



Art Conservation *and tales of a difficult past*

*The Madonna gazes upward, hands clasped at her breast and an expression of reverence on her face. Her prayers are evident to anyone viewing the privately owned copy of *Madonna in Preghiera* (Madonna in Prayer), painted by an unknown artist after an original composition by Guido Reni (1575-1642) that is thought to date from the 17th century. But when the Madonna arrived at Winterthur last year, her prayers may also have included a plea for release from the many indignities that had overtaken her.*



If so, her prayers were answered when she became a treatment project for WUDPAC Fellow Adriana Benavides, a paintings major and a preventive minor.

Adriana found that the oil-on-canvas painting brushwork had originally been lively and refined but was later marred by sloppily applied overpainting. The canvas, which arrived at Winterthur unframed, slumped downward, bowed forward, and was brittle and hard. Adriana's goal was to prevent further deterioration by stabilizing the canvas and attaching it to a new stretcher so that it could be safely stored vertically while awaiting further treatment. To do this, Adriana worked primarily from the back of the painting, where she found two previous canvas linings applied with an adhesive that reacted with water. Since the painting gave no evidence of a water event, humidity alone likely caused the adhesive to soften, which allowed the painting to slump forward and bow out as it dried.



Adriana first applied a protective covering of Japanese tissue paper to the painting's face before turning it over onto a padded mount so she could access it from the back. She then carefully lifted the strainer and mechanically removed most of the lining material and adhesive. A gel that released moisture was used to soften areas of stubborn adhesive. As she removed the second lining, a sweet odor attested to the addition of a substance, possibly

honey, to the adhesive. This might have made the adhesive easier to work with, but it also helped account for the evidence of pest damage. The insects had undoubtedly found the sweet adhesive a tasty snack and even nibbled into the original canvas. With humidification, Adriana was able to gently apply pressure and adjust and reduce the distortions in the canvas and tacking margins. By placing the canvas on a working stretcher, she could also address tears and losses and reinforce the edges with a very thin conservation fabric, thus preparing it for storage until a future WUDPAC Fellow can complete the treatment.

ARTC Spotlight—August 2023

The University of Delaware's Art Conservation Department educates and trains professional conservators who are well versed in the treatment, analysis, documentation, and preventive conservation of individual artifact and archive collections. For more news about our students and other department activities visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.

Top: Winterthur/University of Delaware Fellow Adriana Benavides performs solubility tests prior to varnish removal. Above and right (upper): Mechanical removal of adhesive and bulk non-original material from back under magnification. Right (lower): Copy of *Madonna in Preghiera* after Guido Reni, ACP 1863; during treatment, recto, normal light. (Images: E. Krape, B. Weakley, and A. Benavides.)