

# Art Conservator

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**Rivera  
on the  
Barricades**

**Art Conservator**  
Volume 3, Number 1 • Spring 2008

*Director*  
Thomas J. Branchick  
*Editor*  
Timothy Cahill  
*Art Direction and Production*  
Berg Design, Albany NY  
*Photographer*  
Matthew Hamilton  
*Contributors*  
Katherine Alcauskas, Mary Catherine Betz, Leslie Paisley, Sandra Webber  
*Office Manager*  
Katherine Tremblay  
*Accounts Manager*  
Teresa Beer  
*Office Assistants*  
Rob Conzett, Susan Scherr  
*Printing*  
Snyder Printer, Troy, NY  
*Design Concept*  
Kosak Design, Pittsburgh, PA

**Williamstown**  
**Art Conservation Center**  
225 South Street  
Williamstown, MA 01267  
www.williamstownart.org  
T: 413-458-5741  
F: 413-458-2314

**Atlanta**  
**Art Conservation Center**  
6000 Peachtree Road  
Atlanta, GA 30341  
T: 404-733-4589  
F: 678-547-1453

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Courtesy Bennington College Collection

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**Our new facility** at Stone Hill Center on the Clark Art Institute campus is finished and it's a thrill to see. As I write this in April, refinements are being attended to and we are preparing for our big move in early May. The relocation is anticipated to take two to three weeks, so the dust should be settled before the first of June. The joint CAI/WACC opening events will take place the weekend of June 20th—three



days of dignitaries, invited guests and the public arriving to see the new Center. I attended a press conference on the project in New York in February, where Japanese architect Tadao Ando, the principal designer of Stone Hill, told the group how proud he was of the space he'd made for the conservation of works of art. The Fall issue of *Art Conservator* will devote several pages to the building, which I am on record as describing as one of the best conservation facilities in the world, if not the best. The space truly is magnificent. Meanwhile, WACC staff continue in New Orleans to move collections back into the Louisiana State Museum post-Katrina. We hosted a delegation of cultural officials from Mongolia in April. And the Judith Lenett Fellowship lecture concerning the conservation of the 1763 *Portrait of Jeremias van Rennselaer* and its frame owned by the Albany Institute of History and Art was a "show stopper." Lenett Fellow Katherine Alcauskas did exemplary work both with her scholarship and her "hands-on" activities in the lab—see the story in this issue. This educational collaboration, which we take part in each year with Williams College and the Clark, is a source of pride and genuine accomplishment. —Thomas J. Branchick



In mid-April, WACC hosted a delegation of administrators from Mongolia to tour the facilities and discuss future projects. Director Thomas Branchick (left) and WACC International Project Specialist Cynthia Luk (center, in red) led the visitors through the new Stone Hill Center. The delegation included, from left, Munktuya Batchuluun of the Mongolian Arts Council, Oyunbileg Zundui, of the Ministry of Education, Culture & Science, and Enkhbat Galbadrakh, director of the Cultural Heritage Center.

## Viva Rivera

### Mexican artist and revolutionary Diego Rivera mans the barricades

**B**y 1922, Diego Rivera had returned to his native Mexico after more than a decade in Europe, where he had found the style that would define his international fame. Rivera was a promising art student in Mexico City when he went to study painting in Spain in 1907. By 1911, he was in Paris as Picasso and Braques were inventing Cubism, and for a time, Rivera's work adopted the fractured, faceted appearance of the new style. But the Mexican was not destined to be a Paris modernist. The Renaissance frescoes of Italy, the soft contours of Renoir, the color and simplified forms of Cezanne and the expressive primitivism of Brancusi all played an important role in leading Rivera to his mature style, as did a longstanding interest in pre-Columbian Mexican art.

It was not simply stylistic considerations that informed Rivera, of course. The larger-than-life painter was a lifelong revolutionary and communist, and throughout his career his painting were influenced by his politics. In 1921, Rivera returned to Mexico City to participate in the new, government-sponsored Mexican mural program, an initiative to define the history and ideals of the nation through the lens of Marxist populism. After returning to Mexico, Rivera helped found a union for technical workers, painters and sculptors, and became a member of the Mexican Communist Party.

In 1922, he distilled his artistic and ideological stances in the small but incendiary watercolor *Communeros de Paris*. The little-known painting, just 20-by-16 inches, is a heroic scene of insurrection rendered in vibrant reds, blues and greens owned by Bennington College, which brought the work on paper to the Williamstown Art Conservation Center for treatment in 2007.

The painting depicts the uprising of the Paris Commune in 1871, a dramatic, tragic moment in French history. The Commune briefly ruled Paris following the Franco-Prussian War; its roots were in the Commune of Paris formed during the French Revolution. Between March and May of 1871, an affiliation of radical republicans, intellectuals and workers banded together to seek economic and social reforms in defiance of the conservatives installed in Versailles. The *communards* attempted to create a democratic government that provided free food, clothing and education, a program that, for the brief span of



Diego Rivera, 1932



Diego Rivera's *Communeros de Paris*, 1922, after treatment. The painting depicts the uprising of the Paris Commune in 1871.



its existence, was riven by disputes between moderates and more revolutionary elements ranging from anarchists to international socialists.

Throughout April and May of 1871, the French military mounted assaults on the Commune that culminated in *La Semaine sanglante*, the “Bloody Week” of May 24–28, when troops entered Paris and battled with *communards* behind heavily fortified barricades. It was this last hopeless, courageous stand that inspired Rivera’s picture. It is likely that during his time in Paris, the artist encountered those who remembered the 1871 uprising, and it’s not difficult to imagine that the revolutionary painter would have sympathized with the events that took place there.

Rivera turned repeatedly to the motif of insurrection, from the Mexican Revolution to Shays Rebellion. By glorifying the Paris Commune, the artist by inference also celebrated the revolt of Za-

**For all its hyperbole, the picture is a sublime expression of honor and strength in the face of impossible odds.**

pata and Villa that had just changed life in his country. Rivera was as revered by the populace of Mexico as he was reviled by powerful forces in America. In 1933, he famously ran afoul of Nelson Rockefeller when he insisted on including a portrait of Lenin in a mural he was creating for Rockefeller Plaza. Bennington’s *Communeros de Paris* is an unabashed work of political theater that, in execution if not in scale, is equal to the finest of his political works.

In it, a ragged band of riflemen defend the Commune barricades, while a worker-cum-freedom fighter raises a defiant fist and a stalwart woman lifts the red standard that the Commune used to replace the traditional French tricolor flag. The picture, in composition and symbolism, is a homage to the 1830 masterpiece *Liberty Leading the People*, by Eugene Delacroix, which depicts Liberty as a bare-breasted woman carrying the flag amid the French Revolution. Delacroix’s painting is a complex allegory of history and politics; Rivera’s, an ode to revolutionary valor and virtue. Beyond his bent for propaganda, though, Rivera was an artist of human

pathos and power. The faces of his actors are deeply moving, not only the woman and the man with the fist, but the other characters as well. They embody, by turns, tenacity, loyalty, horror, fear. Rivera renders the ruthless destruction of the Commune in hellish green flames, and, on the picture’s right edge, with a massacre of suffering. For all its hyperbole, the picture is a sublime expression of honor and strength in the face of impossible odds.

It is not known how exactly the painting came into the collection of Bennington College, when or from whom; it was acquired before 1955 and records are incomplete. The Vermont liberal arts college has an illustrious history with the visual arts. After World War II, its art department became a significant outpost of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. Painter Helen Frankenthaler, Bennington Class of 1949, introduced the eminent art critic Clement Greenberg to the college, who quickly made it a second home, lecturing there into the 1970s. Greenberg connected the small New England school with some of America’s greatest abstract painters and sculptors, including Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, David Smith, Hans Hofmann, Barnett Newman and Morris Lewis, and mounted a number of important exhibitions there. Pollock’s first-ever retrospective, for instance, was held at Bennington in 1952.

The college was soon looked to for its progressive program of exhibits. Also in the 1950s, the “shadow boxes” of the then little-known artist Joseph Cornell were given their first display at Bennington. In the 1960s, a group of “second generation” abstract painters found a home at Bennington, including Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Anthony Caro. Given the school’s illustrious history, it is not surprising to find a work by Rivera in its collection.

The Rivera arrived at WACC suffering from flaking paint and small tears at the edges of its paper base. The paint layer was consolidated and stabilized, media losses were inpainted and tears repaired using Japanese paper and wheat paste. A fabric lining, used to tack the picture to a wooden strainer, was removed, and the painting remounted over a support of paper-faced honeycombed aluminum to provide dimensional stability. It was then sealed and refitted into its original frame. While the danger of paint loss was mitigated by the treatment, the paper conservation department determined that the painting remains vulnerable to future flaking. Decisions about its exhibition, travel and loan need to be carefully weighed. The picture is now in storage at Bennington College, with no immediate plans to place it on display. ■



## Steichen's Dance

**E**DWARD STEICHEN (1879-1972) was one of the great innovators of 20th-century American photography. Before World War I, his Pictorialist photographs were renowned for their dreamlike languor, and he was closely allied with Alfred Stieglitz, the country's first champion of art photography. In the 1920s, Steichen produced portraits and fashion images for magazine giant Conde Nast; his ingeniously lighted and composed images for *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* set a new standard for editorial photography. Steichen served as director of Naval Combat Photography during World War II (despite being over 60), and after the war, headed the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art. There, he organized the vast exhibit "Family of Man," a pivotal event in modern photography. Given such an influential career, it is remarkable to consider that Steichen didn't fully commit himself to photography until his mid-40s. Before that he was, as his muse dictated, equally dedicated to painting. He once told a reporter, "Of course, photography is only a side issue with me—I am a painter, first, last, and all the time." One of his most evocative photographic self-portraits shows him holding a brush and palette.

Born Eduard Steichen in Luxembourg, his family emigrated to the Midwest before he was 2. In 1894, he was apprenticed to a Milwaukee lithographer, where he perfected his drawing skills and learned commercial design. He pursued painting and photography simultaneously, unsure which was his true calling. He first met Stieglitz in New York on his way to study art in Paris; when the older man asked if he would abandon photography once he had mastered painting, Steichen exclaimed, "Never. I shall use the camera as long as I live."

Steichen lived in France intermittently for two decades, spending months painting at his country villa in Voulangis, some miles from Paris. There, he worked on a series of moody nocturnes in blues and greens, heavily influenced by Whistler's Tonalism. Among the guests at the villa was modern dancer Isadora Duncan, who one warm evening performed under the trees before a small audience. Steichen commemorated the night in this 1909 painting, *Moonlight Dance, Voulangis*, now owned by the Portland Museum of Art. The picture, which was brought to WACC for routine cleaning, is one of a small number of Steichen canvases still in existence. In 1923, having embarked on his new career as a commercial photographer, the artist had his French gardener gather all his paintings in the yard. There, Steichen lit a massive bonfire and danced around his burning oeuvre, bidding good-bye to his life as a painter. 🍷

Edward Steichen, *Moonlight Dance, Voulangis*, 1909

Portland Museum of Art, Maine. Gift of Anne Augustine Healy. Used by permission.



## Painting and Frame

### Lenett Fellow completes an interdisciplinary study of a Colonial portrait

By Katherine Alcauskas

*Editor's Note—As this year's Judith M. Lenett Memorial Fellow, Katherine Alcauskas had the opportunity to conserve an American painting and its original frame at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. The Lenett Fellowship in Art Conservation is awarded each year to a student enrolled in the Williams College/Clark Art Institute Graduate Program in the History of Art. Past Fellows have conserved paintings by such artists as Jackson Pollock and Sanford Gifford, but this was the first time that both a painting and its original frame were treated together, forming a truly interdisciplinary project. Ms. Alcauskas is a second-year student in the Williams program. The following is adapted from a public lecture she delivered on her project May 7.*

**W**ORKING with my interest in 18th-century art, WACC director Thomas Branchick arranged a project with Tammi Groft, Deputy Director of Collections and Exhibitions at the Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, New York, to work on a 1763 portrait of Jeremias van Rensselaer.<sup>1</sup> The artwork was recently gifted to AIHA, and both painting and frame were in need of conservation.

Not much is known of the sitter, aside from basic biographical information gleaned from family records.<sup>2</sup> He was born at Fort Crailo in 1738, married Judith Bayard in New York City on July 3, 1760 and died on February 5/6, 1764 in Charleston, South Carolina. The portrait was painted just months before his early death.<sup>3</sup> The young man's head and upper torso, oriented at a slight angle to the viewer, are depicted against a graduated tonal background.

The canvas on which the portrait is painted measures 30 by 25 inches, a standard size at the time that was referred to as "three-quarter length," easily acquired pre-cut and pre-primed. As was typical, the artist covered the canvas with a ground layer over which he applied oil paint and a varnish. When the painting entered the lab, there was clear evidence of cupped cleavage, an action that occurs to the paint as the ground layer becomes unstable over time, and which eventually leads to paint loss. Indeed, when examining the painting under ultraviolet light, the presence of overpaint, paint added during a past restoration on top of the original layer, was discovered in a large swatch on the sitter's face. This was worrying,



Opposite page: Lenett Fellow Katherine Alcauskas works on Thomas McIlworth's 1763 portrait of Jeremias van Rensselaer. Right: Removal of overpaint from a previous treatment restored the artist's original nuances around the mouth, eyes and hairline.

as it suggested that perhaps the paint layer in this area had sustained major flaking or damage at some point in the past and that not much of the original portraitist's work survived. Before beginning treatment on the artwork, we first had to consolidate the tenting and flaking paint and ground layer with Beva, a synthetic thermoplastic adhesive. Upon stabilizing the paint layer, we were able to begin conserving the painting.

The portrait was painted by an itinerant Scottish artist named Thomas McIlworth.<sup>4</sup> His grandfather, William Mosman, was one of the great portrait painters of 18th-century Scotland. McIlworth's technique suggests he had some academic training, perhaps under his grandfather. In 1757, he emigrated to New York City, where he worked for five years, advertising his services in newspapers such as the *New York Mercury* and the *New-York Gazette*. There, he painted portraits of the Reverend Samuel Johnson, first president of Kings College, and members of the influential Stuyvesant family, among others. In 1762, he left the city to travel through the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys, painting prominent landowners. McIlworth moved to Montreal in 1767 seeking further commissions, where he is thought to have died two or three years later. McIlworth's known oeuvre amounts to 46 paintings, although the locations of a handful of these are unknown.

As demonstrated by this portrait, McIlworth typically painted the head and torso of his sitters turned at an angle against a tonal background. Many contain rounded spandrels in the upper two or all four corners, which is a convention adopted from portrait mezzotints. The artist's style

is defined by rosy cheeks, distinctive almond-shaped eyes, high foreheads and cherubic smiles. Although certain aspects identified the Albany painting as by McIlworth's hand, when it arrived at the Center it lacked the presence of many of his other works; the colors were nearly monochromatic, and the sitter seemed rather uninspired. The most likely culprit for the darkening of the paint layer, which may have decreased the painting's tonal contrast and muddled the colors, was a layer of accumulated grime atop a yellowed varnish. Varnish is applied to paintings both to protect the paint layer and saturate it, adding a sense of depth. Over time, however, varnishes tend to yellow. Working with Tom Branchick, I removed the varnish, along with the overpaint detected earlier, with swabs soaked in a xylene solution.

When the overpaint was removed, we discovered that, luckily, the sitter's face had not been damaged; instead, during a previous restoration, small losses of paint had been addressed by overlaying the whole face with paint, rather than filling each loss individually, which is more painstaking. Perhaps the restorer lacked the skill or time required to fill the tiny areas, or perhaps the repainting of the face was an aesthetic decision that reflected trends in contemporary portraiture. Indeed, the entire corner of the mouth was altered, covering the sitter's beatific smile and replacing it with a gruff, down-turned scowl. In addition to the alteration to his mouth, the sitter's hair was also changed. When the modifications of previous generations had been removed, elements of the



original painting were revealed. To fully finish the process, the small losses had to be corrected. We inpainted them to match the surrounding area and added a final layer of varnish, returning the painting to its original appearance.

The painting's frame was carved from a soft wood, most likely pine. Over the wood, a layer of gesso was laid to prepare a smooth surface, followed by a dark yellow oil size, gold leaf, and finally, varnish. When the frame entered the wooden objects lab, the original gilding was covered by multiple layers of bronze paint, which had corroded over time and become brown. Ideally, a conservator would want to remove the layers of bronze paint to expose the gilding beneath. In the case of this frame, however, the gesso layer, and thus the gilding, was extremely fragile. If we had tried to remove the bronze paint completely, we would have risked losing the unstable gilding and gesso layers, an act that would have been irreversible and would have destroyed an original surface. Conservators today make every effort to ensure that any alterations they carry out can be reversible at a future date without detriment to the original artwork. Thus, in the end, it was determined that the bronze paint would be removed only to a certain extent, leaving a thin layer atop the gilding. This was done using a gelatinous multi-chemical mixture applied to the frame in small sections, then carefully agitated and removed with



Thomas McIlworth, *Jeremias van Rensselaer*, 1673: The restored painting and frame.

Courtesy Albany Institute of History and Art.

xylene, followed by acetone.

The frame is rococo in style. The sight edge is carved with a leaf-and-dart pattern surrounded by a sand bar, which lends texture to the frame. The rails are decorated with scrolling foliage punctuated by flower heads. The area surrounding the foliage, atop the ogee curve, is marked by circular punchwork. The corners and centers of the rails are emphasized by cast rosettes and acanthus volutes that arch away from the rails. Due to this movement away from the rails, the frame is called “pierced.” C-scrolls further enclose the corners and centers, also accentuated with pointed punchwork. The corners culminate in scallop shells. The outside profile is a shallow cove that ends in a stylized flower-head back edge.

Most of the rosettes were crude replacements that needed to be restored. After determining which were the best preserved, we created a mould of one, from which we cast six additional rosettes. In addition, many of the pieces of original carving around the frame’s perimeter had broken off and rather crudely repaired. These were removed and replaced with small wood blocks that wooden-objects department head Hugh Glover carved to match the original decoration. A layer of gold paint was applied to the mended areas and some slight tone differentiations on the overall frame were corrected.

The frame’s ornate style, adept carving, and intricate gilding technique all suggested it was English in origin, as did the style of its mitered corners joined with tapered and dovetailed splines, and its composition of softwood. At the time, clients typically did not frame artwork themselves, but rather, paid the artist for both painting and frame. Research revealed that McIlworth bought both his canvases and frames from Samuel Deall, a British merchant who was active in New York City. Deall imported sundry goods from England that were assembled and shipped by his brother William and brother-in-law Edward Paul’s company in London.

Samuel Deall’s account books are housed at the New York Historical Society. They record the myriad products that the merchant sold to the New York community—primarily clothing and related paraphernalia such as gloves and muffs, dry goods including spices and seeds, as well as such items as jewelry, scales and weights, shaving brushes, umbrellas and writing paper. Thomas McIlworth’s account with the merchant began in May 1760 and lasted until October 1765. Records show that Deall supplied McIlworth with picture canvases and frames.

The frame on the McIlworth painting matches another in the Albany Institute’s collection on a portrait of a wealthy British woman painted by Thomas Gainsborough in 1759.<sup>5</sup> After further research into the frame makers that Gainsborough frequented, and visual comparison with frames of identified carvers, I felt confident identifying our two frames as originating from the Gosset family workshop in London. Elements common to both McIlworth’s frame and other recorded examples from this workshop are a sight edge carved in a basic pattern, followed by a sand bar, straight rails often ornamented with flower heads and foliage, and pierced corners and centers often differentiated by textured gilding and featuring C-scrolls, rosettes, and stylized shells.

Matthew Gosset (1683–1744), descendant of a Huguenot refugee, owned a workshop in Berwick Street in Soho.<sup>6</sup> This was an area of London heavily inhabited by Huguenot craftsmen.<sup>7</sup> Together with his nephews Jacob (1703–1788), Gideon (1707–1785) and Isaac (1713–1799), Matthew produced carved frames in addition to wax models. He also created custom frames for artists such as Gainsborough, Allan Ramsay and William Hoare. The workshop most likely produced frames for general sale and export as well.

The painting and frame will be on view in an exhibition titled *Framing Colonial Albany*, at the Clark Art Institute through July 6. The exhibit, as well as this article and my public lecture, mark the culmination of a fascinating and rewarding experience in conservation, one that will surely be beneficial to my planned career as an art curator. ■

1. Thomas McIlworth, *Jeremias van Rensselaer*, 1763, oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in., Albany Institute of History and Art (#2007.020).

2. As reported in Ona Curran, *Thomas McIlworth: Colonial New York Portrait Painter* (Esperance, NY: Art Books Press, 2007), 64.

3. A portrait of Jeremias van Rensselaer’s cousin Stephen van Rensselaer II, painted by the same artist presumably around the same time, is associated with a receipt in the van Rensselaer papers dated October 17, 1763.

4. Biographical information on Thomas McIlworth gathered from Curran, Thomas McIlworth; Susan Sawitzky, “Thomas McIlworth,” *New York Historical Society Quarterly* (April 1951); Peter Hastings Falk, ed., *Who Was Who in American Art* (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1999), 2129.

5. Thomas Gainsborough, *Barbara, Lady Mostyn*, 1759, oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in., Albany Institute of History and Art (#1947.78.1).

6. Jacob Simon, “Frame Studies II: Allan Ramsay and Picture Frames,” *The Burlington Magazine* 139.1096 (July 1994), 454; Tessa Murdoch, “Courtiers and Classics: The Gosset Family,” *Country Life* 178 (May 9, 1985), 1282.

7. Simon, “Frame Studies II: Allan Ramsay and Picture Frames,” 454.

**East Meets West in Paper Lab**

East Asian scrolls, screens and concertina albums are both functional and visual objects. The scroll format indigenous to East Asian paintings was designed to make the paintings readily accessible, easy to handle, store and transport, and to protect the painting in use and display. The mounting systems were created for paintings that would live the majority of their life in storage. In the East, a hanging scroll is brought out from storage for a brief period (with some ceremony) to be appreciated with the attention given to an arrangement of fresh flowers, and then placed back into its safe housing to protect the paper, silk, wood and paste from insects, moisture and light. In the West, wall art is typically framed and hung for years, decades or generations before it gets moved or reframed. Westerners who acquire an East Asian scroll painting tend to hang it indefinitely, with no glazing and rarely in a climate-controlled room. As a consequence, the seasonal temperature

and humidity fluctuations put stress on the paper, adhesives and mountings. Adhesives typically dry out, weakening the bond between the painting and its mount. Seasonal changes cause dimensional distortion, and light may accelerate the breakdown of the paper or silk. The scroll also becomes dusty, dirty and vulnerable to punctures, spills or overzealous housekeeping.

In the past 30 years, paper conservation practice has adopted many of the ancient materials and techniques of Asian scroll mounting. After centuries of use in the East, wheat- and rice-starch adhesives, Japanese mulberry kozo papers for repair and lining, and an array of specialized brushes are now incorporated by modern conservators in the treatment of all art on paper, regardless of origin.

Three damaged Chinese paintings on silk were brought to the WACC paper lab for stabilization by a private owner. They had incurred water stains and distortion in storage and had been removed from their original mountings at some point in the past. Conservators examined the vertical-format paintings and determined that due to their compromised condition they could no longer be rolled and unrolled as scrolls.

One of the three was a five-and-a-half foot painting depicting a woman in a cart, from the Ming Dynasty, circa late 16th-century. The painting contained an inscription in Chinese that, translated by the Center's analytical scientist Xian Zhang, revealed the name of the artist as Mrs. Zhu Chou, aka "Du Lin Nei Shi," one of that era's most important women painters, and daughter of the Ming artist Chou Ying. The painting arrived heavily stained by mold, with the silk extremely brittle.

A rigid panel of honeycombed aluminum was made to the same size as the painting's existing dimensions. Water stains were reduced on a suction device using compressed air, and the painting was lined with kozo paper and wheat-starch paste, then stretch-dried on a modified karibari, or vertical drying board, to allow it to return to its original even surface. The painting was mounted on the aluminum panel, which had been covered with a ukekake, a "pillow layer" of overlapping paper shingles pasted only along the edges. This pillow layer, an old Japanese technique, serves as a release layer, allowing the artwork to be more readily removed from the mount in the future. The borders of the lining paper were then covered with silk brocade, and the painting was packaged using a clear acrylic glazing to protect the surface. Spacers covered with matching brocade were made to separate the glazing from the painting. The owner plans to frame the sealed work for display in her home.

Detail of the restored scroll painting by Ming Dynasty artist Mrs. Zhu Chou, including new silk brocade border.



*Little Girl with Grapes*, by John Singleton Copley, during treatment. The cupped paint is still visible under the girl's left eye.



**Copley's sparkling Little Girl with Grapes**

This delightful portrait, *Little Girl with Grapes*, was painted by John Singleton Copley sometime between 1765-70. Copley (1738-1815) was the foremost American portraitist of the 18th century, and painted likenesses of more than 350 men and women of the colonies, particularly Boston.

Although we know the names of many of his sitters—Nathaniel Hurd, Henry Pelham and Paul Revere, for instance—we sadly do not know the identity of this little girl.

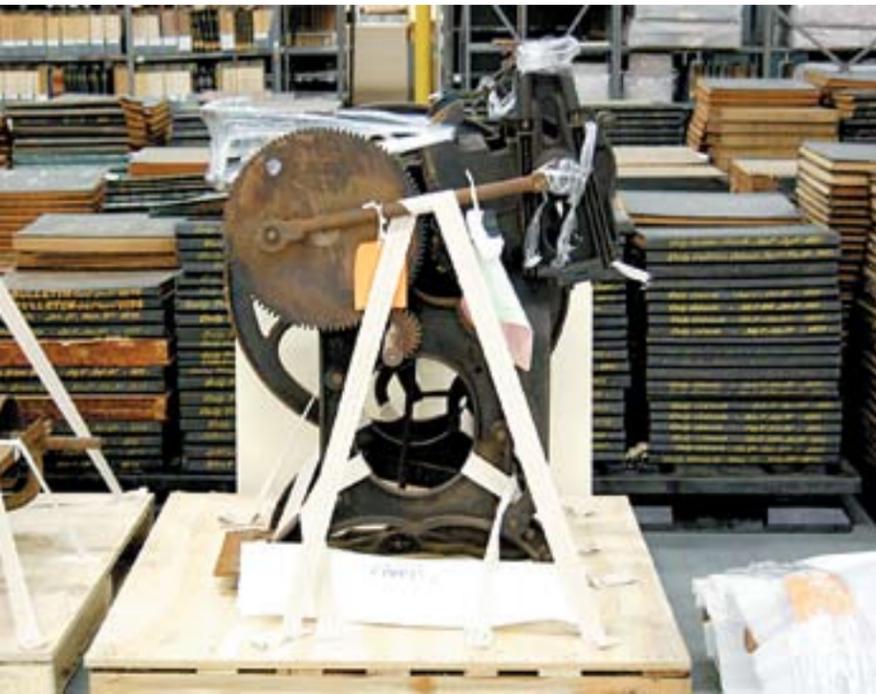
The owner of the painting, Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine, initially brought it to the Center because of a visually distracting area of cupping paint in the sitter's face. The painting had been wax-resin lined in a previous treatment, and the cupping was addressed by the application of heat and applied weight. But the painting was compromised by another problem: the brown background, complete with grapevine clusters cascading behind the figure on the left side, had lost its depth and richness.

The painting is representative of Copley's portraits of the time. The child is roundly modeled with strong contrasts of light and shade and precise contours, giving her a very three-

dimensional effect. Placing the model bathed in light against the somber brown background was a Copley formula that made the figure "pop."

In order to re-saturate the colors and restore the background, it was necessary to first remove the old varnish. (Often, when old varnish is removed, old retouching goes with it; here, previous retouch down the right side of the figure had to be replaced.) The background showed a significant craquelure pattern and suffered from aggressive past cleaning that had removed the thin glazes the artist used to add luster. Copley's browns are typically lush, so, while inpainting them was difficult and time-consuming, the results were rewarding. So too the addition of new glazes, which when completed brought the sparkle back to this charming, anonymous girl.

—Mary Catherine Betz



An historic printing press and bound newspapers in storage before relocation to New Orleans.

humidity, mold, mildew and insect damage threatened an array of LSM's holdings, from furniture to firearms to dolls, as well as vintage recordings, Mardi Gras costumes, maps, manuscripts and books, and a world-class collection of jazz artifacts that includes Louis Armstrong's first cornet.

Katherine Holbrow, head of objects conservation, has led WACC efforts, and helped coordinate the conversion of the 1835 former Mint into a primary storage facility. LSM is a multi-venue institution throughout the state, and the Mint, which once held government bullion, has been part of the Louisiana State Museum since 1981.

This past December, Allison Leone, WACC Assistant Conservator of Textiles and Frames, relocated to Louisiana for the project. Leone supervised a team of six "move assistants" to begin preparing the collections in Baton Rouge. Several WACC conservators and technicians have made briefer trips to New Orleans to take part in specific aspects of the relocation.

In February, the first trucks transported numerous boxes of Colonial-era documents to the facility, followed by recordings, instruments and related artifacts in the Music Collection. The materials were moved to the new storage areas by Leone and her staff under the direction of LSM curators. These moves were followed in March by objects from the Decorative Arts and Science and Technology departments.

The move team members next prepared the library stacks of the Louisiana Historical Center for transport. A walk-in freezer was used to eliminate pest infestation, by quick-freezing books for 60 to 72 hours at -10 degrees Fahrenheit. Library and historical collections, including a 17-foot wooden bateau, were also cycled through the freezer to remove potential infestation.

The move will continue through the summer, and is scheduled for completion in July.

### WACC Supervises Move Of Louisiana History

Under the supervision of WACC conservators, truckloads of historical artifacts have been returning the 75 miles south from Baton Rouge to their permanent home in the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans. More than 200,000 items, including the Louisiana History Center library, were hastily evacuated from the museum after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, many to a protected warehouse in Baton Rouge. Since then, WACC has designed and implemented a program of cleaning, stabilizing and packing the LSM collection for return and rehousing in an upgraded storage facility

Most of the objects had been on exhibit or in storage at an old U.S. Mint building located in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The Mint did not sustain flooding, but did lose power for several weeks after the hurricane, knocking out security systems and climate controls. In the late-summer heat and



Holbrow

### Staff News

After nine years as chief objects conservator at WACC, Katherine A. Holbrow has accepted a position as Head of Conservation at San Francisco's Asian Art Museum beginning in July. In her new capacity, Katie will supervise the paintings, paper, textiles and objects conservation

staff in addition to performing treatment on AAM's collection of 17,000 objects, including jades, sculptures, porcelains and

ceramics, lacquers, arms and armor, and puppets.

Objects conservator Gerri Strickler left WACC in March for a position as associate conservator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. At the MFA, her conservation work is dedicated to objects slated for the new Art of the Americas wing, part of the museum's ongoing project of expansion and renovation.



Strickler

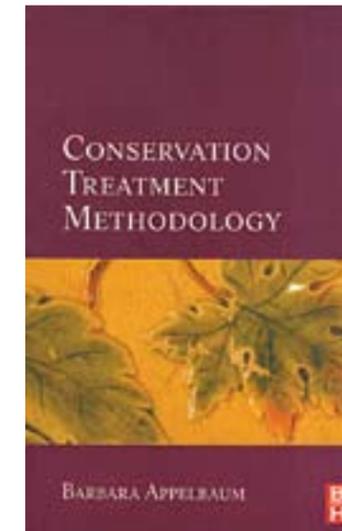
## Interview

*Like art-making itself, art conservation involves a series of decisions concerning intent and technique. Barbara Appelbaum's new book, Conservation Treatment Methodology (Butterworth-Heinemann, 437pp., \$32.95) sets out an eight-step system by which professionals can assess a work, then create and proceed with a treatment plan. The first four steps involve analyzing the object and its history, establishing a conception of its "ideal state" and deciding on a realistic goal for the treatment. The remaining procedural steps grow out of this initial information gathering. The notion of an "ideal state," "the past state of the object with the most meaning for its current owners," introduces an element of subjectivity that is inherent in art conservation, though rarely understood by non-conservators. The book is not a technical manual per se, but rather an examination of conservation's practical, technical and ethical issues. As such, it will be of interest not just to conservators but to curators, archivists, students and art historians tuned to the material life of artworks. Appelbaum was educated at Barnard and New York University in the 1960s and '70s. She is a partner in the conservation firm of Appelbaum and Himmelstein in New York City. The author recently responded via e-mail to questions from Art Conservator editor Timothy Cahill.*

### Art Conservator: What did you, as a professional conservator, learn by writing this book?

Barbara Appelbaum: The backbone of the work and much of its terminology are a result of writing the book, which I had been working on for about 10 years. I had never tried to construct a single methodological structure previously, and much of it happened when I was working with someone else—not a conservator—who insisted on making the whole text clearer and defining the process better.

### You address what might be called subjective aspects of conservation. How



### important is imaginative analysis to the success of a treatment?

It isn't conservation that is subjective—treatment is (sometimes horrifyingly) concrete. It is people's response to objects that is subjective. Few people, however, are aware of what exactly it is about specific objects that gives rise to their responses. That is the conservator's job, to enhance the responses that are appropriate to the nature of the object.

### In what ways does your current approach toward conservation differ from the way you were trained?

When I was in conservation school, there was little or no consistent approach to anything—we just tried stuff. We learned practical methods largely from the more advanced students. That was long before people started to discuss "issues" like repatriation, cultural sensitivities of indigenous peoples, and all that.

### Beyond the practical information in the book, is there some overarching message you want readers to take away?

Thinking systematically about treatment can yield reliable answers that help everyone involved feel comfortable with what is to be done. Additionally, I would like readers to come away with a heightened feeling of reverence for the incredible variety of ways that objects are important to human beings.

Thomas J. Branchick  
Director; Conservator of Paintings/  
Dept. Head

Teresa Beer  
Accounts Manager

Mary Catherine Betz  
Associate Conservator of Paintings

Sara Bisi  
Third Year Intern in Paper

John Conzett  
Office Assistant

Matthew Cushman  
Assistant Conservator, Paintings and  
Analytical Science

Hugh P. Glover  
Conservator of Furniture and  
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Katherine A. Holbrow  
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Montserrat M.M. Le Mense  
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and Frames

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International Projects Specialist

Adam Nesbit  
Assistant Conservator in Furniture/  
Frames and Objects

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Associate Conservator of Paintings  
and Frames, Atlanta

Leslie H. Paisley  
Conservator of Paper/Dept. Head

Susan Scherr  
Office Assistant

Katherine B. Tremblay  
Office Manager

Sandra L. Webber  
Conservator of Paintings

Sara White  
Technician in Objects

Alicia Zaludova  
Technician in Frames

Xian Zhang  
Analytical Scientist



Two views of *St. Mary Magdalene* by Ambrosius Benson, following removal of previous overpainting (left), and after restoration.

### A 16th-century *Magdalene* in Columbia, South Carolina

This painting has been a favorite at the Columbia Museum of Art in Columbia, South Carolina since it entered the collection in 1990 as a bequest. The 18 by 13¾-inch painting on cradled oak panel had been identified as a 17th-century French work titled *A Woman with a Goblet*. Later, the painting was reconsidered and is now believed to depict St. Mary Magdalene with a jar of perfumed oil, painted by Ambrosius Benson in the early 16th century. Benson (1495–1550) was born in Italy but worked in Bruges from 1518. He is known primarily for religious paintings, but also produced portraits. In this work, he has combined both his specialties.

When the picture arrived at AACC, the background was so heavily repainted that it appeared raised around

the figure. Removing this overpaint revealed that the original paint layer was bumpy overall, and that fine bubbles had abraded in the figure's face and hands. It was apparent that the painting had been damaged by fire sometime in the past and a restorer had tried to use thick amounts of paint and varnish to mask both the bubbled paint texture and cracks in the panel. During AACC's conservation treatment, special care was taken to mimic the bubbled-paint texture by adding glass microballoons to the infill and inpainting materials. Microballoons are tiny beads of glass that look like white powder. In some areas, the top layer of the microballoon-bulked material was shaved with a scalpel to match the surrounding paint texture.

## Technical Imaging of Paintings

Sandra L. Webber

**C**ONSERVATORS employ a number of examination and imaging techniques to explore the multiple layers of a painting, layers that are both visible and invisible to the naked eye. Some of these approaches require the simple use of unusual lighting angles, while others involve very specialized equipment capable of producing or capturing electromagnetic wavelengths above or below the narrow band of the visible spectrum. While one technique may assess the nature and condition of the varnish and restoration layers lying on the surface, others are capable of recording hidden layers lying below the visible image.

It is best to call a conservator and describe what you are looking at and what you are searching for, in order to find out which technique may best answer your question. WACC has the capability to radiograph paintings, but there is sometimes confusion in understanding just what an X-ray image can or cannot provide. Radiography is not the magic solution to all problems, and sometimes a simpler, less expensive examination technique is the better choice. A question might be answered with one technique, or several in combination. Occasionally the results are disappointing and no answer is possible, while other cases indicate scientific analysis of the materials is needed.

**Ultraviolet Light** The most commonly used lighting tool for paintings is a long-wave ultraviolet lamp. This wavelength, just beyond violet in the visible spectrum, is used to look at the surface of a painting. Ultraviolet (UV) light causes aged varnishes to fluoresce or glow, with various classes of coatings presenting different color fluorescence. Aged natural-resin coatings, such as damar or mastic, are still the most commonly found on artwork needing cleaning. In natural light these aged resins are yellow or brown in color, but in ultraviolet light they glow a yellowish-green. Depending on the age of the coatings, their thickness or number of layers, the underlying paint film and older retouches may be highly detectable or barely visible through the fluorescing varnish. When buried under old varnish, discolored retouching often looks brown or muddy in UV light, but may not be easily detectable, so confirmation in strong normal light is necessary. When the retouching sits closer to the surface it does not fluoresce, but will absorb the UV rays, looking dark purple. An aged synthetic resin fluoresces pale blue, and the occasionally-seen shellac fluoresces orange. It is important to remember that most new or recently applied varnishes will not fluoresce. It may take more than 10 years of aging before a resin alters enough chemically to create the by-products that cause UV fluorescence.

Certain pigments also have signature fluorescences—madder or alizarin red show pink in UV, for instance, and zinc white (which has been used in ground preparations since the 19th century) appears yellow. The examination of faded or abraded inscriptions on the backs of paintings can also be

Figure 1



An identical section of an oil painting photographed in normal light (top) and in raking light.

aided by ultraviolet light. Iron gall ink, a common brown writing and drawing ink used from medieval times through the 19th century, often fades from visibility, but remains detectable under ultraviolet light.

When appropriate, WACC provides clients with before-treatment UV photos to show the extent of previous retouching, and conservators sometimes rely on UV photos during treatment. While a powerful, heavy-weight UV lamp is used at the Center, very affordable, portable models are available. Every museum and serious collector of paintings should have a long-wave UV lamp and become familiar with its use. Beware of unscrupulous dealers. They sometimes coat their paintings with a UV blocking varnish that totally obscures the paint surface, hiding severe damage and massive cosmetic work.

**Raking Light** While ultraviolet light examinations are routine for almost every painting, there are several normal light techniques which can produce useful evidence. Raking light, a strong oblique-angled light from one side of the picture, can record condition problems such as severe cupping, flaking paint or distortions in a canvas. [Fig. 1] Such photos are sent to clients to show the extent of damage, especially if lining or other structural courses of action have been proposed. Raking light can also be useful in recording the topography of anomalous underlying brushwork, whose presence may record changes made by the artist or may indicate a totally reworked painting. Such discoveries are often followed with radiographic films to determine the extent of the alterations or the existence of a hidden painting.

**Reflected Light** Another technique that also relies on a specific angle of illumination is reflected or bouncing light. Photo lamps are set 90 degrees (or exactly perpendicular) to the picture's surface to catch the surface reflections. Although rarely used, reflected light can show off variations in gloss, thickness and application in a different way than raking light. It is especially useful when comparing a given painting with known works by a painter whose surfaces display particular surface phenomena. We recently provided reflected-light images of the Hood Museum's large Perugino altarpiece, which shows the flat, thinly-painted flesh areas against the thickly painted robes, a phenomenon seen on early Italian oil-painted panels, and especially noted on Perugino's surfaces.

**Infrared Light** The above techniques rely on providing the lighting to a painting's surface, which can then be recorded with either a film-based or digital camera. As digital photography is becoming the industry standard, conservators have been faced with changing from black and white film, which has long been the archival standard in our code of ethics, to digital photography, where long-term storage is still being perfected. This pressure to convert to the newer technology has created a more expensive transition in the two remaining imaging techniques.

For the last few decades, it has been possible to examine hidden aspects of artists' working methods using infrared wavelengths of light (those

beyond red in the visible spectrum). Previously, materials which absorb or reflect heat were differentiated using heat-producing lamps (infrared or incandescent) and a television camera fitted with special filters. Images from the camera were transmitted to a black-and-white television monitor, where they could be manipulated by altering the focus, contrast and brightness. Photographs taken off the monitor were not publishable due to the rolling lines typical of television systems. If useful information was detected, a photograph was taken using infrared film and printed on black and white paper. WACC now produces IR images using a dedicated digital infrared camera and specialized filters. Manipulation of the image can now take place on the computer, and multiple exposures of the surface can be merged to produce an infrared montage of an entire painting.

The principal use of infrared imaging is for the detection of black preparatory underdrawing lines against a white or pale ground layer. [Fig 2] The camera penetrates through the paint film, rendering the colors more transparent or invisible. The heat from the lamps is absorbed by any dark material such as graphite, charcoal or black ink, and reflected by any white surface. Infrared examination is therefore a natural for the study of early Italian paintings, which are traditionally executed on white gesso grounds, and often have images and perspective lines drawn on the surface prior to painting. This examination technique works on any painting having a contrasting pale ground and detectable underdrawing lines, but is of no use on dark-color ground layers, such as those of the 17th century. Old losses can sometimes be seen if a restorer used a filling putty paler than the surrounding original ground color.

Standard infrared viewing (lights in front of the painting) or transmitted infrared (lights behind the painting) can sometimes also be used to detect painted-out signatures or artist changes, but only if the information is much darker than the surrounding area. Just because you want to find a signature does not mean there is one.

**Radiography** Unlike all the above techniques, radiography is not a photographic procedure, but a clinically-based diagnostic technique, using electromagnetic energy found beyond ultraviolet light in the spectrum. Paintings are normally shot at exposures far smaller than medical radiographs, and the low dose of electromagnetic radiation does not hurt or alter the painting materials. Precautions are necessary, of course, to protect the operator and secure the zone where the machine is used. The state inspects the space used for radiography and issues a license to the conservation facility for operating the radiographic equipment.

X-ray film primarily records the structural elements of a painting and the dispersion of lead white, the principal white pigment used by painters for centuries. The sheet of film is placed against the paint layer to produce the sharpest image of the artist's working techniques. Areas of pentimenti, seen as colors, brush-strokes or shapes below the final paint layer, are considered indications of an original work of art, as copyists rarely adjust an image.

Figure 2



Detail of a 16th-century Flemish portrait. Black-and-white infrared image reveals preparatory drawing below the paint layer.

figure 3



A horizontal landscape by Whistler (top), and the vertical self-portrait that x-ray inspection discovered beneath it.



While such changes are often visible to the unaided eye, they are best detected through radiography, where even hidden levels of paint are recorded. The most spectacular radiographs are those that show one painting over another, as in the example of a horizontal landscape by Whistler which revealed a vertical self-portrait of the artist below the surface. [Fig. 3] Although rare, this phenomenon happens when an artist reuses his support, or, on occasion, when forgers employ a period panel or canvas as part of their trickery. Repaired tears and holes on the canvas or panel support, or losses in the ground layers, are easily spotted with an x-radiograph, and cut-down edges and transfers can also be confirmed.

X-ray films are also used for scholarly study when an exhibition or publication on a particular artist is in process. It is useful to compare x-ray images of a number of paintings reputed to be by the same hand, and attributions can come and go based on such studies. Along with infrared comparisons, radiography is a major tool in the examination of the technique of an individual artist and/or his studio.

Clients sometimes believe radiography will reveal everything they ever wanted or needed to know about their art work. Alas, if that were true, we would x-ray everything. Radiographic films of a painting can provide some very interesting data, or they can tell you nothing you don't already know. Radiography is an expensive technique, involving conservator and technician time, film and processing, as well as digital transfer and merging. The cost increases based on the size of the picture. We x-ray no more than one in 50 to 70 paintings that come to WACC, on either the recommendation of the conservator or the request of the client.

◀ SANDRA L. WEBBER has been a conservator of paintings at WACC since 1980. She graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art in 1972, and prior to joining the staff completed a three-year apprenticeship at the Center for Conservation and Technical Studies at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University. She is also an artist and a researcher/writer in New England maritime history.

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### Mission Statement

The mission of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, a non-profit institution, is to protect, conserve and maintain the objects of our cultural heritage; to provide examination, treatment, consultation and related conservation services for member institutions, and for other non-profit organizations, corporations and individuals; to conduct educational programs with respect to the care and conservation of works of art and objects of cultural interest; to participate in the training of conservators; to promote the importance of conservation and increase the awareness of the issues pertinent to collections care; and to conduct research and disseminate knowledge to advance the profession.



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WILLIAMSTOWN ART CONSERVATION CENTER  
225 SOUTH STREET  
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