



## Art Conservation *and hidden histories*

*Even after spending decades rolled up and sealed away in a trunk and five additional years lying flat beneath a heating vent, the unknown woman who is the focus of a painting titled *Woman with a Book*, appears calm and unperturbed. The painting, however, has not fared so well.*

When Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Amanda Kasman first examined the painting this year, it was difficult to determine the extent of damage because it was covered with a thick layer of grime. It was also impossible to turn the painting over because it was so friable.

The painting is one of three by artist Irma Richter (1881-1956) that were sent to WUDPAC for study and treatment by The Onassis Library for Hellenic and Roman Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The library received them in 2006 from the American Academy in Rome, where Richter had lived for many years with her sister, Gisela M. A. Richter (1888-1972). Gisela, a noted expert in Hellenic art, became the first female curator in a major American museum when she was named the Met's curator of Greek and Roman art in 1925. While the other two paintings are thought to depict Richter's sister Gisela and father, John Paul Richter (1847-1937), the *Woman with a Book* remains unidentified. The only hints lie in her style of dress, bobbed hair, and T-strap shoes, which suggest she was likely painted in the 1930s.



One of Amanda's first steps was to remove as much grime as possible using dry sponges. This helped reveal a network of feathery, horizontal cracks riddled with pinpoint losses and lifting islands of thinly applied paint. Examination with ultraviolet light revealed that the artist used a working varnish, applying several layers of paint with varnish in between. This rules out the possibility of cleaning off the yellowing varnish because it would risk undercutting and removing original paint.

As Amanda works through these and other challenges in treating *Woman with a Book*, her goal is to make the painting harmonious with treatments already completed by previous WUDPAC Fellows on the other two Richter paintings. *Woman with a Book* has already been consolidated by carefully repositioning as many tiny flakes in the losses as possible and dripping adhesive into the cracks. Subsequent aqueous cleaning revealed that the scene is much brighter than previously thought. Soon it will be lined and placed on a custom-made stretcher before all three Richter paintings are returned to the Met.

### ARTC Spotlight—November 2019

*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](http://www.artcons.udel.edu).*

*Top: WUDPAC Fellow Amanda Kasman performing local consolidation of flaking using a small brush. Above: Detail during aqueous surface cleaning with a swab; UV imaging of a cross-section sample from the green window, showing sparkly zinc white in the ground layer; UV imaging of a sample from the blue shadow, revealing a reworking varnish layer. Left: Before and after consolidation and aqueous surface cleaning. Images: K. Acuna, A. Kasman.*