



Art Conservation *and a life in the sun*

Silver tea services, ladies in tea gowns, and gentlemen wearing frock coats and boots may all come to mind when considering the most English of social rituals in the late 18th and 19th centuries, afternoon tea. Many hostesses may have also owned an Asian lacquer tea tray from which they served the tea. It is easy to imagine that these trays, imported from China and valued both as functional and decorative items, were frequently displayed in sunny drawing rooms when not in use.

But sunlight has its drawbacks, and Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Madeline Corona believes that exposure to light is almost certainly responsible for some of the deterioration evident in a mid-19th-century coffin-shaped lacquer tea tray from the Winterthur collection that this year became both her technical study and a treatment project. Long exposure to light has caused the tray's once glossy lacquer surface to become dull, and shrinkage of the wooden base has caused the lacquer to crack, lift and tent in many areas. In some places where the tray's flat center meets its curved, eight-sided edge, the lacquer has pulled away from the surface to expose the substrate.

Marks on the back of the 28-inch-long tray indicate to Madeline that legs were likely once attached so that it could be used as a table. The tray's red-and-gold-colored decorations depict ten different figures, either on land or in boats on a river, in a scene that includes pagodas and other Asian-inspired architecture.

Through her technical study, Madeline wants to learn more about the materials in the tray, including which of three species of lacquer tree, each found in different locations in Asia, produced the sap used in the tray's coating. Her treatment will include cleaning the surface to remove dust, grime, and ingrained dirt, consolidating areas of lifting and flaking lacquer with hide glue (chosen for its compatibility with the ground layers), and filling and inpainting areas of loss in the painted designs. Madeline's treatment will help stabilize the object and improve its aesthetic appearance and interpretation while preserving evidence of use and the passage of time.

When her work is complete, Madeline will return the tray to the Winterthur collection, where it likely will be placed in storage perhaps awaiting inclusion in a future exhibition. Madeline's work supplements an IMLS-grant-funded project at Winterthur, focused on the study and treatment of Chinese export lacquer, which includes the transfer of acquired knowledge to students.



ARTC Spotlight—February 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 Madeline Corona preparing for consolidation of the lifting and flaking lacquer by softening the ground with a mixture of water and ethanol applied using a syringe. Inset: Reflected light photomicrograph showing a detail of a figure in the central panel, with areas of loss and lifting lacquer. Right: Detail of the lacquer tray before treatment. Two types of gold powders and vermilion-pigmented lacquer were used to create the chinoiserie design. Far right: Cross-section of a sample from the tray; ultraviolet-induced visible fluorescence shows two thick layers of lacquer over a single ground layer. (Images provided by Jessica Chasen, Madeline Corona, and Catherine Matsen.)

