



Art Conservation *and ancestral memories*

When the 113-year-old, full-length portrait of two well-dressed society women from Philadelphia was discovered rolled up and forgotten in a New England barn, it was covered with dirt and grime. The canvas, however, though unframed and without a stretcher, was structurally sound and family members of the women in the portrait asked if it could be a treatment project for the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation.

This fall, second-year Fellow Pamela Johnson, a paintings major with a special interest in modern art, welcomed the six-foot-tall painting because she knew that treating traditional art is necessary to learn the fundamentals of painting conservation, and working large is great practice for treating modern art. The portrait, titled *Portrait of Susan Hough Pettit and her Daughter, Edith Pettit*, was painted by Frederick MacMonnies (1867-1937), an American artist and sculptor who lived most of his life in France and is most often remembered for his many public monuments. But in 1902, MacMonnies spent about five weeks in Philadelphia accepting portrait commissions from well-to-do people such as Susan Hough Pettit, the wife of a successful lawyer. It is unclear where and when the oval-shaped portrait, which measures approximately 6 x 4 feet, was displayed; however, MacMonnies is known to have exhibited it in New York in 1904.

Before she could begin her treatment, Pam first had to lay the large canvas flat because it could not be placed upright without a stretcher. Her next goal was to remove as much of the dirt and grime as possible from the surface of the canvas, a job she accomplished using tiny cotton swabs that had been dipped in a 2.5 percent chelating citrate solution at pH 6. As she worked, she stabilized areas of flaking paint by carefully lifting up small areas of the canvas and applying Aquazol adhesive to the verso side. She mended five small tears with Stabiltex fabric and BEVA 371, and repaired the many torn and missing areas of the portrait's tacking edge with Japanese tissue and adhesive. Hollytex will be used to provide a supplemental tacking edge for re-stretching the painting over a custom-made large oval expansion bolt stretcher. Before the portrait is returned to the family, Pam will apply an isolating varnish, fill and inpaint areas of loss and attach a backing board with countersink washers and screws. It will then be ready for a frame, or whatever else its future might hold.



ARTC Spotlight—January 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: Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Pamela Johnson removing surface dirt and grime from the painting with a 2.5% chelating citrate solution at pH 6. Above: Portrait of Susan Hough Pettit and her Daughter, Edith Pettit, before treatment. Detail: Blackish-colored dirt and grime being removed from the bottom of the painting. Left: Pamela alongside the newly-assembled stretcher. (Photos: Miranda Dunn and Pamela Johnson.)