



Art Conservation *and the path to treatment*

What do you do when the painting you are cleaning starts to foam? This was the question facing Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Gerrit Albertson as he treated a painting by Pennsylvania artist A. Bryan Wall (1861-1935).

The painting, called *Sheep Going to the Fold*, depicts a shepherd and sheep walking away from the viewer through a field. It has belonged to one family since the artist, who spent most of his life in Pittsburgh, gave it to an older relative of the current owner sometime between 1900 and 1910. That woman owned a hotel in Mercer, Pennsylvania, a small town in a rural area about 65 miles north of Pittsburgh, and possibly a place where Wall did at least some of the many paintings of sheep for which he is known. The painting has always been hung, first in the hotel and later in family members' homes.

Although Gerrit determined that the painting was in good condition overall, the darkened, yellowed varnish and grime reflected decades of being hung in rooms where people smoked, sometimes heavily. It needed to be cleaned. An earlier examination of the painting by Gerrit's classmate Samantha Owens had showed two coats of varnish separated by a layer of grime.

Gerrit originally thought the cleaning would be straightforward. Working with Associate Professor Richard Wolbers, he used an aqueous citrate solution to remove the oxidized varnish from the surface. This mixture was effective until Gerrit noted that the painting's surface was starting to foam. Additional tests showed that the foam contained fatty acids common to soap, suggesting someone had once tried to clean the painting with soap and water (unfortunately, a typical "home remedy"). Wolbers advised using a more concentrated version of the same mixture and raising the pH slightly. This actually increased the lather and made it easier to remove the soap from the surface. Gerrit removed the last bits of yellowed varnish with a xanthan gum gel that he gently applied with a brush and took off with a tiny cotton swab.

Once it was cleaned, the painting gained depth. Colors, such as a subtle pink in the sky, became visible even as the white sheep seemed to pop out from the canvas. Gerrit, who has only minor additional work to do before the painting will be returned to its owner, is delighted that the artist's original intentions have been restored.



ARTC Spotlight—October 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 and above: WUDPAC Fellow Gerrit Albertson removes a discolored coating from the painting with a citrate solution. Above: The painting during cleaning. Right (top): A cross-section viewed under visible (left) and ultraviolet (right) light shows the stratigraphy of the paint and varnish layers. Right (bottom): Soap previously applied to the painting formed suds during removal of the coating. Clearing this soap from the surface was an additional, unexpected treatment step. (Images: Alexa Beller, Gerrit Albertson.)

