

# NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

Issue 34, December 2015



## Collecting for Study:

*A glimpse at the history of the Conservation Center's curious Study Collection, recollections from those who have worked with it and thoughts on its present state and future use*

### THE STUDY COLLECTION AT THE CONSERVATION CENTER CONSISTS OF A DIVERSE

selection of artworks and artifacts ranging from archaeological finds to modern pieces, primarily de-accessioned and/or donated by private collectors, galleries and museums. The collection of three-dimensional objects, paintings and works on paper began to amass during Sheldon Keck's chairmanship, starting in 1961, shortly after the conservation program was founded at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. Paperwork associated with early donations indicates that 1951-1973 Institute Director, Craig Hugh Smyth, worked closely with the Center's chairmen, first Keck, then Lawrence Majewski, Chairman (1966-1972) and Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Art Conservation (retired 1986), playing an active role in promoting the need for donations of artwork for study in the program. Many students and faculty fondly recall Professor Majewski's penchant for bringing an eclectic selection of personally obtained objects to the Center for student examination and treatment. Many of the works that entered the Center from 1961 on were institutional or individual loans, returned to their owners upon completion of associated coursework. In contrast, those that were donated to the Center were added to the permanent collection for study as needed.



Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Conservation, Norbert Baer, who came to the Institute in 1969, confirms, "The Study Collection was built without a clear acquisitions policy, rather the result of a multitude of gifts from interested parties supplemented by occasional serendipitous purchases." Historically, donated works often fit in one of two categories: "basket cases," as defined by Eugene Thaw Professor of Paper Conservation, Margaret Holben Ellis '79, and fakes. The Center has become a repository for artworks that are severely damaged in any number of ways, as well as those of questionable authenticity, both of which lack value for the donor but prove to be interesting study pieces for budding conservators—and art historians. While the Study Collection is housed at the Center and managed by Center staff, use for instruction in art

Larry Majewski in Chan House Study Collection storage



Examination of Study Collection objects by art history students during a course on the materiality of artworks with Noémie Etienne (right), Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, 2013-2015

history courses has been intended and strongly encouraged from the start. To this end, IFA Medievalist and private collector, Professor Harry Bober, and Larry Majewski teamed up to co-teach a fall 1983 seminar at the Institute, *Connoisseurship I: Introductory* (G43.3680). "Collaboration between conservation and history majors" was emphasized in the course description. Professor Baer recalls the "key" influence of Harry Bober, as a "strong advocate for the Conservation Center and a frequent intermediary in arranging... gifts" to it. According to Professor Baer, the course largely "focused on objects in the Study Collection." While the Bober/Majewski seminar was only held once, specialized connoisseurship courses at the Conservation Center have become an integral part of the curriculum for art history students.

When I began working at the Center in 2010, I quickly discovered that records of both loans and donations were primarily written in Larry Majewski's hand. It is clear that Larry remained active in his role of overseeing the collection's organization and management in the time after his retirement, nearly until his death in 1999. Over the years, he created multiple, detailed systems of recording both loans and donations. Many of the records are accompanied by beautiful sketches of associated works. Catalogue cards arranged by artist/origin and/or owner/donor

were created for both loans and donations starting in 1961. All loans and donations were recorded in a log book starting in 1962. Each was assigned a unique log ("L") number. A more complex cataloguing system for donations was developed and gradually implemented in the eighties, shortly after the program moved from the Duke House basement to the then recently renovated Chan House. Under the new system, past and present donations received a second number (CC#), by medium, upon accession to the collection. With the move across 78<sup>th</sup> Street came a new, custom designed storage area on a limited access level of the Chan House. There must have been some pressure to catalogue the collection that had amassed by this time so that everything would be in order in the new storage space. While various iterations of the system were used throughout the decades, cataloguing procedures are largely the same today as they were in the eighties. The logging system, too, remains in place.

contents. From these contributions, it is obvious that he made a personal mission of expanding the selection of study objects to include a wide variety of materials and geographical origins. He frequented a curio shop on Lexington Avenue, where some of the more interesting items, a complete tortoise shell and ostrich egg shell, for instance, were procured. Professor Ellis recalls regular visits Larry made to other vendors in the NYC area: "Mrs. Potters was on Madison Avenue; she had a \$3 and a \$10 window. He also went to Pageant Bookstore [downtown]." Larry even transported archaeological sherds, fresco and mosaic samples and other materials from various NYU—and external—dig sites and historic sites abroad back to the Center for study wherever permissible. A 1988 donation from Newmont Mining Corporation towards the acquisition of artworks for analysis encouraged the continuation of this practice by staff and faculty beyond Majewski's official retirement date. In 2001, donations of objects and reference materials from all over the world, made by the widow of artist, collector, conservator and Majewski friend, Charles Tauss, in his honor, brought additional dimension to the broad collection.

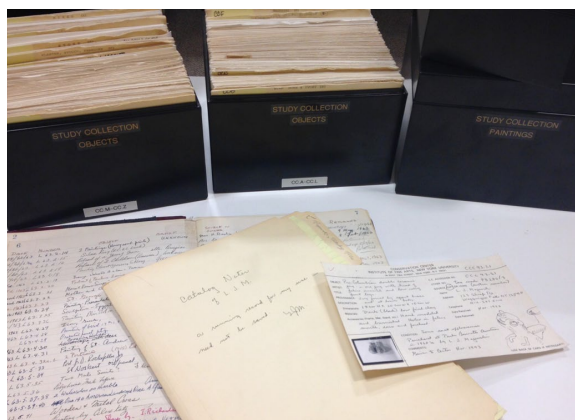
The Center's Study Collection currently consists of approximately 1,500 objects, more than 250 paintings and hundreds of works on paper. The selection of three-dimensional objects includes a variety of ceramics of American, Asian, Byzantine, Egyptian,



John Campbell '05 sorting sherds from the Study Collection

Islamic, Greek and Roman origin (among others), a similarly broad sampling of glass, metal and stone objects, as well as numerous examples of basketry, horn, bone, ivory and leather pieces and raw materials, textiles, and mixed media works. Some of the more frequently examined items include a 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE Etruscan sarcophagus from Tuscania, Roman glass unguent bottles and ceramic lanterns, Attic red figure vessels, an Egyptian cartonnage mask and sarcophagus fragments, Coptic and Peruvian textiles, a Korean bronze ewer (supposedly of the Koryo Period), Islamic Minai'i ware and lusterware, a 10<sup>th</sup> c. Indian Apsara from Mathura, a 15<sup>th</sup> c. polychrome wood sculpture of Saint John, a 17<sup>th</sup> c. carved ivory throne leg from Orissa, India, a Bura (Nigerian) vessel, a Sioux Indian war shield, a stingray skin, assortments of faux scrimshaw and intricate "Fabergé" pieces, a small "Calder" mobile and Futuristic Flowers by the Italian futurist Giacomo Balla. The Center recently acquired a set of antique sea turtle shell desk accessories (picture frames, small boxes and the like) from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The sea turtle shell items, long banned from sale on the art market, were recovered from a barge raided in U.S. waters and were best repurposed for educational use. Donations of similar origin have also been received in the not-so-recent past.

Paintings and works on paper belonging to the collection are also diverse. Among the drawings of both wet and dry media and assorted prints, there are multiple Daumier, Degas, Matisse, Rembrandt and Rodin imitations. The hundreds of drawings and prints are supplemented by



Above: Study Collection card catalogues, original log book and "Catalog notes of L.J.M."; Right: Giacomo Balla's Futuristic Flowers

Many hours have been dedicated to the organization of Majewski's records. I first happened upon a folio in Study Collection storage some years ago labeled, "Catalog notes of L.J.M.: a running record for my use—need not be saved." Larry's notes to himself, an ongoing "work list" on a 3" x 5" index card and "notes on progress of cataloguing," both from Majewski and former student assistants, are eerily reflective of my current "to do" lists. Some things never change. Of course, Majewski's records have been saved and integrated into the Center's Study Collection archives. Larry's dedication to the collection is not only evident in his meticulous record keeping but also in the contributions he made to its





albums, books, Chinese and Japanese hanging scrolls and photographs. Paintings of various media range from authentic Renaissance works on panel to fakes bearing the “signatures” of a number of illustrious painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and cover a wide sampling of styles and media in between. Among several early gifts from The Museum of Modern Art is a badly fire-damaged, large-scale painting from Monet’s water lilies series. Another work in the collection, Arthur Devis’ *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Bull of Northcourt* (1742), can be viewed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it is on long-term loan.



*Devis' Portrait*, treated by Dorothy Mahon '80, Paintings Conservator, Metropolitan Museum of Art, during her time as a student under John Brealey

Many of our graduates appreciate having had the distinct opportunities afforded by working with objects belonging to a collection intended for study. Harriet (Rae) Beaubien '86 recounts, “The use of the Study Collection for hands-on practice was a highlight of the conservation classes I took from fall 1983 through spring 1985. The most vivid of my memories was a seminar that several of us—Lisa Goldberg, Ann Heywood, and I—arranged with Larry Majewski, in preparation for our summer stints as field conservation interns with archaeological projects at Sardis (Turkey) and Samothrace (Greece). Knowing that our lab work on site would be with inorganic finds, we wanted some additional training, particularly with metals. Larry produced a marvelous selection of Kushan coins from the Study Collection (originating from the region of NW India-Pakistan



(from left) Melanie Brussat '05, Matt Hayes '03, Wanji Seo '05 and Former Samuel H. Kress Fellow in Paintings Conservation, Molly March '04, with the fire-damaged Monet

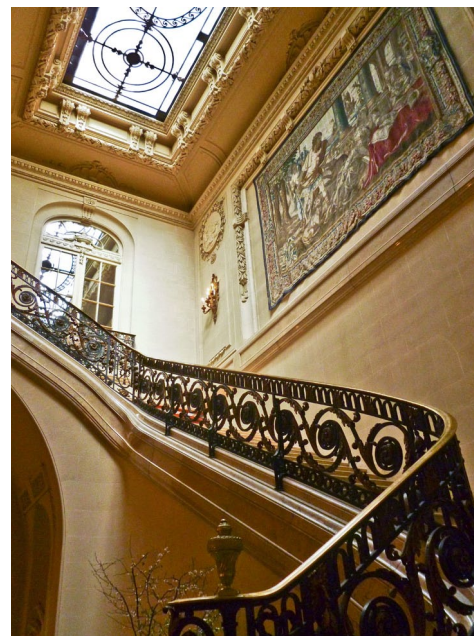
dating to approximately 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE to 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE), which he turned over to us with the instructions to try every treatment known from the literature to have been used to remove corrosion layers from archaeological copper alloy artifacts. We proceeded to subject these poor coins to a series of chemical and mechanical methods, the results of which ranged from pleasing to shocking. There is nothing like learning by doing—and however comfortably or uncomfortably we might feel today about this particular example—there can be no doubt that it taught me an indelible lesson [and] sent a clear message about why we would never never never consider using some of these techniques again.”

As a student, Friederike Steckling '98 was tasked with treating a particularly problematic Jacob Lawrence painting, *Street Scene with Boy with Kite*. Of the experience, she says, “I remember being extremely honored to have a Jacob Lawrence in front of me. I was in awe! I will never forget this painting, not only because it was the first work of a modern master that I treated, but this painting also taught me a valuable lesson that is still with me after 20 years in the profession. I was sure that with hard work and effort I would be able to tackle the very bad flaking problem this painting had. This, however, was not the case and I was extremely frustrated. After endless trials and many discussions...I realized that in this case it was OK and even beneficial to decide not to treat and wait for better materials and technologies to come in the future that can solve the problem in a satisfactory way without harming the original substance.”

Students often develop a sense of ownership for the works they examine and treat during their

time at the Institute. Rachel Mustalish '97 recalls, “When I was a student I examined a [19<sup>th</sup> c.] colored lithograph (chromolithograph) of an old fire truck and perhaps fire station. I loved learning about the printing techniques and became oddly attached. Years later, when I was teaching, it was still in the collection but some other student had done a lining. My first thought was, ‘who treated my print?’”

After an attempted theft of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. Flemish tapestry depicting Odysseus accompanied by Hermes threatening Circe from its hanging place above the main stairwell at the Duke House, Mary Ballard '79, was charged with repairing the damaged, oversized textile. Mary, who was a student at the time, says, “I often lamented how they just split the teeth on the gargyle—ripping the tapestry instead of ripping it off.



17<sup>th</sup> c. Flemish tapestry at the Duke House

We drove it down to Washington, D.C. to the National Gallery for washing in a truck. When it was being prepared to go back up, an architect suggested hanging a polymeric foam to insulate the tapestry against the cold marble. It turns out from the viewpoint of flammability, wool tends only to char, but the foam he suggested burns liquid—imagine that on the stairs! I remember nixing the idea, saying the tapestry would be ok, it would provide its own insulation.”

For years, many of the Study Collection’s valuable resources have remained largely untapped on account of poor storage allocation and a subsequent lack of Institute staff, faculty



*Islamic ceramics in storage prior to 2015 reorganization*

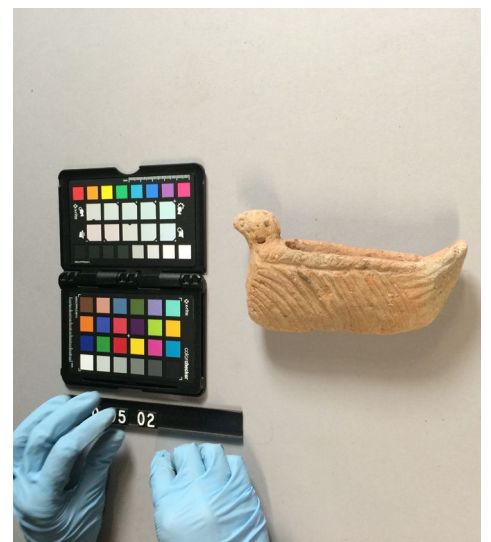
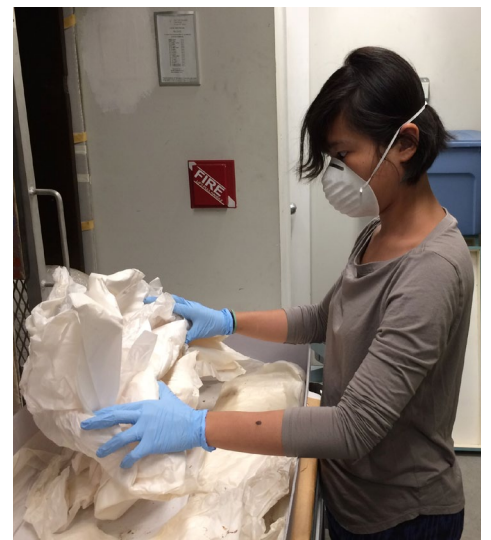
and student awareness as to its contents. It is impressive that the Center's Manhattan-sized storage area accommodates the majority of the numerous objects belonging to the collection (most works on paper and oversized textiles are stored elsewhere on site). Not surprisingly, storage limitations, staff transitions, periods of frequent and/or large donations and a number of other factors have contributed to inconsistencies in the policies and procedures related to the management of the collection and housing of the artworks therein. Some objects had never been accessioned or identified. Some had been accessioned but had lost their identifying information along the way. Others were buried in archival tissue or other packing materials on their shelves after years of use. One day, I found a post-it note with a one-word descriptor on a storage shelf. It said: "CHAOS." As I assisted instructors in pulling objects for instructional purposes, I noted that the same selection of works was chosen semester after semester. This is partially explicable by the nature of the requirements within a given lesson plan, but it rapidly became evident that a lack of knowledge as to what, exactly, was in the collection (accessioned or not) and clear and consistent procedures for accessioning, accessing, storing and making use of it were largely to blame.

Over the past five and a half years, I have methodically combed through logs, card catalogues and antiquated databases of loans and gifts, donation paperwork, notes, reports and

other documentation generated by Larry Majewski, students and former Conservation Center staff and faculty members, cross-checking, organizing and re-organizing the archives. As I made my way through the documentation, I began to create a basic, text-only spreadsheet database recording information on objects that currently belong—or once belonged—to the Study Collection. With great interest, I noted frequent instances of gaps in the sequence of accession numbers, indicating the potential for missing documentation and/or unidentified objects that had once been accessioned. A mystery found in one set of documentation unfolds in others. And there are many mysteries.

The extensive records are reflective of the tremendous amount of time and dedication that so many individuals have given to the maintenance of the oft-challenging collection since 1961. Former Coordinator of Laboratory Services and Assistant Research Scientist at the Conservation Center, Susanne Muehlhaus (then Ebersole) has clear memories of working with the Study Collection: "I remember reorganizing the collection. At the time we were looking into possibilities to establish a database, to collect and safeguard the information. This project and the tedious work was maybe not the most appealing at the time, but looking back I know: it is a privilege to look at such a variety of objects, being alone with them and to have time to reflect." My predecessor, Eileen Hughes, had similar feelings: "For me, the Study Collection was a cabinet of curiosities, an inner sanctum, and most of all, an amazing working experience. It taught me much about a wide breadth of objects and artworks." I could not agree more.

Despite the obvious challenges, access to the collection has recently been significantly improved through the inventorying, reorganization, and rehousing of all three-dimensional works. The framework, text-only digital database of all works in the collection, accessioned, deaccessioned and of unknown origin, is near completion. If all proceeds as planned, the process of merging this framework with existing photographs into an easily searchable, tailored database interface should be completed around the start of the spring 2016 term. Once fully populated, such a database would allow members of the community to view the full inventory of objects and their descriptions, including details on provenance, condition,



*Top: Susanne Ebersole, Larry and former Kress Paintings Fellow, Annette Ruprecht, in Study Collection storage; Center: Melissa Tan removing excess packing material from storage shelves; Bottom: photodocumentation of objects during 2015 survey*



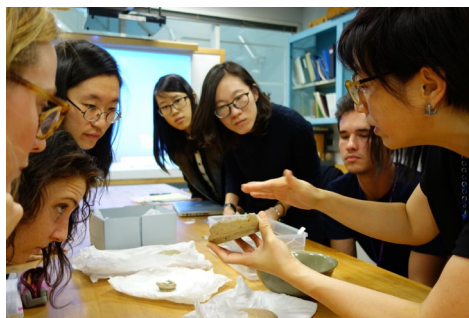
examination and treatment history prior to (where available) and post-accession, along with associated images and links to donation paperwork, additional documentation and reports archived in the Center's Library.

Thanks to a generous donation, we were able to hire recent graduate Melissa Tan '15 to assist in conducting an initial survey of the roughly 1,500 three-dimensional pieces in the collection during the month of August 2015. Numerous "missing" and previously unidentified objects were uncovered at this time. An additional donation allowed us to re-house many of the works. The majority of the ceramic, organic, wood and mixed media objects, as well as some textiles, were photographed in the process. The basic inventory of objects and storage locations was fleshed out. Melissa says of the project, "While there were moments of frustration—when Cat and I were sorting through a seemingly insurmountable mass of pot sherds, doubting if we would ever finish—there were also moments of discovery that reminded us of the invaluable resources available to students at the Conservation Center through the Study Collection."



*A fraction of the many pot sherds that were re-housed during the project*

Some of the objects that were located or re-located during the work over the summer have already been examined independently and in class by both art history and conservation faculty members at the Institute and the collection has received a notable increase in traffic this semester. Art history faculty members who



*Professor Shen utilizes works from the collection during her fall 2015 course, Shipwrecks and Submerged Worlds*

have pulled Study Collection pieces for in-class examination this fall include Günter Kopcke, Hsueh-man Shen and Priscilla Soucek, who made use of the selection of Greek, Asian and Islamic ceramics from various regions, respectively. Professor Shen believes that the hands-on exploration of objects is important for art history students in that it "doesn't just illustrate but also brings life" to the works. Both examination and active treatment of metal objects belonging to the collection are currently underway in the advanced Conservation Treatment of Metal Objects course co-taught by Brooklyn Museum conservators Lisa Bruno and Jakki Godfrey.

Notwithstanding the positive trends in increased accessibility and subsequent usage, much work remains. With additional funding, the Center would be able to hire the appropriate professionals to complete the photography of textiles and metal objects. Future large-scale projects include surveying, photographing and fully integrating the hundreds of paintings and hundreds of works on paper that comprise the remainder of the collection into the searchable database. Ultimately, in keeping with the original intent of fostering the study of both conservation and connoisseurship through the hands-on examination of a broad variety of artworks in an actively used study collection, the Center hopes to improve the availability of the collection for educational use at the Institute, with the possibility to extend access to select colleagues and institutions both within the greater New York University community and in external scholarly capacities.

—Catherine Lukaszewski

*Manager, Laboratories and Study Collection at the Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center*



*Islamic ceramics in storage following the 2015 reorganization*

It is worth noting that there is a separate collection of reference-only materials (historic chemicals and supplies, dyes, fibers, wood, rocks, minerals, plastics, metals and pigments, including the catalogued Forbes Pigment Collection), that are not technically part of the Study Collection but provide additional resources for study at the Center. We hope that an ongoing project to consolidate and re-arrange these materials in a single laboratory of the Chan House will lead to better organized and more easily accessible reference materials for members of the community.

#### *A plea ...*

*Should you wish to make a (much needed) contribution towards the completion of ongoing Study Collection-related projects at the Conservation Center, we will gladly accept! Please make checks payable to New York University and mail to: NYU IFA Conservation Center, 14 East 78th Street, New York, NY 10075. Thank you for your generous support!*

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