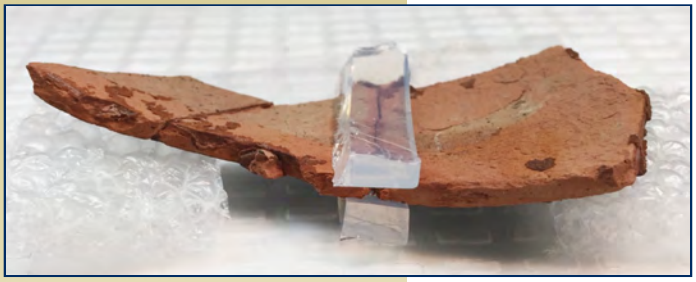
ARTC Spotlight—January 2017

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.

Art Conservation *and piecing history together*

Even common household items can pose many mysteries after more than 2,000 years. That is the case of a Greek black-figure ceramic olpe, a single-handled pitcher used to scoop wine from larger storage vessels, which this fall became a treatment project and technical study for Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Amaris Sturm.



Top: WUDPAC Fellow Amaris Sturm removing degraded adhesive using an enzyme gel and a dental tool. Above: Degraded joins are separated by softening the adhesive with the controlled application of water using a stiff Agarose gel. Below (l-r): Fragments of the olpe before treatment, X-radiography reveals use of a potter's wheel in the manufacture of the ceramic, and aged and degraded adhesives show a bright fluorescence under ultraviolet illumination. (Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum: http://archaeologicalmuseum.jhu.edu. Photos: Amaris Sturm, Claire Taggart.)

The olpe, which was in 57 sherds when it arrived at Winterthur from the Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum in Baltimore, was most likely excavated in southern Italy and was broken in use or burial. It was gifted to the museum in 1942, but there is little additional record of when it was excavated or where it may have spent the prior 2,000 or so years. Amaris estimates that it will be about 8 inches tall when reassembled. From her initial research, Amaris believes the black figures painted in slip on the olpe's red-orange terra cotta surface date it to between 550 and 500 BC. Previous research on stylistic and decorative features on the olpe indicated that the unknown artist may have been "the Hattat painter." A 1982 photograph shows the olpe assembled, but it remains a mystery as to when the aged adhesive failed and the object separated back into multiple sherds. Two different types of adhesive on the sherd's edges point to multiple attempts at restoration.

Because the olpe will be used for research and teaching at the museum, Amaris's treatment will be shaped by the need to preserve evidence of its construction, use, age, and burial. She plans to remove the old adhesives, consolidate the surface to stop future loss to the decoration and break edges, and reconstruct the olpe sherds with a new, stable adhesive. At the same time, she will continue working to identify the adhesives applied in earlier restoration campaigns and also to determine if weathering, or something else entirely, formed a foggy, blanched silicate layer on the surface of the sherds. Another research goal, in line with studies being done at the Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum, is to better understand how the olpe was made and fired to produce the recognizable glossy black-figure designs. When Amaris's treatment and study are complete, the olpe will be returned to the Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum. Amaris hopes her work will help other researchers in the future as they attempt to better understand the olpe and its mysteries.