



Art Conservation *and the record of a lifetime*

Gazing sorrowfully toward heaven, the image of the Virgin Mary in an oil painting called the *Virgin of Sorrows* that Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Miranda Dunn is treating, is characteristic of the Italian Baroque style of painting popular in Europe from about 1690 to 1800.

The Virgin's sadness is traditionally explained by her presence at the crucifixion of Jesus; although this Virgin might also be sad if she had known the wear and tear she would experience before reaching Miranda.

The unsigned painting in a modern-looking plain black frame was last purchased in 2011 at an outdoor antique show in Massachusetts from a dealer who could not clearly remember where he acquired it. The dealer thought it might date from the 17th century, however, and the new owner sought help in determining the painting's age and origins. An initial analysis of the paints used and the painting's overall condition by WUDPAC Fellow Emily Brown in 2013 indicated that it was probably painted in Italy sometime after 1700. When it became a treatment project for Miranda, a paintings major who is drawn to religious art, she found that 200 years of travel and handling had taken a toll. The painting's stretcher was in poor condition, and there was evidence of many attempts at repair and restoration. This included lining to a second canvas and heavy overpainting to cover damaged areas.

Miranda began by cleaning the painting using a mixture of solvents, chosen after careful testing, and also removed as much of the overpainting as possible with a gel. The two canvases had become distorted and buckled over time, and she next removed the old, deteriorated lining canvas. Because the animal hide glue attaching the lining canvas was so brittle, she was able to carefully peel the second canvas away from the first. Before relining the original canvas, she relaxed the original painting by placing it first in a humidity chamber at approximately 75 percent relative humidity for three hours, and then for a shorter period under a vacuum on a metal hot table warmed to 145 degrees. She next lined the painting onto a new, strong, and inert canvas and then attached the lined painting onto a new custom-made stretcher. She applied a thin coat of varnish to protect the painting and infilled the losses with a reversible putty that provided the base she needed to inpaint areas of loss and abrasion with reversible inpainting materials. When Miranda's treatment is complete, the *Virgin of Sorrows* will be returned to its owner, along with the recommendation that it be placed in a historically appropriate frame.



ARTC Spotlight—May 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: WUDPAC Fellow Miranda Dunn setting up a Mylar covering prior to a humidity and vacuum pressure treatment to relax the painting; Above: Following removal of the old lining, cleaning of the verso, relaxation, re-lining to a new canvas, varnishing, and filling of losses, Miranda inpaints losses in the *Virgin of Sorrows*; Right: Removing the old deformed lining canvas, and using a methyl cellulose poultice to remove glue residue left behind from the previous lining. (Images taken by Bianca Garcia and Pamela Johnson.)