



AiA Art News-service



The Science of Art Conservation // Dustin Dunaway

[DUSTIN DUNAWAY](#) OCT 06, 2017

CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



Carol Snow is the Deputy Chief Conservator and the Alan J. Dworsky Senior Conservator of Objects at the Yale University Art Gallery. A devoted art conservator, she previously worked in Baltimore for the Walters Art Museum, and as a private practicing conservator in the greater Boston area. Snow graduated from Skidmore College as a Studio Art major, and went on to obtain her Masters from the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation. Snow's interests include the technology of art and art methods, re-evaluations of previous restoration and conservation techniques, and the identification of forgeries and copies. With an office at both YUAG and West Campus, Snow journeys between the two often, leading conservation projects and lecturing classrooms.

Q: Would you like to briefly explain your role as deputy chief conservator before we get started?

My job as Deputy Chief Conservator and the Alan J. Dworsky Senior Conservator of Objects is to oversee conservation and general preservation of all three dimensional objects in the art gallery, which includes everything from ancient to time-based media. It's really just the art gallery but because the British Arts Center does not have an object conservator, they frequently ask us to come in and have a look or give advice, as does the whole University, actually.

Q: How long have you held this position at Yale?

I've been [at Yale] since 2008, and I've kind of grown within my position. So, when I was first hired I was called objects conservator, I think. Then I was fortunate to have the position endowed, which is why it has such a long title. But it was a gift from a Yale alumni, very generous, Alan J. Dworsky. I think he was interested in funding some aspect of the art museum that had to do with very hands on, very practical work, so conservation was a perfect match for him.

Q: I know you lecture for one class, could you go into that a little bit?

So we team-teach, as a conservation department, "Technological Examination of Art," which has to do with using scientific methods to look at art and understand the properties and materials and methods that were used to create works of art. Looking at how they age, then what past conservation or restoration campaigns that [they] may have had and what we might need to do going forward.

Q: When did you become interested in art conservation?

So, as an undergraduate I was a studio art major. But I loved chemistry and physics and so I found out about art conservation while I was a junior. During junior year abroad I was studying design and architecture at the University of Copenhagen, but I traveled all around Europe and I got to see different museums and works of art that were being restored. So that's when I kind of got the bug. I worked in conservation labs as a senior and got the internship experience very early.

There is a lot more science behind this occupation than you'd first think.

Right and in fact, my parents told me and my sister: "Oh don't worry about science, you don't really need that." My sister ended up getting a PhD in Botany and I ended up getting a Masters in conservation, so it actually took me two years after graduation to get all the necessary chemistry requirements which included general chemistry, physical chemistry, and organic chemistry to get into graduate school. There is more science than people realize. It is a balance of art, art history, anthropology, and science. There are four art conservation programs that offer master's degrees in the United States and they all require getting some practical experience working in a conservation lab, so it's really competitive.

Q: What is your most recent restoration project?

...I don't know if you've noticed but we are undergoing renovations on our Asian Gallery. Right now, my whole team (an associate conservator and two Graduate school interns) is working on Asian material. And a really great example of something I just worked on last week was an Islamic bowl that was believed to be from the tenth century from Iraq, the Abbasid period. It had been previously restored and then it had suffered damage because the previous glue that was used failed. Not uncommon. A lot of times, we end up redoing previous restorations in previous repairs. So, it came to us...right before we were to put it in the case for the exhibition. When I looked at it closer I realized that it had been have very heavily restored and so I started removing all these old plaster fills and old paint that covered original surfaces. In doing that, I revealed a lot of the original glaze, which was wonderful, but in the center of this bowl was...an image of a deer. And I realized that that had been made probably in the twentieth century. That a very clever restorer had inserted these pieces and then sort of filled in around it and painted over it, disguising all these joints and repairs in addition to the fractures you'd expect in a bowl that's over a thousand years old. So what we had to decide was whether it was a heavy handed restoration or in fact a forgery. I am leaning toward a forgery. This is not unusual for this type of ceramic, in fact, to be made out of several different bowls and vessel fragments to then be combined in a way that they are "restored." And it looks like a whole bowl but it is made from so many pieces, from so many different eras, that it becomes a new bowl, a forgery.

Q: Where do these restorations take place?

We have a space in the museum but it's been downsized over the years because we have an amazing facility at West Campus. So within the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage there is a shared conservation space, which is a huge open space for object conservators, painting conservators, and paper conservators.

When does a restoration piece stop becoming art and become something else?

If you go into the lobby, there is this brightly colored glazed ceramic sculpture of a grandmother figure by Viola Frey. This piece belonged to a private owner and got broken into over one-hundred pieces, so she declared it a total loss. The insurance company reimbursed her for the value and then the insurance company brought it to us and said: do you want this sculpture? We said, "Of course we can use it as a teaching tool; it would be a good practice piece for students wanting to go into

conservation graduate school." So, we gave it to one of our interns, a student of the Rhode Island School of Design, who put it back together, beautifully and wonderfully. So, our director, Jock Reynolds, got excited about it and wanted to put it in the lobby. You know it went from a work of art to not existing, then it was reconstructed, which raises the question: is this the same sculpture? But from [Viola Frey's foundation's] point of view, that sculpture stopped existing when it was declared a total loss. The foundation would rather call it a study object. So it was used for practice and someone had an amazing experience, but the foundation doesn't want it to be called a sculpture. So, this raises all kinds of questions: Is this a sculpture? Is this a sculpture by Viola Frey? Is this a work of art? Eventually, it will probably go to West Campus to the Collection Study Center. It won't be displayed in the museum. Just for right now it is on display in the lobby as a conservation project.

The reconstructed "study object," "Archaic Woman," from the Grandmother Series by Viola Frey, is currently on display in the YUAG lobby.