



Art Conservation *and voices from the past*

In Yorubaland, a region in West Africa that includes a large swath of Nigeria and is home to the Yoruba people, the human head is considered the physical and spiritual core of the human body. The head figures prominently in their complex religion, which has many deities, and in their art and material culture, even as many Yorubas have converted to Christianity and Islam.

This year WUDPAC Fellow, objects major, and material culture enthusiast Riley Thomas is treating a mid-20th-century Yoruba object called an *Ile Ori*, which translates to “house of the head.” Found in many Yoruba homes, an *Ile Ori* is a shrine intended to hold the representation of a head, called the *Ibori*. The *Ibori* is believed to be the essence of the person and determines his or her destiny in life; after death an individual’s *Ibori* and *Ile Ori* are both disassembled and scattered at the grave. *Ile Oris* can be found in many museums, but this one is part of Special Collections at Bryn Mawr College, where it is available to researchers and students.

Individuals commission leather workers to create an *Ile Ori* for them, and so each has its own design and decoration. The *Ile Ori* Riley is treating consists of two parts: a cylindrical base topped by a conical lid with a finial resembling a woman. Standing 15.5 inches high and 9 inches wide, it is made of rawhide, orange and blue textile pieces, and decorations that include 13 rows of 59 cowrie shells and two iron-framed glass mirrors.

Riley understands the importance of deferring to cultural sensitivity and appropriateness when treating the *Ile Ori*. While her examination showed that the *Ile Ori* is in fair condition, with losses in the textile components and an accumulation of dirt and grime, her primary goal will be to ensure the object remains intact and stable. She has been advised that what she interpreted as surface soiling on the cowrie shells is considered an intrinsic part of the object and its history, resulting from offerings. She anticipates that her treatment efforts will be limited to a light dusting, stabilization, and rehousing and would pursue further aesthetic treatment only after consultation with others, including scholars of Yoruba material culture. When Riley has completed her consultations, analysis, and treatment, she will return the *Ile Ori* to Bryn Mawr for use by scholars and others interested in the Yoruba people and their culture.



ARTC Spotlight—February 2024

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 Riley Thomas vacuuming the lid of the *Ile Ori* with a soft brush. Above: Detail image of the female figure atop the *Ile Ori*, viewing her right side. The purple tassel is believed to be an earring. Right: An overall image of the *Ile Ori* before treatment and a detail image of the cowry shells adorning the base of the *Ile Ori*. (Images: E. Krape, R. Thomas.)