



Art Conservation *and historical journeys*

The actual history of a painting depicting Christ as “Man of Sorrows” just prior to his crucifixion, surrounded by representations of ten Stations of the Cross, may never be known. But this year the painting became a treatment project for Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Tracy Liu, and her extensive analysis and research has found nothing so far to disprove its owner’s theory that it is a 17th-century Spanish work of art.

The story continues that it hung quietly for three centuries in a Catholic church before the church came under attack from leftists during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), when it was hidden with the Gypsies for safekeeping, only to resurface sometime later at el Rastro, Madrid’s large central flea market. It was purchased there by traveling Americans from whose estate it was acquired by the current owner.



The painting is called *Ecce Homo*, which is Latin for “Behold the Man,” the phrase uttered by Pontius Pilot at Christ’s trial.

Though the artist (or artists, as it appears to have been done by more than one hand) is unknown, the work is similar in style and theme to other 17th-century paintings by prominent Spanish artists. Tracy, who did pre-program work at the Princeton University Art Museum while earning her PhD in chemistry at the University, found in her analysis that the pigments present could date from the 17th century. Indeed, nails in the stretcher are pre-industrial as well.

After consolidating the painting’s friable surface, much of Tracy’s treatment focused on extensive cleaning to remove layers, and possibly centuries, of dirt, grime, varnish and overpaint. She also puzzled over numerous mysterious splotches of a non-soluble paste-like material on the painting’s reverse side that did not correlate to any particular damages in the painting itself. She reached out to the conservation community online to inquire whether

the apparent palette knife scrapings could have cultural or historical significance. Conservators in Spain and Latin America suggested that removal was ethically acceptable, so Tracy carefully removed the splotches with a small scalpel. Before returning the painting to the owner, Tracy will mend a small tear, line the painting to give further support to the brittle canvas, fill losses, and carry out retouching. Although she cannot provide the owner with a more definitive answer as to who might have painted it or when, her treatment will help ensure that the painting has a safer and more secure life in the future.

ARTC Spotlight—April 2019

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 artifacts and entire collections. For more news about our students and other department activities visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.

Top: WUDPAC Fellow Tracy Liu using a scalpel on the painting verso to remove irregular splotches of paste before consolidation of the painting face up on the vacuum hot table. Above: Local consolidation using a brayer during vacuum and heat-assisted planar correction on a hot table; the painting is sealed under vacuum between sheets of silicone release Mylar. Far right: Tracy delivering consolidant in the first of a two-stage facing to protect the friable paint. Right: Details of *Ecce Homo* before treatment (normal illumination) and during treatment (UV illumination), which revealed an underlying layer of discolored varnish admixed with a drying oil. Images: J. Myers, J.H. Stoner, T. Liu.

