

Art Conservator

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**de Kooning
Onstage**

Art Conservator
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Director
Thomas J. Branchick

Editor
Timothy Cahill

Art Direction and Production
Berg Design, Albany NY

Photographer
Matthew Hamilton

Contributors
Allison McCloskey

Proofreader
David Brickman

Office Manager
Rob Conzett

Accounts Manager
Teresa Haskins

Office Assistant
Amanda Turner

Printing
Snyder Printer, Troy, NY

Williamstown
Art Conservation Center
227 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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A reporter from the *New York Times* was at the Center early in October to view the monumental Louis Lang painting we brought back to life last year. The painting, *Return of the 69th (Irish) Regiment, N.Y.S.M. from the Seat of War*, arrived here literally in pieces and, as recounted in the Fall 2010 issue of *Art Conservator*, was painstakingly restored by a team of WACC conservators. The *Times*'s October 17 article, headlined "When Applying the Paint Was Spreading the News," discussed the Center and included a photograph of Associate Paintings Conservator Mary Catherine Betz. The article came in advance of the painting's own return to the New-York Historical Society, where it was unveiled to triumphant admiration in a ceremony during N-YHS's grand reopening. The unveiling, held on November 11, marked a homecoming of the long-unseen artwork to New York and, in a very real sense, the world. We are pleased to be part of such auspicious history.

Hats off to *Art Conservator* editor Timothy Cahill and designer Ed Atkeson of Berg Design, who worked their magic in a gorgeous redesign of WACC's website. I urge everyone to go to www.williamstownart.org to see the updated and more user-friendly presentation, complete with sexy widgets displaying before-and-after treatments. Bravo!

After a 2010 slowdown, the workload is picking up in all departments. It's worth reiterating that now remains a good time to bring work in, to take advantage of the quicker turnaround time before the pipeline fills up.

I personally am looking forward to treating the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute's infamous *Nymphs and Satyr*, which comes to the Center in November when the galleries in the Clark's white marble building close till 2014. The treatment, both cosmetic and structural, will take place through the winter and be on display in an exhibition in Stone Hill Center Gallery in March 2012. Then the big Bouguereau goes on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Suffice it to say that when *Nymphs* leaves here, its centerpiece big white tushy is going to be a whole lot whiter! —Tom Branchick



Chairs used by summer visitors at Stone Hill Center stand empty as autumn makes its arrival in the Berkshires.



Inside de Kooning's *Labyrinth*

Unseen for sixty-five years, Willem de Kooning's largest painting makes its second debut

By Timothy Cahill

Dear Father, It's been more than twenty years since we saw each other. That's a long time. When the war was over I started on a letter to you and up to now it hasn't been possible for me to put it in the mail. There were ideas in it that looked hopeless. I was trying to explain my whole life to you.

In the summer of 1925, 22-year-old Willem de Kooning stowed away in the engine room of a freighter out of Rotterdam and arrived in America looking for nothing more than a different life. He found a job as a commercial artist, but within a year was in Greenwich Village remaking himself as a painter. The process took two decades, during which de Kooning—or “Bill,” as he called himself, insisting on his Americanness—sacrificed economic and domestic security in pursuit of his art. During the Depression, he painted murals for the WPA and married the flamboyant Elaine, who was herself an artist. Everyone was poor and struggling. Then came World War II and everything was rationed. During the war, de Kooning supported himself by making furniture for his friends, selling only an occasional painting. Now it was 1946 and the war was over. Prosperity and confidence were mushrooming. When he wrote his father in November of that year, however, the melancholy Dutchman, aged 42 and destitute, feared he was a failure.

I have an irresistible longing to see you again. There's one thing I want to say about myself, and that is that I'm still in love with the art of painting and that's the reason I have been down and out most of the time and so it wasn't that easy to come to Holland. . . . I will try to come to Holland next year and maybe you will be able to find me an old loft to paint in. Ha . . . Ha. Really, father, the art of painting is very beautiful. I can remember you once telling me that when you were a young man you dreamt of having a great big business, but when you were older you wanted to be content with a small business, neat and proper. And with painting it is the same. If I will ever be a great painter is something for other people to find out. I am content to just be a painter.

De Kooning secured only one commission in 1946, from a young choreographer named Maria Marchowsky. They had been friends for fifteen years, had even once shared a summer house in Woodstock. Now, she regularly had Bill and Elaine to her apartment to talk about art and fix them a decent meal. The year before, Maria had commissioned Elaine to paint her portrait. Now, in the spring of '46, the conversation turned to her upcoming dance performance, and the new solo work she was premiering called *Labyrinth*. They were discussing the project when Marchowsky's husband said to de Kooning, “Why don't you do the backdrop?”

Marchowsky had danced with Martha Graham and her work, like Graham's, was aggressively modern. Her choreography was abstract, psychological, strident. *Labyrinth* was influenced by Freud's theory of the subconscious and the dream

Willem de Kooning, *Labyrinth*, 1946, after treatment.

metaphysics of Surrealism. De Kooning's style at the time was much influenced by his friend and fellow émigré, the exiled Armenian painter Arshile Gorky. Gorky was a leading exemplar of the abstract Surrealist technique of automatism, and de Kooning admired his watery, free-floating forms and vigorous chromatic passages. De Kooning had just completed a small charcoal and oil drawing called *Judgment Day*, a work akin to Gorky's paintings, with Netherlandish echoes of Breughel and Bosch.

The unpainted drop was seventeen-feet high by seventeen-and-a-half-feet wide. De Kooning had never worked on such a large scale. He had twenty-four hours to complete the job; there was no time to devise a new image. He chose to adapt *Judgment Day* and enlisted painter Milton Resnick to help him with the work.

De Kooning approached the commission as scene-painters had for centuries. He spent five dollars at a hardware store for ingredients to make his own calcimine, a kind of distemper whitewash bound with animal glue. To this he added cheap commercial hues. Resnick recalled de Kooning cooking the fish glue binder and adding pigment to it. "I painted, and Bill mixed the colors," Resnick recalled some years later. "He had made a sketch with chalk." They worked all night and were finished by the end of the next day.

"It was enormous, and it overwhelmed me with its brilliant colors," Marchowsky said of the finished painting. "I felt it was much too imposing for me." The background is bright pink, with variously-sized rectangular blocks randomly arranged behind floating biomorphic figures in orange, yellow, and green. The figures, which occupy the four quadrants of the canvas, suggest at once human forms, mythical creatures, and nightmare phantoms. Perhaps they are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. "[W]hat fascinates me," de Kooning once said, is "to make something I can never be sure of, and no one else

can either." The iconography of *Labyrinth* is open ended and permits endless interpretation, with the exception of an ochre figure in the lower center, the perfectly rendered profile of a woman's torso including the small of the back, the buttocks, and a thigh. All the other elements of *Labyrinth* closely echo the ambiguous images in *Judgment Day*, only this female figure is more accurately articulated in the large painting than the original source.

One review, which characterized the darkly psychological *Labyrinth* as "a colorful dance pantomime," also noted "the elegant scenic design of Mr. de Kooning." The drop was used for one performance, rolled up, and stored in Marchowsky's studio. The painter was paid fifty dollars.

Labyrinth arrived at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center in March 2011, carefully rolled on a thirty-six-inch-diameter cardboard tube of the kind used to pour construction piers. It was shipped in a massive, ark-like wooden crate attended by ten movers. The painting arrived at the Center in

advance of being on display for the first time since Marchowsky had performed before it, as one of the highlights of *de Kooning: A Retrospective*, the current exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The seventeen-foot canvas was unrolled in the classroom at Stone Hill Center and inspected by Tom Branchick, director and head of the painting department, and textile conservator Allison McCloskey. McCloskey's first reaction was not unlike Marchowsky's sixty-five years earlier. "It was very exciting," she said. "It's sheer physicality was somewhat overwhelming."

It was immediately evident that the rolled painting had

Above, conservator Allison McCloskey works on the massive canvas at the WACC facility. Right, The conserved *Labyrinth* on exhibit in the Museum of Modern Art.




at one time been exposed to water. Columns of lost paint ran vertically in successively lighter bands from right to left, outlined by dark stains called tide lines. The paint overall was friable, the pigment sifting off the thin medium of the calcimine. The painting had not been made to last; it was, in essence, an oversized piece of ephemera that required careful handling. There were additional paint losses where the cloth support had been flexed, probably while being rolled.

The support was made of seven vertical bands of cotton canvas, each slightly more than two feet wide, sewn on a sewing machine. At the mid-point on both sides, horizontal hand-stitched darts had been added, beginning at the edges and continuing toward the center, stopping several inches short of meeting. This was field surgery, probably performed after the drop was installed onstage to raise sagging corners so it would hang evenly. The thread on several of the main seams had deteriorated and created open gaps, one seven feet long. There were numerous small rends to the fabric, including a jagged four-inch tear in the upper right, and several failing patches. The painting's right border was seriously compromised with multiple tears and loose shards of cloth.

It was decided not to fully restore the areas of paint loss, but to clean, stabilize, and repair the painting for exhibition. The challenge of the treatment was how to perform the work

given the canvas's massive size; this was solved using a system of two cardboard tubes, one for holding the untreated painting, the other as a take-up spool like an oversized player-piano roll. Conservation was done one narrow band at a time. It took four people to lift and advance the painting as work progressed

The delicate paint layer was consolidated with a sealing adhesive lightly misted onto the surface. Textile conservator McCloskey then set to work to repair the damage of age and entropy. She sewed or patched four-dozen punctures and tears, including nail holes along the top edge where the painting had been attached to a wooden rod for hanging. Seams were restitched by hand, using existing needle holes wherever possible, and the darts were reinforced. Branchick and McCloskey devised a hanging system of cotton twill tape and Velcro loops on the top and sides of the backdrop that allows it to be displayed with minimal stress on the fabric or distortion of the painting.

Work was completed in July and *Labyrinth* was transported in its prodigious crate to the Museum of Modern Art. It was installed for its re-debut in the exit foyer of the eponymous exhibit, which occupies all of the museum's sixth floor. When *de Kooning: A Retrospective* opened in September, the large painting was greeted as one of the show's revelations. The exhibition continues at MoMA through January 9, 2012. 

Courtesy Jonathan Muzikar / The Museum of Modern Art, New York.





The Art of the Piano

Reviving George Schastey's Gilded Age splendor

During a span of some twenty years, from the 1870s to the 1890s, George A. Schastey was among the leading furniture artisans of Gilded Age New York. Little remains of who he was; most of what we know lies in the quality of his workmanship. In April 1882, Steinway & Sons delivered a Model B piano to Schastey's workshop, where its ordinary rosewood case was transfigured into a showpiece of nineteenth-century decorative art.

Schastey had been hired to decorate the grand piano by William Clark, a wealthy thread merchant from Newark, New Jersey. Born in Scotland in 1841, William was the third generation of Clarks in the cotton-thread business. In 1860, he immigrated to New York to help run the family's US subsidiary, and in 1865 began manufacturing in Newark. The Clark Thread Company was esteemed for its quality and earned William Clark a sizeable fortune. He took delivery of his artful Steinway nine months after Schastey received it, on December 30, 1882.

Schastey's work epitomizes the taste of its day for highly crafted, richly ornate decor containing a pastiche of Egyptian, Greek, Islamic, and Far Eastern influences. The William Clark piano is a model of elaborate veneering, marquetry, and carving, featuring geometric patterns, abstract designs, floral swags, classical figures, and mythological masks in tropical wood and metal.

Lavish art-case pianos blur the distinction between the piano as musical instrument and as decor. Still made today, decorative pianos had a heyday in the US at the end of the nineteenth century, when one-of-a-kind art cases were a centerpiece of mansions, ballrooms, and similar grand settings. Some of these pianos now reside in museum collections, including the "White House piano" in the Smithsonian Institution and the Steinway decorated by artist Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema owned by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

The piano commissioned by William Clark (no relation to the art-museum Clarks) left the family's possession in 1902, and its whereabouts for much of the twentieth century are obscured. The current owner obtained it from a church some years ago and has been assiduously restoring it. He commissioned master carver Dimitrios Klitsas to recreate missing floral pieces and details from the figures. The piano was then brought to the Williamstown Art Conservation Center for surface treatments and minor repairs to the cabinetry. Chief wood objects conservator and department head Hugh Glover determined the piano's original varnish was intact and required only expert cleaning and waxing. [For more about the piano and treatment, see pp. 10-11.]

In 1893, ten years after creating the Clark piano, Schastey was in debt and his factory destroyed by fire. The age of opulence was fading and with it Schastey's name. His legacy remains, however, written on his piano.

This is literally true. In 1882, before he sent his grand creation to William Clark, Schastey signed his name to the underside of the piano. With it, in crude handwriting and unschooled grammar, the craftsman added his farewell note: *you was sent from new Rochelle n.y. good By good By.*

Detail of the William Clark piano, 1882, designed by George A. Schastey.



The William Clark piano, as created by George A. Schastey. The rosewood cabinet is overveneered with a pale wood, possibly satinwood, and enhanced with darker veneer, carvings, silver, and brass. The piano

is remarkably well preserved and arrived at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center requiring only minor repairs to the cabinet and surface treatments. The original varnish was intact beneath layers of newer varnish, darkened cleaning products, and grime, and required only expert surface cleaning and waxing.



The piano was commissioned by William Clark, the Scottish-born head of the Clark Thread Company in Newark, New Jersey. Analysis revealed that Clark's pierced monogram is silver, coated to prevent tarnishing. The

ornate, intertwined initials are set within a latticework of flourishes terminating at each corner with the head of a satyr. A corner of the monogram plate was broken off at some point; its restoration is being considered.



The fallboard is a bravura performance of marquetry and design. The geometric pattern is inlaid with purpleheart, a dark tropical wood from Central and South America. Conservator Kathleen Payne de Chavez

determined that the abstract bell-shaped details are brass. The masks and garlands on each side of the monogram are classically inspired, while the inverted-dome motif on the near edge of the fallboard is Moorish. Such commingling of influences was typical of the era.



Records from Steinway & Son indicate the Model B "music room grand" was delivered to Schastey's factory on April 27, 1882. In the 1860s, Steinway established a retail facility on East 14th Street in Manhattan and, to the rear of the showrooms, opened the two-thousand-seat Steinway Hall. The concert hall increased piano sales as it quickly became an important part of New York cultural life. The Clark piano has a seven-octave keyboard, containing eighty-five keys rather than the more modern eighty-eight.



The piano's most prominent feature is its trio of female figures at the three leg-points of the case. The nude torsos, hand-carved in purpleheart, are effigies of fertility and abundance, adorned with cornucopias, leaf-and-flower roundels, winding tendrils, and acanthus leaves. The figure on the piano's right side reverently turns both palms inward, while the one on the left displays both palms out. The figure on the third or end leg holds a hand in each position.



The fluted-column legs suggest the splendor Schastey's clients expected from his designs. Schastey's name was "virtually unknown during much of the twentieth century, until letters to the senior [John D.] Rockefeller from Schastey were found in 1970," reported the Maine Antique Digest. The letters revealed that the cabinetmaker had designed and furnished Arabella Worsham's uptown mansion, later the Rockefeller home. Three of the house's Schastey rooms are now in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.





Katz Paints Bluhm

Just when Alex Katz met Norman Bluhm is not known, sometime in the second half of the 1950s. Bluhm, the older painter by six years, arrived in New York in 1956. Born in 1921 in Chicago, he'd flown forty-four missions over North Africa and Europe during World War II, after which he'd gone to Paris to become an artist. Abstract painting was his second language. His work was colorful, passionate, muscular, restless, cacophonous.

By the time Bluhm arrived in New York, Alex Katz had been establishing himself in the art world since 1951, the year he first exhibited (his first solo show was in 1954). Katz had studied at the Cooper Union and in Skowhegan, Maine, where he committed himself to a career as a painter. Against the prevailing culture of abstraction, he developed the spare, detached figurative style that became his signature.

"I don't think I could ever be an abstract expressionist," Katz told fellow painter David Salle in a 2001 interview.

Katz painted Bluhm sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960, reckons his widow Cary Bluhm. "It was before we met in 1960," she recalls. The portrait reveals nothing of the men's relationship. Though they were very different in style and sensibility, it is not hard to imagine them finding common ground at the level of paint—of "paint as paint." In his portrait of Bluhm, Katz is no more tied to the literal inflections of nature than Bluhm was in his large, energetic expressionist canvases. Katz is nearly an abstractionist in the painting, working with broad, reciprocal fields of color that, as it were, also happen to articulate themselves into a likeness.

A likeness of sorts. Though Bluhm would have been in his mid-30s when the portrait was made, Katz depicts him looking almost teen-aged, with a brooding gaze and tentative, self-conscious posture. Bluhm sits uncomfortably on one edge of the chair, precariously balanced, presentational. The loose, blocky forms and rough brushstrokes were typical of Katz in the 1950s, as was the blank background and figure contained within a circle.

The painting is little known, appearing in no books on Katz. It had until recently been held by a private owner, and came to the Williamstown Art Conservation Center for cleaning in advance of going to a dealer. The four-by-four-foot oil on canvas was in good shape, except for some grime, slight cracking, and a layer of mold from being stored in a damp room.

Of the painting, Cary Bluhm remembers little, save an edgy exchange between sitter and artist when the portrait was exhibited.

"Norman said to Alex, 'Why don't you call it GRamercy 5-3569,' the telephone number of Norman's studio," Mrs. Bluhm related. "A little while later, Norman ran into Alex, said, 'Well, I guess your show isn't going too well.'

"What do you mean?' Alex said.

"Well, I haven't had a lot of phone calls!' Norman said."

Bluhm's portrait did eventually sell, of course, without the numerical title.



Alex Katz, *Norman Bluhm*, c.1956–60, after treatment; the full image and, left, a detail.



The Persistence of Dzubas

“These are images of the inner eye,” wrote Fairfield Porter of the paintings of Friedel Dzubas. Reviewing Dzubas’s first exhibition in 1952, Porter observed, “Such paintings require from the artist a severe inner discipline that has little to do with practice with brushes, and little to do with anyone looking over the artist’s shoulder, or commenting on the work when done. His problem is to establish the smoothest connection between himself and his genius. . . .”

After he escaped service in Hitler’s army in 1939, Dzubas (pronounced *tsubas*) came to America and immersed himself in avant-garde culture, eventually becoming friends with influential critic Clement Greenberg. Like so many artists of his generation, Dzubas found his voice in Abstract Expressionism. His canvases became increasingly colorful in the 1960s, when he made a number of frieze-like paintings with deftly subtle hues that interact against neutral white grounds.

Six Dzubas from this period came to WACC to be prepared for exhibition at the Loretta Howard Gallery in New York. Beyond an overall cleaning and removing localized dirt and stains, the treatment required elimination of tidelines, irregular staining caused by water damage. “It was a major challenge,” explained chief paintings conservator and WACC director Tom Branchick. “The tricky part was matching the reflectance of the corrective inpainting with that of Dzubas’ carefully-balanced ground layer.”

“It wasn’t glossy and it wasn’t matte,” Branchick said of the ground. Maintaining the luminance required a centuries-old recipe of cooked rabbit-skin glue and calcium carbonate, toned to match the color and applied with an airbrush. The work allowed Dzubas’s colors to glow once more like the genius of the inner eye.

Arrested Motion: Friedel Dzubas 1961–1971 is on view at the Loretta Howard Gallery through December 23.



Above, Friedel Dzubas, *Aruba* 1969, after treatment and, at top, detail.

Returning the luster to a Tiffany chair

Pharmaceutical tycoon George Kemp commissioned Louis Comfort Tiffany to decorate Kemp’s Fifth Avenue home in 1879, when the glass artist and designer was 31 years old and at the beginning of his career. The contract was his first major commission; it included the entrance hall, dining room, and library of Kemp’s mansion, as well as a large “Arabian salon.” With the salon’s other décor, Tiffany is believed to have designed several chairs and other furniture, according to a contemporary journalist, “of white holly, carved, turned, and inlaid. . . .” Among the showpieces of the designer’s work is this armchair, owned by the Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute.

The chair, constructed of American holly wood, is a showpiece of nineteenth-century Aesthetic design. It is dominated by a regal scalloped crest rail of satinwood veneer decorated with inlaid fans and leafy tendrils. The arms, rails, posts, and apron are embellished with repetitive, relief-carved ginkgo leaves, and the seat and back upholstered with plush. (Research remains to be done on the original fabric; the red plush in the photo is not historically accurate.) The chair was a radiant honey-blond color when new, but when it arrived at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center earlier this year it had lost much of its surface luster and was marred with dark staining overall.

“It had been beaten up a bit,” said Hugh Glover, chief conservator of furniture and wood objects. Beyond a layer of grime and small losses of wood, the chair’s history of refinishing and maintenance had caused dark staining across the carved surfaces. “It was a very difficult treatment to design.”

Over the decades, as the chair’s original varnish had been lost, the wood had been treated with linseed oil to protect it. In places where the oil had come in contact with the wood, the creamy holly had discolored in patches of brown. Using a chemical slurry, Glover removed the old varnish with 0000 steel-wool and brushes around and within the relief carvings. This step was repeated three times. Using a different solvent mixture on cotton swabs, each dark stain was then addressed individually, often with repeated applications.

The chair was then varnished with shellac applied with cotton pads tinged with kerosene, to ensure penetration into the wood pores. The varnished surfaces were sealed and waxed with a medium oak tone. The final color is not intended to replicate the chair as it would have looked new, but to reflect the darkening that occurs from 130 years of life experience.

The chair, which MWPAI acquired in 2009, now takes its place among the Institute’s esteemed collection of nineteenth-century furniture. Its importance is not only as a premier example of American design, but as an early work of L.C. Tiffany, one of the country’s definitive tastemakers of the Gilded Age.



Above, holly armchair designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany, after treatment. At top, detail showing dark, mottled surface before conservation.

WACC assists in establishment of new Nigerian museum

Hélène Gillette-Woodard, Objects Conservator and Department Head at WACC, traveled to Ibadan, Nigeria this past July to offer training and advice to administrators and other stakeholders in the early stages of establishing a new museum of history and culture at Ibadan University. Ibadan, Nigeria's third largest city, was an important commercial center during British colonial rule and remains one of the country's key trading centers.

Gillette-Woodard joined Carol Lorenz, Senior Curator of the Longyear Museum of Anthropology at Colgate University, in leading a "Training of Trainers Workshop" at Ibadan University. The workshop was sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation of Chicago to help train the members of the Museum Development Program in developing legal and technical methodologies for the establishment of their institution and care of the collections. Among the topics covered in the three-day workshop were contemporary practice in acquisition, ownership, conservation, publication, and deaccession.

Nigeria is a country of ancient, multiracial culture, much of it

lost to the present population through years of colonialism and intertribal wars. Through the new museum, Ibadan University hopes to make this rich tribal legacy, history, and material culture accessible to students and the region. The small but growing collection contains religious artifacts, agricultural tools, and household implements. Administrative planners expect to expand the collection to include twentieth-century artifacts, some indigenous, others vestiges of colonial rule. In doing this, the museum faces numerous challenges, from restricted finances to water shortages to unreliable electric service.

This reality gave a different emphasis to the Nigeria workshop from a similar workshop in the US. To develop achievable guidelines and policies for short-term and long-term development of the Ibadan museum, it was necessary to modify American standards of practice and preservation to accommodate local conditions. One example: In the US, insect infestation of an object or textile is routinely treated with controlled freezing to kill the adult, larvae, and

egg stages of the pest, a procedure that requires exposure to very low temperatures for up to two weeks. Such a treatment is impractical in Nigeria, where electricity may not be available for an indefinite period of time. Such restrictions inspire alternative solutions, as in the case of infestation, where research is being pursued on eradicating pest insects with bacteria that can be safely sprayed onto the artifact.

In such instances, the American instructors felt as enriched by the workshop as their African colleagues.

Armed with knowledge gained from the workshop, Ibadan University Museum is now poised to move into the next stage of its development, which includes expanding the collection, hiring staff, and raising funds for a dedicated museum building.

WACC conservator Hélène Gillette-Woodard in Ibadan, Nigeria with Anya Egwu (far left) and Ademola Omobewaji Dasylya of Ibadan University. The statue depicts a mythological warrior.



La Mariée, a 1930 aquatint by Jacques Villon, after a painting by Marcel Duchamp, during treatment.

Between 1922 and 1930, Jacques Villon completed a series of color aquatints from paintings by modern masters for the Paris gallery Bernheim-Jeune. The works, numbering forty in total, include faithful copies of Manet, Renoir, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, and others. In the last years of the series, Villon collaborated with avant-garde figures from his own circle, including Jean Crotti, Albert Gleizes, and his brother, Marcel Duchamp. His 1930 edition of *La Mariée* (The Bride) reproduces a key Duchamp painting from 1912. This print, signed by both brothers and numbered 32/200, is from the collection of the Mount Holyoke College Museum of Art. It was brought to the WACC Department of Paper Conservation to remove extensive soil as well as reverse discoloration and staining brought on by age and previous matting.

La Mariée represents a transformational moment in Duchamp's artistic life. It was made in August, 1912, when Marcel declared himself bored both of Cubism (he'd made the explosive *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* earlier that year) and painting itself. Though *La Mariée's* fractured planes retained a Cubist influence, the work most decidedly looked forward to the revolutionary visual syntax of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, which he began in 1915. Marcel's bride is no mere abstraction of female form, but the erotic dynamo for a new concept of art; "not the realistic interpretation of a bride," he explained, "but my concept of a bride expressed by the juxtaposition of mechanical elements and visceral forms."

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Pre-purchase examinations aid museum acquisitions

The Birmingham Museum of Art in Birmingham, Alabama recently contacted the Atlanta Art Conservation Center about a portrait by Jane Stuart, daughter of Gilbert Stuart. The museum was considering the acquisition of the portrait of Oliver Hazard Perry—the “hero of the Battle of Lake Erie” in the War of 1812—and wished to have the condition of the painting assessed prior to purchase.

The dealer offering the work had previously had it inspected by a conservator, who pronounced it in a remarkable state of preservation. When the painting arrived in Birmingham, however,

or will require ongoing maintenance. An examination can also identify works that, despite poor appearance, would be good additions requiring only minimal treatment.

Such was the case at the Montgomery Museum of Art in Montgomery, Alabama. The painting *Girl with Sheep* by Eastman Johnson was being deaccessioned by another institution and the Museum was interested in acquiring it. The pre-purchase exam revealed an oil-on-board painting with minor issues. Mismatched areas of retouch covered some minor paint abrasion and the varnish was significantly yellowed. The most pressing concern

was the appearance of a pentimento sailboat on the right horizon. It had been painted out by the artist but had become visible with time. Neither the surface cleaning nor the apparition of the ghostly sailboat dissuaded the Montgomery Museum from purchasing the work. It has since been cleaned to remove the varnish and retouchings, and the sailboat was correctively inpainted to minimize its appearance.

The experience for the Montgomery Museum was so positive the institution retained AACC to inspect four additional works under consideration. These

included paintings by George Inness, Stephen Scott Young, Sevrin Rosen, and Scott Francis. We presented our findings to the Montgomery collections committee in October, and the museum is moving forward on only one of the proposed acquisitions.

In Birmingham, the assessment of the Stuart portrait revealed a painting in original condition with minimal prior intervention, needing only slight remedial attention. Treatment included mending a torn tacking edge, flattening small surface dents, and application of a very light varnish to saturate the dry appearance. The painting, now in exhibition condition, is under review by the museum and appears about to enter the collection.

—Larry Shutts, Associate Conservator of Paintings



Paintings examined by the Atlanta Art Conservation Center include Eastman Johnson's *Girl with Sheep* and *Oliver Hazard Perry* by Jane Stuart.

the collections manager judged it damaged, and AACC was called in. With the cooperation of both the seller and potential buyer, the painting was delivered to the AACC paintings department for further assessment and treatment.

One of the consequences of the economic downturn has been an availability of artworks at attractive prices. These opportunities that seem too good to miss have increased the number of pre-purchase examinations at AACC. A conservator can quickly evaluate the existing condition of an artwork, the extent and quality of previous repairs, and what treatments are necessary or imminent. Pre-purchase examination can help prevent purchasing a work that is in poor condition, has undergone heavy restoration,

Supports for Textile Display: Overview and Strategies for Flat Objects

By Allison McCloskey

Assistant Conservator of Objects and Textiles

Most textiles and other three-dimensional objects made from organic materials require support mounts for safe storage and display. A good mount design provides the necessary foundation while presenting the object to its full advantage, and allows for a safe, minimally invasive, and re-treatable method of attachment. Support mounts play an important part in an object's preservation; if well-designed, they slow down the damage gravity exacts and can serve both storage and display, thereby reducing unnecessary handling and its associated risks. Display supports aid in the viewer's understanding of an object, preserving the intended form or shape in as inconspicuous a manner as possible. As part of an exhibition, the manner of display can significantly complement curatorial research and interpretation.

Costumes and similar textile or fabric objects pose unique concerns for support and display, compounded by their complex structure and range of use. The object must first be assessed for structural stability. An object's main support point during its useful life (e.g., the shoulder seam of a garment) can become weakened or compromised with time and wear, and a different mount design and/or stabilization treatment may be necessary to prevent further damage. A well-designed mount will distribute the weight of an object safely and evenly.

Commercially made mannequins are ill-suited to support historic garments. They are made of unstable materials that may react chemically with the object. The shape of a mannequin is often too modern for a historic silhouette, resulting in a poor and possibly dangerous fit. It is usually not possible to safely fit a rigid arm form into a fitted historic garment, since the manipulation and force necessary to do so can cause significant stress on fabrics and result in serious damage. An appropriate mount will be made of archival materials, using barrier layers to prevent chemical interactions where needed; provide the right amount of rigid support and soft cushioning where needed to respond to the varied structure of garments; and have a cover that will not abrade or otherwise damage the object while providing gentle nap-bond friction to help secure it in the desired orientation.

Each object requires individual assessment to design a successful mount or support. One can often begin with standardized support designs, but customization of the support to meet the object's specific needs is critical to preventing damage. A wide range of stable materials, along with techniques and equipment to work with them, provides the mount maker with the ability to safely support an object for exhibition and storage.

What follows are case studies of treatments that describe and illustrate specific challenges and solutions in support mount design and use.



Figure 1

Woman's hide dress

This young woman's dress [Fig. 1], of Tsistsistas Suhtai (Cheyenne) origin, was made of semi-tanned animal hide with carved bone ornaments and glass beadwork. The support consists of two four-inch-thick planks of Ethafoam, intersected at right angles along the axis and carved to form a torso with measurements taken from the garment. A layer of needle-punched polyester provides light padding and a smooth surface for the rough-cut Ethafoam (2.2 lb. density). An undyed cotton stockinette cover was scoured to remove manufacturer oils and soil, then custom dyed with fiber-reactive dyes to achieve a visually appealing color. This fabric has a smooth surface that forms a nap bond with gentle friction against the hide, preventing slipping or shifting without abrading the garment.



Figure 2

Silk taffeta dress

This silk taffeta dress [Fig. 2] was owned in the 1880s by Kate Stoneman, first woman graduate of Albany Law School. Structured undergarments were worn under dresses such as this to create a very specific shape, or silhouette, following the fashion of the period. Corsets would cinch the waist, conform the bust, and encourage a straight posture with shoulders held back. A custom Ethafoam¹ form was made to mimic these effects and support the dress on display. Two planks of Ethafoam were cut in an outline of the desired form and intersected, then the form was rounded and filled as needed to recreate the shape of the historic posture inherent in the dress design. Needle-punched polyester and a scoured cotton stockinette protect the stiff, lightweight silk from abrasion. The sleeves were filled with a lightweight, acid-free tissue; fitting a rigid arm form into the sleeve of the bodice would likely cause damage.



Figure 3

Woman's hair piece

This nineteenth-century woman's hair piece [Fig. 3] has a series of symmetrical ringlets that were retained in perfect order with minimal need for maintenance. Silk ties were used to secure the hairpiece on the wearer's head, out of sight behind the neck. After consultation, it was decided that display on a full head form would compete visually with the object itself. A less intrusive solution was favored, involving a narrow support made of a crescent of Ethafoam covered by a scoured cotton broadcloth. Alternately, a shaped support made of clear, heat-moldable Vivak² could have been used, faced on the top with needle-punched polyester for a nap-bond grip to prevent the hair piece from sliding or shifting. The silk ties were humidified to relax creases, and loosely retied to prevent further damage.

Chilkat robe

A support form can be a critical element in the interpretation of an object. Rather than being displayed flat, this Chilkat robe [Fig. 4] made of wool and cedar bark appears to be draped over a man's shoulders, as it would have been worn during traditional dance ceremonies. A core torso of Ethafoam consists of two intersecting planks, carved and then rounded to create a male form. Since the blanket-like garment is not fitted, exact dimensions were neither evident from the garment nor critical and an approximation of the wearer's size sufficed. Several layers of needle-punched polyester placed at the sides of the torso provide extra dimension to suggest arms that are held slightly away from the body. The cotton stockinette cover allows a gentle nap bond friction grip with the object to help secure it in place.



Figure 4

Plains Indian vest

A solid torso form underneath this intricately beaded Plains American Indian vest [Fig. 5] would be highly visible through the arm and neck openings. This clear support was made from sheets of heat-moldable Vivak and attached to a clear cast acrylic rod that slips over a stand. Vivak is available in a range of thicknesses, and the thinner varieties allow for heat forming and shaping at relatively low temperatures. A thickness was selected that was easily worked while being rigid enough to support the weight of the vest, which is made of semi-tanned hide and glass beads. This clear support allows the viewer to see the lining material and other construction details. A precise fit of the vest on the form is critical in this case to prevent slipping on the smooth surface of the Vivak.



Figure 5

Japanese suit of armor

The mount for this seventeenth-century Japanese suit of armor [Fig. 6] incorporated the storage chest in a traditional method of display. Inspired by such tradition, the simple wooden support was fabricated with modifications to be more archival. The shoulders are rounded and softened by adding carved Ethafoam inserts with scoured fabric covers to distribute weight and alleviate pressure points on the shoulder elements. The armor rests on the padded shoulders and does not directly contact the interior wood frame of the mount. The frame was treated with several applications of an approved polyurethane, tested to help block the wood's natural acids, along with a chemically stable colorant. This coating smoothed the wood surface to prevent abrasion during any incidental contact, provided protection for the armor against the acidic wood stand, and created a visually unobtrusive appearance for the mount, which can be seen through the armor from certain angles. A custom-bent brass rod was attached to the mount to support the menpo, or mask, with padding at the points of contact. Freestanding Ethafoam inserts support the shin guards and shoe covers, which stand in front of the suit seated on its storage chest.



Figure 6

Caribou fur parka

This Inuit boy's caribou fur parka [Fig. 7] has stiffened and requires a gentle support to return it to form. Storage had flattened the parka and left rigid folds along the sides and sleeves. Controlled humidification allowed for some reshaping. The hood insert was attached to the torso form, but the soft-form arms were inserted separately to limit the manipulation needed to place the parka on the support mount. The torso size was determined by the shoulder measurement of the garment, but in this instance extra padding was added, since the wearer had multiple bulky layers under the parka.



Figure 7

Bandolier bag

This Potawatomi bandolier bag [Fig. 8] has wide straps with heavy glass beadwork. To give the viewer a sense of how the bag was worn, it is presented on a support that shows the intricately beaded straps in the round, rather than folded flat. Areas of the support that are not visible were faced with needle-punched polyester to provide gentle friction from a nap bond to prevent sliding or shifting. A custom-curved strap support was attached to a slanted display panel (also following the contours of the bandolier bag) made by the owning institution.



Figure 8

1. Ethafoam is a closed-cell polyethylene micro foam from Sealed Air Corp.
2. Vivak is a clear transparent thermoplastic sheet composed of polyester terephthalate glycol from Bayer Material Science AG.



Allison McCloskey, Assistant Conservator of Objects and Textiles, has been at WACC since 2007, treating artwork and working with clients to help preserve their collections. She studied Art History and Museum Studies at Rutgers University (1998), followed by the MA programs in Art History and Museum Studies at Syracuse University (2001). She specialized in textiles with a concentration in preventive conservation at the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (2006) and completed internships at the National Museum of the American Indian and with the New York State Bureau of Historic Sites at Peebles Island Resource Center (PIRC). She is a Professional Associate of the American Institute for Conservation.

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227 South Street, Williamstown,
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The mission of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, a nonprofit 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 nonprofit 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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