Art Conservation *and prehistoric mysteries*

Slightly curved with a rough, uneven, and flaking surface coated with shellac and laced with plaster, this 17½-inch-long fragment of a mastodon tusk seems out of place among the early American antiques and artifacts usually found in the Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library. The tusk was gifted to Winterthur in 1964 by Gertrude Brincklé (1885-1973), who was associated with the Wilmington Society of Fine Arts before it became the Delaware Art Museum, but records about the gift have not been found. The tusk was discovered in a collection of study materials by a Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) instructor in 1997. Lacking a visible catalog number, it was not immediately recognized as an accessioned object. The connection became clear in 2014, when the tusk became a student documentation project.

This year WUDPAC Fellow Meghan Abercrombie, a second-year objects major interested in natural history, has undertaken treatment of the tusk with the goal of identifying appropriate ways to clean and stabilize it so that it can be used for further research. The work requires cautious handling and care because of the tusk's age and fragility. Mastodons are prehistoric, ten-foot-tall mammals that lived in North America between 25 million and 11,000 years ago. They were first recognized as a species separate from their more famous and slightly taller relation, the mammoth, in 1806.

Meghan's study includes examination of two small paper labels, one on each side of the tusk. The labels, made from wove linen paper consistent with early 19th-century papers, read "fossil tusk of Mastodon/ from Mississippi" and "fossil/tusk of the/Mastodon." This agrees with reports that several mastodon skeletons were found in the Mississippi area in the 18th and 19th centuries and, with the estimated age of the paper labels, indicates that the tusk was excavated in the early 19th century.

Meghan is also investigating the plaster and shellac on the surface of the tusk. These may be remnants of efforts to consolidate the fragile tusk during excavation. When Meghan completes her analysis, she will reduce the amount of dust, grime, and old shellac and stabilize friable and flaking areas on the tusk. She also plans to confirm the species of the tusk as mastodon through scientific analysis. As Meghan completes her analysis and treatment, she is looking ahead to her upcoming summer and third-year internships, hoping to work further with natural history collections and indigenous communities.

ARTC Spotlight—November 2021

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: Detail of one of the linen paper labels on the surface of the tusk reading "fossil tusk of the/Mastodon/from Mississippi;" the deteriorating orange-brown shellac coating is clearly visible on the surface of the tusk. Above: Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Meghan Abercrombie analyzing the surface of the tusk under magnification. Right: Meghan gently removing dust from the surface of the tusk with a dry cotton swab. Photos: E. Krape/UD.