

# *Mademoiselle de Maupin*

## Conservation of John Buckland Wright engravings and copper plates

Tara Elder and Libby Melzer

The Golden Cockerel Press material held in Special Collections of the Baillieu Library contains an important group of ten engravings, together with their copper printing plates, produced by John Buckland Wright (1897–1954) for the book *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, which was published in 1938. Though both the plates and the engravings were in good condition, they presented a particular challenge to conservation staff at the university's Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC), since the plates and the prints were to be mounted and displayed together. This necessitated the testing of new materials and the modification of established processes to allow the copper plates to be securely mounted in a way that met archival preservation standards and also permitted them to be removed at a later date without causing unnecessary stress to the print, or destroying the new window mount.

The Baillieu Library has an extensive print collection. It spans the last five centuries and includes prints by renowned Australian and European artists.<sup>1</sup> Baillieu Library Special Collections has a highly significant collection of private press material and has been collecting Golden Cockerel Press items for over 50 years. It is the latter collection that



**Previous page:** John Buckland Wright, *Theodore v [and] Rosette at the spring*, 1937, engraving, 31.9 × 24.8 cm. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Here the engraving is shown before treatment, in its old mount. Photograph by Tara Elder.

**Below:** Tara Elder attaching hinges to the back of a mount. Photograph by Libby Melzer.

incorporates the Buckland Wright engravings.<sup>2</sup> The collection began with a donation from Dr J. Orde Poynton, and was enhanced by acquisitions made through the Friends of the Baillieu Library, the Ivy May Pendlebury Bequest and the Baillieu's own funding. The Library purchased the John Buckland Wright plates and their corresponding engravings, which are artist's proofs, in 2011. They were displayed in the Leigh Scott Gallery the same year, as part of the exhibition *Write of fancy: The Golden Cockerel Press*. The works came from the archive of Christopher Sandford, who owned the press at the time they were made.<sup>3</sup>

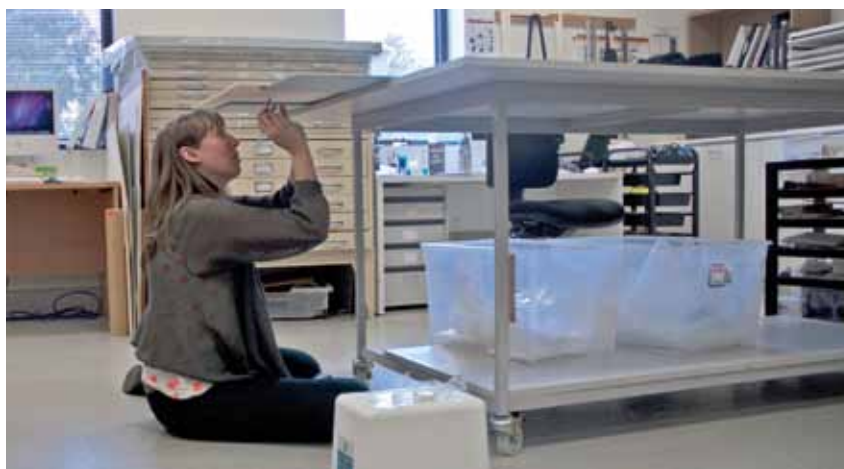
John Buckland Wright was born in New Zealand in 1897, and moved to England during his childhood. After serving in an ambulance unit in World War I he trained as an architect, but gave it up in 1924 after being inspired by an exhibition of engravings at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Buckland Wright travelled around Europe teaching himself wood engraving and etching, before eventually settling in Paris. Throughout his career he made drawings from statues, specialising in depicting the nude female form. In 1929 he began making copper-plate prints, after being taught the process by French printmaker Roger

Lacourière.<sup>4</sup> Buckland Wright enjoyed producing book illustrations and worked for a number of private presses. He was the favourite illustrator of Golden Cockerel Press owner Christopher Sandford. Buckland Wright collaborated with the press from 1936 until his death in 1954, producing over 200 illustrations for 17 books.<sup>5</sup>

The prints and copper plates treated at CCMC were illustrations for a translation of Théophile Gautier's erotic novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, published by the Golden Cockerel Press in 1938.<sup>6</sup> The opportunity to illustrate the novel was initially offered to Norman Lindsay, but he never responded to the offer and Buckland Wright

ended up reluctantly producing the illustrations. He did not have an enjoyable experience working on the book.<sup>7</sup> Although he had been satisfied with its printing and production and believed his plates to be a success, he became upset when Sandford expressed disappointment with the engravings, saying that they were only 'suitable for girls' schools and mothers unions'.<sup>8</sup> While the novel received good reviews, it sold slowly.<sup>9</sup> This contributed to a decision by the press to avoid publishing any more translations of French erotic novels.<sup>10</sup>

When acquired by the Baillieu Library, the Buckland Wright prints were mounted alongside their corresponding copper plates.



John Buckland Wright, *Theodore v [and] Rosette at the spring*, 1937, engraving and copper printing plate, both 31.9 × 24.8 cm. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Here the print and plate are shown after treatment. Photograph by Tara Elder.



The mount board was of unknown materials and differed from the standard size and colour used for exhibiting items from the Baillieu Library collection. The prints were hinged to the backboard of their mounts with gummed paper tape and the copper plates were adhered to the mounts with an unknown adhesive. Nevertheless, engravings and plates were all in good condition, with some minor surface dirt and handling damage.

The objectives of the conservation treatment were to remove the prints and copper plates from their mounts, clean them and remount them using archival materials and techniques consistent with the Baillieu Library's standards. Further, it was important to devise a mounting system that would enable the items to be framed and displayed vertically, as well as handled and removed from their mounts without causing damage to plates, prints or mounts.

After documenting their condition, we took the prints off their mounts, removed the tape and adhesive residues and dry-cleaned the prints to remove surface dirt, then repaired any tears and attached new hinges to the prints. We took the copper plates from their mounts and removed residual mount board and adhesive residue. The nature of the earlier

mounting required the mounts to be destroyed in order to remove the plates, which necessitated the use of large quantities of solvents to soften the adhesive. During this process we also removed an earlier surface coating and polished the plates with a soft cloth. After consultation with the curator, we applied a protective coating of microcrystalline wax to the plates to prevent them from darkening through exposure to air, which would have reduced the contrast of the engraved lines, and diminished the visibility of the image. Finally, we remounted the prints into new, archival-quality window mounts constructed using the library's standard mount sizes and board.

While mounting the prints was straightforward, mounting the copper plates presented several challenges. The first was that the adhesive could not be directly applied to the back of the plate, since this would require the mount to be again destroyed to remove the plate in the future. To avoid this, we modified an established technique for mounting works of art on paper, where tabs of strong, lightweight, Japanese kozo-fibre paper are adhered to the back of the work. However, as even kozo-fibre paper would not be strong enough to support the weight of the copper plates, we adopted Holytex® spun-

bonded polyester as an alternative. Tabs of Holytex could be threaded through slots cut into the support board and adhered on the back, so that they were not visible from the front, but were easily accessible.

The second challenge was to identify a reversible and stable adhesive that would adhere to the metal of the printing plate, be strong enough to support its weight, not deteriorate with age or be detrimental to the plate or print, and be safely reversible in the future. Working with CCMC objects conservator Carmela Lonetti, we tested a range of proprietary adhesives. However, while most of the adhesives would support the work in a vertical position, as soon as the plate was tilted forward they would peel away. Eventually we chose the adhesive Selleys All Clear® (a non-corrosive co-polymer sealant),<sup>11</sup> which could be removed with the solvent toluene. The tab system allowed us to use a significantly smaller quantity of adhesive. To prevent the plate from moving in the mount, we applied a small bead of Bostik Multi Bond® adhesive,<sup>12</sup> which is stronger but less flexible than Selleys All Clear, to the back of each plate. This prevented movement of the plate if the mount was leaned forward at an angle.



Although we applied the adhesive directly to the back of the plate, it could easily be removed by rotating the plate, thus preserving the mount intact.

The treatment achieved all our objectives and was successfully carried out using materials and techniques that are both stable and reversible. John Buckland Wright's copper plates and prints from *Mademoiselle de Maupin* are a significant part of the Baillieu Library's collection of Golden Cockerel Press material and are now able to be safely stored, displayed, accessed and enjoyed, both today and in the future.

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**Libby Melzer** is a senior paper conservator at CCMC and the head of the paper conservation laboratory. She has a Bachelor of Applied Science in the conservation of cultural materials (University of Canberra) and is currently undertaking a Masters by research on the parchment of medieval manuscripts.

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- 1 *Baillieu Library Print Collection*, 2007, University of Melbourne Library, [www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/prints](http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/prints), accessed 8 February 2013.
- 2 Kerrianne Stone, 'Write of fancy: The Golden Cockerel Press and the Baillieu Library', in Kerrianne Stone and Stephanie Jaehrling (eds), *Print matters at the Baillieu*, University of Melbourne, 2011, pp. 119–22.
- 3 Kerrianne Stone, 'Acquisitions: The Golden Cockerel Press', in *University of Melbourne Collections*, no. 8, June 2011, pp. 54–5.
- 4 Christopher Buckland Wright, *The engravings of John Buckland Wright*, Oxford: Ashgate Editions, 1990, pp. 13–18; Roderick Cave and Sarah Manson, *A history of the Golden Cockerel Press, 1920–1960*, London: British Library, 2002, p. 123.
- 5 Buckland Wright, *The engravings of John Buckland Wright*, p. 20.
- 6 Cave and Manson, *A history of the Golden Cockerel Press*, p. 251.
- 7 Roderick Cave, 'Letters from John Buckland Wright to Christopher Sandford', *Matrix*, no. 9, 1989, p. 158, reproduced in Buckland Wright, *The engravings of John Buckland Wright*, p. 40.
- 8 John Buckland Wright, Buckland Wright papers to C. Sandford, 2 February 1938, in Cave and Manson, *A history of the Golden Cockerel Press*, p. 140.
- 9 Cave and Manson, *A history of the Golden Cockerel Press*, p. 140.
- 10 Owen Rutter, Golden Cockerel papers to R. Mathers, 12 January 1939, in Cave and Manson, *A history of the Golden Cockerel Press*, p. 141.
- 11 Selleys Australia and New Zealand, *Materials safety data sheet: Selleys All Clear*, 2010, [www.selleys.com.au](http://www.selleys.com.au).
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