

# Virginia Greene

CONSERVATOR  
EXTRAORDINAIRE

BY LYNN GRANT

VIRGINIA GREENE, THE Museum's Senior Conservator, retired this year after an illustrious career at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Ginny, as she is universally known, came to Penn in 1963 as a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology. Her interest in

archaeological conservation grew out of her participation on the Tikal Project—the Museum's massive archaeological study of the Guatemalan Maya site of Tikal (1956–1970)—when she realized she would rather work with artifacts *after* they had been excavated rather than digging them up herself.

In 1969, with some financial assistance from the Women's Committee of the Museum, Ginny enrolled in the conservation training program at the Institute of Archaeology in London. Upon graduation in 1971 she came back to the

Museum to head its Conservation Lab—which had been established in 1966, also with support from the Women's Committee.

Ginny's depth and breadth of experience, as well as her background in anthropology, made her an important contributor to more than 80 exhibits. None was more challenging, perhaps, than the *Gift of Birds: The Featherwork of Native South American Peoples*. Not only did she perform technical studies of featherworking techniques and contribute to the exhibit's accompanying book, she also worked with live models, attiring their nearly nude bodies with artifacts to ensure that the exhibit's mannequins functioned properly.

As conservator, Ginny has treated tens of thousands of artifacts in the Museum's collections. Her contributions to conservation, however, have been even more far reaching. The Museum was one of the first museums of archaeology and anthropology in America to have a conservation lab staffed by professional conservators. For over 40 years, it has been a magnet for conservation students, who are typically required to do internships under the supervision of trained conservators before receiving their own certification.

During her career, Ginny has trained about 50 pre-program or curriculum interns, many of whom have gone on to become leading conservators around the country and the world. The practical, production-oriented experience they receive in our Conservation Lab serves as an excellent counterpoint to the academic ideals taught in



Senior Conservator Virginia Greene works on an Egyptian figurine in 2006.



Ginny Greene tries an armband on the human model who was cast to produce a mannequin to display feather artifacts in the Museum's 1994 exhibit *Gift of Birds*.



The Oceanian Section storeroom in 1976 had objects stacked chaotically on wooden shelves or in acidic boxes, with rolling screens (on the left) covered in artifacts tied on them. Inset: a similar system in use in the African Section storeroom during the same era.

most conservation-training courses. In recognition of Ginny's contribution to the field of conservation, the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) honored Ginny in 2001 with their Caroline and Sheldon Keck award for "sustained excellence in the training of conservation professionals."

Ginny has also lectured regularly on conservation to various groups, presenting papers on conservation to her peers, and undertaking committee work for the AIC, with whom she has edited several publications. She has taught a course on the Conservation of Archaeological and Ethnographic Materials at the University of Delaware as part of Winterthur Museum's Training Program in Conservation, served on an advisory panel on conservation training for George Washington University and has served as a conservation consultant both locally and abroad.

But perhaps Ginny's most important impact has been here at the Museum in our collections storage areas. Although the Roman emperor Augustus may have boasted "I found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble," we can truly say about Ginny that "she found the Museum's storerooms in rickety wood and left them in powder-coated steel."

This Herculean task, in which she has been assisted ably by an ever-evolving Collections staff, began in 1978 with a full survey of the Museum's collections as mandated by the then new Director, Martin Biddle (1977–1981). At that time, the

Museum's collections were scattered over the building, storage furniture was antiquated and inadequate, and environmental conditions appalling. Many would have bleached and thrown up their hands in despair at the magnitude of the challenge. Ginny, however, persevered, breaking the problem down into manageable segments and writing, or helping to write, grant after grant to improve storage conditions. The result has been a vast improvement in the old storerooms, and, when the state-of-the-art Mainwaring Wing of the Museum was being designed and built for the storage of ethnographic artifacts, Ginny's hard-won expertise was invaluable.

Ginny's retirement from the Conservation Lab, fortunately, does not spell the end for her association with the Museum.

Instead, her career has come full circle to her early days at Tikal. Her first post-retirement project will be the publication of her (necessarily delayed) contribution to the Tikal Project, *Tikal Report 28: The Pottery Figurines of Tikal*. For the Museum, we wish her the best with this project and all the others she has planned. 🏠

LYNN GRANT is the Museum's Conservator for Loans and Traveling Exhibits.

The new Oceanian Section storeroom in 2008 has clean, climate-controlled storage with artifacts stored in polyethylene bags (for protection against dust) on museum-quality powder-coated steel compactor shelving.

