



Art Conservation *returns Shangri La's magic*



When heiress Doris Duke chose Shangri La as the name for the Islamic-style house she had built in Hawaii in 1937, she clearly thought of it as a mystical, hidden paradise. The magical reference may have seemed even more apt as Duke filled her tropical home with the intricately decorated surfaces of the Islamic art and artifacts that she purchased or commissioned.

Today, the magic of Shangri La is being preserved at least in part with the help of students from the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC).

Shangri La is now a museum, maintained by the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art (DDFIA). Through a multi-year partnership between DDFIA and WUDPAC, students are working to conserve the museum's Syrian Room, a two-chambered reception room, or qa'a, installed in the late 1970s. It was Duke's final major renovation at Shangri La. WUDPAC Fellows Samantha Skelton and Jessica Ford spent this past summer at Shangri La focusing on the Syrian Room's wall elements, which include painted panels, cabinets, vitrines, and a decorative niche known as a masab. Samantha and Jessica located extensive amounts of flaking in the paint and the 'ajami (a type of raised gesso decoration) on the surfaces, along with serious damage in the walls' substrate due to a 1985 termite infestation. Their treatment goal was to stabilize the elements by consolidating the flaking paint and 'ajami and filling the cavities in the substrate. To do this, they applied Aquazol® 500, a synthetic thermoplastic adhesive, to the flaking paint and 'ajami, and also used it to make minor structural repairs. They filled the cavities by injecting large amounts of Paraloid® B-72, another synthetic thermoplastic adhesive, bulked with glass microballoons through termite holes in the walls with a syringe. The final step was to inpaint any exposed fills.

Another goal for the pair was to research the Syrian Room's complicated, and largely undocumented, provenance and treatment history to determine a baseline for future conservation efforts. They discovered that while most elements in the room date to between 1707 and 1854, not all came from the same Syrian home. They learned that the room's journey from Syria to Hawaii included many years in basement storage at New York University in Manhattan, and found that the elements had undergone some stripping, cleaning, and restoration before and during installation at Shangri La. Jessica and Samantha concluded their detective work by creating 96 color-coded maps documenting past treatments and the current condition of the wall elements for use as a reference and guide for future conservators.

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The University of Delaware's Art Conservation Department educates and trains professional conservators in the treatment, analysis, documentation, and preventive conservation of individual artifacts and entire collections. Our students are powerful public spokespersons for cultural heritage and its preservation. For more news about our students and other department activities, visit our web site at <http://www.artcons.udel.edu>

Top: WUDPAC Fellow Jessica Ford working on scaffolding in the Syrian Room. Above: Jessica applying consolidant to flaking paint; Fellow Samantha Skelton flattening cupped paint flakes with a heated spatula during the last stage of consolidation.