

The evolution of SIP-C and working to improve demographic balance in the profession of art Conservation

Submitted by sharragrow on 09 Jan 2024

Image



By Nina Owczarek and Joyce Hill Stoner

The University of Delaware (UD) has been working in partnership with the Alliance of HBCU Museums and Galleries (the Alliance) since 2017 to counter the demographic underrepresentation of Black or African American people among conservators in the United States (see the [FAIC Compensation Survey 2022](#) and the [US Census from 2020](#) for specific data).

Thanks to past funding from Samuel H. Kress Foundation and current funding from the Bank of America Charitable Foundation, the program has hosted 44 students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) over the past seven summers. Over the years, the program has made changes in the number of students, timing, and format with accompanying name changes; the program began as the Two-week Introduction to Practical Conservation (TIP-C), then a distance-learning version was introduced during COVID-19 shutdowns (DIP-C), and the current six-week format includes an initial cohort building period followed by an internship (SIP-C). Dr. Jontyle Robinson, founding director of the Alliance, and Dr. Caryl McFarlane, former member of the Alliance, were instrumental in the initial development of the program and in forming the partnership between UD and the Alliance. (For further details on the genesis of the program and its structure, please see [Owczarek and Stoner, 2023](#))

The Programs:

Two-week Introduction to Practical Conservation (TIP-C)

Dr. Joyce Hill Stoner led the initial three TIP-C years (2017-19), and the program focused on inspiring an interest in conservation via the examination and preservation of four dioramas from the Tuskegee Legacy Museum. These fragile mixed-media (largely plaster and painted wood) dioramas were part of a series of 33 made in 1940 under the supervision of African American artist Charles Dawson for the American Negro Exposition in Chicago emphasizing the contributions of African Americans to world culture. The dioramas required in-depth examination; stabilization treatments; removal of grime; replacement of ship rigging (for the *1619 Arrival of Enslaved People in Virginia*); consolidation and replacement of snow (for both the dioramas of *Crispus Attucks in the Boston Massacre* and *Matthew Henson at the North Pole*); stabilization and repair of the impressive figures of the *Harlem Hellfighters*; and filling, inpainting, careful packing, and shipping for all dioramas. Unfortunately, discovering a significant amount of asbestos in the fifth diorama (*The First Great Builders* depicting construction of the Great Sphinx in Egypt) halted future work on the dioramas at UD (at least for now).

Additional activities included treating a large painting by Jimmie Mosely, which had suffered severe water damage. The painting, owned by the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore (another HBCU), depicts African Americans fighting in the Korean War. Other skill-building exercises included marbling paper with Dr. Melissa Tedone; learning about preventive conservation with Dr. Joelle Wickens and William Donnelly; using the handheld X-ray fluorescence spectrometer with Catherine Matsen to identify metals on the dioramas; creating card weavings with Laura Mina; making paint with Brian Baade; electroplating pennies with Lauren Fair; conducting X-radiography on a painting with Matt Cushman; and taking field trips to the Delaware Art Museum, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, the David Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, and the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, to name a few. Each year, at the end of the program, the students give presentations to the entire faculty on the dioramas and works of art they studied or treated.

Distance-Learning Introduction to Practical Conservation (DIP-C)

Nina Owczarek organized and led the Distance-Learning Introduction to Practical Conservation (DIP-C) in 2020 and 2021. The shift to distance learning, coupled with the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, resulted in more focus on preventive care and social justice. At the same time, the program welcomed a new partner: the Conservation Center at New York University. The program leaned on contextualizing the role of conservation in communities while teaching preventive measures, conservation philosophy, and ethics. The program retained hands-on activities through a combination of student-supplied artifacts and shipped materials. ??

Six-Week Introduction to Practical Conservation (SIP-C)

Now co-hosted by Owczarek and Stoner, the program transformed again in 2022 and became the Six-Week Introduction to Practical Conservation (SIP-C) offering an initial cohort-building introduction period at Winterthur that captured many of the skill-building activities of TIP-C and wove the themes of DIP-C throughout, then sending pairs of students to host institutions for a month-long practical internship. The 2023 host sites included the Brooklyn Museum, Fisk University, the Smithsonian American Art Museum Lunder Center, and Yale University Art Galleries (in addition to Winterthur); the 2024 host site list is currently in development. The students returned to Winterthur at the end of the program to present their summer work and celebrate their accomplishments.

Discussion

TIP-C/DIP-C/SIP-C, in cooperation with the Alliance for HBCU Museums and Galleries, has been providing students with an introduction to the field of art conservation while taking steps to shift the current inequitable demographics of the art conservation field in the US. The Alliance has developed its own suite of offerings that build on one another, complementing content and deepening cohort connections. The UD program is only one among several institutions that partner with the Alliance; other universities include Bard Graduate Center, Fisk University, Princeton University, and Yale University among others. Many of the UD program participants also participate in programs through these other partnerships.

Each year the program evolves and adjusts, absorbing student feedback and our world's ever-changing circumstances. Key challenges include our struggles to incorporate more diverse representation in our instructional team and the assigned projects, developing strong mentorship and future employment pathways following the program, identifying and inspiring more students to apply, our own learning, and encouraging others to cultivate welcoming work environments.

Students have also shared the following feedback with us:

"TIP-C was a turning point that set me on the path of combining my love for science, museums, and the arts, and SIP-C proved to be the confirmatory experience along my journey into the field. The programme not only inspired but also equipped me to enter the field of art conservation, and I am forever thankful to have participated and built this network of support." *Taryn Nurse, TIP-C 2017, TIP-C 2018, and SIP-C 2022*

"The SIP-C program was a great opportunity to network and get some hands-on experience in museum conservation. I look forward to being introduced to the new cohort each year, and I am glad this program exists so HBCU students get the opportunity to create space in the field!"

Payton Murray, SIP-C 2022

"The SIPC Program is an amazing hands-on introduction to the field of conservation. It provided knowledge on the art of conserving and the cross-field collaboration involved, as well as equipping my cohort and me with the necessary understanding of how to apply to graduate programs for art conservation. I not only finished the internship inspired and informed, but I also experienced what my future in conservation could look like. I am so grateful for a program such as this one and would recommend it to anyone considering working in cultural and heritage preservation or exploring the scope of art conservation." *Starr Smith, SIP-C 2023*

Conclusion

One of the 2017 students was accepted into the graduate-level Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation and entered the Class of 2026 earlier this fall. Other past participants are investing in growing their conservation experience and obtaining the requisite coursework for graduate applications or are now teaching at universities and are recruiting future applicants. These signals give us hope that this program is helping to make small inroads in moving the needle towards better representation. Even if conservation is ultimately not their chosen career, students emerging from the IP-C summer programs have a better understanding of the preservation of cultural heritage and may go on to allied fields, taking the lessons of this introductory program with them. For example, a former student is now an art professor. This year he identified one of his students as a strong candidate for conservation, recognizing the combination of an interest in art and science, and has another candidate for next year. One former student is now a curator, while another is studying art history at Columbia University. Others are successful exhibiting artists who report feeling better informed about the materials they use. A 2018 student is now a highly successful exhibiting artist whose paintings have been purchased by major museums. All past students carry the experience and knowledge of this program with them, and the hope is that the ripples of awareness will spread. The authors have learned much from the students, and the students themselves have provided powerful inspiration to continue this work.

Acknowledgements

The authors are extremely grateful to the many people who have supported this work and to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and Bank of America Charitable Foundation for their generous funding. This program would not be possible without the courageous and fierce advocacy of Dr. Robinson and the Alliance of HBCU Museums and Galleries. In addition to the names mentioned in the text, all members of the WUDPAC faculty and Winterthur Conservation Department have offered help and assistance along the way. Ian McClure of Yale and Dr. Patrick Ravines of Buffalo have both carried out additional inspirational work with the Tuskegee dioramas. Each year, a UD student has contributed to the program as a teaching assistant. In chronological order beginning with 2017 they are Julianna Ly, Amanda Kasman, Meghan Abercrombie, Kiera Hammond, Julianna Ly (again), Morrigan Kelley, and Susana Stovell.

Further Reading

Alliance of HBCU Museums and Galleries. 2023. "Our Mission." Accessed 4 July 2023.
<https://allianceofhbcumuseums.com/about/>

Author Bios

Nina Owczarek is assistant professor at the University of Delaware (UD) in the Art Conservation Department. Prior to joining UD faculty, she was associate conservator at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology for nine years. She is editor and contributing author of *Prioritizing People in Ethical Decision-Making and Caring for Cultural Heritage Collections* (2023).

Joyce Hill Stoner, PhD, Rosenberg Professor of Material Culture Studies Director, Preservation Studies Doctoral Program, UD, has taught for the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program since 1976, founded the FAIC Oral History Project in 1975, authored more than 95 book chapters and articles, and has been studying the paintings of the Wyeth family of American artists. Andrew Wyeth painted her portrait in 1999.

(To read the full article with all the images, explore the December-January 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 99, p. 42-47)