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# William Hodges in the South Pacific

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**Abstract:**

My research is focused on the artist William Hodges and his works based on his time spent in the South Pacific with Captain Cook in the 1770s. When I began working on my senior thesis for Art History, it became clear that viewing his art works in person and looking at the files museums kept on his artworks would be absolutely essential. However, the majority of his work is held by the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, which would be difficult for me to visit. With the help of my mentor Janis Bergman Carton, I applied for an Engaged Learning grant. With the grant money, I was able to travel to the UK and visit places like the British Library and the National Maritime Museum, where I conducted research that would be crucial to my thesis.

For my senior honors thesis, I decided to focus on William Hodges. William Hodges was an eighteenth century painter, best known for his landscapes of India and the South Pacific. I narrowed my interests down to his works conducted on and inspired by his journey with Captain Cook to the South Pacific. This work has been overlooked and undervalued by art historians for over two hundred years, so I hoped to cast a new, more favorable view on it.

When I began my initial research under my mentor Dr. Bergman Carton, my focus was on a painting entitled *Crater in the South Pacific*. Not much was known about the painting, other than it was attributed to Hodges, although several scholars questioned this attribution. I also extensively researched Cook's voyage and William Hodge's biography. Much of what I read on Hodges's work discussed his use of visible brushstrokes and texture, as well as other artistic qualities that did not really come across in the small, often black and white reproductions that were supplied in books. It became obvious that viewing these works in person would be crucial to my research.

With my funding from Engaged Learning, I was able to buy a plane ticket to London. I made appointments at the British Library, the National Maritime Museum and the Brighton Art Gallery to view the Hodges works they held, as well as primary source documents and the object files created by the museum. When I arrived in the UK in December 2014, my first appointment was with the Brighton Art Gallery, where *Crater in the South Pacific* was held. The conservationist at the museum graciously had the painting taken out of storage so I could view it and discuss it with her. Her opinion was that it was definitely 18<sup>th</sup> century, but she saw other evidence

that could definitively attribute this work to Hodges. When comparing the brushstrokes and artistic techniques of this work to other Hodges works I was able to view up close, I began to doubt the Hodges attribution. The style was very different, with much more fluid and finished brushstrokes. The object file held by the Brighton Art Gallery really convinced me that this could not be a work by Hodges. In the file were several letters from scholars, including one from David Attenborough, which said that this could not possibly be by William Hodges. For one thing, it was a completely different style to his other works. For another, Hodges could not possibly have seen the type of volcano depicted in the painting during his voyage, because none of that kind exist in the places he visited. While I was disheartened by this discovery, it actually ended up being beneficial. While I did have to change focuses, I also was able to establish that the painting was misattributed fairly quickly. If I had not had access to the painting and its file, I don't know if I would have been able to accomplish that.

At the British Museum, I was able to view and closely read primary documents that have become key in my research, such as William Hodge's account of his travels to India and his essay on architecture. At the National Maritime Museum, not only was I able to view all of their original engravings in storage of Cook's second voyage, which were created under Hodges' supervision, but I was also able to photograph and discuss them with a curator there. When I viewed the permanent collection of Hodges paintings they have on site, I got to see over 25 original paintings. When I was discussing Hodges's work with one of the museum guards, he told me that underneath a certain painting, *A View in Pickersgill Harbor*,

another painting had recently been discovered. It was a depiction, possibly the first one ever, of icebergs in the Southern Ocean. For some reason, Hodges made the decision to paint over it.

My thesis now focuses on William Hodges's recently discovered work *Icebergs*. I explore the possible reasons for its cover-up, as well as the lack of Antarctic depictions in Hodges's work from the voyage. Without the help of Engaged Learning, I would not have been able to definitively decide that *Crater in the South Pacific* is not a Hodges painting and I would not have known about this recently discovered work, over which almost nothing is published. Because it is such a recent and unstudied find, I feel like I can make an original contribution to the study of William Hodges.