



# Interview with Laura García-Vedrenne and Clair Emma Smith, ECPN San Francisco Regional Liaisons

This latest interview presented by ECPN Outreach Officers is with **Laura García-Vedrenne** and **Clair Emma Smith, ECPN San Francisco Regional Liaisons**. We interviewed these two emerging conservators to find out more about the San Francisco Mentorship Program that began almost a year ago. The Mentorship Program, which they helped form in response to COVID-19 lockdowns, was created to help match pre-program students struggling to find opportunities with virtual mentorships in the Bay Area.

Continue reading to learn more about this program and the two hardworking emerging conservators behind it. You can also learn more about the **ECPN Liaison Program** and find Regional Liaisons in your area to connect with [here](#).

## Outreach Officers' Burning Questions:

### 1. How did the mentorship program come about?

At the beginning of the pandemic, we were faced with a new challenge of engaging with our community of Emerging Conservation Professionals (ECPs) virtually. Once everything began to shut down in March, our ECPs began expressing concern about their futures due to canceled internships, in-person classes, and general ability to network. It immediately became apparent to us that what our ECPs could really benefit from was an individual relationship with a local conservator - someone who is willing to review resumes, portfolios, and even provide feedback on graduate applications as a mentor. We both personally know how much having the support of the conservation community can make all the difference in finding future internship opportunities as well as minimizing the hurdles necessary to get into a graduate program. We began speaking with past ECPN San Francisco Bay Area Liaison, Justine Wuebold, who is now a Member at Large of the local conservation guild - Bay Area Art Conservation Guild (BAACG). She was instrumental in getting us in touch with all of the BAACG members/conservators who were interested in becoming mentors. From there, our own networking brought us in contact with Michelle Barger, Head of Conservation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). Michelle introduced us to members of her staff who also wanted to participate in the program. We now have a running list of conservators, both in institutions and private practice,

who are interested in becoming mentors and are getting assigned as more of our ECP's express interest.

**2. How have you been able to connect interns with mentors and what have these connections been like?**

When we first began reaching out to our ECPs to see if anyone had interest in the program, we mainly wanted to find out what was expected of a mentorship. Ultimately, most of our ECPs expressed a great need for having someone review graduate school application material such as resumes and portfolios, as well as give generalized advice. We then chose to match each ECP with a conservation mentor that had the specialization that the mentee was looking into or who fit their overall goals. One of the important things we learned early on from starting this program was that this was never going to be one size fits all. Everyone has their own ideas and ways of doing things, so we left it up to the mentor/mentee to figure out how best to be in contact and accomplish goals. Right now, these mentorships range from email correspondence and furthered networking to virtual meetings on conservation ethics, at-home exercises, and reviewing of applications.

**3. How do you see these relationships and the virtual mentorship program continuing?**

We can see these mentorships continuing virtually for the time being, at least through a good part of 2021. It is our hope that, once we are able to return to "normal" life, these virtual mentorships can turn transition to in-person relationships, consisting of networking and studio tours. One of the greatest things about having a mentor is that it can be a life-long relationship. It is always exciting to run into a mentor who supported you at a conference or workshop and catch up! We imagine this same experience will be felt once our mentors and mentees are able to finally meet in person, when it is safe to do so.

**4. Have you noticed any changes within the field as a result of COVID-19?**

Yes. We are thrilled to have witnessed a stronger and clearer stance in rejecting unpaid internships. This action was supported by graduate programs announcing they will no longer require as much previous experience, given present circumstances. This encourages ECPs to be patient to get an initial experience or to search for opportunities for volunteering virtually at non-profit institutions. We have also noticed a rise in efforts to translate training content to reach wider audiences. Finally, we believe that these difficult times have pulled us closer as a community since we gained awareness on the vulnerabilities of our profession and tried to provide support to friends and colleagues.

**5. What changes do you hope to see in the future in regards to the field of conservation?**

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that professional development can be done from home. Whether that is watching webinars, talks, and conferences or doing independent research on a particular subject. We hope to see more of this in the future! Another significant change would be to place more value on intellectual activities. Though "hands-on" work is essential to our practice, we often underestimate the amount of time we spend thinking behind a computer and that is also something to acknowledge! Finally, we would like Conservation to be recognized more often as an essential activity for providing proper care to collections.

## **6. Have you been personally affected by COVID-19, how so?**

Clair Emma: I had recently relocated to the Bay Area from Boston just a few months before the pandemic hit, so my own networking was essentially stopped in its tracks. My job search has also halted since libraries and institutions are not actively hiring much and those in private practice are nervous to take on any new employees. I am still waiting for the right position to appear and, in the meantime, I have taken a step back on my search and chosen to focus on my volunteer position here with ECPN, as well as another chair position in a different organization. Conservation has always been a field that requires a lot of patience to get to where you want to go - this particular period is just adding another layer to it!

Laura: I am the current Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Textiles Conservation at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF). With the museum's closure, my supervisors and I had to pivot and modify the structure of a regular working day to make sure I am able to meet my learning outcomes while working from home and completing practical work onsite on a staggered schedule. I was named part of the museum's essential staff and I was allowed to regularly check our collections, both in galleries and storage rooms. As a result, this strengthened my knowledge on preventive conservation. Since in-person conferences, workshops and loans have been mostly canceled or have gone virtual, networking opportunities have been strongly reduced for ECPs. Though I believe that we need to find alternative ways to meet with other fellows and established conservators, it has been challenging to put this into practice. On a personal level, current travel restrictions have made it harder to stay in touch with colleagues, friends, and family back in Mexico.

## **7. Do you have any worries or anxieties about the field as a result of COVID-19?**

We understand that the field is going through an extremely difficult time since many institutions have experienced losses in funding and in revenues. We are particularly worried about the job market for ECPs since there are few opportunities available at the moment, which creates a highly-competitive environment amongst peers. We can only hope that the scenario improves during 2021.

**Thank you both so much, Laura García-Vedrenne and Clair Emma Smith, for your hard work as ECPN Regional Liaisons and what you have contributed to your Bay Area Community. We look forward to what comes next! If you would like to connect with Laura García-Vedrenne and Clair Emma Smith, you can email them at [sanfrancisco.ecpn.liaison@gmail.com](mailto:sanfrancisco.ecpn.liaison@gmail.com)**