



Art Conservation *and family histories*

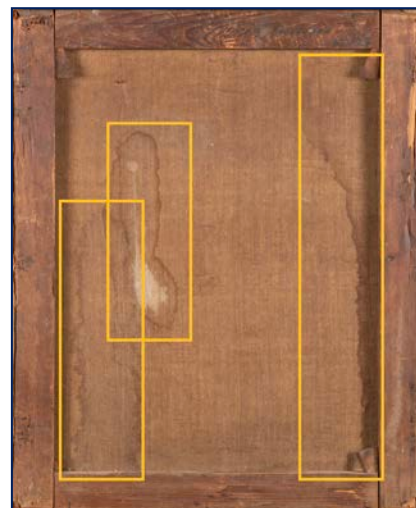
Two young boys clamber up a May Pole, racing to reach what appears to be a pipe tied in among the ribbons on top in an oil painting dated 1857 and signed “F.E. Montanus.” The little-known artist was born in Germany and moved to Chur, Switzerland where he ran a photography studio. The painting has no title, and WUDPAC Fellow and paintings major Emily Landry, who is treating it this year, refers to it simply as “The Boys,” or “Boys Climbing.”

The painting, purchased in Chur, Switzerland sometime after World War II by a woman who sent it home to Venezuela, has been a valued possession of the same family ever since. In 2023, after a family member discovered water damage from a ceiling leak and an active pest infestation, the painting was sent to the United States for conservation treatment.

Once the painting arrived at Winterthur, it was immediately placed in a carbon dioxide (CO²) chamber for 21 days to kill any active pests. When Emily was then able to examine it, she found that the painting’s condition was poor overall, and that much of the damage was, indeed, due to pests. Wood-eating insects had tunneled through the stretcher wood, and the stretcher bars had lost mass overall. The canvas was brittle, slack, and suffered from multiple losses and tears, and she found evidence of multiple water events. The paint was flaking, lifting, and covered with a variety of mechanical craquelure. The painting had multiple, unevenly applied coatings which may have been a result of previous restoration efforts.

Emily’s foremost treatment goal is to stabilize and protect the painting. Given the extent of the damage, this will necessitate lining the painting to better support the canvas and replacing the existing stretcher with another that is custom-made.

Her first step, however, was to consolidate the flaking paint. Afterwards, she was able to clean the painting. Using an aqueous solution released the odor of nicotine, leading her to believe that a portion of the discoloration was caused by cigarette smoke. To treat the tears and losses in the canvas, Emily used multiple techniques including Heiber thread-by-thread method in addition to fills with Japanese tissue. She will replace layers of darkened coatings on the painting with a reversible varnish and fill and inpaint the losses. When Emily has completed her treatment, the painting will reside with a descendant of the original owner in Delaware.



ARTC Spotlight—March 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 Emily Landry and Rosenberg Professor of painting conservation and PSP director Dr. Joyce Hill Stoner preparing to line the painting on a hot table using vacuum. Above: Emily carefully checks the surface for any debris that could make an indentation in the paint surface while heated under vacuum. Right: Overall images of the recto and verso of the painting with outlines highlighting areas of water damage. (Images: S. Callanta, E. Landry.)