



Art Conservation *and discovered histories*

When one looks at a painting, there’s no telling at first glance what may be hidden beneath. Here, a woman appears in partial profile, wearing a white *chemise à la reine* dress, her pale skin offset by a dark studded band around her swan-like neck. With a slight blush in her cheek, she appears to be a young woman secure in her station. But who is she? And what secrets does she hold?

This year, WUDPAC Fellow and painting conservation major Tatiana Shannon is working to find some answers as one of her second-year treatment projects. The work itself has had an unusual journey: “This is a painting I was given as a very weird, random and delightful gift about a decade ago that I’ve been toting around for the better part of a decade,” explains Tatiana, a self-described “massive history nerd” originally from New York’s Staten Island. “I’d always wanted to treat it but before coming to Winterthur I just didn’t have the training or resources to do so.”

Tatiana started examining this work (that she’s nicknamed “Marcia”) as a first-year documentation project. A late 18th- or early 19-century oil painting on linen by an unknown artist who may have been trying to emulate the style of British painter Joshua Reynolds, Tatiana researched French and British costume history, did pigment research, and used imaging techniques to learn more about the painting’s structure.

Using x-radiography, Tatiana discovered one of Marcia’s secrets: “There’s a gentleman beneath the lady!” The x-radiograph showed the figure of a formally dressed man with glasses over which Marcia was painted. When Tatiana examined a cross-section of the paint layers under the microscope, she found “the painting underneath does have a varnish as well, which is wild. As far as I can tell it’s a fully completed second painting underneath the first.”

Tatiana is currently testing adhesives that will help secure the paint where it’s lifting from the canvas. She’ll address a tear in the upper right corner using a technique called thread-by-thread tear mending, before removing an adhered lining canvas, and relining the painting onto a more stable synthetic lining material. Eventually she will reattach the painting to a new stretcher. “Then we’ll start seriously testing various solvents and emulsions to see to what extent we can safely reduce or remove the old, discolored varnish,” says Tatiana, who is eager to continue to solve some of Marcia’s many mysteries.



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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: This x-radiograph detail of the portrait reveals another figure beneath the woman in the blue sash. Above: Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Tatiana Shannon used UV-A imaging to document varnish layers and previous treatment history. Right: Raking and regular illumination images show cracking patterns and topographical changes. (Images: T. Shannon)