



Art Conservation *and the character of preservation*

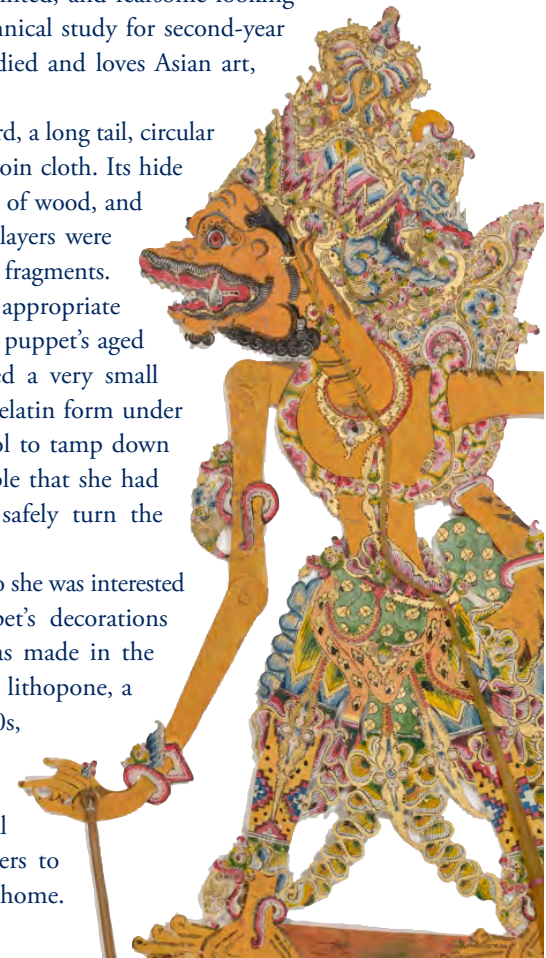
*Part man and part monkey, Sugriwa is an important character in the Hindu epic, Ramayana, and a familiar figure to Indonesian audiences, who love to see the story told by Javanese shadow puppets. The flat, highly decorated puppets, part of an art form that dates to the 9th century, have bodies made from untanned water buffalo hides and are manipulated behind a lamp-lit white cloth screen by a puppet master called the *dalang*.*

When two local art collectors found that paint on a 33 ½-inch-high *Sugriwa* shadow puppet they had acquired in Java in 1983 was flaking badly, they turned to the Winterthur/University of Art Conservation Program (WUDPAC). They wanted to stop the paint loss but retain a sense of the puppet's history. With that as the goal, the ornately chiseled, colorfully painted, and fearsome looking object this year became both a treatment project and technical study for second-year WUDPAC Fellow Alexandra Nichols. Alex, who has studied and loves Asian art, welcomed the project.

The puppet has yellow-orange skin, a black curly beard, a long tail, circular red eyes and white fangs, and wears a crown, jewelry, and loin cloth. Its hide body was in good condition, as were the two handles made of wood, and a third handle made from water buffalo horn. The paint layers were cracked and actively flaking, with many completely detached fragments.

Alex made extensive tests to determine the most appropriate consolidant for stabilizing the paint without changing the puppet's aged appearance. Working under magnification, she then used a very small brush to carefully apply a solution of the consolidant in gelatin form under the puppet's flaking paint and a small, silicone-tipped tool to tamp down and hold the paint flakes in place. The paint was so friable that she had to complete one side of the puppet before she could safely turn the puppet over.

Alex is also drawn to modern and contemporary art, so she was interested to discover through her technical study that the puppet's decorations included a red synthetic dye, indicating that it likely was made in the 20th century. When she also determined that it contained lithopone, a pigment manufactured by DuPont Chemical Co. in the 1930s, she felt *Sugriwa* had truly come full circle in his travels from Java to the WUDPAC program at Winterthur, a former DuPont estate. After the completion of her technical study and treatment, Alex worked closely with the owners to re-install the now stable puppet for safe display in their home.



ARTC Spotlight—August 2015

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 and top inset: WUDPAC Fellow Alexandra Nichols applying a gelatin adhesive to consolidate the shadow puppet's painted surface; Above: Fractured orange on the puppet's arm; Right: Javanese shadow puppet of Sugriwa, a character from a traditional Hindu epic. (Images: Lauren Gottschlich and Alexandra Nichols.)