

Summer Projects in Parks for Conservation Program Interns

School's out, and students enrolled in the graduate conservation training programs are looking for hands-on conservation work. Museum collections of the National Park Service are as diverse as the parks themselves, encompassing all types of organic and inorganic materials, and preservation requires the expertise of conservators working in every specialty recognized in professional conservation. It's a good match for the National Park Service.

National Park Service conservators represent most of these specialty fields. The Division of Conservation at Harpers Ferry Center in West Virginia functions as a central conservation resource for the NPS nationwide. With a staff of 17 conservators, the Division of Conservation is equipped with specialized laboratories for conservation of archeological objects, decorative arts and historic objects, ethnographic materials, furniture and wooden artifacts, paper, and textiles and has recently developed and staffed a conservation science laboratory as well. With a staff of

two objects conservators, the Collections Conservation Branch of the Northeast Cultural Resources Center provides conservation services to parks in New England and the mid-Atlantic states for treatment of historic and decorative art objects including outdoor sculpture.

The major conservation training programs in the United States are the University of Delaware (Winterthur), New York University (Institute of Fine Arts

Conservation Center) and New York State University at Buffalo. Summer internships are a graduation requirement of the Winterthur and Buffalo graduate training programs. Although not as an academic requirement, NYU program students are encouraged to take on summer work for professional growth. In every case, training programs seek to match the students' interest and abilities with the activities of a professionally recognized conservation facility.

The Harpers Ferry Center Division of Conservation has established cooperative agreements with the training programs to place both year and summer interns and trains an average of three program students a year, placing interns with specific laboratories and projects according to their skills and interests. Rigorous academic and technical conservation curricula have equipped these students with knowledge and skills that can make them valuable team members in completing conservation treatment projects. Students in turn expect to gain valuable experience in the "real world" of conservation by developing treatment proposals based on accurate condition assessment, and completing conservation treatments including all documentation within the proposed time-frame estimate.

These cooperative agreements also provide the administrative umbrella that enables the Collections Conservation Branch (CCB) to access and fund program interns for projects both on-site and in the CCB conservation laboratory in Lowell. Working with the programs through Harpers Ferry, the CCB conservators (the author and Carol Warner) have supervised interns on such on-site projects as the survey and conservation of plaster sculptures at Saint-Gaudens NHS, and treatment of the bronze Colonel Prescott statue at Bunker Hill Monument in Boston.

On-site conservation projects are particularly well suited for use of summer interns because, by their very nature, the treatment goal(s) must be achievable in a set period of time. Each project requires summer interns to review material characteristics of the object, diagnose

Suzanne Davis, summer intern from the NYU Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts Program, stabilizes fragile flaking gilt on a chair from a suite of furniture in the Vanderbilt Mansion. Photo by Eugenie Milroy.



deterioration mechanisms, undertake appropriate testing, collaborate in the development of a treatment proposal, and participate in the final treatment and documentation reports.

When funding was made available for an ideal summer project at Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Site in Hyde Park, New York, the CCB contacted nearby NYU to see if any of the conservation program students would be interested in participating. The result was that, in the summer of 1998, graduate students Suzanne Davis and Eugenie Milroy from the NYU Conservation Training Program became a key element in the successful completion of a conservation project at the Vanderbilt Mansion.

It was a challenging project. The Vanderbilt Mansion contains one of the finest intact collections of furniture from the Gilded Age designed *en suite* for the mansion in 1897. However, decades of uncontrolled climate extremes within the building have led to problems of extensive flaking and loss of gesso, bole, and gold leaf on the high-style furniture. At the time of the project, even light routine dusting was impossible without further loss of gilded surfaces. To exacerbate the problem, oily soot from a boiler puff-back covered every surface throughout the 54-room mansion.

The Williamstown Art Conservation Center, a private regional conservation organization in Massachusetts, had been contracted by the park the previous year to develop a comprehensive plan for soot removal, but the fragile gilded furniture could not be cleaned using normal soot removal techniques without first stabilizing insecure surfaces. Based on selection criteria of severity of condition and visual prominence within the furnished room, park curator Anne Jordan selected specific items for treatment using information supplied from a comprehensive Furniture Conservation Survey completed in 1992 by contract conservator Robert Mussey of Boston. With the goals of the Gilt Stabilization Project defined and funding secured for the CCB to undertake the work, the CCB and park curator began logistical planning for the project.

Although interns are paid a modest stipend for their eight-week commitment, rental apartments can be difficult to find for only two months and weekly hotel rates can be prohibitively expensive for students. To facilitate the project, the park generously provided living arrangements for the conservation team. This housing

turned out to be the original mansion gatehouse, which, along with the mansion, was designed by the premier architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White. Having been used for park housing for decades, the gatehouse itself bore no signs of the Gilded Age, but was extremely comfortable and convenient to the work site. The park supplied furniture, sheets and basic kitchenware. The students brought additional comfort items to the site and a few luxury items such as a coffeemaker, toaster and shower curtain were loaned by CCB conservators. The terrific living arrangements provided by the park went a long way in contributing to the success of the summer project.

The mansion's large and well-lit basement laundry room was converted into a field conservation laboratory by the park and the CCB. The park cleared, cleaned and painted the room, and supplied worktables, shelving and various supplies and tools already available at the site. Additional materials were ordered from conservation supply companies, and a vanload of supplies and equipment was sent from the CCB Conservation Laboratory in Lowell.

The project began with an introductory workshop by furniture conservator Hugh Glover of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center on the theory and practice of gilding and gilt stabilization for conservation team members and interested park staff. Conservation treatment of selected furniture then began under the guidance and direction of CCB conservators. For the duration of the project, one or both conservators visited the site two days a week to work with the interns and monitor their progress. In addition, two park staff members also participated in several phases of the treatment under close supervision. Treatments involved re-attaching flakes of gilded surface, consolidating weak areas, soot removal, and filling and toning losses when necessary to blend with the surrounding surface and unify the visual appearance of the piece for exhibition. At the end of the summer, 12 fairly complex pieces were completed, but there are many more pieces that must be stabilized. The park is pursuing funding to continue this work, and the CCB will again advertise this internship opportunity to conservation training programs.

A major reason for the success of this summer project was the collaboration of several agencies to ensure that the project would satisfy the expectations of all parties. Collaborators for this project included the park, which wanted to be

able to remove soot from gilded furniture; the CCB conservators, who needed daily on-site activity for completion of the conservation treatment hours required to finish the selected pieces during the project time-frame; NYU academic program officers, who seek appropriate professional internship opportunities for their students; and, finally, the students themselves, who seek enriching and challenging summer projects in a great location. All of these expectations were met.

Past surveys by the CCB have identified treatment projects in addition to the continuing Vanderbilt Mansion Gilded Furniture project that are also good matches for summer interns. These projects include stabilization of an exterior painted frieze at Saint-Gaudens NHS in New

Hampshire, treatment of plaster sculpture at Weir Farm NHS in Connecticut, and conservation of sculpture and large historic objects in the home and library of Thomas Edison in New Jersey. When funding for these projects is in place, they will be advertised to the conservation training programs with hope of attracting bright and skilled summer interns to work on-site with the CCB conservators. Living quarters designed by McKim, Mead and White may not be available for all on-site summer projects, but the parks and their collections are fabulous.

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A Workshop

Integrating Field Archeology, Conservation, and Culturally Appropriate Treatments

An interdisciplinary workshop, Integrating Field Archeology, Conservation and Culturally Appropriate Treatments, was organized through the Curation Program of the National Park Service's (NPS) now defunct Intermountain Cultural Resource Center (ICRC). The workshop occurred in June, 1997, and was held at the Center's Santa Fe, New Mexico, office and at Pecos National Historical Park. The workshop had two primary purposes. One purpose was to provide training on fundamental field conservation philosophies, techniques, and materials. The workshop also provided a forum and an opportunity for discussion and training on various aspects of culturally appropriate treatments as they pertain to certain material types, artifacts, and features. The workshop was highly unique in that concepts of culturally appropriate treatment were linked with those of field archeology, field conservation, and museum management.

There is a long history of collaboration between European archeologists and conservators

on archeological field projects. This has resulted in several notable publications, including: *Conservation on Archeological Excavations*,¹ *The Elements of Archeological Conservation*,² *Retrieval of Objects from Archeological Sites*,³ and *First Aid for Finds*.⁴ Such collaboration is the exception rather than the rule in the United States, however. It is not surprising, therefore, that the single comprehensive U.S. publication in this area is *A Conservation Manual for the Field Archeologist*, by Catherine Sease.⁵ The Sease publication served as the main 'reference' for the workshop. The need to further integrate the principles of archeology, conservation, museum management, and general resource management in the planning and execution of archeological field projects has been recognized as a need for many years in the U.S. and has been called for in numerous publications.⁶ While we have seen some progress through national and regional initiatives on archeological site protection and collection management in general, archeological field conservation remains virtually invisible. This is of particular concern when publication such as "The Federal Curation