



Art Conservation *and preserving a rare needlework*

A large needlework and a collection of essays published in 1841, only the second book to be published by an African American woman, are the lone physical reminders we have of Ann Plato. Census data records that she was born free in the 1820s in Hartford, Connecticut. She graduated high school and taught at the South African school there before disappearing from the written record in the late 1840s. The needlework, measuring about 18x36 inches, is an embroidery on open weave linen and is part of the Winterthur collection.

It is a treasure that interests both researchers in art history and admirers of decorative arts because it is a rare needlework made by an African American woman or schoolgirl. Kris Clossen, Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDAC) Fellow and textile major, treated Ann Plato's needlework this year with the goal of creating greater research and exhibition potential to the work. Kris felt honored to have the opportunity to preserve such a historically significant work. The needlework depicts a house and garden in a landscape with a large vase of flowers on one side and a cornucopia on the other. It has been enhanced throughout with paint, and the signature "AI Plato" is stitched in the sky above the house. Before treatment, the work was heavily stained, overstretched, and had fragile embroidery floss. Kris's goal was to stabilize the piece while also reducing signs of damage, such as a tideline caused by water, that have altered its appearance since Ann Plato completed it.

Kris began by removing the many closely spaced iron nails that had likely held the needlework to a wooden board since it was completed. After placing a soft nylon screen over the needlework, Kris carefully vacuumed each side while avoiding areas of paint. They then used an aqueous gel with a chelator to do additional surface spot cleaning, this time avoiding the embroidery, to remove as much of the tideline and rust stains left by the nails as possible. They then stabilized areas of loss and fragile embroidery, much of it in the sky, using laid and couch stitches. Kris is in the process of creating an appropriate mounting and display system for the needlework that will allow it to be safely accessed by researchers, while also providing a way for Ann Plato's story to be told to admiring fans of historic needlework.



ARTC Spotlight—February 2021

The University of Delaware's Art Conservation Department educates and trains professional conservators who are well versed in the treatment, analysis, documentation, and preventive conservation of individual artifact and archive collections. For more news about our students and other department activities visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.

Top and inset: Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Kris Clossen examining Ann Plato's needlework. Right: Before treatment, the 18x36-inch needlework was heavily stained, overstretched, and had fragile embroidery floss. Far right: Detail of the needlework during treatment; the work has been enhanced throughout with paint, and the signature "AI Plato" is stitched in the sky above the house. Images: E. Krape and K. Clossen.

