



Art Conservation *and a journey home*

Students in the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) are seldom able to see an object they have treated be returned to its cultural homeland. WUDPAC Fellow Leah Bright is an exception, since the more than 100-year-old Tlingit basket she treated has been recently returned to Alaska in the care of modern-day Tlingit weaver and basket maker Teri Rofkar.

Little is known about the basket's story between the time it was made in the late 19th or early 20th century by the Tlingit, who are indigenous to North America's Pacific Northwest Coast, and its donation to the WUDPAC study collection in 2007. The basket, dirty, brittle and missing portions of its rim, was first cleaned and partly stabilized in 2011 by WUDPAC Fellow Crista Pack. Leah, who grew up in Alaska and is interested in ethnographic materials, focused her efforts on mending several more tears, filling areas of loss, and mending rim fragments that were entirely detached.

The basket, likely made for the tourist trade, was woven with roots of the Sitka spruce, which grows abundantly along the Pacific Northwest Coast. It is decorated with bands of red, yellow and dark brown ferns and grasses in geometric designs that symbolize geese on the wing, a shaman's hat, and water cascading down a mountain. The spruce root shows its natural color except where it was dyed red along the borders of the designs. The brightness of the dyed decorative elements, typical of the aniline dyes first used by Tlingit basket weavers in the late 19th century, helped Leah to date the basket.

Leah mended the tears using a so-called "Frankenstein" mend, twisting strands of toned Japanese tissue paper and applying them perpendicularly to the tear with a water-soluble adhesive. She reserved larger strands for places like the misshapen basket bottom, where the tears were misaligned and required stronger repairs. To fill small areas of loss in the weave, she fashioned pellets out of a toned cellulose fiber and lined them up on a backing of Japanese tissue paper so they resembled the basket's weave pattern. She also re-attached loose rim fragments using the same water-soluble adhesive.

For the basket's return to Alaska, Leah created a housing to protect it during transit, and later on from light, dust, and excessive handling. She then sent it off with Teri Rofkar, who hand-carried it on the plane to Sitka; Leah knows that she has helped give the basket a new purpose within a Native community.



ARTC Spotlight—April 2016

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: Winterthur/University of Delaware Fellow Leah Bright examining the Tlingit basket during treatment. Above: Detail of a tear in the rim of the basket before treatment, and Japanese tissue mends used to reattach three fragments to the rim of the basket. Right: The basket rim before reattachment of the six fragments, and after treatment with all repairs highlighted.