



## Art Conservation *and the labors of preservation*

*Bent and laboring at their work, the two young peasants in the etching by Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875) are using shovels to dig in a field.* The famous scene, titled *Les Bêcheurs* (The Diggers), reflects Millet’s interest in rural life and is a classic example of the realism found in the works by artists who were part of the Barbizon school, which Millet helped found.

In 1855, Millet also executed the scene as a painting and his work served as an inspiration for Van Gogh (1853-1890), who studied it before painting his own *The Diggers* in 1889. The etching now belongs to the University of Delaware Art Museum, and this year it became a treatment project for Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Anisha Gupta. While it was generally in good condition overall, Anisha’s treatment goal was to remove or reduce liquid stains on the print, mend some small tears along the edges and also reduce the overall yellowing of the paper.

The etching is printed on a very fine, lightweight, and possibly handmade paper that is thought to be India Paper, a thin and extremely durable type of paper often used in Bibles. Anisha began her treatment by lightly cleaning the margins and back of the print with small erasers and eraser crumbs. She next removed paper hinges from the back of the print. To do this, she applied deionized water directly onto the adhesive holding the hinges in place. This softened the adhesive so that she was able to carefully lift the hinges away with a microspatula.

To reduce the acidity that was causing the paper to yellow, she blotter-washed the print with calcium-enriched, filtered tap water. This also helped to reduce the water stains in the right and bottom right margins, as did subsequent applications of alkaline water and mild chelation that she applied by brush or gel.

Anisha allowed the print to air dry and then used a small piece of Japanese paper and wheat starch paste to mend two small tears and a loss along the top and left edges. To reduce distortions, she re-humidified it by

placing it between sheets of Gore-Tex and damp blotter paper and friction-dried the print by placing it between handmade sheets of Japanese paper, blotters, and light weight. Before returning the etching to the museum, Anisha will complete her treatment by creating a window mat that she will attach to the print using Japanese paper and wheat starch paste.

### ARTC Spotlight—July 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](http://www.artcons.udel.edu).

Top: WUDPAC Fellow Anisha Gupta examines the Millet etching under the microscope (photo: Evan Krape); Inset: A “vatman’s tear” formed when the paper is created; Below (l-r): Rinsing the print in a calcium-enriched bath and applying a gel to reduce staining (photo: Joan Irving).

