

NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

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The Class of 2025

Caroline Carlsmith

Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Time-Based Media Art Conservation

COME TO THE FIELD OF CONSERVATION AS A PRACTICING ARTIST with a background in archiving, collections management, historic preservation, and critical theory. As an undergraduate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I trained in a variety of both traditional and new artmaking materials and techniques, while also studying contemporary art history and visual criticism. Many of my artworks were and continue to be in dialogue with the sciences, and while a student I also worked in specimen preparation at the Field Museum of Natural History. In my third year I attended the New York Studio Program, where I first experimented with installation and began developing the drawing practice that remains the backbone of my work.

Following my graduation with a BFA in Studio Art and a BA in Visual Critical Studies, I worked as an archivist for the contemporary art space **Gallery 400** at the University of Illinois at Chicago, organizing and digitizing thirty years of the gallery's exhibition history through the support of a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. During this period, I also helped organize Summer Forum for Inquiry + Exchange, a text- and conversation-based interdisciplinary residency program; attended residencies at **ACRE** and the **Vermont Studio Center**; and continued to actively exhibit.

In 2012 I entered the Art Theory and Practice master's program at Northwestern University, where I was able to deepen my installation practice and began incorporating time-based components including video, interactive sculpture, and living plants. Working in collaboration with faculty and graduate students from the English and Comparative Literature Departments, I created an architecturally scaled text installation in Northwestern's Deering library based on versions of Walt Whitman's poem eventually titled *Song of Myself* and helped organize a special exhibition in the library with the Transatlantic Walt Whitman Association.

After receiving my MFA and attending the **SÍM residency** in Reykjavik, I moved to New York City. There I began working as a Collections Manager for a group of private art collections on the east coast. It was in this capacity that I first encountered conservation. The collections I managed were materially diverse and brought me into contact with experts in an astonishing variety of art forms. As I worked alongside



(left to right: Maria Olivia Davalos Stanton, Caroline Carlsmith, Clare Misko, Devon Lee, Celia Cooper, Amalia Donastorg
photo credit: K. Martin

my conservator colleagues, I began to understand that the field of conservation wedded my love of making and interest in science with the stewardship of material culture that I value. After meeting with Kevin Martin, the admissions officer at the Conservation Center, I knew NYU was the right program for me, and I began my chemistry prerequisites at Hunter College. I also accepted a position at Judd Foundation, where I focused on advocacy for the historic preservation of Donald Judd's former homes and studios in New York City and Marfa, Texas, which Judd permanently installed with his own work and the work of his contemporaries.

The summer of 2018 I spent in Mexico City at the **SOMA residency**, where I began writing a screenplay which I later developed into a video project as a 2019 Media Arts Fellow with **BRIC** in Brooklyn. Although video had become my artistic focus, I did not initially apply to the Conservation Center in the time-based media track, but simply with a strong interest in learning to preserve contemporary art. When the faculty encouraged me to consider the Mellon program, I realized that the complex installation works that I love most often incorporate a temporal component, and that learning to handle time-based media is the best way to prepare myself to care for contemporary collections. I am thrilled to stay in New York City to study at the Institute, where I can continue to foster relationships with contemporary artists using new materials and time-based media that will present exciting challenges to conservators in the coming years.

Celia Cooper

Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Library & Archives Conservation

As part of a course in vernacular paleography that I took as a junior at Columbia University, I attended regular sessions at my school's rare books and manuscripts library. There, I was able to study and handle Old English and French manuscripts in-person for the first time, not mediated through a computer screen or as a reproduction in a glossy modern book. Watching over many of these sessions was Alexis Hagadorn, Head of Conservation at the Columbia University Libraries, and the first conservator I ever met. At the time, the idea that doing that sort of work, taking care of special collections and helping to safely share them with library visitors, seemed both glorious and out of reach. Soon after my paleography course, I looked up graduate programs in conservation and their prerequisites and was pretty daunted. Although I had enjoyed my art and chemistry classes in high school, by that point in college I was firmly committed to a comparative literature major, with little room for electives.

Tucking conservation in the back of my mind, I instead went on to an internship in the books and manuscripts department at Bonhams auction house in their New York office. There, I was exposed to a much wider range of materials than I would have ever encountered in my academic studies, from an early home pregnancy test prototype to a first edition of *Moby Dick* to the diaries of Civil War soldiers. After Bonhams, I moved on to work in the rare book room in the Strand bookstore, cataloging and pricing books for sale. Both positions were immensely educational, allowing me to handle a whole range of materials I would have never thought to seek out myself. Still, there was something missing.

By that point I had been out of college for a few years and had mostly recovered from the burn-out of my undergraduate years. I was at a point where I felt I could begin moving towards returning to school for graduate work. Slowly, I let conservation creep back into my head. I had no practical conservation experience and almost none of the prerequisites, aside from a smattering of art and art history courses. Still, there was something inside me that told me that if I didn't at least try, I would regret it. With the trepidation of someone who hadn't studied chemistry in nearly a decade, I enrolled part-time at Brooklyn College and began the slow process of earning the necessary credits.

Coursework aside, I was still left with the problem of having no pre-program conservation experience. Luckily, I got an internship at the Brooklyn Museum's conservation lab, where I was able to confirm that working in conservation did in fact suit me, and that my efforts were not misguided. Moreover, it gave me an appreciation of the thoughtful and methodical care with which the conservators who I worked with did their work, and the careful balancing of considerations that informed each of their decisions.

Although my internship came abruptly to a halt in March 2020 (along with my in-person studio art and chemistry lab courses), by that point I felt I had mustered up enough experience to at least give a go at applying to graduate programs. Considering everything I had heard about the intensity of the application process, the conservators at the Brooklyn Museum were immensely supportive

throughout the application process, giving me advice and even setting up a nearly department-wide video call to help me through my pre-interview jitters. When I got the call from the Conservation Center, I felt an enormous sense of relief. As someone who has spent most of my adult life in New York City, I know how enriching the breadth of cultural institutions in this city will be for my education, and I feel enormously privileged to be able to take part in this program.

Maria Olivia Davalos Stanton

Marica and Jan Vilcek Fellowship in Conservation

I fell in love with chemistry in an after-school program in 4th grade, using pH paper on a variety of liquids. My fascination for the subject only grew in subsequent chemistry classes, from the periodic table of elements in middle school to stoichiometry in high school to chemical synthesis in undergraduate. Throughout this, I would attend gallery openings with my mother, a professor of Chicana/o and Mexican American art. Immersed in both my technical chemistry studies in school, and surrounded by art and artists on the weekends, I was truly content. By my second year at Stanford, however, I found myself at a crossroads. My roommate, noticing my strife, and correctly deducing that I was anxious about having to leave behind art to become a chemist, encouraged me to meet with a past professor of hers who taught the Science of Art. After a bit of emailing, I went in to meet this professor, Susan Roberts Manganelli, and her colleague Samantha Li, at Stanford's **Cantor Arts Center**. She asked what my interests were and what drew me to chemistry, and the more I talked, the more I realized I truly loved chemistry and art and didn't know how to do both. Susan, upon hearing this, kindly interrupted me to explain that she was a paintings conservator, and, in fact, art conservation may just be the field for me. That fateful day, I walked into a conservation lab not knowing what it was and walked out with a weight off my shoulders.

Turning my focus to art conservation. I applied to the Multicultural Undergraduate Internship Program (now the **Getty Marrow Undergraduate Internship**, MUI) at the J. Paul Getty Museum, and was accepted into their Decorative Arts and Sculpture Conservation department. I spent the summer between my sophomore and junior year working under Julie Wolfe and Jane Bassett. From vacuuming 17th-century French tapestries to creating annotated bibliographies to weathering copper coupons, I got to see the full breadth of an art conservation lab. As much as Susan opened the door to art conservation, Julie and Jane invited me in, and in the years since, have encouraged and supported me as I worked my way toward graduate school.

I continued working with Susan and Samantha at Cantor, eventually migrating from the outdoor sculpture cleaning crew to do more research in the lab. During my senior year, I devoted much of my time conducting independent research on the two Romano-Egyptian mummy portraits in the Cantor collection, *Portrait of a Woman* and *Portrait of a Young Man*. I used various imaging and analytical techniques including XRF and RTI to gain a more thorough understanding of the materials, methods, and conservation issues of the portraits. To complement these technical analyses, I collaborated

with Gabrielle Thiboutot, a graduate student in Stanford's Archaeology department. I loved collaborating with an archaeologist; it provided me with the art historical context to study and appreciate these portraits, these fragmentary remnants of the mummies themselves, and proved that art conservation was exactly the field for me. Where else would I get to use technical analysis, art history, and work in a laboratory setting all for the same project?

After graduating from Stanford, I knew I wanted to work toward a graduate degree in art conservation, and sought out opportunities that would foster that goal. As an apprentice papermaker working at **Cave Paper** in Minnesota, I learned western and Japanese papermaking techniques. Over the 18 months I worked at the production papermill, I used a variety of fibers, including cotton, abaca, kozo, and Belgian flax. This greatly impacted how I think about book and paper objects, and although I will be specializing in objects, I have retained a soft spot for papermaking and paper art. I volunteered at the Midwest Art Conservation Center (MACC) under Megan Emery in the objects lab, but was also invited to assist Rita Berg '14 in the paintings lab, where I worked on both the frame and painting for the same treatment. This experience provided a platform for my year-long internship with a private practice paintings conservator Ria German-Carter in California. I also worked as a conservation technician for two short-term intensive projects at MACC: the on-site treatment of a mosaic apse of a church in Winona, Minnesota, and a stained-glass restoration project.

The four years between undergraduate and graduate school helped crystalize my interests in art conservation: I discovered my love of objects, and the endless variety of materials and media it provides, and I found how much art historical and collaborative perspectives are important to me as an emerging conservation professional and how necessary it is to bring my identity as a queer person of color to my job.

That third realization was not a sudden event, like the day I met Susan and discovered art conservation, but one that developed over time, starting with the MUI internship and culminating after the uprisings over the murder of George Floyd and AIC's 2020 Virtual Meeting. One presentation by conservator Quinn Morgan Ferris '15 and archivist Siobhan McKissic argued that damage is not inherently negative but rather an additional piece of evidence to consider for treatment. I interviewed the duo for my paper conservation column in my role as Newsletter Editor for **Hand Papermaking, Inc.** Talking with them, I envisioned myself fostering those decolonial frameworks and paradigm shifts in my own career, which helped me reframe the past few years spent not just building my skills but also building a conscious framework with which to engage art conservation. I do not have to separate my quest for justice, equity, and inclusion from my work.

I am beyond excited to start the next phase of my art conservation education at the Conservation Center. I am thankful for all the moments, large and small, that have brought me here, and I look forward, with trepidation and stupendous joy, to being a graduate student!

Amalia Donastorg

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow

I entered my undergraduate studies at Case Western Reserve University as a biology major intent on checking the boxes required for medical school with the goal of becoming a surgeon. This long-held vision for my future was heavily influenced by my mother's work as a maxillofacial surgeon in the Dominican Republic, and later as a dentist in the United States. I was passionate about science, detail-oriented, and most of all wanted to work with my hands. As a freshman shadowing surgery at the university hospital, I was taken by the detailed hand work and moved by the idea of leaving something better than I found it.

It was spring of freshman year that I took my first art history class—a spur of the moment decision that, little did I know, would change the course of my career. My dormant childhood love of art reawakened, and I found a joy in art history I knew medicine could not provide. I decided to switch to an art history major and minored in biology and chemistry to broaden my scientific education in alignment with my interests.

Unsure of how exactly I wanted to work in the arts, I took a collections management internship at The Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA). During my work that summer, I was exposed to the conservation suite for the first time and was blown away by the sight of a massive Gentileschi painting in the same room as a fume hood! I admired the conservators and secretly wanted to be them, but conservation looked out of reach to me. Two years later, I got my chance with a pre-program internship at the Intermuseum Conservation Association (ICA), a regional lab in Cleveland. There, I gained an introduction to the field starting with minor treatments in objects, textiles, and paintings conservation. Watching my mentors at ICA I found myself recognizing a similar attention to detail, skill, and specificity that I had admired in the surgeons I'd once shadowed. I loved the work and quickly knew that my future was in art conservation.

After university, I spent a year in paper conservation at the CMA learning under Paper Conservator, Moyna Stanton. There I treated various 17th- and 18th-century French prints and drawings, worked alongside curators, and assisted in exhibition preparation. I also worked as a photography preparator under Joan Neubecker and learned frame conservation and gilding techniques from the Technician of Paintings and Frames, Dave Piurek. Following my time at CMA, I returned to ICA as a full-time textiles conservation assistant to Textiles Conservator, Jane Hammond, though in reality half of my time was also spent working on objects and paintings. Working as a conservation assistant at ICA gave me a huge variety of treatment experiences and made me appreciate what working at a regional lab can entail. At ICA, I worked on massive flag and tapestry lining projects, washed outdoor sculpture, worked on furniture, strip-lined paintings, repaired frames, prepared artwork for shipping, led chemistry workshops, started the process of moving a three-story conservation facility...the list goes on. I count myself beyond lucky to have been able to learn so many different things at ICA, and especially so for the role models I found in my co-workers.

In the paintings lab, working under conservators Wendy Partridge '99 and Andrea Chavalier '88, my interest in paintings conservation solidified. It was through Andrea and Wendy that I learned more about the offerings of the Institute's dual-degree program and decided to apply after a year at ICA. I was at work the morning Hannelore Roemich called to congratulate me, and seeing a restricted number almost declined her call! I'm glad I answered! My decision-making process to accept the offer was instantaneous, and I look forward to the challenges and opportunities to come.

Devon Lee

Connoisseurs Circle Fellowship

I moved to New York City nearly four and a half years ago with a backpack, a summer internship offer from a conservator in private practice, nowhere to live, and bright-eyed optimism for my future. The excitement I felt was slightly tempered upon my arrival when I was immediately hustled out of several hundred dollars, but this became the first of countless valuable lessons that the city has taught me: when a strange man approaches you outside of the terminal at JFK and asks if you need a taxi, kindly decline his offer and get in line for a legitimate yellow cab instead of blithely climbing into the backseat of an unmarked black car. Sorry, mom! For the first time in my life, I was without a safety net. It would have been terribly easy to spend what remained of my savings on a flight back home to Wisconsin right then and there, but in the end, I could not allow myself to surrender the potential opportunities that I had come to NYC to seek out. Sink or swim, right?

I began my undergraduate studies at the University of Minnesota as a first-generation college student with rudderless ambition. Though I was certain that I would not find fulfillment as a working artist, at that point the only subject in which I believed I shone was studio art. At different times I considered pursuing astrophotography and scientific illustration, and while ultimately neither career was the right fit, I recognized that what compelled me to both was the technical application of artistic ability. Despite my misgivings, I set out on the path to a BFA in drawing and painting and hoped that I would stumble across a true calling along the way.

That long-awaited crystallizing moment occurred well into my undergraduate studies during a field trip to the Midwest Art Conservation Center. The conservators conducting our tour spoke at length about the conservation principles that guided their treatment of a complete, original set of Audubon's *Birds of America* prints, several of which rested on a nearby table in all their glory. As another conservator demonstrated the stratigraphic analysis of a painting's surface, I felt something fall into place. I graduated in 2017 figuratively armed with that BFA, a BA in art history, a minor in medieval studies, and literally armed with four years of competitive fencing experience. Before the ink was dry on my diplomas, I had landed in NYC with my sights set on graduate school.

As my exposure to the field of conservation broadened I became acutely aware of the vastness of objects conservation. My pre-program internships introduced me to a wild diversity of materials and tools, and I have enjoyed being swept up in the constant change of pace and scenery. In my undergraduate art history studies, I

became fascinated by early modern European collecting history and knowledge-making practices, especially as they pertained to the natural world. I studied the blending of naturalia and artificialia, and this fixation has certainly informed my interest in the conservation challenges posed by composite objects.

For more reasons than I can list, NYU was the only program to which I applied. My ability to look at and engage with works of art was so deeply enriched by my undergraduate art history coursework that I could not imagine pursuing a graduate-level education in conservation without rigorous emphasis on the subject. Additionally, by virtue of living in NYC and regularly attending events hosted by the Institute of Fine Arts and the Emerging Conservation Professionals Network, I have come to know and befriend many current and former students of this program. In each of them I see exceptional eloquence, cleverness, curiosity, and genuine kindness; I admire and strive for these qualities within myself, and I am honored to have been accepted into a community that embodies and embraces them.

At this point I must thank Frank Hurley, who supervised my first internship and simply never stopped supporting me in my professional endeavors; Ivana Horacek, Ph.D., who cultivated my art historical interests and guided me endlessly as I wrote my undergraduate thesis; Theresa Downing, Ph.D. Candidate, who devoted more of her personal time to supporting my application to this program and preparing me for my interview than I could ever have reasonably expected; Matthew C. Reiley, whose infectious passion for his work and encouragement of my ideas came at a pivotal moment in my early career; and Julia Sybalsky '12, who has given me countless opportunities to succeed and inspired me beyond words to believe in myself as a conservator.

On that fateful day of admission notifications, I received a call from a restricted number. Wary that the caller might be trying to reach me regarding my car's extended warranty, I inadvertently declined "The Phone Call" and thus I received the news of my acceptance to this program via a lovely voicemail from Professor Roemich. I had to play the message three times before I could allow myself to believe what I was hearing and start celebrating the fact that so many years of work and preparation had actually just borne fruit. Full of gratitude and with the support of wonderful advisors, family, and friends, I did not hesitate for a moment to proudly accept my place in the Conservation Center's Class of 2025.

Clare Misko

Conservation Center Fellow

I've been attracted to art since I was a small child, and I have to thank my mom for this, because she always emphasized the arts in raising me. At first, I wanted to be an artist, but I always enjoyed the technical act of making things more than I did developing creative concepts. In high school, I fell in love with art history thanks to Ms. Tashma, a hilarious and dynamic teacher who challenged us to see the art of the past not as dead images in a textbook but as relevant and with something to communicate to us. In college, I was initially torn between studying psychology and art history, and I think the same things—fascination with the human person in

both individuality and common humanity—drew me to both fields. One of the things I value about art is that it is a kind of meeting ground between, and a record of, so many people: those who made it, bought it, gazed upon it, handled it, used it, damaged it, and altered it, among others. There is also a vulnerability and sense of presence in the listening that takes place when interacting with art, and entering into this space is something I have appreciated more and more as the speed of our digital world has increased. From this comes my desire to conserve and preserve art.

When I started my undergraduate studies at Rhodes College, I still hadn't heard of conservation. My art history courses emphasized research, critical reading, and "close-looking" at the works of art themselves. I had the opportunity to serve as research assistant for two professors, one in art history, the other in archaeology, and in retrospect, both of these experiences deeply impacted my trajectory toward conservation. And, though I didn't think too hard about it initially, I was introduced to conservation for the first time in Jonathan Harr's *The Lost Painting*, which was one of the required texts in my favorite Baroque course.

After graduating with my degree in art history, I knew I didn't want to go the curatorial or academic routes, and frankly I was frustrated with certain issues in the field, especially those around accessibility. I had heard more about conservation science from a visiting lecturer toward the end of my undergraduate career, and I remember being incredibly excited by the fusion of art and science. I briefly considered conservation then, but I ultimately balked when I thought about the two years of chemistry prerequisites I still needed and the corresponding financial consequences. I reasoned that it would be better for me to get a stable job and let go of art altogether. I proceeded to work in administrative roles in doctors' offices for a few years and ended up an office manager.

Finally, though, I realized that as much as I liked the patients and was somewhat fulfilled in knowing that what I was doing was helping them, I was deeply unsatisfied with the direction my life was headed. In that moment, I also saw that in conservation, all of my interests coalesced—physically making things, art history, chemistry, and doing something meaningful for people—and I knew this was what I needed to do. I had to quit my job so I could take general chemistry, and I began studying for the GRE (which I'm happy to see is no longer a requirement). I also reached out to a few college professors, especially David McCarthy and Victor Coonin, but also Miriam Clinton and Erin Harmon whose immediate and generous support was humbling. I would be seriously remiss if I didn't thank them, because I certainly would not have made it through the turbulence of my pre-program years without them.

Covid-19 threw a major wrench into everything I was doing, as it did for everyone else—my job went into limbo, my labs and coursework went remote, and it became much harder to find an internship, which was already a sticking point due to my location. I was still finishing my organic chemistry sequence and working in the local Lowe's paint department when I was fortunate to be offered an internship at Kuniej Berry Associates, a private paintings conservation studio in Chicago. Making the drive downtown once a week, and under the supervision of Cynthia Kuniej Berry, I was

able to help with various aspects of examination, documentation, and minor treatments before being given a painting to examine and start treating myself. The experience I had in Cynthia's studio confirmed my desire to study paintings conservation. I am deeply grateful to her for taking me on and for all of the support and knowledge she shared with me.

NYU's conservation program was always my ideal. It married my interest in art history with my desire to practice conservation in a way that other programs did not, and the Kress Paintings Program spoke to my love of Old Masters. The community and opportunities at NYU and in New York in general are unparalleled, and the more I learned about it, the more I knew this was the one place I wanted to be.

In a weird coincidence, I got my NYU acceptance letter while finally getting the first dose of the Covid vaccine, which felt slightly poetic, as I had finalized and submitted my NYU application while in quarantine with Covid symptoms. I had also been offered admission at the Courtauld, and I was initially too overwhelmed to know how to decide between such different programs, even though NYU had always been my top choice. However, after reflecting on what I was looking for and having several conversations with Conservation Center faculty and students, my choice became extremely clear. It was and is surreal to be offered a place in the program, and I am excited to be embarking on this new chapter. I feel very acutely how much I have to learn, but I also feel very supported by everyone at the Conservation Center. I can't wait to see what the next four years will bring.