



Art Conservation *and the life of a teapot*

Although the brightly colored, late 18th-century painted enamel teapot has little known provenance before Henry du Pont acquired it for Winterthur in 1963, it is not difficult to imagine a wealthy English person in the late 1700s using it to pour tea for guests in the drawing room.

In the intervening centuries, age and a life that may not always have been quite so genteel have taken a toll on the teapot, as Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Allison Kelley found this year when it came to her as a treatment project. Allison, an objects major with a preventive minor, documented discolored and flaking overpaint, loss of some of the base layer of enamel, exposed and oxidized spots of copper, and a large area of restoration that likely masked additional damage.

The teapot was probably made in what is now Guangzhou (Canton), China for the English and American markets sometime between 1750 and 1800, based on skills taught to Chinese craftsmen by Jesuit missionaries a century earlier. Round with a curved spout and a handle, the teapot is made of copper and coated with white enamel that was then decorated with polychrome enamel decorations in pinks, blues, and greens. The decorations depict Chinese figures in Chinese settings and are unusual because decorations on teapots created for the export trade typically showed Western figures in European settings. This difference helps create a bit of mystique around the little object, which represents one of the earliest junctions of western trade with China and the cultural intersection of four countries – France, China, England, and the United States.

This rich history has been only one happy aspect of a project that Allison said “gives her joy” as she sits with the teapot and continues her treatment. Another was the work that led to an unforeseen discovery when Allison, while removing old restoration materials and overpaint near the curved spout, uncovered an original design that had been concealed by the previous restoration. Working carefully, she discovered the hand of a little boy who appears to be feeding a deer, and, in another spot, she found a bit of turquoise paint unlike any other color in the decoration. When Allison completes her treatment, the teapot will be returned to the Winterthur collection where, she believes, it may be selected at some point for display. If so, it will be just the latest stop in its long and well-traveled life.



ARTC Spotlight—October 2020

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 above: WUDPAC Fellow Allison Kelley working to reduce overpaint and fill material on the kettle. Right, top down: Detail of front when viewed in ultra-violet (UV) light, the extent of previous restoration is revealed; an up-close view of the deer and boy figures with overpaint in place; and an up-close view showing the deer and boy figures with the overpaint removed, revealing the arm of the boy feeding the deer. Images: Evan Krape and Allison Kelley.

