

NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

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Conservation at Villa La Pietra

*Summer Projects at NYU's Study Abroad
Campus in Florence, Italy*

Villa La Pietra, an Italian Renaissance estate bequeathed to NYU by Sir Harold Acton in 1994, contains an enormous collection of objects, books, textiles, photographs, paintings, furniture, souvenirs and household objects ranging from the Etruscan period to the 20th century, and includes Italian Gothic, Renaissance, Art Nouveau and Far Eastern influences, to name but a few. This collection, and the surrounding gardens, affords conservation students ample opportunities to pursue practical training outside the classroom environment.

During May, June and July of this year, conservation students from NYU participated in various projects spanning many different material categories, including paper and books, lacquer, outdoor sculpture, polychrome reliefs, textiles and frescoes. Typical projects can include treatment and surveys, as well as long-range research projects. Conservation of the collection focuses on preservation and strives to maintain the estate as it was when Sir Harold Acton died—as a private family home.

Under the direction of conservation consultants, students from the Center travel to the Villa for short-term summer projects. Treatment of works of art on paper, books and documents in the collection is supervised by Margaret Holben Ellis '79, Eugene Thaw Professor of Paper Conservation and Director of the Thaw Conservation Center at [The Morgan Library & Museum](#). This summer, second-year book and paper student Morgan Adams spent two weeks working on a sketchbook by the 18th-century French artist Joseph Chamant. The complex sketchbook is filled with watercolor and pen and ink drawings of theater scenes and palace courtyards, as well as collaged paper overlays added by the artist to make changes to his compositions.

Morgan thoroughly examined the sketchbook and documented the historical binding features with supervision from Professor Ellis and Maria Fredericks, Drue Heinz Book Conservator, The Morgan Library & Museum. “With further research into the artist and the materials used in the sketchbook,” Morgan says, “we hope to shed light on the date and location of manufacture, the sequence of binding (it has been sewn at least twice and trimmed three times), and the artist’s use of the sketchbook.”

Ongoing treatments are commonplace at the estate and the team has proposed a conservation treatment for next summer that would preserve the historical binding and stabilize the sketchbook to greatly improve handling for research and display purposes. Morgan also assisted Maria with the preparations for a future survey of the Villa’s book collection; a very diverse grouping that will provide a great experience for future conservation students interested in books.

Some students have the good fortune to return for



Morgan photographs while Maria Fredericks makes notes—the photos will make up a digital reference that will minimize the need to handle the Chamant sketchbook itself



View looking towards Fiesole from the conservation lab at Villa La Pietra

multiple visits to the La Pietra estate. For instance, Amanda Holden, a fourth-year textile student, returned to the Villa for the third time this summer assisting Deborah Trupin '82, Textile Conservator at the [NY State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation](#), on a two-week project remounting three framed textiles. Working with Villa conservators Costanza Perrone and Claudia Beyer, Amanda says that “each textile had been mounted with poor quality materials so replacing these materials ensured that they would be better preserved.” One of the framed textiles is believed to be an early 19th-century hand-woven portrait of Napoleon I, made by a prominent weaving company in France. “This was an exciting piece to research and discuss with everyone in conservation and throughout the Villa.”

Many times, the teams are able to enjoy excursions outside of the estate, not only to immerse themselves in the Florentine culture and food, but to learn more about its art and artisans. “One evening,” says Amanda, “my supervisors arranged for me to attend a private, behind the scenes tour of [Antico Setificio Fiorentino](#), a weaving firm established in 1786. The weavers still use 18th and 19th-century looms, which were incredible to see!”

Pamela Hatchfield '86, Robert P. and Carol T. Henderson Head of Objects Conservation at the [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#), continued supervising the treatment of a Chinese Coromandel lacquer panel, a project she began in the summer of 2007. Past seasons saw students taking samples and consolidating flaking lacquer, which appeared across most of the screen. This season's work by fourth-year students Raina Chao and Briana Feston, both objects majors, was to continue consolidation and to focus more on the aesthetic issues of filling losses and removing overpaint. The team

took advantage of the [Crayola™ Cutter](#) to cut Japanese tissue fills, which had been painted with acrylics and coated to get just the right sheen. In the end, however, it was decided not to remove much of the overpaint, as it revealed an even more problematic surface.

The final week of the project was spent working on the survey of the decorative arts collection at the Villa. “We did condition checks on everything,” recalls Briana, “from light fixtures and shelves, to marble basins and wooden benches—it was an amazing opportunity to see much of the collection up close.” The students were also able to visit other area house museums, such as the [Museo Stibbert](#), as well as visiting the excavations at the Etruscan site of [Poggio Colla](#) with director Greg Warden.

Second-year paintings students Kristin Bradley and Sophie Scully spent two weeks helping Jean Dommermuth '96 to continue work on the *Saletta delle Rovine*, or room of ruins, a small, cross-vaulted room frescoed in the mid-18th century with a scenic representation of imaginary classical ruins. During the 19th century, a small, high window was enlarged, disrupting the pictorial composition and introducing more modern materials to the wall. Past work during the current campaign of restoration (2006 – 2011) has included overall surface cleaning to remove soot and salts, the removal of old consolidation and retouching materials, and the removal of old cement fills.

This season, the team, along with Daniela Murphy, a Florentine conservator leading the project, focused on areas surrounding the window structure, including the areas of repaint on the *zoccolo*, or base, on three walls. A lively debate between the team and *soprintendente* Brunella Teodori over the extent to which the 19th-century materials should be removed led to the removal of this newer material on three of the

four walls. The team began by removing the 19th-century repaint on the *zoccolo*, because the original 18th-century paint was evident beneath. In other areas, they removed additional overpaint to reveal more of the 18th-century original, helping to bring a visual cohesiveness to the room's design.

Polychrome sculpture also received special attention this season. Kristin Robinson and Shauna Young, third- and first-year paintings students respectively, teamed up with Jack Soultanian, Jr. '79, Conservator at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), to examine a 15th-century polychrome relief of the *Madonna and Child* from the circle of Desiderio da Settignano. The recent purchase by the Villa of a Zeiss OPM199 binocular microscope afforded the opportunity to examine the materials of the relief, including its support and polychromy. The week-long project was all about looking, without the benefit of sophisticated analytical methods, and what one might deduce from such an examination.



Detail of the Villa's lacquer panel



Sophie Scully polycing paint off the wall of the Saletta delle Rovine



Third-year paintings student, Kristin Robinson

“Our study revealed that the relief was not made from terracotta, as had been long believed, but rather of stucco,” observed Jack. An investigation of the painted and gilded surface showed remnants of multiple campaigns of overpaint, varying in number for the different parts of the relief. Sufficient visual evidence



Shauna uses the Zeiss OPMI99 binocular microscope to examine the Madonna and Child relief

remained to largely reconstruct the original polychromy, and a watercolor rendering was produced. Jack also notes the exciting discovery of the original green underpaint for the flesh tones of the figures, probably *terre verte*. While such an underpaint is often found on Italian panel paintings of the period, few sculptures have been documented as showing this technique.

Moving outside the house, students have the chance to work on projects in the surrounding gardens. Collaborating with two students at the end of May, Cybele Tom and Kristen Watson, second- and third-year objects majors respectively, George Wheeler '81, Director of Conservation Research in the [Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation](#) at Columbia University, supervised the cleaning of outdoor marble sculpture in



George Wheeler positions his misting system on one of The Four Seasons statue

the Villa gardens. This summer marks the 15th season that George Wheeler has assisted at the Villa with the conservation program for the outdoor sculpture.

George, his Italian counterpart, Alessandro Conti, and the students cleaned *The Four Seasons*, marble sculptures positioned on the west terrace of the Villa. They used a misting system devised by George and former Conservation Center student Douglass Kwart that uses a network of bendable hosing, able to be positioned into tight, awkward crevices. The water spray was directed at hard gypsum crusts found in areas of the sculpture where there isn't natural water run-off. In the end, they found that the gypsum crusts weren't the problem; rather, it was biological growth and biological stains that proved tenacious. "We employed a variety of poultice methods combined with determined scrubbing with nylon brushes to achieve an even and legible 'clean' for *The Four Seasons* sculptures," says Cybele. The gardens have over 300 outdoor stone pieces that are in need of attention, so this project is sure to need the help of future conservation students.

Spending a week or two in Florence during their summer hiatus sounds like a dream to most students. Luckily, ours have the unique opportunity of spending that time working intimately on the curious and eclectic collection of an early 20th-century American family abroad, and it's all housed in a beautiful and historic villa: La Pietra. •

—Kevin Martin

Kevin is the Academic Advisor for the Conservation Program

All projects are carried out under the general supervision of the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici ed il Paesaggio e per il Patrimonio Storico Artistico, e Demoetnoantropologico per le Province di Firenze, Pistoia e Prato*, as the collection and the Villa have been officially listed as cultural heritage protected by the Italian government.

While at the Villa, Briana Feston gave a talk on plastics, "What is Good (Plastics) Design: A Case Study in Analysis Guiding Treatment," at the Institute of Applied Physics (IFAC-CNR), a national research center outside Florence. "I think this talk was particularly interesting to the audience," Briana says, "because in Italy the relationship between conservators and scientists is often more removed than in the US. For example, scientists work at regional centers or private enterprises, and are not always directly on site at the museum. I also had the opportunity to talk with several scientists working on plastic conservation, and we spoke about light bulbs, and how certain areas on a light spectrum might influence the degradation of plastic, a concept I hadn't thought of, and am interested in learning more about." The Center's 50th Anniversary Fund provided an honorarium for Briana to present her research to scientists and graduate students in both science and conservation at the IFAC-CNR.

Alumni Spotlight

George Wheeler '81 talks to the *NY Times* about the recent weathering study of Cleopatra's Needle, a 71-foot tall obelisk gifted to the United States government by Egypt in 1881 commemorating the opening of the Suez Canal.

photo credit: Jean Dommermuth, Amanda Holden, Kristin Robinson, Shauna Young