



CONSERVING ANTIQUITY OFFERS INSIDER'S VIEW

When we were asked if we might like to curate an exhibition on conservation, our first thought was, *really?* As full-time conservators, we both believe strongly in the value of preserving material culture. But it was hard for us to imagine how we might construct an exhibition around what we do on a daily basis. Conservation, like many tasks in archaeology and museums, is usually conducted behind the scenes, and it was a challenge for us to decide what aspects of our work should be featured in an exhibition.

Exhibitions involving conservation often choose to focus on a few interesting conservation treatments or on the technical investigation of a specific collection or type of object, but we wanted to take a more general approach. It's an amazing experience to work first-hand with artifacts from the ancient world, and we decided to give visitors an insider's view of conservation at the Kelsey and on its excavations, showcase recent conservation projects, and invite visitors to participate in some of the things we do regularly.

For example, in one activity, we ask visitors to spend time looking closely at a variety of mysterious artifacts in the way a conservator would: thinking carefully about how and why they were made, and considering what condition issues are most important for each. In another part of the exhibition, we demonstrate a simple but effective investigative technique commonly used by conservators: examination with ultraviolet light. We even have an activity for kids, who can piece together magnetic puzzles of several Kelsey Museum objects.

The exhibition features three recent conservation projects from the Kelsey Museum's collection. Two of these involve complex artifacts, a cartonnage mummy mask and leather body armor,

both from Graeco-Roman Egypt. The mummy mask is cracked and brittle, with many detached fragments, and before recent conservation treatment it was too fragile to be displayed or even handled for research. It had been repaired in the past, but the old repairs were no longer functional. We show visitors the painstaking process of removing these old repairs, replacing the detached fragments, and generally supporting and strengthening the mask through the use of inert, reversible materials.

The leather scale armor was excavated at Karanis by the University of Michigan in the 1920s. There is little documentation of the armor from the excavation, but today it exists in many fragments of different sizes. Some of these are substantial and reveal details of the armor's original construction. Last year, in preparation for exhibition of the armor in *Karanis Revealed*, conservators at the Kelsey undertook a detailed study of this artifact. We describe this process, some of our findings, and the conservation treatment of the leather.

Finally, we feature a major conservation research project conducted last year by the Kelsey's Samuel H. Kress Conservation Fellow, Caroline Roberts. Carrie's primary Fellowship task was to investigate numerous condition problems observed in the Kelsey's collection of limestone funerary stelae from the site of Terenouthis, Egypt, and then to use this information to design a treatment plan for the stelae.

One of the most challenging aspects of our jobs is providing conservation for the Museum's excavations at Tel Kedesh, Israel, and the Abydos Middle Cemetery, Egypt. In the hallway of the Newberry building, we'll walk visitors through the goals of archaeological conservation in general as well as specifically for each of

these sites. We'll show photos of our field labs, feature various projects from each site, and discuss some of the challenges and rewards of conservation fieldwork.

In the exhibition, we also ask visitors to consider why conservation is important. Conservation in museums and for archaeological and historical sites can't exist without support from governments, the public, and private individuals. To learn from our visitors, we're asking them to share their thoughts on why we should preserve artifacts and sites. On a larger scale, preservation of objects and structures from the past is necessary for the work of historians and archaeologists, but the conservation of cultural material influences all of our lives. What we as a society choose to safeguard determines, long-term, how we understand and interpret history. At the Kelsey Museum, the ability to exhibit, teach with, and better understand art and archaeological artifacts enriches the educational experience for University of Michigan students and faculty. For our community, conservation of the Kelsey's unparalleled but often fragile collections means that people in southeast Michigan and beyond can view and learn about objects from the ancient world. Conservation is important for individuals in other ways as well; everyone has family heirlooms to care for or items of personal significance that they would like to preserve. In this exhibition, we discuss risks for many types of materials along with the ways that conservators identify and manage these risks.

In planning this exhibition, we were fortunate in many respects. Over the past two years we've been lucky to have multiple students and interns working in the conservation lab, and their fresh perspective and contagious enthusiasm were invaluable. Having come of age at a time when social media dominates communication, these young conservators are committed



to sharing what they do and to finding better ways of communicating information about conservation to broad audiences.

We also received advice and inspiration from colleagues at other institutions. Multiple museums have recently created exhibitions on conservation, including the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in Virginia. Conservators at these and other institutions were generous with their time, describing their thought processes in planning conservation exhibitions and what worked and didn't work in their galleries.

From conservators at the Hearst Museum, we learned that having a conservator working in the gallery was hugely successful, while including the cost of conservation projects in panel and label text was not. From the Shelburne Museum we learned that exhibition cases using ultraviolet lights should not have on-off switches; visitors who repeatedly turned the lights on and off burned out 7,500-hour light tubes in a matter of weeks.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (CFW) exhibition gave us ideas about how to approach preventive conservation in the exhibition. Preventive conservation involves long-term strategies for collections care, things like climate control, acid-free storage cabinets and containers, and staff training in object handling. The CFW conservators did a great job demonstrating why preventive conservation is important. Two ideas that we borrowed from them are the exhibition of items that have been damaged due to inadequate preventive conservation and others that can be touched by visitors.

Like any exhibition at the Kelsey Museum, *Conserving Antiquity* involved a lot of collaboration. But unlike most

exhibition curators at the Kelsey, we aren't used to telling a story with the Museum's collections, nor have we previously designed activities for visitors. So Scott Meier, the Museum's exhibition coordinator, and Peg Lourie, the Museum's editor, had to teach us as much as work alongside us. Dawn Johnson, the Museum's new associate director, provided invaluable help in developing content and assisting with various aspects of the exhibition's production. We're also grateful for the technical assistance provided by Noah Posthuma, who designed the Web site and programmed iPads and computers for use in the galleries.

We are happy to be able to offer several conservation events while *Conserving Antiquity* is on view. Dr. Matthew Adams, Senior Research Scholar at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, will open the exhibition with a talk about archaeological conservation and how the discipline of archaeology has become more focused on preservation. In December John Steele, Conservator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture at the Detroit Institute of Arts, will talk about recent conservation projects at the DIA, including an upcoming conservation treatment for an important outdoor sculpture. Finishing the lecture series in January will be a talk by Clara Deck, Senior Conservator at The Henry Ford. Among other things, Clara has worked on conservation of The Henry Ford's Dymaxion House, one of our favorite "objects" in that collection. If you're an Associate of the Museum, we have planned a special evening champagne event for you that will feature the conservation of the Museum's Barosso watercolors. Last but certainly not least, for parts of each week one of us will be working at a lab bench in the exhibition, so stop by and see what we're up to.

Suzanne Davis
Claudia Chemello



Peg Lourie (left) and Claudia Chemello review text panels for the exhibition.

Opposite page, left: Caroline Roberts treats the cartonnage mummy mask featured in the exhibition.

Opposite page, right: Scott Meier and Haley Hoard during installation.

Above left: Scott Meier installs an amphora in the gallery.

Above right: Scott Meier and Suzanne Davis experiment with the magnetic puzzle wall.