

Unburying the Past

Lenett Fellow traces the history of a forgotten man

By Ginia Sweeney

Each academic year, a second-year student at the Williams College/Clark Art Institute Graduate Program in the History of Art is awarded the Judith M. Lenett Memorial Fellowship in Art Conservation by the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. The two-semester fellowship provides the student with the opportunity to research and conserve an American art object. This year's Lenett Fellow, Ginia Sweeney, worked on a long-forgotten nineteenth-century portrait from the collection of the Albany Institute of History & Art. She was supervised by Thomas Branchick, WACC director and head of the paintings department. The project culminated in a public lecture at the Clark, from which the article below has been adapted.

When I first encountered the portrait of Edwin Morgan, it was hanging in its cramped home of many years: the compact storage area of the Albany Institute of History & Art in Albany, New York. Standing a foot and a half or so from the huge canvas, I craned my neck to see it. Under the fluorescent overhead lighting,

its poor condition stood out above all else. It was a big, dirty canvas, slack and warped in its stretcher. Underneath those brown layers of grime, the subject was obscured but decipherable: a distinguished man with an unmistakable air of gravitas.

Edwin Denison Morgan. Born in 1811, his illustrious career

included his making a fortune at a young age in a wholesale grocery business, and serving as New York City Alderman, New York State Senator, Governor of New York, Major General in the Civil War, and United States Senator. He was a leader in the Whig Party and later the first, and, to date, longest serving chairman of the Republican National Committee. He was an active patron of the arts, and his own collection, which was exhibited at the National Academy of Design after his death, included three Bouguereaus, a large genre painting by Jules Breton, and an Asher B. Durand landscape. Morgan served as an officer of the corporation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the early 1870s.

Yet despite his myriad accomplishments and contributions to our nation's history, Edwin Morgan is not a figure that looms large in our collective memory. So as I worked at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center to remove the materials distorting Governor Morgan's likeness, I sought also to perform a similar sort of excavation on the history of an illustrious man, and of a forgotten depiction of him. Time has changed the physical properties of the portrait, and also its meaning. When it was commissioned in 1861 by the Albany Common Council as part of a series of portraits of New York governors, it had the precise purpose of representing civic power. Its years in storage have stripped away those layers of meaning, just as they have added physical layers of damage.

This is an object whose existence has been all but erased from the historical record, even whose very authorship is uncertain. Its sitter was an eminent man and his legacy leaves him worthy of our respect and admiration. In spite of the eminence of its sitting, this painting has been relegated to the closet of American history and art history both.

The conservation process itself raised philosophical questions, because we have no record of the painting's original

appearance. The discoloring and warping of the canvas were clearly the results of maltreatment and the passage of time. Without documentation, we can never know the true values of the colors the artist used. Over the course of the project, we had to make decisions about how thoroughly to clean the canvas and how to inpaint losses. The goal was to make the painting function as a cohesive whole.

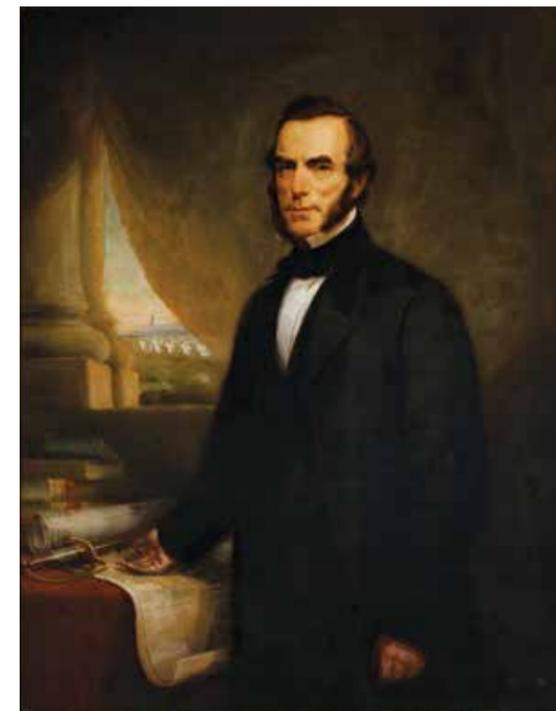
I hope and believe the result resembles the original intention of the artist as much as possible. Through conservation,

a previously unexhibitable painting, hidden in storage for decades, is rendered once again usable. The previous condition drew attention primarily to the material history of the object. Now, in its newly conserved state, the portrait can serve as a window into an important moment in New York and American history.

The artist has depicted his subject in a distinguished pose. He stands upright, his chest puffed out, wearing a fine black three-piece suit and bow tie. His body is turned towards the viewer at a three-quarters angle. One hand, curled into a loose fist, hangs at his side; the other is deliberately placed on a partially unfurled map of the United States. The map sits atop a red-cloth covered table with a large sword and stacked

books. Behind Morgan, a drapery hangs partially opened, revealing a campground of white tents pitched in receding rows to the horizon. Above the tents, small but unmistakable, an American flag flutters in the wind. Much later, after cleaning and conserving the painting, I would consider the meaning of the pose and surroundings.

As I started the treatment process, I realized I had a fear of touching the painting. Through my studies of art history, all art objects had gained an impenetrable aura that caused them to exist in an exalted, intellectual realm beyond the material. Conserving the portrait of Edwin Morgan forced me



Asa Twitchell (attributed), *Edwin Denison Morgan*, c.1861, after treatment. As Lenett Fellow, Ginia Sweeney (opposite) conserved and researched the long-forgotten painting.



to deal with the artwork on a directly material level. As Lenett Fellow, of course, I not only had to touch the painting but use solvents to clean it and even add my own inconspicuous paint strokes to the surface. Each day presented a new worry that I might irrevocably ruin the painting, despite Tom Branchick's assurances to the contrary. I soldiered forth with a great deal of trepidation.

The original condition of the painting presented several problems. The overall surface was discolored. The collar and chest of the governor's shirt, presumably originally white, were tinted a dull shade of brown as if stained with mud. The area of sky and land visible through the drawn curtains was also covered with a smoggy residue of grime and, we assumed, discolored varnish.

I began by cleaning the painting with an aqueous solution and cotton swabs, which removed a fair amount of grime. The surface dirt gone, we discovered the painting was not coated with the more usual yellowed varnish, but rather with a discolored layer of shellac, a hard resin related to lacquer, made from the secretions of insects. The shellac layer was visible in a photograph under ultraviolet light as a lightly fluorescing coating applied unevenly over the surface.

Because of the haphazard application, we inferred that the shellac was added not by the artist, but in a later restoration. Removing it presented solubility problems. It is difficult to remove shellac without disturbing the paint layer underneath, which in the case of Morgan was applied in thin, easily damaged glazes.

Proceeding gingerly at first, I changed course in the

cleaning process, switching from a water-based surfactant to a solvent. Luckily, the shellac lifted off without a problem. The transformation was instantly noticeable. The sky and mountains behind the curtain were blue, the tablecloth red; the collar and front of Morgan's shirt a gleaming white.

Once cleaning was complete, we turned attention to relining the canvas, to reinforce the areas of brittleness and loss. The relining process was fairly routine, but not for me, having never taken part in such a process. One of the unexpected lessons of the Lenett fellowship was the amount of time and physical labor required in the conservation lab. Stretching the lining canvas onto the wooden strainer proved a surprisingly taxing undertaking. The physical labor put into the conservation process only deepened my understanding of the Morgan portrait on a material, as well as a symbolic, level. My final technical work involved inpainting areas of lost pigment. Here again, I felt twinges of anxiety. Much of the inpainting, thankfully, was along the edges now covered by the frame.

Part of my task was to research authorship of the portrait, which is unsigned. I began with almost nothing to go on; the AIHA archive files contain only a single passing reference to the painting in the minutes for the March 11, 1861 meeting of the Common Council of the City of Albany. The Albany Institute dates the picture to between 1861 and 1863, and based on the date of the above citation, I surmised it was in the earlier half of that range. Morgan's term as governor ended in 1862 when he was elected to the US Senate.

Unfortunately, there was no mention of an artist in conjunction with the commission. The painting is generally attributed to Asa Weston Twitchell (1820-1904), a self-taught Albany artist, but such an attribution is tricky, as I was to discover. In a 1943 letter inquiring about Twitchell, the then-director of the Albany Institute wrote, "Some of his work is very good. It is quite uneven, however." This was precisely the issue I faced in securing the attribution of the portrait of Governor Morgan. The likeness of Morgan is less than perfect, compared to other contemporary images of him. Yet Twitchell was capable of quite convincing work. He had a deft hand and sensitive touch, and according to one source was the leading portraitist in Albany from 1849 through the end of the century. He created other gubernatorial portraits commissioned by the City of Albany, including Samuel Howell Lloyd and Dewitt

Clinton, as well as a fine early painting of Herman Melville dating to 1847.

In these, I found hints of the same hand as the Morgan portrait. Comparing the faces of all four portraits revealed similar paint handling. Morgan's face is painted more delicately than the rest of the painting, with tiny, wispy brushstrokes creating his hair and features. The other portraits have been executed with the same attention to detail, minute brushstrokes, and careful modeling of the face.

Given the stylistic similarities between the Morgan portrait and Twitchell's other work, as well as the artist's place as Albany's leading portrait painter at the time of the commission, I concluded he is the most likely author. This attribution is by no means certain, however. Notwithstanding the few stylistic characteristics, his work bears no utterly unique in either the Morgan painting or the others.

Portraiture is often said to have two purposes: first, to represent the appearance of the sitter, and second, to depict some inner essence of that person. In the second half of the nineteenth century, photography gained in popularity and brought new possibilities in lifelike representation. In the face of this technological development, the symbolic role of the painted portrait took on greater weight, as the paintings operated as much as repositories of biography and character as physical appearance.

The Twitchell portrait is a statement not so much on Morgan's appearance (there are paintings and photographs that capture that more accurately), but about his authority and influence. The picture denotes Albany as the seat of power for the State of New York, even as it references the pivotal moment in New York and United States history in 1861, as the Civil War began. The painting's iconography embodies a sense of civic pride in Morgan's leadership. The sword on the table



In May, Sweeney delivered the Lenett Fellow lecture at the Clark Art Institute.

suggests Morgan's rank of Major General in the Union Army, while the cavalry tents gathered outside the window reference the New York state troops he rallied to fight for the cause.

After a failed attempt to appease the South on the question of slavery, Morgan willingly aided the Union's war effort. He first volunteered New York state troops to the Union Army in February of 1861, before the war formally began. In April, he dispatched the first four regiments to Washington. As a leader in the Republican Party, Governor Morgan was a strong and early supporter of President Lincoln. He quickly became known as the "War Governor," the role he is seen in here.

Now restored to its original luster, the portrait of Governor Morgan takes on a new meaning. If the obsolescence of the portrait led to its poor condition, its poor condition perpetuated that obsolescence. Despite several recent loan requests, the Institute had been unable to lend or exhibit the painting. With the past century of neglect and maltreatment stripped away, the painting can begin its life again. No longer will it languish in storage, unseen and forgotten. The past uncovered, it can now serve as an important relic of history. 



Rows of Union Army tents behind Morgan evoke his efforts as New York governor during the Civil War. Top, ultraviolet photography revealed the presence of a shellac coating discoloring the paint surface.