



Art Conservation *and double (or triple) the mystery*

An early 20th-century portrait of a male sitter with glasses was purchased at a yard sale by the current owners to hang over a mantel during their murder mystery dinner parties. The painting was stored in the owner's attic for years; however, they later discovered that they had actually purchased two paintings—one on each side of the canvas. The portrait on the reverse is a Buffalo Soldier, the name given to two of the six all-Black cavalry and infantry regiments created by Congress in 1866. The name later came to represent all six regiments.

This year, the portraits became a treatment project for Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Magdalena Solano. Through x-ray analysis, a third painting, a landscape, was discovered beneath the Buffalo Soldier. The artist of these multiple paintings was William George Kriehoff (1875-1930), a Philadelphia painter known primarily for his portraits. Over his career, he painted portraits of many notables, but he spent the last 15 years of his life (1915-1930) working on the art staff of the old *Philadelphia Public Ledger* (1836-1942). The double-sided portraits, dated 1918, were done while he worked there, and the landscape was completed earlier and painted over. The portraits' subjects are unconfirmed, but they may be a Ledger board member and Colonel Charles Young, a celebrated Buffalo Soldier who had a long military career and later became the first African-American National Park Superintendent.

Although both sides were covered with dirt and grime, they were in generally fair condition, with some surface abrasions, aged and yellowing varnish, distortions in the canvas, and small losses throughout. They appeared never to have been treated. Magdalena was able to remove the dirt and grime from the portraits, but further treatment became more complicated as questions arose about the best method for treatment, and how far to take that treatment. Both portraits were covered with many layers of paint and varnish; humidification for the flattening was challenging but eventually successful. (Any treatment required suspending the canvas in a double-sided stretcher so both recto and verso could be accessed safely.) The paint used for the Buffalo Soldier's portrait appears to have been intentionally mixed with varnish for a transparent effect, making safe removal of the darkened varnish extremely difficult. Magdalena worked with Winterthur scientists and her advisors to resolve the questions surrounding the artist's working methodology and devising a safe treatment. Treatment will be continued by future WUDPAC Fellows, while Magdalena said she continues to be curious about the artist and his work.



ARTC Spotlight—June 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 lower left: Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Magdalena Solano conducting surface cleaning tests on the recto and verso of the painting. (Images: Evan Krape) Above: Cross-section photomicrograph of the Buffalo Soldier, which shows multiple layers of paint in between pigmented varnish layers. (Image: Nylah Byrd) Upper left: Magdalena adjusts the edge-lining and begins preparing the painting for humidification. (Image: Evan Krape)