



Press Release: December 21, 2021

## THREE BOOK CONSERVATION ALUMNI FROM WEST DEAN COLLEGE OF ARTS AND CONSERVATION GIVEN MAJOR AWARD

- First time the award has been given to a Conservation project in Malta -



Three Book Conservation Alumni from **West Dean College of Arts and Conservation** have been awarded *The Barakat Trust Major Award* to be used for the conservation of the Islamic Manuscript Collection at the Franciscan Provincial Archives in Malta. Awarded annually, this is the first time the award has been given to a conservation project in Malta. The award covers material costs up to a maximum of £10,000 and the project will run until September 2023 – after that the manuscripts will be made available to researchers.

David Plummer is currently Book Conservator for the Archdiocese of Malta, while Maria Borg and Channelle Briffa are book and paper conservators at the Notarial Archives. All three gained qualifications in the conservation of books and library materials from West Dean College - Channelle studied from 2015-2017 and received a Graduate Diploma/ MA; while David and Maria studied at the College from 2017-2019 and gained Graduate Diploma/ Post Graduate Diploma and Graduate Diploma/ MA respectively. Since graduating, David has been working at the Archdiocese as a book conservator for two years and they had all been working on the condition survey of the collection for a couple of months prior to receiving the award.

The Barakat Trust was set up 35 years ago to support the study and preservation of the artistic, architectural, and archaeological heritage of the Islamic world, and has supported over 700 projects in over 40 countries. The competition for their grants is fierce, and their academic advisory committee favours projects that improve public access and engagement, ensure the long term



preservation of significant heritage, and provide opportunities for education, training, and capacity building (<https://barakat.org/>).

A spokesperson from the Barakat Trust explains: “The project in Malta is particularly relevant because it involves a heritage collection that is important and yet little known to the rest of the world. Malta is a fascinating place in terms being a cultural hub with strong links to the Islamic world, and we felt that this project to preserve Arabic manuscripts captured Malta's place in the world extremely well. Our committee felt that the project had a strong public engagement programme, which would raise the profile of this collection and shed new light on its story of cultural exchange.”

David, Chanelle and Maria state: “This award is extremely important to the Franciscan Order of Malta because it preserves their historical ties to the Near East. This is also very important to us as emerging conservators because it will help us learn more about the Islamic collections in Malta. We are very excited about the research and documentation of the manuscripts that will reveal more details on the materials and structures of the bindings, as well as their significance in the context of Islamic collections in Malta.”

Prior to the award, the conservators all had the opportunity to study and work on Islamic materials and bindings, which are different to Western bindings because they were produced using different materials and methods of production. During their time at West Dean College, they were exposed to a variety of materials, binding types, and conservation treatments, which provided a solid foundation for their future conservation careers. They also attended a workshop on Islamic bindings with Dr Karin Scheper.

Friar Noel Muscat, Head Archivist of the Franciscan Provincial Archives observed: “The strategic position of the Maltese islands at a crossroads between Europe and Africa, and between the western Mediterranean and the Middle East was an asset not only for its political and military significance, but also for missionary activity. The Franciscan friary of Santa Maria di Gesù in Valletta, founded in 1571 during the reign of the Knights of St. John, became a centre for missionaries going to the Holy Land, where the Franciscans are custodians of the Christian Holy Places. For this reason a school of Arabic was founded in this friary during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Maltese Franciscans who were teaching Arabic in two Franciscan colleges in Rome, namely S. Pietro in Montorio and S. Bartolomeo all'Isola. The manuscripts used by these Franciscans are still held in the Franciscan Provincial Archives. They are unique manuscripts of Arabic grammar or Bible texts in Arabic, copied by an Arab slave who was a scribe. These manuscripts are now being restored thanks to the generosity of



book conservators Maria Borg, Chanelle Briffa, and David Plummer, who also applied for and received a grant from the Barakat Trust for the project. Given that the resources at our disposal in the Franciscan Archives are very limited, we are extremely grateful for their expert service, in order to preserve these documents which are unique in Malta as a collection of Arabic manuscripts linked to the history of Malta as a cultural melting pot in the Mediterranean basin.”

For more details on the project, David, Maria and Chanelle have created a website: [www.franciscanislamicate.com](http://www.franciscanislamicate.com) and Instagram account: @franciscanislamicate

West Dean College of Arts and Conservation has an international reputation for excellence and is a full partner of the University of Sussex. Students regularly work with material from museums and private collections, due to the College’s extensive links with the heritage sector, as well as objects from the College’s own historic Collection and Archive. For more information on Conservation study opportunities, see [www.westdean.ac.uk](http://www.westdean.ac.uk). Applications for Conservation Studies specialisms including Books, Ceramics, Clocks, Furniture and Metalwork are open now for September 2022 study, with the application deadline for equal consideration on January 26, 2022. Dates for Open Days will be announced very soon.

**West Dean College of Arts and Conservation can be found on Social Media:**

<https://twitter.com/westdeancollege>

<https://www.facebook.com/westdeancollege>

<https://www.instagram.com/westdeancollege/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/school/westdeancollege>

**Notes to Editors:**

- West Dean College of Arts and Conservation was founded in 1971 by the poet and Surrealist patron, Edward James, recognised by BBC Arts as the ‘the greatest patron of art of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century’.
- The College is part of The Edward James Foundation (Charity No. 1126084), also comprising West Dean Gardens, West Dean Estate and West Dean Tapestry Studio.
- All photography is free to use for editorial purposes.
- West Dean College is situated on the A286, six miles north of Chichester and within easy access of Portsmouth, Guildford, Brighton and London.

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