The censer before (far left) and after (left) treatment. KM 29764.

A PERFECT FIT

Last fall I began a "condition survey" by systematically examining the metal artifacts in a storage drawer that had been brought to the Kelsey conservation lab. Condition surveys like the one I undertook can lead to surprising discoveries about a museum's collections and reveal new conservation challenges.

My internship had just begun, so I was new at using the database and working with the collection. Hence my confusion when I came across two copper alloy objects with the same accession number. One was the head of a small human figure and the other was an incense burner, or censer, that was on display. Suspiciously, the censer featured a decorative figure that was headless. A visit to the gallery with the newly discovered head confirmed that it was a perfect fit. Curator Terry Wilfong was excited about this discovery, as he had recently noticed an archival image of the censer that appeared to have an intact head.

The censer comes from the site of Karanis, Egypt, and dates to Roman times, although such objects were important items in Egyptian ritual as early as the Old Kingdom period. On the dynastic side of the temple case in the Upjohn Exhibit Wing, there is an image of a similar censer in use at Abydos more than 1,000 years before the Kelsey censer was made. Censers were probably used to burn incense as part of religious rituals such as funerary rites. The Kelsey censer is made from a copper alloy that was cast in several interlocking parts. It has a tubular shaft with a falcon head at one end and an outstretched hand holding a bowl at the other. The center of the shaft features a kneeling/sitting figure and a cartouche-shaped enclosure.

LeeAnn Barnes Gordon reduces the old coating that had covered the surface of the censer.

Archival photographs taken after excavation show that the surface of the censer was once covered with rough, bulky corrosion products. Presently, the surface lacks thick corrosion layers but is evenly covered with shallow pits. This appearance is characteristic of metals that have undergone chemical treatments such as "stripping," which can reveal bright metal surfaces like those of a freshly minted penny. Chemical stripping is a quick and effective way to remove corrosion. However, today it is a method rarely used by conservators since valuable surface details can be lost. The Kelsey censer was covered with an artificial patina of green paint, which was most likely added in order to tone down shiny metal surfaces that would have been exposed by stripping. Treatment records in the conservation files noted that the censer was also covered with a colorless, protective coating in the 1970s.

The censer was brought to the lab for treatment. Documentation conducted before treatment included written descriptions of the censer and its condition, as well as photography. Examination revealed that the head was previously broken and had been joined to the censer with adhesive that had discolored with age. Just below the old repair was a fresh break corresponding to the break on the neck of the figure on the censer. Coatings that had been applied to the censer appeared uneven, glossy, and plastic-like. In addition, the head was a darker shade of green than the rest of the censer, perhaps due to differential treatment, storage, or display conditions since their separation. The purpose of the treatment was to improve the stability of the censer by reattaching the head.

I reduced adhesive residues on the neck of the figure using a surgical scalpel blade under magnification. A dilute layer of synthetic adhesive was applied to the break edges on the neck of the body and the head to prepare the surfaces for mending. The head was joined using a more concentrated solution of the same adhesive. I chose this adhesive because accelerated aging tests have shown that it does not discolor, remains strong yet flexible, and is easy to reverse. Old coatings were reduced using solvents applied with brushes and cotton swabs.

Through this rewarding project I learned more about early twentieth-century preservation treatments that may have influenced the censer's current condition. The head is now secured to the censer, and it more closely resembles its original appearance. The treatment was a success, and the censer is back on display in the temple case.

LeeAnn Barnes Gordon
Conservation Intern

KING DARIUS SPEAKS

The Kelsey's newly installed "sound shower" presents a passage from the famous inscription of Darius the Great (reigned 522–486 BC) of Persia carved on Mount Bisitun in northwestern Iran. His words are spoken by Professor Emeritus H. D. Cameron of the Department of Classical Studies. Come to the Museum and press the button to hear Darius speak!