



## Art Conservation *and a woman of mystery*

*Kidnapped at a young age from her home on Crete to join the Sultan's harem in Istanbul, Emetullah Rabia Gülnus (1642-1715) survived court politics and palace intrigue to bear the respected title of Valide Sultan, or Mother Sultan, when both her sons came to rule the Ottoman Empire. Her prominence made her the subject of many portraits, including one of a young woman wearing an elaborate headdress and gown decked with pearls and other jewels that recently became a treatment project for second-year Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Josh Summer.*



Darkened and yellowed, the portrait arrived at WUDPAC after being purchased at auction by a Pennsylvania collector. Records showed previous sales in the Midwest, but its origin was unknown, as were the name of the artist and whether the portrait is a copy or was painted from life.

As Josh began his treatment, clues about the painting's history began to emerge. The many coats of overpaint and at least four layers of varnish, each separated by layers of dirt and grime, were evidence of its age, while analysis of Prussian blue paint pigments showed that it had been painted, or at least retouched, sometime after 1704, when that pigment first became available. The manner in which the painting was attached to its stretcher indicated that the stretcher was not original and that it might have been restored at an earlier time in Italy.

The painting's original appearance began to emerge as Josh cleaned the surface and gently removed as much overpaint and varnish as possible. Vivid colors became evident, as did a long-invisible oval around the sitter. After cleaning, Josh removed the degraded, brittle lining and relaxed the tacking edges by moistening and flattening them under weights. He reinforced tears along the foldover edges with Japanese tissue, lined the painting to a new synthetic canvas and stretched it over a custom-made expansion bolt stretcher, reduced old fills, and coated the surface with a non-yellowing synthetic varnish. Currently, Josh is carefully retouching losses and areas where disfiguring overpaint was not soluble enough to be safely removed.

Josh hopes that analysis of pigments in addition to the Prussian blue will yield more hints about where and when the portrait was painted. It is likely, however, that the Valide Sultan will still be a woman of some mystery when Josh completes his treatment and returns the portrait to its owner.



### ARTC Spotlight—January 2016

*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: Elemental composition of pigments being analyzed with an x-ray fluorescence spectrometer. Pigments can then be cross-referenced with manufacturing histories in order to determine a terminus post quem, or the earliest point in time in which the paint was applied. Above: Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Josh Summer securing the relined painting to its new stretcher with new tacks. Above, left: Carefully releasing the brittle canvas from the old degraded stretcher using a thin spatula to disrupt the bond from hardened animal glue. Left: Residue of thick overpaint on one of dozens of small swabs during cleaning. This dark paint is a mixture of two previous restoration campaigns where the background was painted black and then dark brown. (Images: Josh Summer and Katie Rovito.)*