Art Conservator

A PUBLICATION OF THE WILLIAMSTOWN ART CONSERVATION CENTER

VOLUME 12, NUMBER 1 • SUMMER 2017

Contents | Summer 2017

Art Conservator
Volume 12, Number 1 • Summer 2017

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On the cover
Our special issue celebrating WACC's fortieth anniversary, 1977-2017.

From the Director

Welcome to this special issue of *Art Conservator*, celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. It's amazing to look back and see how the Center has grown since 1977, when it opened as the Williamstown Regional Art Conservation Laboratory with two conservators in a single room. Today, we boast a staff of more than a dozen conservators, interns, and technicians and a magnificent Tadao Ando building, with 20,000 square feet of work, storage, handling, and classroom space. Our membership has grown in kind, from an original consortium of five museums to more than fifty of the Northeast's most prestigious art institutions. Sandy Webber, my longtime colleague, writes the history of this growth in the pages that follow.

I've had the great good fortune to have been here thirty-six of those forty years. Looking back, highlights are many, too many to name, so I'll share just a couple "war stories." In May 1985, I was called to Albany, New York, to view eight vandalized paintings from the Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Art Collection there. I had been involved with this extraordinary public collection since 1979, so when I saw how the paintings had been slashed with a steak knife and defaced with red marker, it was like looking at old friends who'd been brutally attacked. Working with those artists who were still alive at the time, including Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Motherwell, Ray Parker, Grace Hartigan, and Joan Mitchell, I was able to restore seven of the paintings back to their original appearance. The eighth was copied by the artist, making the collection whole again.

On the strength of that project, the New York State Arts Commission asked me if I could conserve a Jackson Pollock owned by Nelson Rockefeller himself. The painting had been heavily damaged by a fire in the Governor's mansion while Rocky was in office. This was the most challenging and controversial treatment I have ever performed, but in the end I'm pleased to say the work was endorsed by both Eugene Thaw and (with some reservations) Francis O'Conner, co-authors of Pollock's *catalogue raisonné*. I could write a book . . .

Thomas Hart Benton's mural cycle *America Today* was another major project. The cycle consists of ten large scenes painted in 1931 for the boardroom of the New School in New York City. Unfortunately, in 1968 the artist decided to "restore" the works himself, and proceeded to clean and even sand their surfaces, then repaint them. The Equitable Life Assurance Society had purchased the murals from the New School and wanted them restored to their 1931 appearance. I did write a book on that project, *Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals*, co-authored with Emily Braun.

Twenty years ago, to observe WACC's twentieth anniversary, I was asked by the Clark Art Institute to publicly clean a picture in the museum galleries, allowing patrons to view the process. The painting chosen for the treatment was Ridolfo Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of a Man*. A ventilation system was set up by an open window in the gallery and I swabbed away discolored varnish. The experience was proof positive one can clean paintings, answer questions, and tell stories at the same time.

I could go on all day. These past thirty-six years have been quite the ride. I've had the privilege of being on it with many wonderful colleagues, clients, friends, and hugely supportive trustees. I am grateful to you all. Here, as they say, is to the next forty years!

—Tom Branchick

The Lab at 40

An anecdotal history of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center

by Sandra L. Webber

Editor's note: Sandra L. Webber trained at the Center for Conservation and Technical Studies at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, from 1977-1980, during which time she served two summer internships at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. Upon graduation, she accepted a position as a paintings conservator at WACC in 1980 and remained here until her retirement in 2015. She witnessed the Center's growth during its first four decades, and was involved in many memorable treatments. Sandy was a regular contributor to Art Conservator while at the lab, and agreed to come out of retirement to write an annotated chronology of WACC for this special issue.

In August 1977, when the Williamstown Art Conservation Center opened its doors, it inaugurated a new conservation center for the northeastern United States and marked the rise of a new concept in art conservation services as well.

Following a surge of interest in preserving the nation's cultural patrimony in the years leading up to the nation's bicentennial in 1976, nonprofit regional centers were encouraged by the federal government in an effort to make art conservation more broadly

WACC archives

A view of the original, single-room lab in the late 1970s.

accessible. Traditionally, such art-care services were available only at large metropolitan museums and from private restorers. Regional centers were designed to provide economically feasible conservation services to museums and cultural institutions that could not afford in-house departments. United into a consortium, these institutions would share access to a centralized facility supplied with trained conservators and the necessary-but-expensive technical equipment. The Williamstown facility was one of a group of regional centers begun throughout the country under this initiative between 1977 and 1979.

Five museums—the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, and Williams College Museum of Art—came together to found the Williamstown Regional Art Conservation Laboratory, as WACC was first called. Today, the WACC consortium hovers around fifty non-profit institutions, and the Center extends its services to non-member collections and private and corporate clients. The term "laboratory" in the original name reflected the scientific approach of twentieth-century "conservation" towards the older craft of art restoration. Modern conservators combine scientific training with studio art and art history and adhere to a strict code of professional ethics. The Center adopted its current name in 1995, but by then was known to staff and clients alike as the "Williamstown Lab," a designation that holds to this day.

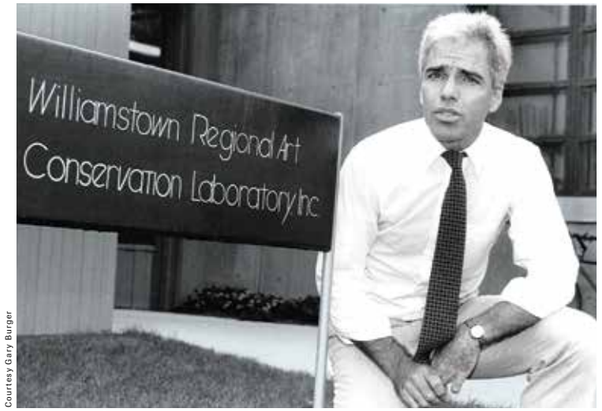
As early as 1973, Jean Harris, chair of the Art Department at Mount Holyoke College (and later director of its art museum), and Charles C. Cunningham, chief curator of the Clark Art Institute, had begun discussing the idea of forming a shared conservation facility. The Clark had opened in 1955, and for its first twenty years had contracted its art-treatment needs to off-site professionals. By the 1970s, though, the museum had begun to consider hiring a resident conservator. A service building that was part of the Clark's original construction housed an area originally conceived as a conservation space, making it the natural site to establish the lab. The Clark's then-director, prominent Yale art historian George Heard Hamilton, was at the time also on the Advisory Board of the National Endowment for the Arts. In March 1975, the Clark applied for and received a matching grant from the NEA to establish a regional conservation facility, one patterned on the ICA, the Intermuseum Conservation Association, a consortium-based facility founded in 1952 at Oberlin College and located now in Cleveland.

At first, the Williamstown Lab consisted solely of a Paintings Department. Gerald R. Hoepfner was appointed director in late 1976 and began implementing the lab in January 1977. Gerry had trained in Europe, worked at Oberlin, and most recently had established a conservation lab at the University of California, Davis. He may have been recommended as director by George L. Stout, who knew both Gerry and George Hamilton. George Stout, famous as one of the World War II "Monuments Men," was a pioneer in modern art conservation, beginning with his work in 1928 with the Technical Studies Department of Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. Gerry brought with him to Williamstown some basic tools and equipment, including a used X-ray unit, and purchased the rest new, most notably the large eight-by-twelve-foot vacuum hot table designed by Bill Maxwell and still in use today.

WACC archives (2)

Top, founding director Gerald R. Hoepfner around the time of the lab's inception. Right, WACC after its first expansion, c. 1985. Opposite page, Hoepfner's successor, Gary Burger, poses beside a sign with the Center's original name.

Gerry's collection of contemporary California paintings decorated the walls of the lab, while outside cows could be seen wandering about, having strayed from a nearby pasture. The first staff members included a secretary and two advanced painting interns, hired in 1977-78. In those early years, all black-and-white photographs were taken, processed, and printed by the conservators themselves. The darkroom adjoined a small examination room equipped with stereo microscopes and an infrared reflectography video system. While the Center was officially a separate business entity, its relationship with the Clark Art Institute was highly cooperative from the start. The Clark's comptroller oversaw accounting and payroll until 1984. That same year, WACC hired its first photographer, who shared the Clark's photo studio. The underground tunnels and rooms of the 1955 building were used for art and materials storage. WACC's presence extended even to the museum's exhibition programming. In 1981, David Brooke (who succeeded Hamilton as director) mounted "A New Look at Old Friends," an exhibit featuring seventy newly cleaned paintings from the Clark collection shown alongside photographs of their before-treatment state.



Courtesy Gary Burger

In 1979, the lab added paper conservation services, and soon the two departments were pressing the limits of available space. By 1984, the staff included a director, five conservators, a photographer, three administrative personnel, and a grant writer, and consortium membership had grown to nearly thirty institutions. Two years of fundraising had secured funds to support both expanding the lab's physical space and establishing an endowment to secure the its future. Cambridge, Massachusetts architect Charles Fox designed the Center's two-story addition, which featured spacious labs with banks of tall windows and dedicated areas for offices and administration. The staff moved in 1985. The vacated work space allowed for further expansion of services at the Center, and the next year saw the opening of what is now the Frames and Wooden Objects Department.

After eleven years at the helm, Gerry Hoepfner departed Williamstown for Philadelphia in 1988, and for more than a year, the staff oversaw operations as the search for a new director took place. Gary Burger, then-director of the Berkshire Museum and treasurer of the WACC's Board of Trustees, was recruited by the lab staff, and began his tenure in May 1989. He instituted a campaign to upgrade the lab technologically, converting the staff (after some grumbling and a bumpy beginning!) from IBM typewriters to computers. Gary also extended the client list to corporate collections, including IBM, Xerox, Chase Manhattan, American Express, the Equitable Life Assurance Society, and others. Corporations, who were never part of the consortium membership, added a significant increase to the lab's work load and earnings. However, as time passed, most corporations sold their collections, effectively eliminating this category of clients.

In 1989, Gary carved out a small space in the furniture lab to establish an Objects Department, and that same year the staff began offering Analytical Services, employing its own equipment and specialized instruments at Williams College's science departments. Observing the lack of conservation services in the Southeast, Gary sent the lab's objects conservators to Atlanta to provide workshops and to gauge interest in a regional lab there. As a result, in 2001 WACC opened the Atlanta Art Conservation Center, a satellite organization run in partnership with the High Museum of Art. Gary Burger left WACC in 1997. (In 2002—partly, he explained, because he missed working with conservators—he accepted a position as Director of Conservation at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, where he worked until retiring in 2010.)

Thomas J. Branchick was appointed WACC's third director, a position he still holds today. Tom had been named head of the Paintings Department in 1986, and assumed his new duties as director in 1997 while retaining his longstanding bench-work profile. By then, the staff included nine other conservators, a

WACC archives

Current director Thomas J. Branchick, c. 1984. Branchick began as a third-year intern in 1981. By 1986, he w as head of the Paintings Department, and was named director in 1997.

scientist, a photographer, and four administrative personnel. The growth that began under Gary's direction continued under Tom's. In 2001, the Clark retrofitted a garage adjoining the Center to house a much-needed expansion of the Objects Department and to provide secure storage for objects and furniture. Shortly afterwards, planning for a further WACC addition was impacted by the Clark's own dramatic expansion plans with Japanese architect Tadao Ando. Environmental studies determined that the land occupied by WACC would be needed for the Clark's new building, and that WACC structures would be demolished. After considering several alternatives, the Clark chose to relocate the Center to a new facility on its Stone Hill property.

Tom and the WACC staff began exciting design meetings with Gensler Associates, the project's architect of record to plan the new lab spaces at the Lunder Center at Stone Hill, a grand facility with sweeping views of the Berkshire Hills and Vermont's Green Mountains. The building, which houses WACC, Clark exhibition galleries, and a classroom/conference center, was placed first on the Clark's multi-year construction schedule, allowing WACC to continue operations without interim relocation. In May 2008, the staff worked with teams of professional movers and riggers to relocate WACC to its present home on higher ground a half mile south, losing only three weeks work time. Stone Hill was a dazzling advancement over our older, patched-together warren of labs, offices, and corridors. Its large, light-filled spaces enhanced the conservators' working conditions and their options, allowing for in-lab treatment of murals, oversized paintings, and monumental sculpture. The new facility also included a complete suite of digital radiography equipment in a new lead-lined X-ray room, both funded by the Stockman Family Foundation, and provided the furniture lab with a nitrogen fumigation system for the treatment of insect infestation. By 2012, the Objects Department had expanded its staff to offer textile conservation. With its tremendous increase in square footage and flood of light from huge east- and north-facing windows, WACC's facility at Stone Hill was a showplace for art conservation—with the added bonus of being a sublime nature- and weather-watching station as well!

Education and Publications

From the beginning, education has been at the forefront of WACC's mission, through apprenticeships and intern training, outreach programs and workshops. Government agencies, both federal and state, along with private foundations and individuals, have supported the Center in these initiatives.

In the 1970s, the rise of regional centers was linked to significant increases in funding for art conservation training programs, typically at the graduate level and affiliated with a university or large museum. With the first wave of these conservation graduates came grant-funded internships and expanded career opportunities in museums and regional centers. Numerous past and present WACC staff members were beneficiaries of this funding, and many are now training a new generation of young conservators.

The lab offers vital learning activities at every level of experience, from summer students to post-graduate interns. The craft aspect of conservation lends itself to traditional workshop training. Apprentices learn the profession first-hand, studying techniques, materials, and ethics under the guidance of the lab's conservators, and augment their training with coursework in chemistry. WACC's pre-program apprentices, who come to the lab to work for a year or more after completing undergraduate studies, enjoy a high rate of admission to competitive art conservation graduate programs. Approximately one hundred interns of various levels have passed through the lab since 1977, including many who later became WACC staff members. Similarly, workshops, both in-house and in the field, provide hands-on training for member institutions and other conservators, taught by staff or visiting experts.

The lab has hosted numerous international interns over the years, a practice considerably enhanced between 2002 and 2012 when now-retired conservator Cynthia Luk initiated funding to partner with several countries to promote their conservation efforts. WACC hosted conservators and interns from Bulgaria and Mongolia, and WACC staff members visited those countries to assist with conservation planning. The international program expanded understanding of conservation techniques and offered insights on how to raise public awareness of preservation, based on US models.

Beginning in 1984, the WACC staff began team-teaching a one-semester course on art conservation in affiliation with the Williams College Graduate Program in Art History. Meeting two evenings a week in the lab during the Spring semester, the course is tailored for students preparing for careers as scholars, museum curators, and administrators. The curriculum is designed to add an understanding of the physical aspects of art-making and art objects to the historical and theoretic study of art

© Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute / Richard Pare 1–3

In 2008, WACC relocated to its Tadao Ando-designed facility at Stone Hill. From top, the building in its pastoral setting, showing the large east and north windows; a view inside the lab from the terrace; and three views of Ando's dramatic creation through the seasons.

history. The course covers the technical examination of works of art and an introduction to conservation approaches and techniques. Objects currently under treatment at the lab are used as teaching aids.

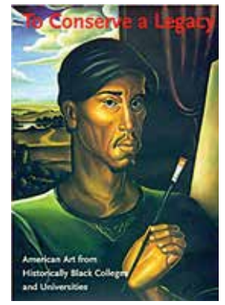
One of the most rewarding aspects of WACC's collaboration with Williams College and the Clark is the annual Lenett Fellowship, begun in 1995 in memory of former graduate student and American folk-art expert Judith Lenett. Focused jointly on American art and conservation, the Lenett provides one student per year with a unique internship that combines original art historical research with hands-on treatment of a member institution's artwork. The fellowship culminates with a public lecture and reception at the Clark. Discoveries made by the Lenett Fellows have offered meaningful contributions to the field of American art.

Another important aspect of the WACC education legacy is its publications activity. Important projects over the years have resulted in major books combining art history and conservation. In 1985, the Thomas Hart Benton mural cycle *America Today*, then owned by the Equitable Life Assurance Society and now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was treated in public view at the Williams College Museum of Art. The associated exhibition at WCMA was accompanied by a catalog co-authored by Tom Branchick and scholar Emily Braun. The 1994 traveling exhibit *Altered States: Conservation, Analysis and the Interpretation of Works of Art*, organized by Mount Holyoke College Art Museum and the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, also produced an award-winning catalog written largely by WACC conservators.

The 1997-1998 project *To Conserve a Legacy* was a major exhibition and conservation initiative, organized by the Addison Gallery of American Art and The Studio Museum in Harlem, in association with the WACC and six Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Clark Atlanta University, Fisk University, Hampton University, Howard University, North Carolina Central University, and Tuskegee University. The resulting catalogue, produced jointly by the organizers, examines a cross-section of paintings, drawings, prints, and sculpture from the participating colleges, and discusses a century of art collected by America's HBCUs. The project provided conservation internships for HBCU students through WACC, and brought to light, in the words of Atlanta Constitution critic Catherine Fox, "artists whose work might have disappeared save for the support of these institutions."

After a project on the Connecticut Historical Society's unrivaled collection of tavern signs entailed two year's work by four WACC departments, Sandra Webber and Alex Carlisle contributed essays to the 2002 exhibition catalog *Lions, Eagles and Bulls*. Object conservators Katherine Holbrow and Geri Strickler's 2005 *Ornamental Surfaces of Late Victorian Metal Furniture* reviewed discoveries made during treatment of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute's object collection. In 2009, after ten years of preparation, the Clark published its magisterial, two-volume *Nineteenth-Century European Paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute*, which featured more than three hundred technical examinations by Sandra Webber. In 2012, Leslie Paisley, WACC's chief paper conservator, contributed to *Landscape Innovation and Nostalgia, The Manton Collection of British Art* for the Clark, offering technical examinations of the collection's works on paper,

Bree Lehman (left), 2009-10 Lenett Fellow, inspects an early American portrait with curator Duane Watson and advisor William Clutz.



Clockwise from upper left, Hildegard Homburger (left) leads a 2008 paper workshop; Lenett Fellow Jason Vrooman inspects Jackson Pollack's *Number 2, 1949*, from the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, in 2006; WACC conservators review a burial site outside Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia in 2007; X-ray revealing a lost self-portrait by James McNeill Whistler, discovered by conservators beneath a landscape by the artist; cover of the catalog *To Conserve a Legacy*, published in 1999; conservators take advantage of the increased space in the Stone Hill paintings lab as canvases fill easels and lean against walls in 2008.

compiled with the aid of an intern. Hugh Glover, head of the furniture department, will have an essay in the catalog of the Clark's forthcoming Alma-Tadema exhibition, describing his extensive work on the museum's artist-designed Steinway piano from the music room of the Gilded Age Marquand mansion.

WACC's tradition of publication also includes the twice-yearly publication *Art Conservator*, now in its eleventh year. Founded in 2006, the full-color magazine grew out of the Center's newsletter *FYI* (1998–2006). Conceived and edited by Timothy Cahill, *Art Conservator* is unique among art conservation publications in the US, charting a course between the public-relations agenda of most newsletters and the technical/scientific content of peer-reviewed journals. It publishes non-technical articles about treatments and other activities at the Williamstown and Atlanta Centers for museum administrators, curators, and registrars, as well as scholars, art dealers, collectors, and others interested in conservation topics. A technical bulletin prepared by one of the Center's conservators, covering topics on object and collection care, storage and handling, mounting and presentation techniques, and materials history, is also included. The WACC website offers client assistance information as well as every issue of *Art Conservator*.

Memorable Treatments

The conservation of works of art is, of course, the central function of WACC and the area of greatest pride and satisfaction for the conservators. From hand-enameled pocket watches to contemporary canvases that barely fit through the door, many memorable projects have passed through the Center in forty years. Each WACC conservator has more than one memorable treatment in his or her portfolio, many of which have been featured over the years in exhibitions or publications.

In 1978, the lab received its first of many grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for conservation services and education. As a result, road trips and collections surveys began in earnest to assist consortium members in prioritizing their

conservation needs (and, in the bargain, hopefully encourage their patronage). So too the comprehensive and time-consuming facility assessments funded by IMLS, the Institute of Museum and Library Services. As Leslie Paisley notes, there is a distinct reward to shepherding a collection from facility assessment to successful conservation treatment program, a feeling that you really made a difference to the life of the institution and the artworks.

The association with the Clark Art Institute collection has been an on-going privilege, allowing conservators to work on a wide range of world-class masterpieces. Complex Clark treatments stand among the staff's personal favorites, including Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr*, Perugino's *Pieta with Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea*, Gericault's *Trumpeter of the Hussars*, Renoir's *A Box at the Theatre*, and Sargent's *Fumée d'Ambre Gris*.

Large-scale projects have become a feature of all departments of the lab, often taking conservators on the road to where the work resides in situ. Tom and I remember the almost magical 1989 cleaning of the 3,200-square foot José Clemente Orozco fresco, *Epic of American Civilization*, at Dartmouth's Baker-Berry Library. Scene by scene, we covered the work with a special wet-strength paper applied with deionized water and ammonium carbonate, to remove salts that had migrated to the mural's surface. The papers wicked up the salts as they dried, then released from the painted walls and quietly drifted to the floor. The sheets were then cleaned for reuse and hung over the scaffolding, until the library resembled a tenement laundry scene, a picture that greatly amused the local press. The 1989 treatment of the Boston State House murals on the upper level of the Memorial Hall rotunda was made all the more memorable due to the virtuoso scaffolding erected for us. This may seem like a minor point, until you've worked on a project with poor scaffolding!

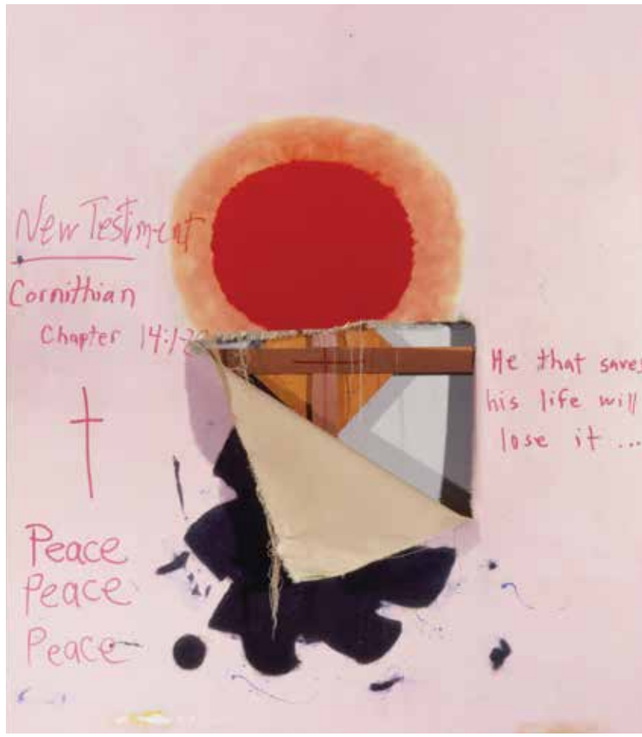
Objects conservator Ingrid Neuman collaborated with craft- and trades-specialists while caring for the large outdoor pieces on the Empire State Plaza, part of the vast state-owned art collection assembled by Nelson Rockefeller in Albany, NY. She recalls especially the time she was called in after late-night concert-goers had rolled into the plaza's reflecting pool the ten-foot by thirty-two-foot yellow George Sugarman sculpture, which called for welders to put it back together. In 2013, objects head Hèléne Gillette-Woodard, with various rotating assistants, relocated for several months to the United Nations in New York City, to restore and remount the organization's 1,100-pound mosaic copy of Norman Rockwell's iconic painting *Golden Rule*.

WACC paintings conservator Montserrat Le Mense (right) and Williams College student Vanessa Soetanto, at work in 2010 on a diary written on the wall of a house during Hurricane Katrina, now in the Louisiana State Museum.

Unexpected discoveries, while less frequent, are among the more exciting events in conservation. Leslie Paisley, working with scholars and scientists, was instrumental in confirming a rare and unknown Shaker drawing *Tree of Light* by artist Hannah Cohoon. In one of those fairy-tale stories that sometimes come true, the work was discovered by its new owner beneath a cheap print he'd purchased for the frame. His $5 investment yielded a rare folk artifact that sold at auction for six figures. Paintings conservators, while x-raying the Addison Gallery's *Old Battersea Bridge* by Whistler, discovered a fully developed self-portrait of the artist, vaguely remembered in the literature but considered long lost. And WACC scientist and avid Red Sox fan Kate Duffy worked with a documents expert to examine a letter in the collection of the Berkshire Athenaeum that demonstrated the game of baseball was played as early as 1791, not in Cooperstown or New York City, as previously thought, but in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

Emergencies, varying from fires and floods to accidents and vandalism, are always part of the staff's experience. One such disaster occurred in 1985, when the lab received a frantic call from the Empire State Plaza Art Collection reporting that eight oversized paintings by such key New York School artists as Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Robert Motherwell had been slashed, shredded, and vandalized with magic markers. Although horribly damaged, Tom was able to eventually save seven of the works. The eighth was replaced by the original artist's studio, an option made available due to New York State laws protecting artist's rights.

Hugh Glover recalls the complex treatment of an extravagantly carved black and gilded frame, possibly by English carver Grinling Gibbons. The frame, at the Lewis Walpole Library in Farmington, Connecticut, sustained heavy damage, and its treatment enhanced Hugh's growing expertise in historical gilded surfaces and frame design. Probably the largest survey and long-term planning program the WACC staff ever conducted was a multi-year project for the Louisiana State Museum following the 2005 devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The project required large-scale collection relocation due to flooding, long-term planning, as well as the rescue of a diary



Before-treatment view of vandalism to Adolph Gottlieb's *Orange Glow* at the Empire State Plaza collection in Albany, New York.

scrawled by a survivor on the walls of the house where he was trapped during the storm.

Where will the next four decades take the Williamstown Art Conservation Center? With more senior staff retiring soon, the doctor-patient relationship typical of art conservation will be passed on to the next generation of conservators. While the past was marked by growing pains and various permutations of the workspace, perhaps the future will be more settled in the premier conservation studios on Stone Hill. Or maybe, based on past growth, even this space will one day need expanding. Art conservation is an art, a craft, and a profession built on hand skill and constant creative decision-making. Despite the availability of surrogate digital photography and computer-assisted tooling, skilled conservators need not fear being replaced by artificially intelligent robots! And never knowing what project will come through the door will surely continue to challenge and inspire the staff for years to come.

The Director

Tom Branchick reflects on thirty-six years at the easel

By Timothy Cahill

The Williamstown Art Conservation Center owes the Cranbrook Academy of Art a debt of thanks for the fruitful alliance the Center has enjoyed with Tom Branchick these past thirty-six years. It was while he was a student at the prestigious Michigan art school that Branchick's career in art conservation was set in motion.

"I never had any clue I was going to be an art conservator," WACCs current director says. "I was going to become a printmaker and probably teach." That changed after the aspiring artist landed a student job assisting a Sotheby's representative on campus to facilitate deaccessioning portions of Cranbrook's art collection. Branchick was barely out of high school when he found himself handling some of the academy's world-class treasures. This was during a brief period when Cranbrook, a graduate-level program only, was experimenting with admitting undergraduates as well.

"I can still remember packing this really beautiful faience Egyptian sphinx that the Met had bought," he says smiling, still able to feel the elegant blue earthenware sculpture in his hands. "And because I was a printmaking major, I did a lot of little tear repairs and some hinges that had failed on some of the prints. That was fun, and it planted the seed of conservation in my mind. My plan had been to go to graduate school in printmaking at Yale, because Gabor Peterdi was still there. But I began to think to myself, maybe this art thing is not the direction I should be going. I really liked the handling of museum collections and looking at stuff, the intimate physical contact. You could "hands-on" the thing and really see what you were looking at. So that's what started the whole chain reaction."

It was a "chain reaction" that led him a few years later to Williamstown. He arrived at the Center, then known as the Williamstown Regional Art Conservation Laboratory, in 1981, a brash third-year intern completing his graduate training in art conservation. From his first day, he inhabited the Center, in the words of one longtime colleague, "like he owned the place." Hired as an assistant conservator upon graduation, he rose through the ranks, to associate conservator, then conservator, then to head of the paintings department. In 1997, Branchick was named WACC's third director, and ever since has served both as chief paintings conservator, in charge of the Center's largest department and working on many of its most visible treatments, its chief executive. In this capacity, he's overseen the growth of the Center's endowment and managed a major expansion into its present home in the Lunder Center at Stone Hill Center, at the Clark Art Institute.

As WACC celebrates its fortieth year of operations, Branchick agreed to his first in-depth interview, in which he spoke about his training, the pleasures of his profession, the qualities that make a good conservator, and thirty-six years of service to the lab he calls home.

Branchick's realization that he might be suited more to a life handling art objects than creating them follows a familiar arc for art conservators. As aspiring novelists might go into newspapering as a secure way of life, so young artists find their way to conservation. The profession calls on many of the same skills, offers many of the same satisfactions, and has the attraction of providing a steady, stable income. Before assisting the Sotheby's man at Cranbrook, Branchick had never met a conservator. "I wasn't even totally aware that there was a profession called art conservation," he says.

The seed that was planted took years to grow. At school, Branchick also met his life partner, Will, and after graduation, the couple relocated to Will's hometown of Albany, New York. Branchick quickly found a job as an illustrator and graphic artist in the exhibitions department of the New York State Museum. The job put him in contact with conservators from the Peebles Island Resource Center, the headquarters for New York's Bureau of Historic Sites.

"Jim Hamm, the paintings conservator, and Patty Dacus in paper, were the two principle conservators at Peebles Island, and they would come over to the exhibition center, because we were using artifacts from the State Museum's collection and some of them needed work. Because I was doing hingeing and minor tear repairs on paper, I started working with Patty, and later, a little bit with Jim. That persuaded me to take conservation another step further. In the meantime, I went back to school to take chemistry, because they didn't have any of that at Cranbrook."

The budding conservator had planned to be at the NYS Museum for a year, but stayed six before entering the Cooperstown Graduate Program in the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works in 1979. The graduate degree program was affiliated with the New York State Historical Association and the State University of New York at Oneonta, which granted the MS degree. "Cooperstown," as the program was known, moved to the State University at Buffalo in the 1980s, where it remains one of the country's most prestigious art conservation institutions. It

Director Tom Branchick with *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* by Il Guercino.

was founded in 1970 by Caroline and Sheldon Keck.

The Kecks were major mid-century figures in art conservation. Sheldon was part of the World War II military unit known later as the "Monuments Men," charged with securing Europe's art treasures after the war. He and his wife established their reputations as leaders in the conservation field, working side by side at the Brooklyn Museum and Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. In their separate obituaries, both Kecks were described as conservation "pioneers" by the *New York Times*.

Leaders and innovators they were, but as Branchick describes it, Mrs. Keck in particular also had a knack for being difficult.

At Cooperstown, "they were a 'good cop-bad cop' team," he recalls. "Sheldon was a sweet, genteel, incredibly kind person, and she had a mouth like a truck driver. In the graduate program, we had a clinic where the general public could get their art worked on for not a whole lot of money, because it was a teaching tool. But if Caroline didn't like the person who walked in the door, or didn't like their object, she'd say, 'Take this piece of [crap] and get the hell out of here.' She could be merciless."

Despite this, Branchick became what he calls her "golden boy," partly for his acumen in classroom and easel, and partly "because I wasn't afraid of her and I'd stand up to her." While her abrasive personality may explain part of a distaste certain other conservators felt toward Keck, her conservation philosophy doubtless played a role as well. The Kecks espoused certain old-school techniques, some of which had become dubious by the late 1970s and early '80s, when Branchick studied under them. He was taught, for instance, to use wax lining for all paintings, a technique, he explains now, that can demonstrably "alter" works by darkening them or even staining them "irreparably" from the wax.

There was a wild-west aspect to art conservation that was on its last legs when Branchick was young, and the old lions of the field were to an extent each a law unto themselves. Conservators disagreed over basic procedures and defined their roles based on differing aesthetics. New polymer adhesives and water-based paints were coming on the market that were regarded either as miracles or anathema. Every old-schooler had his or her private solvent and varnish recipes, which they swore by and others swore at. The WACC paintings department still uses "Keck 2" and "Keck 3," formulaic solvents for cleaning paintings developed by Caroline Keck.

It was a lively era to be a junior conservator, as the field transitioned into the more standardized, systematic, codified discipline it is today.

"If anything, art conservation has become a kinder, gentler profession," says Branchick.

The volatility of that bygone time was, he says, a reason he ended up in Williamstown.

"I really wanted to go to the Museum of Modern Art, because I considered myself a contemporary-art specialist." Having been trained as a printmaker, Branchick applied to intern under Antoinette King, then a paper conservator at MoMA, and later the director of the entire conservation department.

"She gave me an interview, and I thought everything went really well," he says. "But then I wasn't hearing from her, didn't hear from her at all, until I finally called and said, 'Are you going to take me or not?' She said, 'This is no reflection on you. I'd love to take you. But I have to tell you, I made a vow to myself that I would never take another Keck-trained student.'

"So I asked, 'Why did you interview me?' and she said, 'Well, I just wanted to see. You're not out of the Keck mold. And I did consider it. But I made this vow to myself, and I'm sorry.'

"So I ended up coming here," he smiles.

The "Williamstown Lab" had been in operation for four years when Branchick arrived. It had two departments, paintings and paper, and he worked in both. "I was two days in paper, three days in paintings." About those early days, he says only, "The lab was really small. Otherwise, it wasn't really different." Mostly, he focused on learning his craft.

"There are so many bags of tricks you can use in conservation," he says. "And I really wanted to see what the Europeans were doing." Gerry Hoepfner, the lab's founding director, had a conservator friend at the Swiss Institute for Art Research in Zurich. He arranged for an exchange that brought a Swiss conservator to Williamstown and allowed Branchick to work in Zurich for three months. "In addition to the Institute, there were a lot of private conservators in Zurich that took me in their studios to see how they worked. I was exposed to a lot of different techniques. Ironically, while I was there, I didn't work on hardly any European art. Because I was American, they handed me all the contemporary American art that collectors needed worked on."

One such treatment involved a painting by Robert Ryman on acetate drafting film. Branchick was asked to mount the work on an aluminum panel, a job that had stymied his Swiss counterparts. He devised an ingenious solution of preheating the elements prior to the mounting process, then quickly cooling the finished work with ice.

The creativity of this solution suggests one of the key qualities shared by artists and conservators, creative imagination.

"It's major," Branchick insists. "And it's an innate talent. You either have it or you don't."

Branchick consults with Michael Conforti, then-director of the Clark Art Institute, on the 2012 treatment of William Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr.*

A genius for art conservation? Seen from the outside, the process seems methodical and mechanical, but think about it and it makes sense. Conservation is the same as any problem-solving profession. One learns principles, techniques, and best practices, and through experience adds facility and judgment. But creativity and innovation are gifts more than acquisitions. It cannot be accounted for.

For Branchick himself, part of this instinct is a profound response to the materiality of an artwork and how it retains and reveals so much of the artistic sensibility that created it. He's never lost the undergrad's thrill of being "up close and personal" with works of art. "Even museum curators don't have the one-on-one with an object that conservators do," he notes. Branchick is not one to speak in metaphysical terms, but one suspects that part of the attraction is the way paintings resonate with the energy of creation. The spirit of the artist is manifest in an artifact's physicality.

"As a one-time artist," he explains, "I like to discover how the piece was made. It's like solving a puzzle, trying to think through how the artist constructed the work, the materials used, and what was the intention in terms of color effect, reflectance, etc." Observing the innumerable decisions, judgments, and moves an artist makes to render the work is not unlike walking around a sculpture, seeing it from all angles, he says. "It's looking at a painting like a 3-D object. When you look at it in a dimensional way, the things that influence the perception are color, topography, style of brushwork, canvas weave, ground application, things like that. Put the composite together and that's the signature of the artist. "

Branchick thinks it would be "tough" to be a good art conservator without being something of an artist as well.

"You can have all the science background and book smarts, but if you don't have the hand skills, if you can't paint or match color—these are major components of what the profession is all about, what a treatment is about. You need experience and instinct. You also need the art history. You need to know how something should look, and you need to have done a lot of looking yourself."

He points to a painting on his easel by the Baroque painter Il Guercino of Christ and the Samaritan woman at the well.

"When I was in Rome and Florence last October, I spent a lot of time looking at Guercino, thinking about the possibility of this piece coming here. I'm glad I did that, because I got to see a lot of Guercinos that I wouldn't normally have seen, and that enabled me to create a memory bank of what the surface should look like, what the color palette should look like, etc.

"I'm the guy who's sticking his nose in the painting until the guard comes up and makes me step back. Paintings and painters all have their own fingerprint. Absolutely. And you

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Voices of Experience

A young conservator gathers oral histories

by Rachel Childers

Earlier this year, conservation intern Rachel Childers volunteered to conduct interviews with past and current conservators at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. The interviews were prepared for the Oral History Project of the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC). The Oral History Project was established in 1975 under the leadership of Joyce Hill Stoner, to create of an archive of transcribed interviews with conservators, conservation scientists, and related professionals. These documents now form an extensive record on the history of the field. A full list of the archived interviews can be found on the Oral History Project webpage.

Childers interviewed Sandra Webber, WACC paintings conservator from 1980 to 2015, and current conservators Leslie Paisley, paper conservator and head of WACC's Department of Paper and Photographs, and Hélène Gillette-Woodard, objects conservator and head of the Objects Department. For this issue celebrating the Center's fortieth-anniversary, Art Conservator *redacted brief excerpts from these interviews. Childers was a pre-program intern with the WACC paper department from January 2015 until June 2017. She has been accepted into the highly competitive art conservation program at Buffalo State/The State University of New York.*

LESLIE PAISLEY *arrived at WACC in January 1989 after five and a half years as senior paper conservator at the Pacific Regional Art Conservation Center in Honolulu. She was trained as an apprentice by Christa Gaehde, the renowned conservator of prints and drawings, and later served an advanced internship at the-then Center for Conservation and Technical Studies at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. Paisley is paper conservator and head of WACC's Department of Paper and Photographs. In this excerpt, she describes her early experiences with conservation, and how she came to apprentice under Gaehde.*

RACHEL CHILDERS: Could you talk a bit about your start in conservation?

LESLIE PAISLEY: I was in England my senior year of college and discovered art conservation through the sister of an artist friend. I went to England to study art history, and there met Christine Bullock, who was a paintings conservator working in the basement of Kenwood House in Hampstead Heath. It was operated as a regional conservation center in the middle of Hampstead Heath.

When I watched what she was doing, I was entranced. I was graduating with a very non-practical major from college. It was in humanities, but I had taken art history and various literature classes and wasn't quite sure what I was going to do with myself after graduation. But I kind of fell in love with conservation while I was in England that year and started visiting conservation studios. ... When I came back to the US, I started pursuing the idea and returned to school to get more chemistry to apply to graduate conservation programs.

A friend from my youth was living in the carriage house at Christa Gaehde's house outside Boston. My friend was about to move to New York to attend the Fashion Institute and she had an arrangement with Christa where she did housework for her in exchange for rent. She said, "Would you want to take this over?" I was up for it and Christa was up for it, but she said she didn't want to train anyone in conservation. Her husband was an art historian, and a lot of the art historians they came across thought they wanted to be conservators, but they weren't necessarily good with their hands. She'd recently had a couple experiences that weren't so good.

Christa said, "Well you can live here, but I don't want to take any trainees." I lived in the carriage house and worked for her doing housework for probably a year and a half before she one day said, "Do you want to come and watch me work?" I said, "Well, I'd love to," but I didn't go over without a specific invitation. A couple weeks later, she said, "What about coming on Saturday?" I did. She sat me right down in front of a Toulouse-Lautrec poster that she had finished lining and [needed] some in-painting in the areas of losses onto the lining paper.

She sat me down with the watercolor box and showed me what she was doing and said, "Do you want to try doing that?" Without any preparation for what I could do wrong or without worrying about it, she just walked out of the room and then came back about twenty minutes later and saw what I had done. She said, "How would you like to start working two days a week?"

I quit one of my part-time jobs and started working with her and then eventually quit my other part-time job and started working full-time. That's how she took me on. She was German and she had quite high standards for cleanliness and precision. I think she saw how careful I was as a housekeeper and realized that if I could have that attention to detail and be meticulous—she must have decided, "Okay, well if she can be that careful as a housekeeper, maybe she has some potential as a conservator."

Leslie Paisley

SANDRA L. WEBBER *is the author of "The Lab at 40: An Anecdotal History of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center," in this issue. Webber was a paintings conservator at WACC for thirty-five years. In the interview below, she describes her early years in Williamstown and reflects on some memorable treatments.*

RACHEL CHILDERS: What year did you come to WACC?

SANDRA L. WEBBER: I was hired in July of 1980. I had done two summer internships in '78 and '79.

RC: What was the atmosphere in the lab like?

SW: Founding director Gerry Hoepfner hired several new people in 1980 because the lab was growing so much. New members were coming in all the time. The workload was increasing and so they couldn't get by with two conservators. We had lots of interesting projects and did a lot of work with the Clark Art Institute early on. For those of us who were fresh out of school, we got to treat some of the really wonderful paintings at the Clark. It was great.

RC: Are there any treatments that stand out to you?

SW: From The Clark?

RC: Not only from The Clark, but from your whole time at WACC?

SW: Yes. Well, several were from The Clark. Their beautiful Perugino painting *Dead Christ with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus*, had been transferred from panel to Masonite by someone in 1950 and the varnish had yellowed really badly. It was a tricky painting to clean and I also discovered a lot of little details that had been abraded in earlier treatments that I was able to sort-of rescue, little gold leaf halo lines and delicate tears on some of the figures. It's such a beautiful painting, it was hard not to be affected emotionally by it as you worked on it. That was one.... The Monet *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim* was sort of like treating colored frosting. It had to be done under a microscope, partly because some of the pastel loops had actually broken off and were floating in the varnish. I actually reattached them after the varnish was removed. I glued bits of impasto back, little flying bridges of paint. It was really exciting to view under the microscope, because it was just luscious and beautiful at that level, and it was the only way to really clean it effectively. They decided to leave it unvarnished because it was glossy enough on its own. The thought of ever having to reclean that brushwork with solvents—I didn't recommend it. The Clark decided to place it under Plexiglas instead, which was a good move, I think. The glazing keeps it clean, and keeps people from touching it, which was always a temptation with that picture because it's so—"textural," I guess, is the right word.

RC: You spoke of WACC's connection with The Clark. I was wondering if you can elaborate a little bit on WACC's

Sandra L. Webber

connection to the member institutions generally and how important that connection is.

SW: The Clark, of course, was the museum that initiated the Center. They started the lab financially, along with the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts], and they always had an interest in our success. Because their collection is so wonderful, it's been a privilege to work on their paintings. When I go into the galleries it feels like "our own" collection. Even with other member's collections , I feel a proprietary attachment to anything I've spent hours and hours working on. They're like old friends. You walk in and say to yourself, "Oh yes, I remember that treatment."

HÉLÈNE GILLETTE-WOODARD *grew up in a family of scientists, and as an undergraduate at the University of Maryland completed both a BS in Ecology and Bacteriology with a minor in Chemistry, and a BA in Art History with a minor in Studio Art. She interned at the National Museum of African Art, Harper's Ferry National Park Service Conservation Lab, and the National Museum of Natural History before entering the Cooperstown Graduate Program in the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. She was senior objects conservator and head of the objects lab at the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 2009 when the effects of the 2008 economic crash eliminated her position. She came to WACC later that year. In the excerpt, she describes how conservation has changed over the course of her thirty-year career.*

RACHEL CHILDERS: As you do look back, how do you think conservation has progressed since you first started?

HÉLÈNE GILLETTE-WOODARD: Oh, it's changed tremendously. Conservation was so new when I started in the '80s. It was just getting its feet under it and becoming scientifically oriented. Before that it was very much apprentice-trained, very much craft-oriented. So during my time-period we were 1) really trying to get the respect of our colleagues, so we weren't considered just fix-it people, and 2) learning how things deteriorate and what we would do that would cause the deterioration to either accelerate or keep at a static, inert level.

Also, the profession has seen a change from reversibility to re-treatability. At one time, everybody had the mantra, "it has to be reversible." But when you really look at that framework it doesn't really work. You can't reverse a cleaning. There's no way you can put the dirt back. It's not reversible.

Hélène Gillette-Woodard

So, emphasis has shifted to re-treatability and taking care that you're not putting any further damage into the piece with your treatment. That, I think, was really the development of the past twenty years, learning the science of deterioration as well as the science of conservation.

And we've dropped a lot of stuff that I first started with, like, wax-resin lining in paintings, use of PVA emulsion glues, over-treating something, over-restoring something. And learning the difference between an ethnographic piece versus a historic piece versus a dec-arts piece versus other contemporary pieces. All these approaches are different and the materials are different.

So, that whole thirty years of development has gone on. I think we're at the point now where we're going with preservation more than we're going with "treating" a piece. So if we can preserve a piece it's better to do than to try and over-treat it. I think in the very early days everything was just over-treated and you lost a lot of material. Now we're trying to preserve that material and I think that's kind of where the goals are now. We've changed goals. We've matured as a field. And I've been lucky in the last thirty years to see that maturing of the field. Where it goes from here, I think, is going to be determined by how museums are looked at by the public. I mean, if museums and collections are not appreciated, or if the "experience" is more appreciated than the collection, we're going to lose. But I think a lot of that has to do with the education we can bring through our cultural institutions.

Director, *continued from page 17*
remember that fingerprint." Pointing at the easel, he says, "I hadn't see this painting before. I'd only seen it in photographs. So when it arrived and I was looking at it in person, my memory bank from Italy was jarred and it was like, 'That's right' and 'That's right' and 'This is what he was after.' It's a physical memory."

When the Director position at WACC came available in 1987, Branchick was encouraged by trustees and museum colleagues alike to apply. But why, when he enjoyed being at the easel so much, did he want to add administrative responsibilities to his job description?

"I believe in this organization. I believed in the possibility of making it better—more professional and up-to-date as regards conservation philosophy, ethics, treatment variations. My method was to lead by doing. I pride myself on the fact that I've never asked any staff member to do anything that I wouldn't do myself. There have been bumps in the road. But I think the staff is better now than it has ever been. It's more cohesive. Personalities are personalities, that's never going to go away. But at the end of the day, everyone here respects one another for their professional abilities."

Branchick gets "up close and personal," c. 1985

During his tenure as director, Branchick has put WACC on solid financial footing, increasing the endowment from $743,000 when he took over to more than $3 million today. But he has faced his share of challenges as well. One of the most serious came after the 2008 economic crash. The consortium of museums that forms the economic heart of the Center saw their own budgets contract, which caused many to scale back or suspend collections care. Branchick steered the Center through the resulting lean times and kept the consortium numbers largely intact.

The biggest legacy of the director's first two decades at the helm is WACC's current home in a showcase Tadao Ando-designed building on the Clark campus. In 2005, Branchick had been leading a decade-long capital campaign to expand the Center's facilities behind the Clark when the museum advised him that the lab would instead have to vacate the premises. Environmental regulations had forced the Clark to scrap the original plans for its own ambitious expansion; the alternative was to build where a complex of service buildings housed, among other things, the conservation center.

WACC considered a number of options, from occupying one of the old mill buildings at the nearby Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MassMoCA) to creating a freestanding building on U.S. Route 7 outside Williamstown. Finally, the Clark commissioned Ando to design a facility on the south slope of Stone Hill. "The staff was overjoyed that we were going to stay on the Clark property," Branchick says. "Jaws drop when visitors see ... how truly magnificent it is here," he wrote when the building opened in 2008, and he himself never grows tired of working inside an architectural work of art.

Now 65 and an "old lion" himself, Branchick is not quite ready for retirement. He recently committed to the Board of Trustees to remain at his post until 2021, when he turns 70. "As long as my health allows me to keep doing what I'm doing, that's the plan." As it happens, that will be the year of his own fortieth WACC anniversary.

Thomas Branchick
Director; Conservator of Paintings/ Dept. Head

Annika Amundson
Assistant Conservator of Objects & Textiles

Margaret Barkovic
Assistant Conservator of Paintings

Mary Catherine Betz
Conservator of Paintings

Rob Conzett
Office Manager

Hélène Gillette-Woodard
Conservator of Objects/Dept. Head

Hugh Glover
Conservator of Furniture and Wood Objects/Dept. Head

Matthew Hamilton
Photography Technician

Terry Haskins
Assistant to the Director/Accounts Manager

Mary Holland
Paintings Apprentice

Rebecca Johnston
Conservator of Paper

Henry Klein
Conservation Technician

Montserrat Le Mense
Conservator of Paintings

Eric Mallet
Office Assistant/Technician

Leslie Paisley
Conservator of Paper/Dept. Head

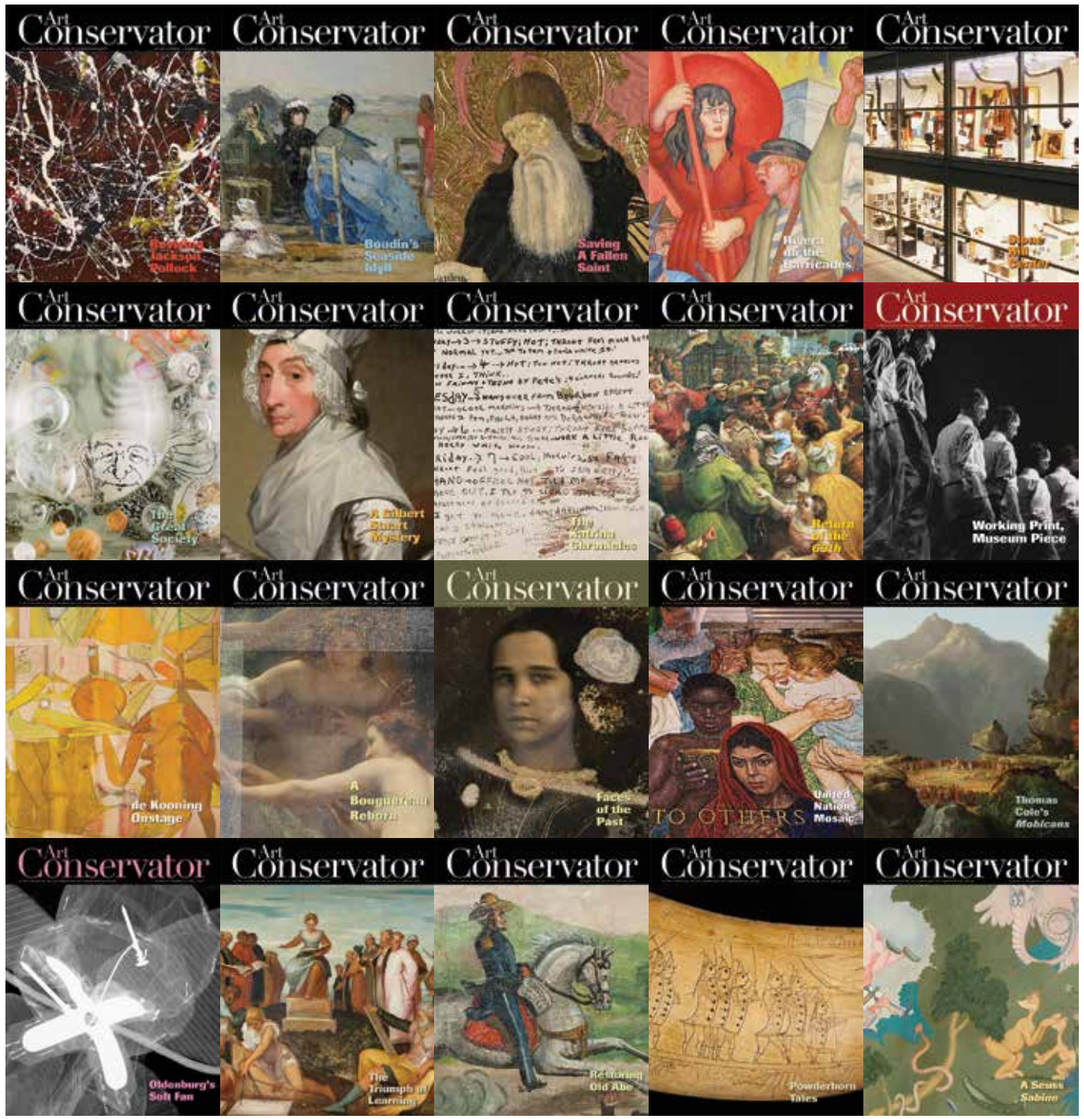
Christine Puza
Associate Conservator of Furniture and Wood Objects

Michelle Savant
Conservator of Objects/Atlanta

Larry Shutts
Conservator of Paintings/Atlanta

Simeon Youngmann
Conservation Technician-Paper

A Rich Feast



On this fortieth anniversary of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, *Art Conservator* marks the first twenty issues of our unique venture, to provide an engaging and accessible magazine about art conservation for the general reader. Beginning with the Fall 2006 number featuring Jackson Pollack, our first twenty covers, seen here chronologically, have been a window on the distinction and diversity of artists and artifacts treated at the Center. From Gilbert Stuart to Willem de Kooning, St. Anthony Abbot to Dr. Seuss, Pop Art to powder horns, it's been a rich feast. We invite you to keep looking.

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Springfield Museums
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Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
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Williams College Museum of Art
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Atlanta, GA 30341

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—Savannah, GA
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—Nashville, TN
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—Thomson, GA

Mission Statement

The mission of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, a nonprofit institution, is to protect, conserve and maintain the objects of our cultural heritage; to provide examination, treatment, consultation and related conservation services for member institutions, and for other nonprofit organizations, corporations and individuals; to conduct educational programs with respect to the care and conservation of works of art and objects of cultural interest; to participate in the training of conservators; to promote the importance of conservation and increase the awareness of the issues pertinent to collections care; and to conduct research and disseminate knowledge to advance the profession.

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