



Art Conservation *and conversation pieces*

The life-sized, wooden cut-out figure in stylized Turkish attire provides a mystery for 21st-century viewers. Who is he, where did he come from, and what was his role in the home of one of Philadelphia's most historic families more than 200 years ago?

All these are questions Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Second-Year Fellow Emily Wroczynski, a paintings major with a minor in paper, is working to answer while she also treats the figure's conservation needs. The figure belongs to the Germantown Historical Society, which hopes it can be returned for display with discolored coatings removed so that more of the original colors and design will be visible. It was donated to the Society in 1931 by descendants of 18th-century Philadelphia Quaker and wine merchant John Wister (1708-1789).



ARTC Spotlight—November 2014

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.

Images: WUDPAC Fellow Emily Wroczynski performing cleaning tests on a "dummy board" figure depicting a man in Turkish costume, unknown artist, c. 1778; 70.1 x 23.1 inches (178.0 x 58.8 cm.); collection of the Germantown Historical Society. Right: The dummy board during cleaning. (Photos: Evan Krape, Jim Schneck, and Emily Wroczynski.)



Known as a "dummy board" or "silent companion," the wooden cut-out man in the Turkish garb and others like him could be found in many homes, both here and in Europe, in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Although it is not well understood what role dummy boards might have played in a time before electricity, television, and automobiles, it is thought that they were intended to help spark conversation and social interaction. The Turkish dummy board is unusual, since most others that still exist typically depict soldiers, workers and servants, children, or animals. Emily believes the dummy board she is treating might have been used in theatrical events, possibly at the Southwark Theater, which once stood not far from Wister's 18th-century Philadelphia townhouse.

Emily's theory has been buttressed by a discovery. Although she first thought the figure was meant to represent an actual, dark-skinned Turk, after carefully removing three layers of discolored varnish with a solvent gel she found that his left hand is white. Emily now believes the figure is a man wearing its creator's concept of a Turkish costume, including a turban, dagger, and flowing blouse and pants, and that it might have had a role in a scene from a play. She does not know how the Wister family might have acquired or used it. Before the dummy board is returned to the Germantown Historical Society, Emily will complete an environmental analysis and make recommendations for ensuring its preservation. She also will construct a support for the figure, since dummy boards originally were attached to chair rails in order to remain upright.