



Art Conservation *and unusual art materials*

Cuttlefish bones, an egg, and wicker can be used to make an interesting piece of contemporary art, but they can also deteriorate quickly. When a collector experienced this with a three-dimensional piece of construction art called *Greek Beach V* that artist Ilse Getz (1917-1992) had created from found materials in 1965, he donated it to the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation for use as a teaching tool.

This year, *Greek Beach V* became a treatment project for second-year Fellow Claire Curran. It has proved to be an ideal project, as it has given Claire the opportunity to work with non-traditional materials and gain additional experience with the unique approaches necessary in the conservation of contemporary art.

In *Greek Beach V*, cuttlefish bones that Getz picked up off a beach in Greece and a store-bought egg rest atop a piece of wicker that sits on plywood inside a Plexiglas case. When Claire received it, the cuttlefish bones were completely unstable with active flaking, and only one-third of the egg remained attached to the wicker. The remaining fragments, including the dried egg yolk and white, were at the bottom of the display case. The plywood support posed a special concern

since it can off-gas formaldehyde, which produces formic acid as a by-product. The limited ventilation within the case had created an acidic micro-environment and caused the cuttlefish bones to deteriorate rapidly.

After carefully opening the case, Claire first strengthened the fragile outermost surfaces of the cuttlefish bones by spraying them with three finely misted coats of an adhesive. She then stabilized the rest using a micro-pipette and very gently allowing another adhesive to wick within the porous structure without distorting it. She then carefully re-assembled the egg by fitting the fragments into place like a jigsaw puzzle. The shell was so thin that Claire had to entirely line the inside of the egg with Japanese paper saturated in adhesive so that it would stay in one piece. Before returning the artwork to its case, Claire will place a piece of Microchamber board underneath the plywood. This board contains absorbents that will prevent acids from deteriorating the bones again.

Claire's treatment allows this work to safely return to display and be enjoyed by those interested in the artist and the artistic movements of the 1960s. She hopes that *Greek Beach V* will find a home at an institution with a modern and contemporary art collection.

ARTC Spotlight—April 2014

The University of Delaware's Art Conservation Department educates and trains professional conservators in the treatment, analysis, documentation, and preventive conservation of individual artifacts and entire collections. Our students are powerful public spokespersons for cultural heritage and its preservation. For more news about our students and other department activities visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.

Top: WUDPAC Fellow Claire Curran re-assembling egg with extant fragments. Above: Claire mist consolidating the surface of the cuttlefish bone with a dilute adhesive. Before treatment insets: The remaining egg fragment still intact and attached to the piece of wicker; *Greek Beach V* in its Plexiglas case with loose egg fragments. Far right: Claire readjusting already adhered egg fragments for better alignment using a hot air gun. Right: The egg after re-assembly, filling, and inpainting. (Photos: Nick Pedemonti, Emily Brown, Kelly McCauley, and Claire Curran.)

