

# NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

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## The Class of 2021

### Catherine (Cat) Stephens

Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Library and Archive Conservation

THINK I FOUND MY WAY TO CONSERVATION THE WAY A LOT OF people do, by exploring many different career options and gradually deciding that I didn't particularly want to spend my life doing any of those things exclusively. In high school I thought I wanted to be some kind of scientist, then early in college I thought maybe I could hack it as a printmaker or be one of those graphic designers that desperately avoids web-design. By my senior year I was starting to think I could possibly support myself as a bookbinder (if I were pulling double-shifts in a coffee shop) when I finally I learned about conservation and suddenly everything made sense!

I graduated with my BFA in graphic design in 2011 from RISD, managed to find an internship at a book and paper conservation lab and suddenly realized, at last, I was on the right track. As soon as I started comparing the various U.S.- and U.K.-based graduate programs in book and paper conservation, I could tell that the Mellon Library & Archives Program at NYU would be my first choice. In early 2012 I had just moved to New York when I was taken on as a part-time conservation technician at the New York Botanical Garden's LuEsther T. Mertz Library under the supervision of Olga Souza Marder. This job allowed me to work part time in other libraries and private labs around the city, including Daria Keynan's '86, and for over five years I managed to make ends meet while getting my pre-program experience in book and paper conservation.

It sounds a bit sentimental, but I thought of the New York Botanical Garden Library staff as my second family, and when I finally sent off my application to NYU last December, I was torn between optimism and (almost) hoping that I'd have to spend another year at the Mertz Library conservation lab. The day I received Professor Roemich's call, I didn't hesitate to accept, but I did have mixed feelings as I danced around the rest of the day, spreading the news to my coworkers.

The first few weeks of the program have been AMAZING, and it still surprises me that such an incredible program exists. It's been quite an adjustment going back to school and figuring out how to keep all of these plates spinning (this first art history paper is proving tricky) but I'm now feeling much more comfortable at the Conservation Center and the Duke House. I'm really looking forward to seeing what this year brings and getting to know everyone at the Center, and I'm so happy to be a part of the merry band of 2021!



(left to right) Sarah Montonchaikul, Taylor Healy, Emma Kimmel, Nicole Feldman, Catherine Stephens, and Kristin Holder

### Sarah Montonchaikul

Heinemann Fellow in Conservation

RECEIVING MY ACCEPTANCE LETTER FROM NYU WAS THE fruit of five years of labor. The road here is not an easy ride but our professional community is one of encouragers and collaborators, qualities for which I am extremely thankful. Conservation is a compelling discipline itself but my experience was particularly enriched by the relationships I've had with mentors in the field. I am completely indebted to my supervisors during my pre-program years as they not only shaped my understanding of conservation but were also my biggest cheerleaders, and I credit them with my success thus far.

Earning a spot in a program was one of the most challenging things I've had to accomplish, and I spent those five years preparing for this new chapter with a singular goal in mind. NYU had been my first choice for conservation graduate school since I began researching how to become a conservator. There is a relief that comes with that kind of certainty but the confidence (in my ability and my application) came later. The requirements to apply to the programs were intimidating and the rate of acceptance even more so. My undergraduate degree from Southern Methodist University is in art history and NYU's philosophical approach to conservation education aligned most closely with the graduate school environment I was seeking. Additionally, the opportunity to have the art world of New York City as a resource is an advantage that tops many a pro-con list. I have already felt the effects of this asset in our laboratory and studio visits this semester.

While I will be training as a generalist in objects conservation, ar-

archaeological materials and fieldwork have a special place in my heart. My first pre-program internship was on an archaeological dig north of Florence called Poggio Colla (Etruscan, occupied from 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE), and I do love the unique challenges faced by field conservators. There is so much to learn about the ways in which people lived and how they understood their place in the world by studying the objects that they used, and as an objects conservator I look forward to helping safeguard that information. The diversity of material within artworks that are considered to be “objects” is amazing; as such, this variety usually requires an understanding of other specializations. Vulnerable organic material is of particular interest to me at this moment and is an area in which I have very little experience. Some of my educational goals at the Conservation Center are to familiarize myself with as many different materials as possible and to understand how conservators use the tools available to them to inform their practice. Analytical techniques and instruments are improving our understanding of objects and their construction and NYU has access to some of the most well-equipped labs. I am extremely excited to take advantage of these resources to learn how to ask better questions in my research and treatment.

I will admit, though, that I was terribly nervous during the first couple of days of orientation. Having to adjust to a new city, new school, and new classmates was daunting, but after our first academic discussion about our assigned summer readings everything seemed to fall right into place. The students in my class are so bright, curious, and genuine and their enthusiasm feeds mine. This feeling of community has to be one of the best things about school. I didn't have many occasions to meet other pre-program students during my pre-program years, and I felt totally isolated. No one I knew understood what I was trying to accomplish, and often even close friends needed a third or fourth explanation of the field of art conservation and why it was taking so long to get into a program. Now, I have the great fortune to be able to go to a gallery with classmates who want to have a conversation about relative humidity and exhibition light levels. My world has been turned on its head and I feel extremely lucky to have been given the chance to start my career here.

### Emma Kimmel

Mario Modestini Fellow

WITH THE CLARITY OF HINDSIGHT, MY DECISION TO PURSUE art conservation has been a long time in the making. My parents are a quintessential example of “opposites attract”—my mother an operatic singer and lover of the arts, my dad a staunch logician and computer engineer. I was pulled in both directions throughout my childhood: visiting science museums and art museums, attending after-school painting classes and science and math clubs. In college I intended to study neuroscience, later changing to art history—I could not choose! It was not until my conservation internship that I finally had the “ah-ha!” moment I was searching for. For me, art conservation realizes a harmony of diverse interests I had unconsciously sought since I was young. I am lucky to have found a field that so uniquely combines the arts and science!

Prior to college, I studied oil painting for ten years using Old Master techniques—copying masters, painting portraits and still-lives. I then delved into museum work once I got to college, working in several dif-

ferent departments at the Allen Memorial Art Museum throughout my studies. Over the summers I worked in various different conservation studios: paintings conservation in Ruth Barach Cox's private practice, furniture and woodworking conservation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, paper and archives conservation at Duke University's conservation lab. Out of these various experiences, I realized paintings conservation was what I found most fulfilling.

When applying to graduate school, considering each program's offerings in paintings conservation was paramount to me. I have a particular interest in Old Master paintings, especially late Medieval and early Renaissance works. The opportunity to learn from works in the Samuel H. Kress Collection was unparalleled; at NYU I could study artwork I was truly passionate about! As an art history graduate from Oberlin College, I also felt strongly about the importance of continuing to study art history, making NYU's program an ideal fit for me. When I heard about my acceptance I was over the moon, it was truly a no-brainer for me to come here!

Moving to New York was, of course, a large draw for me as well. For a girl who moved here from North Carolina, I am constantly in awe of the arts and other activities that now surround me. Everything about New York seemed overwhelming to me at first, but I have quickly adapted to the pace of city life. In what other program could I be learning papermaking in Brooklyn one day for class, then running off to the Met another day for one of my art history classes? To call it dreamy would be an understatement. I feel so lucky to be a part of this program and cannot wait to see what the upcoming years hold in store for me!

### Kristin Holder

Conservation Center Fellow

AS AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF Washington I planned to go to medical school and spent the first three years studying science and mathematics. Wherever possible I squeezed in as many art classes as I could. But by my fourth year I realized that I wanted to spend my life making and studying art, so I changed my major to painting and ended up getting two degrees: a BFA in painting and a BA in interdisciplinary visual arts. I eventually got an MFA in painting at The American University in Washington, DC where I focused on very large scale landscapes (more than twelve feet!) and installation drawing. In between undergraduate school and graduate school, I worked in a biochemistry laboratory at the University of Washington Howard Hughes Medical Institute studying transmembrane signaling proteins.

In the years since graduate school I taught drawing at the University of Maryland at College Park and worked as a technician in the Department of Paintings Conservation at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and in the Department of Prints, Drawings, and European Paintings at the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin. At the National Gallery of Art I became fascinated with paintings' histories and what could be revealed by x-radiography and infrared reflectography. The conservation “seed” was planted then; whenever I was working with paintings I only thought about how they had been made and what had happened to them over time. It was in my most recent job, in a curatorial position at the Blanton Museum, that I saw the important role of stewardship and preventive conservation in

caring for a collection. With my background in science and art, I knew that as a conservator I could combine my analytical and hand skills with a passion for art and history.

The Conservation Center was the only program that I applied to as it is the only program in the country that offers the dual degree of MA in art history and MS in conservation. I strongly believe in the two fields' dependence on each other. Courses at the Center can be tailored to students' interests, allowing us to think creatively about how to hybridize disciplines and contribute new knowledge to the field. I knew that the proximity of the program to museums, galleries, private conservators, and artists would also provide endless opportunities for learning outside of the classroom.

As an older student returning to school after teaching and working in museums for several years, I was most nervous about adjusting to my new identity as a student. What would it be like to sit in classes? How has technology changed how classes are taught and how students learn? Would I manage my time efficiently? I found that I was able to adapt many of the skills I learned in the work force to my new life as a student.

In the first year, conservation students take four classes per semester: in the fall two are in the Conservation Center with your first-year cohort and two are with art history students in the Duke House. Each class is a different teaching style, lecture or seminar, but one of the things that I have really appreciated is how much student participation the professors build into the curriculum. We are regularly asked to present readings, formulate questions for guest lecturers, and explore museums and galleries for projects. In the short time that I have been at the Center I am beginning to realize how little I know; the prospect of learning something new every day is thrilling.

If I think back over the first few weeks it makes my head spin! Already I have been able to make paper in a papermaking mill, learned how to use a polarizing light microscope, and visited the Antonio Ratti Textile Center at The Metropolitan Museum of Art to see sixteenth- and seventeenth-Century English tapestries.



I visited the city many times during my adult life and have always regarded its galleries and museums as a resource for learning about contemporary art and history. Those visits were finite on many levels. Living here is different. The city is vast and changes from day to day, like the sea. Each time I survey the skyline that is its horizon, I know I will see something new.

## Taylor Healy

Dedalus Foundation Fellow in Conservation

**D**URING MY UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION AT VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY School of the Arts, I rigorously pursued a studio practice shaped by the convergence of traditional and innovative ideas of art production: the role of the artist's hand versus the role of technology in regards to authenticity, and where the two meet. Because I was set on a career in conservation, applying to NYU was a no-brainer. My decision to come to the Conservation Center was the only easy part of the application process—after being wait-listed at the SUNY Buffalo and University of Delaware programs—I answered “the phone call” from Professor Roemich with sobs of joy (thankfully, she couldn't see my ugly cry). Fast forward a few months after an awesome summer of crossing off experiences from my bucket-list, the nervousness set in next to my excitement to start. I was anxious to meet my classmates and also mildly worried about our class dynamic. It didn't take long for that feeling to dissipate because we instantly got along and have since grown extremely close.

“Pre-program” is a strange term that is supposed to define your motley experiences prior to starting a graduate program in conservation, but also expresses the simultaneous lack thereof. It was full of cold calling (or emailing) countless museum HR departments asking for conservators' email addresses and for “informational interviews” and A LOT of rejection. But the great thing about rejection is that it leads you to somewhere you truly belong. For me that was three museums a week, three totally different commutes, ID badges, and conservation labs specializing in three different materials.

As a pre-program intern at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I proposed a project to 3D scan complex three-dimensional objects and sending those scans to CNC fabricate form-fitting supports from Ethafoam. The Costume Institute conservators, inspired by this advanced technology, decided to apply this method to confront storage challenges regarding the spring 2014 exhibit “Charles James: Beyond Fashion” by 3D scanning original James forms and mannequins. By collaborating with the Met's Collections Management, Digital Media, Scientific Research, Objects Conservation and Administration departments, I was able to execute this project while navigating a large museum bureaucracy and presented this research to AIC's Textile Specialty Group at this past Annual Meeting.

I am not new to NYC, but attending NYU has really opened up resources and opportunities that I never thought I had access to. So far, the coolest perks as an NYU student is using your @nyu.edu email address to reach out to scholars who wrote the book you are reading in class and getting a response back (what?!?!). Even the IFA buildings are magical—when else in my life will I be able to regularly have lunch on the rooftop of an Upper East Side townhouse?

Coming into a program that requires 110% commitment I still feel a bit self-conscious about being 0% committed to any concentration.

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I feel that I have not had enough experience in each area to make a decision, and I am waiting for that love-at-first-sight moment with a material that will decide the role I will someday play in conservation. Just speaking with the upper classmen has overwhelmed me with endless possibilities. Until then, I will keep an open mind and continue to be indiscriminately amazed.

Progress report of my first month: at least once every day I find myself audibly gasping in awe and wonder at works of art that I am holding in my hands. I hope this never gets old. I never had a doubt about how rigorous this program would be, and it is tough, but I have never felt so fulfilled in my studies until now. Each of my classes is intensely engaging just because of the passion the professors inject into each lecture.

The road here (which is not unlike my classmates') was circuitous, bumpy, and full of uncertainty. I guess the next four years will not be much different, except for the brigade of support provided by my classmates, staff and faculty, and the nebulous network of alumni scattered around the world. I am incredibly grateful to be attending such an amazing program and becoming part of a brilliant community.

## Nicole Feldman

National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow in Conservation

MY TIME SO FAR AT THE CONSERVATION CENTER HAS BEEN A whirlwind of reading, assignments, and field trips all over the city. It feels as if this is the first time where the classes I am taking go hand-in-hand with my future as a conservator. Furthermore, I am with people who have the same interests and quirks that I do. You know you are in the right place when you can discuss the pleasure of carefully removing tape and labels among your cohort!

To be entirely frank, I was unsure if I was ever going to get to this point. I began my journey at Trinity University in San Antonio, thinking that I was going to major in chemistry. However, it was not until I began to take art history courses that things started to feel right. I decided I would double major and tailor my education to pursue a graduate degree in art conservation. During this time, I did scientific analysis at the Alamo and on a marble statue head at the San Antonio Museum of Art as part of the chemistry department's Undergraduate Research Program. I continued working at the Alamo under the guidance of conservator, Pamela Rosser, and spent a long summer doing historical monument conservation.

After graduating, I moved to Colorado to begin work at the Denver Art Museum. I started out first as an outdoor sculpture conservation intern under the supervision of Senior Objects Conservator, Gina Laurin, and Associate Conservator, Kate Moomaw '07. I then moved into a part-time position as the Conservation Assistant where I worked with the Textile Conservator and fellow, Allison McCloskey and Emma Schmitt; Paintings Conservator Pam Skiles; and Director of Conservation and Paper Conservator, Sarah Melching.

When application time rolled around for Graduate School, I had only a vague understanding of what each school offered. However, the lure of getting an art history degree on top of a conservation degree, and being in a city with some of the top museums and resources made the Institute of Fine Arts my top choice.

I was really lucky to get an interview my first year applying, and while I did not make it in that year, I'm glad I got to see what the inter-

view process was like and meet the faculty and students. I was disappointed, sure, but considering how competitive the field is, I took it as an opportunity to take another full year to gain as much experience as I could and prove myself. And somehow, still not sure I believe it, I managed to do just that.

I know without a doubt that I want to focus my studies on objects. Specifically, I have an interest in medieval sculpture and wooden polychrome sculpture. Where better to get to explore this passion than under Professor Michele Marincola and The Cloisters! That definitely added to the appeal of the program at NYU.

Now that I'm here, I feel like everything is happening really quickly. Moving from Denver, Colorado to New York City was a pretty big transition. It took some time to adjust to city life and begin making this my home. I can't tell you how many times I have gotten lost in Central Park or inside the Times Square subway station. But as I say way too often, it's an adventure! I love living in the city and exploring whenever I can. There are times when I still can't believe this is my life.

*Photo credits:  
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