



Art Conservation *and historical craftsmanship*

Damaged in an earthquake, riddled with worm holes and covered in dirt and grime, the 37-inch tall Madonna of the Immaculate Conception arrived at the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) in very poor condition. But the polychrome Ecuadoran statue is much beloved by its current owner, who cradled it in a baby blanket when she delivered it to WUDPAC, and it was welcomed as a treatment project by second-year fellow Bianca Garcia.

Bianca, who was born and raised in Puerto Rico, has a deep appreciation for Spanish art and culture, and she quickly set to work trying to learn more about the sculpture's origins. The owner had been able to tell her only that she inherited from an uncle, a diplomat who reportedly received it as a gift in 1942 from parishioners of a church in Quito, Ecuador after it fell from a church wall during an earthquake.

The sculpture depicts the Virgin Mary standing on an upturned yellow crescent moon. Although the owner thought it dated from the 19th century, an analysis of the paints used on the wooden structure and some additional research led Bianca to decide it more likely was made by skilled craftsmen in the late 17th or early 18th century. By studying a cross-section of the paint, Bianca also discovered that the Madonna's black robe was actually blue, and that it covered a layer of gilding. When the robe was first created, it had appeared to be a rich brocade.

Much of the sculpture's paint was loose and flaking. Before attempting to remove the dirt and grime, Bianca first consolidated the paint using Aquazol diluted in a mixture of water and isopropanol, and then re-adhered it to the statute with a heated tacking iron. She then was able to gently clean the surface using

a citrate solution. Before completing her treatment, Bianca plans to remove remnants of an old layer of varnish, address the worm hole damage by injecting an adhesive to consolidate and strengthen the wooden substrate, and fill the holes so that she can inpaint over them. She will also repair and inpaint small cracks in the Madonna's china-doll-like face.

Although Bianca's treatment will greatly improve the *Madonna of the Immaculate Conception*, she does not plan to try to return it to its original appearance. Before returning the fragile statue to its owner, however, she hopes to create a digital reconstruction of how it may have looked when it was new.



ARTC Spotlight—March 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, please visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.

Top and above: WUDPAC Fellow Bianca Garcia surface cleaning the Madonna with a buffered citrate solution; Right: Detail of the hands before and after consolidation and removal of surface dirt and discolored varnish—examination of paint cross-sections showed that the sculpture was painted four times since its creation, including a layer of paint that was applied over gilding, a technique called estofado. (Top image taken by Pamela Johnson; all other images by Bianca Garcia.)

