



Art Conservation *and preserving a ceramic puzzle*

In 2017, a severely compromised contemporary Mexican ceramic jar that had broken into dozens of pieces was gifted to the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) for its study collection. This year when WUDPAC Fellow Abigail Rodriguez, an objects major and textiles minor with a strong interest in murals and architectural conservation, began treating the object, she was daunted and saddened by the amount of damage it had suffered.

Yet she also liked artist Lydia Quezada's (b. 1956) riff on traditional Mexican pottery and soon began to feel a connection to the artist's process in creating the piece. She also felt cheered at the prospect of bringing it back to life.

The ceramic jar or *olla* is a piece of Quezada's well-known "three blacks" pottery, in which the vessel is reduction fired after being hand-sanded, polished, and painted. The black surface of the earthenware object appears either smooth, glossy or flat, depending on the process used to finish and decorate it. On this *olla*, the interior and most of the exterior are smooth, while two large circular areas placed symmetrically on opposite sides of the body have been burnished to a high gloss. Matte lines and borders hand-painted atop the glossy areas form a design of spiraling curves and geometric shapes.

Abby approached the *olla* like a puzzle and began by laying the many pieces side by side on a table. After fitting the pieces together, she used Paraloid™ B72, an easily reversible acrylic adhesive, to attach the pieces and reconstruct the *olla*. To avoid having to then tape the pieces in place until they dried because that could leave a residue on the surface, Abby instead anchored them in place by setting them in a "sandbox" she devised by filling a shoe box with glass beads. Her final step was to paint and tone about 15 small areas of loss she had filled with Flügger acrylic putty. After experimenting with paints and methods of application, she decided to use an airbrush to apply paint that would match the tone of the matte, flat, or glossy surface. To protect the surrounding areas, she applied plastic wrap so that her inpainting only covered filled sections. Abby hopes that once her treatment is complete, she can one day share her work with the artist.

ARTC Spotlight—April 2021

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 artifact and archive collections. For more news about our students and other department activities visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.

Above and top: During treatment, Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Abigail Rodriguez examining sherds and creating fills for a ceramic jar, or *olla*, a piece of artist Lydia Quezada's reduction-fired "three blacks" pottery. Right: Before assembly, the ceramic sherds were laid out like a puzzle, with larger pieces in their relative positions. Far right: The *olla* after treatment. Images: E. Krape, I. Messina, and A. Rodriguez.

