

Harvard Art Museums

Fogg Museum
Busch-Reisinger Museum
Arthur M. Sackler Museum

Press Release

Harvard Art Museums Launch Audio Tour Dedicated to the Famed Forbes Pigment Collection

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and Harvard Art Museums Announce Joint Acquisition of Artist's Pigments



Left: A selection from the Forbes Pigment Collection at the Harvard Art Museums. Photo: Caitlin Cunningham Photography; right: Jars of pigment used by Georgia O'Keeffe, jointly acquired by the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and Harvard Art Museums. Photo: Courtesy of Sotheby's.

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The Harvard Art Museums today launched [A History of Color: An Audio Tour of the Forbes Pigment Collection](#), a digital resource that showcases the stories and science behind some of history's most fascinating colors, all contained within one of the world's largest collections of historical pigments. The tool takes viewers on a guided tour of 27 pigments, dyes, and raw materials—from [ochres](#) and [charcoal](#), the oldest pigments known to have been used by humans, to [YInMn blue](#), which was discovered by accident at Oregon State University in 2009.

The lively stories of these colors are shared through short audio recordings by two Harvard Art Museums staff members who work closely with the Forbes Pigment Collection: Narayan Khandekar, senior conservation scientist and director of the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, and Alison Cariens, conservation coordinator in the Straus Center. Each “stop” on the guided digital tour shows an image of a pigment sample from the Forbes collection along with corresponding audio clips. To provide further visual context, many recordings are paired with images of objects from the museums' collections that incorporate the pigment, including links to online object records for deeper investigation and prompts on where to view the work in the galleries. Full transcripts of each recording

are also available alongside the audio prompts in the slides. Entries for other pigments in the collection will be added to the tour over time.

In the tour, Khandekar and Cariens discuss a wide variety of pigments, including Tyrian purple, which was extracted from small Murex shellfish by the ancient Greeks; cochineal, tiny bugs that produce a red pigment first used by the Aztec and Maya peoples and later highly prized in Europe; mauve, one of the first synthetic dyes, created in 1856 during a search for a cure for malaria; and Emerald Green, a favorite of Van Gogh (and highly toxic).

Tara Metal, the museums' digital content manager, spearheaded the creation of the tour. Her objective was to expand representation of the pigment collection on the museums' website.

"Like so many of our visitors, I've long been enchanted by the Forbes Pigment Collection and have enjoyed learning the stories behind the pigments from Narayan and Alison over the years," said Metal. "My aim was to make those stories widely accessible but in a way that still felt intimate. I hope that our audiences come away from this guide with enthusiasm for the intersection of art, science, and history—and of course with a favorite pigment as well!"

"This introduction to the Forbes Pigment Collection only scratches the surface of our collection, but it opens up exciting conversations about color," said Khandekar. "Color is everywhere around us. Our spaces are filled with items that have been designed and colored with deliberate choice, and the search for color has been happening for thousands of years. Alison and I are excited to share these histories and shed light on what the raw materials of works of art look like."

"I'm thrilled to be able to share the stories of pigments with audiences around the world," said Cariens. "I respond to questions about our pigment collection on a daily basis, and this new guide allows me to tell individual stories of pigments and the history of the Forbes Collection on a wider scale."

Georgia O'Keeffe Pigments

In March 2020, through an auction at Sotheby's, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and the Harvard Art Museums jointly acquired a group of 20 jars of pigments used by O'Keeffe. A wooden box that the artist used to store the jars was also included in the lot. Each jar is affixed with an adhesive label that has the name of the pigment handwritten by the artist. The colors—including burnt sienna, indigo, and rose madder—represent commonly used pigments by the artist throughout her career.

The two museums will share all aspects of ownership of the group, including sharing all documentation and research. The partnership will allow for the group of pigments to be on public display at varying times at each museum and will open up conversations about collaborative research projects between the institutions.

"We're thrilled to be a partner in caring for these materials and look forward to working with colleagues at the Harvard Art Museums, now and in the future, to share wonderful stories about these pigments and O'Keeffe's work with our audiences," said Cody Hartley, director of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

Martha Tedeschi, the Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard Art Museums, agreed, adding "we are excited about our first partnership with colleagues at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and about this innovative model for joint collection stewardship."

Support for the purchase of the pigments came from the general acquisition fund at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. The Harvard Art Museums portion of the purchase was made possible through the generosity of several supporters: Narayan and Natasha Khandekar; and ancestors of Edward W.

Forbes (namesake of Harvard's famed pigment collection), including Weston and Susanah Howland, Sukey Forbes, Beatrice Forbes Manz, Barbara Forbes Purser, and Andrea Forbes Schoenfeld.

O'Keeffe's pigment jars join many other groups of artist's materials held by the Harvard Art Museums, where staff from the [Straus Center](#) and the [Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art \(CTSMA\)](#) investigate materials, artists' methods, and issues associated with the making and the conservation of works of art. Other materials held by the museums include John Singer Sargent's paint box, brushes, and [palette](#); Barnett Newman's [studio materials](#); paints used by José Clemente Orozco and Lewis W. Rubenstein for the execution of Orozco's mural [Dive Bomber and Tank](#) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1940; and materials used by the artist, lawyer, and philanthropist James Naumburg Rosenberg, many of whose paintings, drawings, and prints are also in the Harvard Art Museums.

"These pigments fit perfectly into the work our staff conducts at the Straus Center and CTSMA," said Khandekar. "As conservators and conservation scientists, we strive to understand art from many perspectives, and this partnership provides an amazing opportunity to study material directly from O'Keeffe's studio."

The Harvard Art Museums hold two paintings by O'Keeffe in the collections: [Red and Pink](#) (1925) and [A Memory Late Autumn](#) (1954).

About the Forbes Pigment Collection

The Forbes Pigment Collection, which was begun by former Fogg Art Museum director and Straus Center founder Edward W. Forbes in the early 20th century, has grown to include more than 2,700 samples from all over world. Forbes, along with Rutherford John Gettens—who was the first scientist hired at the Fogg Museum and who collected samples for the Gettens Collection of Binding Media and Varnishes—investigated these materials used by artists to better understand paintings and create a scientific approach to art conservation in the United States.

The majority of the colorful pigments are on display—along with samples of binders, other raw materials, and historical scientific instruments—in a row of gray cabinets on Level 4 of the Harvard Art Museums. The collection is not directly accessible by visitors, but is viewable from a distance, across the Calderwood Courtyard, through glass walls. The cabinets are part of the Straus Center's analytical lab space, where the pigment samples are in active use by conservation scientists who rely on the samples for testing and as reference materials.

An installation of pigment samples was put on display within the reception space for the Art Study Center, also on Level 4, in late June 2017. These display cases allow visitors to get a closer glimpse of thematic selections of pigments.

The Forbes Pigment Collection has been the subject of videos by CNN's [Great Big Story](#) as well as popular British YouTuber Tom Scott on his [Built for Science](#) channel. Simon Schama wrote about the collection for [The New Yorker](#) in 2018. Stories have also appeared in [Fast Company](#), [Vice](#), and [Artsy](#), among many other outlets.

About the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

Since 1997, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum has shared the art, life, and story of Georgia O'Keeffe to visitors from around the world. Located in New Mexico, where Georgia O'Keeffe lived the final decades of her life, the O'Keeffe Museum has sites and experiences in two historic destinations, Santa Fe and Abiquiú. For more information, visit okeeffemuseum.org.

About the Harvard Art Museums

The Harvard Art Museums house one of the largest and most renowned art collections in the United States, and are comprised of three museums (the Fogg, Busch-Reisinger, and Arthur M. Sackler Museums) and four research centers (the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, the Harvard Art Museums Archives, and the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis). The Fogg Museum includes Western art from the Middle Ages to the present; the Busch-Reisinger Museum, unique among North American museums, is dedicated to the study of all modes and periods of art from central and northern Europe, with an emphasis on German-speaking countries; and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum is focused on Asian art, Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern art, and Islamic and later Indian art. Together, the collections include approximately 250,000 objects in all media. The Harvard Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff. Integral to Harvard University and the wider community, the museums and research centers serve as resources for students, scholars, and the public. For more than a century they have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and are renowned for their seminal role in developing the discipline of art history in the United States. The Harvard Art Museums have a rich tradition of considering the history of objects as an integral part of the teaching and study of art history, focusing on conservation and preservation concerns as well as technical studies.

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