

Conservator Education at the Museum

AN INTERN'S EXPERIENCE

BY ALLISON LEWIS

CONSERVATORS ARE RESPONSIBLE for the care of museum collections, making sure that objects are stored, transported, handled, studied, and exhibited in ways that preserve their physical integrity. To do this, they must understand how different materials deteriorate, react with modern materials, and interact with their environment.

We acquire this knowledge through a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on training. Before going to graduate school, we volunteer in conservation labs and take classes in such disciplines as science, art history, studio art, and anthropology. We then earn a graduate degree by taking two or three years of classes, plus doing multiple internships in museums, on excavations, or in other cultural heritage management institutions. In our final year of training we undertake a graduate internship—the culmination of the degree program—which allows us to gain essential practical experience beyond the classroom, to hone necessary skills under the guidance of experienced conservators, and to develop particular interests. At the same time, we benefit our host labs by providing the most up-to-date information on new conservation approaches.

Penn Museum's Conservation Lab has had a long-standing commitment to conservation training. Their reputation for providing great internships, in combination with my love for working with archaeological and ethnographic objects, brought me to the Museum for my graduate internship. Here I have been able to work on a range of objects from different cultures and periods, composed of everything from amber to ostrich egg shell. The Museum's collection, which encompasses the sweep of human history, offers an unparalleled opportunity to grapple with the challenges of conserving objects that were not created solely as works of art. Because much of their value lies in the information that they can provide about the cultures that made and used them, every conservation treatment we use must seek to maintain the physical wellbeing of the object without compromising either its potential to yield information in the future or the object's val-

ues for its original makers and their descendants. We also have to take into account how our treatment will influence viewers' interpretations of the object.

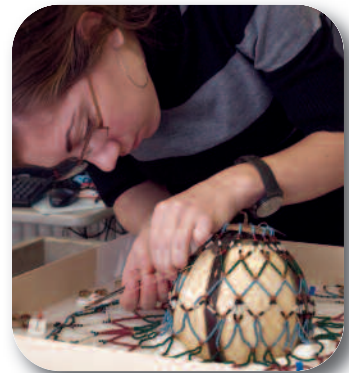
The projects I have worked on over the last year have provided valuable real-world experience in dealing with the technical and theoretical questions that arise in the conservation of archaeological and ethnographic objects. The range of objects I have encountered include

Near Eastern and Mediterranean ceramics, an Etruscan copper alloy *oinochoe* (small jug) a Native American stone pipe bowl, Mesopotamian cylinder seals, North American basketry, Roman glass, Polynesian bark cloth, and composite objects, such as an ostrich egg container decorated with paper, leather, gourd, glass beads, and cowrie shells. I have even learned the finer points of conserving fish-skin footwear by reshaping a pair of severely crushed, creased, and brittle Ainu salmon skin boots in preparation for a major loan of the Museum's Ainu material to Japan. Beyond performing treatments, I have also dealt with other aspects of conservation, including the creation of stable storage environments in historic buildings, the intricacies involved in courier trips between museums, and, most importantly, how conservation relates to bigger questions that face museums in the 21st century. 🏠

ALLISON LEWIS, a graduate intern in the Museum's Conservation Lab (2007–2008), completed her MA in Conservation at UCLA in June 2008.

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Allison Lewis repairs the badly damaged beaded netting on an ostrich egg container from southern Sudan. The repairs allow viewers to see how the container looked before it was damaged, but can be easily distinguished from original sections of the netting. In the future, the treatment can be undone without harming the object.