



Art Conservation *and preserving the journey*

Large and colorful, the panel painting depicts scenes from the life of Buddha and is believed to have been made in Thailand in the 19th century, possibly to hang near a temple entrance. But after years in storage, exposure to humidity and damage from water, the painting was flaking so badly that it could not be set upright to be fully examined when this year it became a technical study and treatment project for Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) second-year Fellow Ellen Nigro.



on the right is actually two connected scenes, the first showing Buddha teaching in Tavatimsa Heaven and the second showing Buddha descending from heaven. It measures approximately 4' x 7', and its two panels are held in place by a frame that is adorned with a floral motif and wraps around its edges.

Through her technical study, Ellen's goal is to confirm the historical materials and techniques thought to have been used in the painting. Her initial analysis indicated that the pigments included synthetic ultramarine, helping to confirm the mid-to-late 19th century date, when such items could have been brought into the country by foreign traders. Her analysis has also shown that the paint medium was not oil, and as indicated by the water damage to the front, definitely water soluble. Historically, tamarind seed extract was known to be used as the binder for some Thai paintings; analytical results thus far and Ellen's experiments with actual tamarind seeds indicate that this is a likely possibility.

The most urgent step in Ellen's treatment of the fragile painting is consolidation of the flaking paint, a painstaking process that must be completed before the painting can be set upright, cleaned, and examined further. To do this, liquid adhesive is carefully applied beneath each flake, which is then relaxed beneath an individually cut-to-fit humidity chamber made of Gore-Tex, blotter, and Mylar and finally coaxed back into place with a small heated spatula pressed against the curled paint chips. When Ellen's treatment of the painting is complete, the painting will be returned to the Walters Art Museum.

ARTC Spotlight—November 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.

Top: Buddha's Descent from Tavatimsa before treatment began; the paint layer was extremely fragile and the painting cannot be displayed upright. Above: WUDPAC Fellow Ellen Nigro rearranges dislodged paint flakes before applying a consolidation adhesive. Right: A horse and rider in the lower left quadrant of the painting before and after consolidation. (Photos: Jim Schneck, Ellen Nigro.)