

The Praska Visiting Professorship: *Broadening Perspectives in Conservation*

OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, THE CONSERVATION CENTER HAS welcomed prominent U.S. and international conservation professionals to teach for a semester, bringing new research and practices to the Center's curriculum. This program, the Judith Praska Distinguished Visiting Professorship in Conservation and Technical Studies, was established by an anonymous donor and named in honor of the donor's grandmother.

This fall, Dr. Cathleen A. Baker, a book and paper conservator at the [University of Michigan Library](#), joined us as the sixth Praska professor. We take the opportunity now to look back on the founding of the program and catch up with those scholars and scientists who have shared their knowledge with our students and enriched our curriculum.

Dr. Cathleen A. Baker

Baker's diverse interests in the paper arts are reflected in the catalog of her independent imprint, [The Legacy Press](#). While teaching at the Center, she's found the cross-disciplinary approach to learning has broadened her interests even more and led to new discoveries.

In fact, it was during a lecture in the textile block within the Technology & Structure of Works of Art I class by conservator Susan Brown on the eastern techniques of wool felt-making that Cathy had a revelation on the origin of

the reed mat used as a base to create paper from fibers. Given her knowledge of Asian and Islamic papermaking techniques, Cathy recognized this mat as a precursor to those used in traditions of plant-fiber papermaking that spread from east to west.

Not only has she learned from other professors, but Cathy also appreciates how much she's learned from her students.

Dr. Cathleen Baker



"As I expected, the students are accomplished, intelligent, and eager to learn; what more could a teacher ask for," she says. "Their observations often challenge my long-and-fast-held views" and "can force me to question what I have always 'known' as true."

Salvador Muñoz Viñas

Salvador Muñoz Viñas, the Spring 2015 Praska professor, said the collaborative environment at the Center was a highlight for him. Salvador, also a paper conservator, came to us from the [Polytechnic University of Valencia \(UPV\)](#) in Spain, where his work revolves around conservation theory and the technical aspects of paper conservation. Salvador says the Center's case-based approach to paper lab projects was a welcome change from the topic-based style he was used to, and inspired him to combine both approaches in his teaching.



Salvador and Conservation Center Chairman, Hanne Roemich

Shannon Mulshine, a third-year student specializing in paper conservation, recalls Salvador's "beyond the books" teaching style. She worked with Salvador on several particularly challenging projects, finding that some of the best lessons came from those that did not end successfully. "Remembering and even discussing treatments that did not go the way we expected helps us to develop into more skilled and responsible conservators. Thanks to Salva, I'm definitely closer to that goal," she says. One of their shared projects seemed like a lost cause: a Diego Rivera graphite sketch that had been crumpled and torn into seven pieces. Yet the team was able to flatten and reintegrate the piece, creating an impressive end result. "Salva's methods blend personal experience and experimentation with scientific evidence in a clear and convincing way. He is a great example of a continuous learner in the field, which is something to strive towards," Shannon says.

Dr. Alan Phenix

Conservators Alan Phenix and Julie Wolfe, along with their young son, headed east from the Getty in Los Angeles to begin a dual visiting professorship in spring 2014. Alan, a scientist at the [Getty Conservation Institute](#), said the experience of designing and teaching a semester-long course gave him a chance to view his field from a new perspective, allowing him to appreciate “the larger picture.” He especially enjoyed the challenge of teaching a mixed group of paper, objects, and paintings conservation students, which pushed him to consider how his material could be applied more broadly.



Alan Phenix analyzing a paint sample by SEM-EDS at the Getty Institute

In addition to praising the support he received from colleagues and institutions in New York City, Alan says his favorite memory was his contact with “an excellent group of bright, highly motivated and organized students,” many of whom he met up with again at the American Institute for Conservation Annual Conference in Miami.

At that conference, Alan presented on solvent theory in conservation practice, a topic that was just “a kernel of an idea” when he arrived at the Center, and which he was able to explore and develop during his time here. The subject of his Praska public lecture—always a highlight of the visiting professorship, for the community and the Professor—the history of turpentine in painting, also began as a casual area of research and has now led to the publication of a [book](#). “Being able to wrap up a long-running piece of research gave a real sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, and I am very grateful for having had the opportunity and freedom to reach that goal,” he says.

Julie Wolfe

Alan’s wife Julie, a conservator at the [J. Paul Getty Museum](#), also had a creatively productive time here, exploring the archives at the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation and writing a book on the materials and methods of Lichtenstein’s outdoor sculpture. Teaching at the Center also took her out of her professional comfort zone, she says. After realizing “how site-specific conservators become when they focus on the needs of a particular collection,” she was able to build on her expertise to help students engage with the “broader issues that provide lasting relevance.”

Melissa Tan ’15 recalls taking Julie’s course, The Conservation of Public Art, and says of her instructor, “Julie was very passionate about the field and really drilled the importance of documenting the history and treatment of a work.” One important question Julie raised was whether certain works should even be outside, Melissa says, noting that “a lot of institutions build collections of outdoor sculpture without having a contingency plan of how to care for it.” In a particularly relevant teachable moment, the class was

supposed to visit both the MoMA sculpture garden and Columbia University’s outdoor collection, but extreme weather kept them away both times.

Julie’s role at the Getty includes mentoring young conservation professionals, and she enjoyed the chance to connect with students at the Center in this way. “I am honored by contributing to their critical thinking and future careers,” she says. “I will also hold on to that memory of the semester ending and feeling that I was just getting started!”



Julie Wolfe

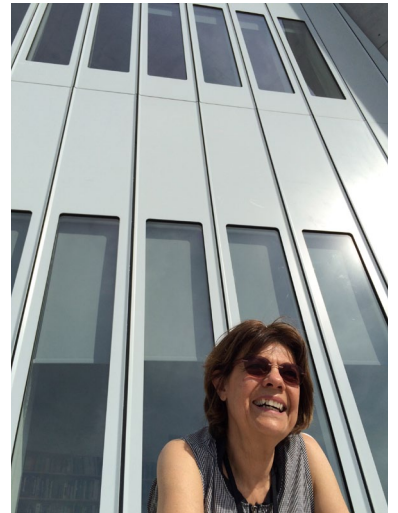
Carol Mancusi-Ungaro

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro’s work at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) focuses on the artist’s voice in contemporary art conservation, which became the topic of her course during her spring 2013 Praska professorship. (See Newsgram [Issue 28](#)) While she says this theme is relevant to all art graduate students, Carol found “the melding over time of preconceived approaches of the conservator and art historian both invigorating and engaging.”

Carol started the [Artists’ Documentation Program](#) in order to best understand the artist’s materials and intentions. And as the founding director of the Harvard Art Museums’ Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Carol has created an archive to document the artist’s creative process.

Therefore, one of the main assignments in Carol’s class was to interview an artist, and Carol was especially impressed by the contributions made by her students. “Their various responses not only revealed their own characters, but without exception the experience heightened their excitement about studying art.”

This year, the Whitney Museum inaugurated the Bucksbaum, Leary, Scanlan Conservation Center, where Carol continues her dedication to innovative treatment and research in preserving the museum’s collection. She says her time teaching NYU students helped her view her approach in a new light: “The questions posed by young scholars enriched my work at the Whitney by reminding me of the importance of curiosity in shaping a fresh take on an iconic work of art.” Read more about the Whitney’s conservation efforts here: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/11/the-custodians-onward-and-upward-with-the-arts-ben-lerner>



Carol on the patio of the new Whitney Museum (photograph by Helen Fosdick, co-founder of the DIA Art Foundation)

Christine Frohnert

Our first Praska professor, contemporary art conservator Christine Frohnert (profiled in Newsgram [Issue 19](#)), introduced the topic of time-based media (TBM) conservation to the NYU curriculum in her course, Art with a Plug: The Conservation of Artwork Containing Motion, Sound, Light, Moving Images and Interactivity. Three years later, TBM conservation has become a rapidly-growing field as museums expand their collections and seek specialized conservators to look after them. Indeed, thanks to a recent Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant, the Conservation Center will begin planning a new TBM specialization within its current curriculum for implementation in fall 2018.

Frohnert is a partner, with Reinhard Bek, in a busy private consultancy firm, [Bek & Frohnert LLC](#). She recently moderated the final panel discussion at the [TechFocus III](#) conference, held at the Guggenheim Museum, on software-based art, and presented at conferences in Los Angeles and London. Yet she describes her Praska professorship as “one of the hardest, but also one of the most rewarding experiences in my professional career.”

Christine’s approach to teaching was a bit like that of treating a contemporary artwork: remain flexible and adapt to circumstances as they arise. She found herself balancing the course to cover a wide range of

students’ strengths, and quickly identifying students’ interests so that she could turn them into challenging assignments.

She’s particularly proud of several students whose standout class projects led to greater recognition and engagement in the field of TBM conservation. Four of her students received IFA/Mellon Research Initiative grants for their work in this emerging field. One of them was Brian Castriota ’14 whose work on equipment significance and obsolescence in Diana Thater’s video installations became the subject of his Master’s Thesis, passed with distinction by the Institute faculty. He went on to become the first Samuel H. Kress Fellow in Time-Based Media Conservation at the Guggenheim Museum.

Christine’s favorite memory of her time at the Center was “looking into the eyes of the students during the class! The subject was new for most of them and it was a fantastic experience to see students getting excited about this new specialty in art conservation.”

Bringing highly specialized and talented educators to the Center is a unique opportunity, which our faculty and students deeply appreciate. We are fortunate to be able to continue this appointment, thanks to the most recent commitment of our donor, for the 2016-17 academic year. We are proud to report that Thea van Oosten, an internationally-recognized expert in conservation science, has accepted our offer to teach The Physical Properties of Plastics as our Praska professor for spring 2017.

–Jennifer Downey
The Conservation Center



Christine Frohnert, and business partner Reinhard Bek, at work in their Harlem studio

For more on the Judith Praska Distinguished Visiting Professorship in Conservation and Technical Studies, click the boxes below to watch their public lectures at the Institute.

FROHNERT

MUÑOZ
VIÑAS

BAKER

Watch these, and other videos, on the Institute’s Vimeo page: <https://vimeo.com/ifa>