



Art Conservation *and a portrait renewed*

In the prime of his life, wealthy businessman Moses Yale Beach (1800-1868), whose ventures included publishing the New York Sun and founding the Associated Press, sat to have his portrait painted. It isn't known where the portrait, in its elegant, gilded frame, might have hung since, but during recent renovations of a school named for him in Wallingford, Connecticut, it was discovered in a closet.



The portrait was in very poor condition, but the school felt its subject, who also donated the land on which the building is located, made the portrait too important to discard. Officials turned for help to the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Arts Conservation (WUDPAC), and this year the portrait became a treatment project for second-year Fellow Alexa Beller. Alexa recognized from the quality of the unsigned painting that its artist was skilled and had probably been formally trained. But when she removed the portrait from its frame, she found that the painted canvas was pulling away from the stretcher and beginning to sag; cupping paint was falling away from the surface, and the canvas's brittle edges were turning to powder.

Before she began to treat the portrait's many condition issues, Alexa gently vacuumed decades worth of dirt and dust from its reverse side and used a solvent to remove as much varnish and soil as possible from the painted surface. She then removed the portrait from its stretcher support and laid it flat. Working slowly and carefully with materials that included humidity, weights, blotters and Japanese tissue paper, followed by a dilute solution of the adhesive BEVA 371, a humidity chamber, and a vacuum heat table, she was gradually able to relax and flatten the canvas, soften the cupping paint and secure it more firmly to the

canvas, reduce the tenting of the fine cracks running through the portrait's surface, mend small tears, and repair loose fragments along the tacking edge.

Alexa completed her treatment by lining the painting to a new secondary fabric support, stretching the lined painting back on its original stretcher, varnishing the surface, and filling and inpainting losses. She was then able to return the painting to its original frame so that a stabilized and much improved portrait of Mr. Beach is now ready to be hung again, although that will not be in the Moses Y. Beach School. Plans are to return the portrait to the Wallingford Public Library, where more residents will be able to see and appreciate one of their town's early benefactors.

ARTC Spotlight—November 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 visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.



Top: Alexa Beller inpainting losses near the completion of treatment. Inset: Alexa mending a tear and securing a canvas insert into a loss in the canvas. Above: The painting before treatment in specular light highlights the slackness of the original canvas; the painting was placed in a humidity chamber. (Images: Albertson, Schneck, Beller.)