



## Art Conservation *and reframing context*

*Our current knowledge regarding the uses and cultural context for some historical objects is still framed by the writings and opinions of the 18th- and 19th-century European and American explorers that collected them. Second-year WUDPAC NEH Fellow Caitlyn Fong is trying to update some of those views—especially regarding the sword and sheath from Borneo she is studying that are part of the Penn Museum’s Dr. William H. Furness III collection.*

“There’s a primitive view of the people of Borneo, and that is largely influenced by these explorers,” she explained. “Their writings informed the way people were thinking about these countries.” Collected by Furness at the end of the 19th-century, the approximately 30-inch metal sword and its sheath, originally thought to be used in headhunting rituals, carries a complex history. Beyond violence, Caitlyn noted, “Swords were also used as agricultural tools. It’s not only a symbol of warfare.”

The sheath features intricately designed woven textile and basketry, as well as a carved wooden ornament and an attached tooth. “The records indicate it’s an alligator’s tooth,” she said, “but I believe it’s a bear’s based on my comparative research.”

Caitlyn’s conservation work focuses on stabilizing the materials. She has begun by surface cleaning the sword and sheath to remove accumulated dust. She is also addressing corrosion on the metal blade using mineral spirits and delicate mechanical cleaning. “The goal isn’t to make it look pristine because it has lived a life,” she said. Rather, she’ll try to stabilize the material “and prevent future decay.”

A significant challenge lies in mending the sheath. Using long-fibered paper and a cellulose-based adhesive, she is reinforcing fragile areas of the weaving. Additionally, she is conducting scientific analysis to identify the dyes used in the textiles and confirm the species of the tooth through peptide mass fingerprinting (PMF), a technique that identifies proteins to determine the species of origin for biological materials.

Beyond conservation of the physical materials, Caitlyn hopes to shed light on the colonial legacy behind the collection and provide a more nuanced understanding of Bornean artifacts. “These objects are especially rich for interpretation,” she noted. “The motifs in the textile, even the colors of the textiles [can] have different meanings [within a society].”

For Caitlyn, this project is personal. “I grew up in Malaysia,” she said. “I asked to work on an object from Southeast Asia so I could learn a bit about the history of a collection here that’s tied to that place.”



### ARTC Spotlight—March 2025

*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](http://www.artcons.udel.edu).*

*Top: Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Caitlyn Fong assessing the condition and materials of the sword and sheath. Above: Ornaments of the sheath include thread bundles, carved wood, and a tooth. Right: Cosmetic sponges show the dirt removed during careful surface cleaning. (Images: Leah Palmer and Caitlyn Fong)*

