



Art Conservation *and structural puzzles*

After three centuries of loving use, the 18th-century secretary desk and bookcase was in rough shape when it arrived at Winterthur. The cases, flat on their backs and accompanied by dozens of loose pieces of wood and detached molding, they had been left with the Finger Lakes Land Trust in Ithaca, New York, as part of an estate donation. Its history, however, includes ownership by generations of a single family that moved from Australia to England and finally to this country.

The Trust, which is dedicated to land conservation, sent the pieces to Winterthur for study by WUDPAC and WPAMC (Winterthur Program in American Material Culture) Fellows. This year, it became a treatment project for WUDPAC Fellow and furniture major Lila Reid.

The bookcase is meant to sit atop the secretary desk, a form that was popular in England by 1710. Certain design features, such as the relatively small lopers, the two pieces that slide out to support the drop-down desk lid, and the flat cornice with arched mirror panels on the bookcase, help date the desk and bookcase to the early 18th century, and Lila believes it was made between 1715 and 1740. It is constructed primarily of oak, which Lila has characterized as possibly English white oak, with highly decorated burl veneers.

Lila’s goal is to stabilize the cases by repairing structural problems. The desk, for example, is currently supported by blocks because pieces of the bracket feet have broken off. Lila will remove the old, failed adhesive remaining on the failed joints and use hot hide glue to repair them. She will also address the aesthetics by cleaning the surfaces of accumulated grime and reattaching detached and loose molding and veneer. To do this, she will inject hot hide glue into areas of lifting veneer, followed by clamping or weighting to re-adhere it to the substrate. She will also reattach extant detached pieces and create new ones where losses exist.

She also hopes to solve some puzzles, starting with the mirrors that cover the bookcase doors and appear to be made from a tin-mercury amalgam mirror. If so, the mercury may drip as the mirror continues to age and degrade, requiring the use of certain precautions and safety measures. Though Lila sees no evidence of this, she will use XRF to confirm the mirrors’ composition. Once Lila’s treatment is complete, the desk and bookcase will be stored standing upright, with the bookcase anchored to the desk. Lila hopes that while it remains at Winterthur, it will continue to be fascinating a study object for future WUDPAC students.

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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 Lila Reid opening one of the doors of the bookcase. Above: Lila dry surface cleaning the desk using a soft bristle brush. Right: The desk (lower drawers not pictured) before treatment and a detail of the interior drawers and missing molding. (Images: E. Krape, N. Caccamo.)

