

Old Again

The conservator: Christine Thomson, who has a studio north of Boston where she works, sometimes alone, sometimes with an associate, on the conservation of old furniture and decorative-arts objects from all over the world. Chris began her career 28 years ago as a technician. She learned on the job: the conservator who was her teacher suffered from migraines and would take to his bed, saying to Chris of a particular challenge, “See if you can figure this out.”

Some projects in the studio: A Federal mirror whose original gold-leaf was at some point painted over with bronze radiator paint. A 1930s French Art Deco desk, with patches of sun bleaching. A wild 19th-century Anglo-Indian chair, whose dark bracken-like filigree needs repair in several spots. A neoclassical sofa from the 1820s which, unusually, still has its original under-upholstery, of interest to scholars; it needs new upholstery that won’t damage the piece and can be easily removed to expose the original surface for any future study.

10:20 Chris is examining an old Japanned bonnet-top high chest. She has already completed a judicious restoration of the piece’s fragile, spirit-based-varnish surface, filling in missing applied-gesso ornament but mostly leaving the faux tortoiseshell background alone so the chest won’t appear over-restored.

When the chest arrived, the hardware was too big and too Chippendale. Chris has already removed the Chippendale hardware; now she is trying to figure out, by closely examining nail holes and faint marks in the wood, the size and shape of what was there originally.

10:35 Chris holds a piece of tracing paper against a drawer front and gently traces the pattern of nail holes. Then she holds one of the Chippendale escutcheons up to the chest to see which nail holes match it. Any holes in the wood that don’t match must be older — and therefore left by the original hardware.

10:40 Removing the drawer and standing it on end, Chris looks closely at the faint imprints left on its surface by both sets of hardware. She repeats this with each

drawer, under incandescent and then ultraviolet light, discerning a curve here, an indentation there.

10:59 She makes a quick tracing of the outline of one of the Chippendale escutcheons, and compares it to the marks on the wood.

Gradually, using the subtle clues provided by the piece itself, the Chippendale hardware she removed, and samples and photographs of Queen Anne-style escutcheons and drawer pulls, Chris is assembling a speculative portrait of what the hardware might have looked like. She will send her sketches to a period-hardware expert in Providence, who will look at them with a historian’s eye, saying, “Yes, that shape looks right,” or “No, you would never have seen that particular detail in that period.” Together they will refine the design and fabricate new pieces that have the right scale and feel for the chest.

11:35 Leaving the chest for the time being, Chris goes to another work table to look at paint samples with a binocular microscope. She is preparing for this afternoon at the Peabody Essex Museum



▲ Photo by Joan Wickersham.

in Salem, where she is working on an exceptionally rare and beautiful piece: a figurehead by William Rush, a leading early American sculptor and carver. This circa-1800 wooden figure of a woman was painted 28 to 30 times in her seagoing life and the thick layers of paint have obscured the delicate detail of Rush’s carving. Chris has made cross-sections of paint samples scraped from the figurehead. Under the microscope, the striated layers of history are visible: many coats of white, some light blue, a period when the figure’s dress was green and its shawl was burgundy, and then back to white again. For several months Chris has worked on the project one afternoon a week with PEM conservator Mimi Leveque, and they are as familiar with the striations as an archaeologist would be with the layers of a dig.

11:55 A phone call from Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, inviting Chris to lead a gilding workshop, to tie in with an upcoming exhibition of European decorative arts. She and the MFA curator discuss techniques that might be demonstrated: oil gilding can be applied to any surface, while water gilding is a more complicated process, although it can be burnished to look like gold. “That was the purpose of gilding, when it originated in Egyptian times — to make a lesser material look like gold.” They agree on a date for the workshop, after

Affixed to the prow of a ship, this carved woman with the neoclassical face must have appeared strong and graceful. But, lying here, she looks helpless.

Chris checks her calendar to make sure it won't conflict with a workshop she's scheduled to lead at Winterthur.

1:45 In the basement of the Peabody Essex, Chris and Mimi Leveque stop to admire a piece laid out on one of the tables: an Inuit raincoat made of strips of seal intestine, fashioned along the dashing lines of a Russian naval officer's cape. Mimi says the museum will clean it up and repair it as much as possible. "There's a woman I know, just outside of Anchorage, who works with seal intestine, and I'm going to get her to send me some."

1:55 The Rush figurehead is reclining on a table in the museum's mount shop. "There's our girl," Mimi murmurs gently. Affixed to the prow of a ship, this carved woman with the neoclassical face must have appeared strong and graceful. But, lying here, she looks helpless, swooning

on the table, clutching her shawl around herself as if for warmth, her surface scraped in some areas, still thickly clotted with paint in others. In every sense of the word, she's distressed.

1:57 The three conservators — Chris, Mimi, and intern Sara Lapham — don white Tyvek coats, rubber gloves, and safety goggles. They gather around the figure and begin coating small areas with a proprietary non-toxic paint remover. They wait a few minutes for the surface to soften, and then use small wooden-handled Japanese carving tools to scrape down the paint. Mimi works above an eyebrow, while Chris and Sara attend to the pleats in the dress.

"Did you get your new iPhone, Chris?" Mimi asks.

"I did. It's almost too nice. My old one I used to just throw around, but this one's like a little treasure. I'll have to get over that."

2:10 Carefully and patiently, scraping tiny areas with the tiny tools. Talk of other conservators, who's working where, which museums are cutting staff.

2:24 More scraping. Talk of airlines: cancelled flights, lost luggage.

2:30 More scraping. Talk of Circus Smirkus: Mimi's daughter has spent the summer touring as an aerialist.

2:50 Sara jumps: her blade has snapped. Matter-of-factly, she changes blades, puts her safety goggles back on, and resumes scraping.

3:05 Mimi vacuums out some paint scrapings from the figure's eye socket. The vacuum-cleaner bags and garbage bags of scrapings swept from the table are full of lead and very heavy. They're taken away periodically and disposed of as toxic waste.

3:12 Two museum curators come in to see how work is going on the figurehead. Mimi



Architects Wanted

Innovators have always been drawn to the promise of off-site construction. Now, off-site is delivering on that promise more than ever with high quality materials and sustainable, green principles. As always, we're fast and cost-effective. But we need your inspiration. Consider designing your next permanent school, medical, retail or office building project using off-site construction. **For more information contact Laurie Robert at NRB Inc. or Cliff Cort at Triumph.**

Laurie Robert | laurierobert@nrb-inc.com 800.465.7594 www.nrb-inc.com
Cliff Cort | ccort@triumphmodular.com 800.257.2536 www.triumphmodular.com



shows them some photographs of cross-sections of paint layers, as well as sketches the conservators have made of how the figure was painted at various stages. “So what we’re doing now is really a three-part job: first, analysis of the layers of paint; second, removal; and third, the decision about what to do.”

The decision, which ultimately rests with the museum’s curator of maritime art, will be whether to leave the figure with a mottled surface, showing some of the different layers of paint; or to apply a clear matte varnish (which could be removed at some future date — reversibility is always a consideration in conservation) that would protect what’s there and also heighten existing contrasts; or to paint her — but then which of the three existing color schemes should be re-created?

3:30 More scraping. Talk of the museum’s recent acquisition of a Jain temple cart, or howdah, a ceremonial pavilion that would have been mounted on an elephant’s back. “It’s huge,” Mimi tells the other two. “There are these long side pieces, so it could be

drawn by oxen, and then when you got it to the elephant, you put the little house piece up on top.”

“What’s it made of?” Chris asks.
 “Rosewood and chased silver. Some leather pieces. And little cymbals on all the wheels. There are some bits missing, which we’ll have fabricated in India. But it’s mostly just a monster cleaning job.”

3:40 Mimi goes off to meet with one of the museum’s curators about an object upstairs. Chris and Sara continue scraping. Chris asks Sara about her coursework; she is taking classes and racking up work hours, preparing to apply to conservator programs. She tells Chris she got an A-minus in chemistry.

“Yay! Who was in the course? A lot of nurses? When I took it, it was a lot of nurses.”

3:44 Peering at the figure’s flank, Chris says, “I think I just ran into a chunk of metal here.” X-rays have shown that the figure has some buckshot in her — at some point, someone must have taken pot shots

at her. The conservators believe the shot is made of lead, making it difficult to date: steel shot is more easily dated because of its carbon content.

4:05 Mimi comes back and puts on her white gown again. “Job for Chris upstairs.”
 “What?”

“A Hawaiian cabinet with a warped door.”

“Sadly, you can’t do that much about warping,” Chris says. “You can sometimes reset the hinges and make it look less warped, but...”


“I know,” Mimi agrees.

4:15 More scraping. Mimi twists around to get at a tricky spot. “Hmm. I need to have her move her arm. Do you think she’d do that for me?”


Chris says, “I bet she would, if you asked her.”

Joan Wickersham is a writer in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her new book is *The Suicide Index: Putting My Father’s Death in Order* (Harcourt).

ARCHITECTURE ENGINEERING PLANNING INTERIOR DESIGN COMMISSIONING



Maine. Not just for your vacation—for your career.



With a lively arts, culture and restaurant scene, Portland is thriving, and so are we!

- *Best Places for Business & Careers in the U.S.*, Forbes, May 2007
- *Best Performing Cities Index 2007*, Milken Institute/Greenstreet Partners
- *25 Best Cities*, Kiplinger Personal Finance, June 2007

Join SMRT’s dynamic and growing professional design team, located on Portland’s waterfront. Check out our current opportunities at www.smrtinc.com or call our HR group at 207.772.3846.

PORTLAND, ME MANCHESTER, NH NORTH ANDOVER, MA TROY, NY







Photo: Richard White Sons
 Photo: Robert Benson



A CENTURY OF CONSTRUCTION EXCELLENCE
WWW.RWSONS.COM
 Architect: Elkus Manfredi Architects

Harvard University
 Riverside Student Housing
 Memorial Drive Woodframes - Phase II