



Art Conservation *and historical service*

The first time WUDPAC Fellow Gianna Puzzo saw the antiquated gas mask, it lay wedged beside a firefighter helmet on the bottom shelf of a display case at the University of Delaware Disaster Research Center. It was one among many disaster-related artifacts in the Center’s E.L. Quarantelli Resource Collection, one of millions of masks that played a critical role during World War II when they were carried into battle by American servicemen. When Gianna, a preventive major, and their supervisor, Anisha Gupta, Ph.D. candidate in UD’s Preservation Studies program, were invited to complete a collections assessment at the Center last fall, they knew little about the mask’s history. What they did know was its significance to the Center’s mission and conservation methods to improve the collection’s care. Displayed in three cases, the objects collection includes items recovered at disaster sites, materials used in disaster education, artists’ representations and disaster memorabilia.

The gas mask became a project for Gianna in the spring and an opportunity to put some of the assessment’s recommendations into action. Anisha and Gianna decided one way to help preserve, study, and display it would be to place it on a mount. The goal of the mount was to improve the display and make the mask more accessible for researchers. Gianna determined the gas mask to be a 1943 M3 Lightweight Service Mask made from a degrading vulcanized rubber. The tubing especially had become stiffened and cracked, making handling potentially risky.

Under the supervision of Winterthur’s Associate Preventive Conservator William Donnelly, Gianna built a “stab mount” consisting of a padded head form on top of a metal rod that elevates the vulnerable rubber tubing. A painted deck provides a solid foundation, allowing the mask to be more easily moved and handled. Archival materials suitable for long-term storage and display were selected including the carved Ethafoam head, archival blue board, a cut and heat-shaped acrylic chin strap to support the faceblank, and washed natural fiber fabrics. When Gianna returned the gas mask with the completed mount, they also provided the Center with handling and display recommendations, including a hazard warning about asbestos-bearing paper on the underside of the canister. The M3 Service Mask returned in time to be displayed as part of the Center’s 60th Anniversary programming.

ARTC Spotlight—July 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 Gianna Puzzo testing the fit of the gas mask to the head form. Above: Gianna placing the newly mounted mask back in the display case. Right: Diagram of the mount construction and materials; two views of the mask on the complete mount. (Images: Kiki Peters, Kacey Green, and Gianna Puzzo.)

