



Art Conservation *and the artist's history*

The boy in the portrait is about three years old. He wears a red jumper suit with white ruffles at the sleeves and neckline, and his right hand rests on the back of a small, white dog at his side. He gazes serenely out at the viewer. His name was John Durand, and the portrait was painted by his father, Asher Brown Durand (1796-1886), an artist usually remembered for magnificent landscapes and his role as one of the founders of the Hudson River School. Thought to have been painted in 1825, the portrait is representative of Durand's earlier career, which also included work as an engraver, and it belongs now to the New-York Historical Society. It came to second-year Fellow in the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Laura Hartman as part of a two-fold treatment project and technical study that also includes two of Durand's palettes.

As she treated the painting and studied the palettes, which date from 1879, Laura also learned something about Durand's technical development over his long career.

Laura examined the extensive network of cracks in the paint film, and her treatment goals were to stabilize the painting so no more cracks would develop and to improve its overall appearance. She first brushed the reverse side of the painting with an adhesive and then relaxed the paint through humidification. Next, she placed the portrait on a temperature-controlled heated table to strengthen the paint by further consolidating it with the adhesive. Finally, she inpainted the spaces within the wider cracks.

As she studied the palettes, she began to draw a relationship between the paint she found there and what she learned through her analysis of the paint on the portrait. She knew that before about 1840, artists in the United States made their own paints by grinding pigments and mixing them with oil. By 1879, good quality commercial paints were available here and Durand probably would have purchased most, if not all, of his materials. Laura saw, perhaps not surprisingly, that the painting contained a more limited range of pigments than the palettes. Even so, further analysis of the painting also showed that in 1825 Durand was already experimenting with using resinous glazes between layers of paint, a technique used later by Hudson River artists as they tried to create a diaphanous effect and control for hue and shading in their landscapes. Laura worked under the direction of Rosenberg Professor and paintings conservator Dr. Joyce Hill Stoner.

ARTC Spotlight—June 2012

The University of Delaware Art Conservation Department educates and trains professional conservators in the treatment, analysis, documentation, and preventive conservation of individual artifacts and entire collections. Our students are powerful public spokespersons for cultural heritage and its preservation. For more news about our students and other department activities, visit us at <http://www.artcons.udel.edu>

Top: A detail of the severe craquelure seen throughout the painting. Insets: Laura inpainting visible gaps in the craquelure and a cross section of paint layers from the background showing the interlayering of organic media and the addition of excessive amounts of oil that likely led to extensive cracking. Right: One of the artist's palettes, ca. 1879, now at the New-York Historical Society.

