaching, advocacy for national science and Australian artists, and philanthropy. He was the University's foundation professor of biology and headed the first Australian university department to appoint female academic staff.² He was also heavily involved in the National Museum of Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria, through both philanthropy and his administrative talents. He is best remembered for his contribution to anthropology and ethnography, in particular his written and competent pictorial records of Aboriginal society in the early 20th century.

The creator of the portrait, W.B. McInnes (1889–1939), is a celebrated

Australian portrait painter, having won the Archibald Prize seven times between 1921 and 1936. He was born in St Kilda, Melbourne, in 1889 and trained at the National Gallery School in Melbourne from 1903. He travelled to Europe and exhibited at the Royal Institute of Oil Painters in 1913, and later that year upon his return to Melbourne, at the Athenaeum. He was appointed acting director of the National Gallery of Victoria in 1934, and became head of the painting school on the death of Bernard Hall in 1935.³

McInnes' portraits are alive with expressive, energetic brush strokes applied in a bold manner, often with flat, square brushes. His technique exploits the qualities of resinous mediums for their fluid, dynamic effects. In this portrait, McInnes has applied many areas of paint in treacle-like dripped bands of colour. The treatment of this painting involved the removal of a very discoloured natural resin varnish layer, which had darkened the colours of the composition and reduced some of the sense of depth and perspective created by the artist. In attempting to restore the painting to its original brilliance, organic solvents were used to remove this layer. Tests were made beforehand to determine which solvent could successfully remove the



discoloured varnish layer without damaging or altering the underlying paint layers. Once the varnish was removed from the painting, areas of old, discoloured restorations, small losses and minor abrasions in the paint layer were in-painted with conservation-grade paints that are designed to resist discolouration and remain readily soluble in years to come, thereby making the treatment of this painting easily reversible by

Previous page: William Beckwith McInnes, *Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer*, 1924, oil on canvas, 214.4 x 109.2 cm. Reg. no. 1924.0002, University of Melbourne Art Collection, gift of subscribers, 1924. Shown here after conservation treatment.

Left: Painting conservator Caroline Fry removing the discoloured natural resin varnish layer from the painting.

Right: Detail of the lower edge of the painting during treatment, showing the painting during the varnish removal stage. The line of discoloured varnish is clearly visible.



conservators in the future. A new, synthetic resin varnish formulated for conservation purposes was then applied to the painting as the final stage of the restoration process. As a result of this conservation treatment, McInnes' portrait of Sir Walter can be seen for the first time in many decades without the disfiguring yellow layers of varnish.

Since October 2008 the painting has been on long-term loan to the National Portrait Gallery, enabling Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer to stand amongst other eminent figures from Australia's history, and a significant piece from the University's collections

to be appreciated by both Australian and international visitors to our national capital.

Catherine Nunn is a senior painting conservator at the CCMC and teaches in the Masters program. She has a Bachelor of Applied Science in conservation of cultural materials (University of Canberra) and was a postgraduate intern at the Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre in 1999. Catherine then worked at the Auckland Art Gallery, undertook an advanced internship at the University of Cambridge, followed by several years as a freelance conservator in London, before returning to CCMC in 2007.

Vanessa Kowalski is a painting conservator at the CCMC and teaches in the Masters program. She has a Bachelor of Applied Science in conservation of cultural materials (University of Canberra) and a Bachelor of Arts in creative arts from the

University of Melbourne. Vanessa initially joined the CCMC in 2003 as a postgraduate intern and returned there after completing internships at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2006) and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (2007–2008).

Notes

- 1 William Beckwith McInnes, *Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer*, 1924, oil on canvas, 214.4 x 109.2 cm. Reg. no. 1924.0002, University of Melbourne Art Collection, gift of subscribers, 1924.
- 2 D.J. Mulvaney, 'Spencer, Sir Walter Baldwin (1860–1929)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 12, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990, pp. 33–36.
- 3 Richard Haese, 'McInnes, William Beckwith (Billy) (1889–1939)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 10, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986, p. 283.