



Art Conservation *and moments from history*

Frozen in time, six members of a wedding party gaze calmly from a sepia-toned, silver gelatin photograph. The bride holds a large floral bouquet and is seated in a chair while the groom and two other couples stand to her left. When this photograph recently became a treatment project for Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Heather Brown, her only information was that it came from the program's study collection. So one of her first steps was to try to date it.

She knew that toning, including sepia toning like that in the photograph, was popular in the 1920s and 1930s. With the help of textile conservation classmate Elizabeth Shaeffer, Heather also learned that the bride's tiara head dress and pie-crust fan veil, as well as the loose dresses, short hairstyles, and Mary Jane shoes worn by the two other women, were popular in the nineteen-teens and twenties. She concluded the photograph was taken sometime between 1915 and 1930.

Heather determined that the photograph was in fair condition overall. Mounted on a brittle and flaking laminated board, with indications that it once was contained within a window mat, the photograph was covered by a heavy accumulation of surface dirt.

Using a scalpel and a spatula, Heather carefully separated the photograph from its deteriorating mount. She then reduced the mount residues from the back of the photograph by applying methyl cellulose to loosen the adhesive that bound the two pieces along the bottom edge, being careful to limit the solvent's application time to no more than 30 seconds so that it would not sink into the photo itself. Cleaning the photograph presented another challenge, since the dirt was firmly attached to the gelatin and could not be brushed away. Testing under the microscope revealed that the surface dirt could be minimized using a mild enzymatic solution, applied carefully with cotton swabs so as not to dissolve the highly sensitive emulsion.

Before returning the photograph to the study collection, Heather humidified and flattened it to remove the distortions caused by a bend in the mount board. She placed the photograph on a screen over a tray of water until the photograph relaxed. She then inserted it between sheets of absorbent blotter paper, all under weight, to dry.



ARTC Spotlight—May 2013

The University of Delaware's 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. Visit our web site at <http://www.artcons.udel.edu> for more news about our students and other department activities. To learn more about the university-museum partnership that brings material culture and preservation training to University of Delaware students, visit the special exhibition web site and activity blog for "A Lasting Legacy," a year-long exhibition at the Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, at <http://www.winterthur.org?p=910>

Top, inset: WUDPAC Fellow Heather Brown surface cleaning the photograph. Above: Detail of the photograph during treatment. Left: The photograph after treatment. Photos: Heather Brown and Vicky Schussler.