



Art Conservation *and a life at sea*

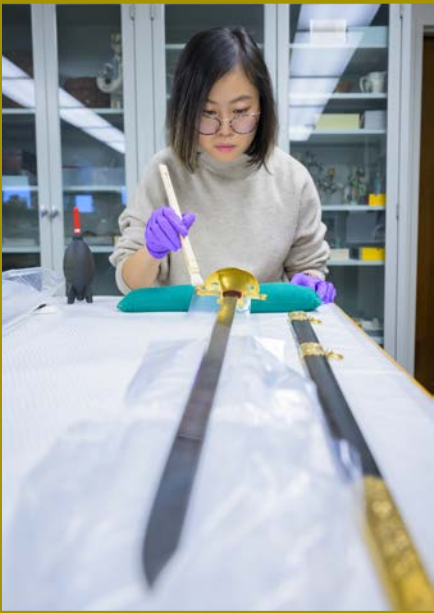
On February 20, 1815, when the United States frigate *Constitution*—already dubbed “Old Ironsides”—engaged in one of the last sea battles in the War of 1812, a young Maryland lieutenant named Harry E. Ballard (1786-1855) was on board. The action, with the British cruisers *Cyane* and *Levant*, took place in the Bay of Biscay in the northeast Atlantic and resulted in the defeat and capture of both British ships.

Ballard, a graduate of the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, eventually rose to the rank of Captain and after his death was buried in the academy’s cemetery.

This Henry Ballard was most likely the man who, in July 1829, received a handsome commemorative sword, engraved with his name, from Maryland’s governor. The sword now belongs to the Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, and this year is a treatment project for WUDPAC Fellow and objects major Ka Yee Christy Ching. Made by some of the most prominent craftsmen of their day, it has a gold, eagle-headed pommel, an elaborately inscribed cut-and-thrust steel blade, and a scabbard made of wood wrapped in black leather with two gold mounts for attaching the sword to a belt or sash. Among the many nautical-themed etchings on the blade are three ships above a panel with an image of the Federal eagle and a banner with the motto “E Pluribus Unum.” The words “Constitution, Cyane and Levant,” and the date “FEBRUARY 20, 1815” are engraved to the left and right of the panel.



Christy’s treatment goals were to stabilize the sword by arresting the spread of green corrosion, removing tarnish on the hilt, and stabilizing flaking leather on the scabbard. To reduce the corrosion, she used such tools as an insect pin, bamboo skewer, various brushes, and cotton swabs dampened in mineral spirits under magnification. Tarnish was mechanically reduced using elastomer erasers and cosmetic sponges dampened in ethanol. To stabilize flaking leather on the scabbard, Christy applied an acrylic adhesive, Lascaux 498. She created tabs from mulberry paper, inserting them between the mounts and the scabbard to reduce movement when the sword is handled. Finally, she coated the hilt with microcrystalline wax to protect the metal against future corrosion. Soon, Christy will return the sword to its display alcove on the museum’s 7th floor, so that interested visitors can once again admire its beauty and reflect on Henry Ballard and the 1815 naval action in the Bay of Biscay.



ARTC Spotlight—December 2023

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.

Top: Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Ka Yee Christy Ching reducing corrosion on the hilt under magnification. Above: Christy dry surface cleaning using a soft brush. Left (upper): Before treatment image showing tarnish and corrosion on the hilt. Left (lower): Applied coating on the hilt from a previous treatment fluorescing orange under UV. (Images: E. Krape and K. Ching.)