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Network

Get to know the ECPN Graduate Liaisons

Spotlight on WUDPAC

This latest ECPN Outreach series highlights the Graduate Liaisons in the [ECPN Liaison Program](#), who facilitate the flow of information about their particular graduate programs from their perspectives to you, their fellow emerging conservators. Whether you're pre-program or a graduate of a different program or specialty, they are here to help!



Photo: Nylah Byrd completing photograph identification exercise during her first year at Winterthur

In this highlight, you will read an interview with **Nylah Byrd**, current student and WUDPAC liaison, who has generously taken the time to answer questions about her graduate studies, pre-program experiences, and career goals.

The Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) is a three-year degree program jointly sponsored by the University of Delaware and Winterthur Museum. Graduate students earn a Master of Science in Art Conservation and can choose a specialty from 8 areas of conservation: furniture, library and archives, objects, paper, photographs, preventive conservation, and textiles. The program also offers an undergraduate degree in Art Conservation and a PhD in Preservation Studies. The [WUDPAC program website](#) has a wealth of information regarding their program, entry requirements, and information about current students. If you have questions and don't want to cold email a program administrator, please reach out to Nylah at WUDPAC.ecpn.liaison@gmail.com!

Scroll through below for personal insight, tips and tricks, and valuable information about this impressive emerging conservator, her graduate studies, and chosen specialty!

Outreach Officers' Burning Questions:

1) What is a tool or material that you use every day/most often?

Nylah: My critical thinking skills. Conservation requires a lot of critical thinking and honestly it can be exhausting at times. I really try my best to identify potential biases in whatever Conservation literature I'm reading. I also try to think about why someone would choose a certain material or method for treatment, realizing that some people just have their favorite ways of doing things, which doesn't mean it's the best or the only way to do things. I have to keep reminding myself that "conservators are people too" meaning we are flawed, make mistakes, and have our biases. I have to remind myself of this because treatment reports tend to take the individual person out of the process as much as possible. I believe this is changing in the field now and we're moving toward more documentation of the individual. But when reading past treatment reports I find it helpful to remind myself "conservators are people too" especially if the treatment includes a method or material we no longer use/ consider best practice.

2) What has been your favorite treatment/project you have completed at WUDPAC (or pre-program)? Why?

Nylah: My favorite treatment project so far is a rehousing project I completed during my pre-program days. I created a book to house a collection of pocketwatch papers (I suggest looking them up). It was the first project where I had the most agency in the outcome. Of course my supervisor had lots of input because I was still pre-program, but this project was the first time I felt like I had enough knowledge to make some decisions on my own. I loved the project because it was very well thought out and I tried to consider the future of the collection as much as possible. I left room for new pocketwatch papers to be added and left a guide to understanding the organization of the book in hopes it would be easily usable by researchers. It was the last project I completed for the institution I was working with, and the moment was very bittersweet because I was so proud of myself for finishing the project and yet I felt the final product was my baby in some ways and didn't want to leave it behind.

3) What has been the biggest challenge for you at WUDPAC?

Nylah: Right now the biggest challenge is maintaining my mental health. WUDPAC's second year mostly consists of long term treatment and research projects that you have to schedule yourself. Combine that with the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, it's become crucial for me to pay attention to how I'm doing and feeling. WUDPAC as a program has been accommodating to these events and I am grateful for that because there is no way I can go back to "normal". As a result, it's been challenging for me to schedule out my time and to make sure I'm not overwhelming myself because some days are just not good days and I can't predict when that will happen.

4) Would you tell us a little more about choosing your specialty at WUDPAC, your supervisors, your second-year projects, and/or how WUDPAC has been helping you reach the goals you've set for yourself?

Nylah: I was undecided about my major for most of the first year because I had only done paper and object conservation pre-program. I didn't want to rule anything out in case I fell in love with painting conservation for example. In our program, object conservation is split into two blocks: organics and inorganics. Inorganics block was toward the end of the year and I wanted to wait until after that block at least before confirming my specialty. I ended up choosing to specialize in objects conservation because during those blocks I had the most fun. I'm minoring in library and archives conservation as well because I love books and I think having some paper and book knowledge can only help my conservation career in the future. We don't really get a choice of supervisors since there's really one supervisor per specialty (except for objects in which case there's two and they both become our supervisors). Objects majors get to submit a wishlist of materials and/or collection types we would like to work with in the coming year, then our supervisors pick objects that fulfill part of our lists. My biggest focus right now is just completing my

treatment projects as best as I can while paying attention to my mental health and not burning myself out. My supervisors have been very supportive this whole time, which is so helpful. I think maintaining good mental health would be a lot harder if I had supervisors who were pressuring me to get work done. My long term goals have been a bit nebulous lately as I rethink wanting to work in a museum versus going into private practice, or perhaps working in an archive. However I have no doubt I will graduate with skills that I can apply to whatever career path I chose.

5) How many times did you apply to graduate school and what do you feel was the strongest component of your application?

Nylah: I applied once with about 950 pre-program hours (approx. 9 months). I only bring this up to highlight that it is possible to get in without multiple years of pre-program experience. I'm honestly not sure what the strongest component of my application was. I wish I got more feedback after my interview. I graduated from undergrad with a BA in Archaeology and minors in Studio Art and Chemistry. My background was very well suited for conservation, which was probably a strong part of my application; however, I was still on the fence about applying in 2019 because I wasn't sure I had enough pre-program experience. A conservator I talked to told me that the programs might appreciate how I already completed my chemistry requirements, and that helped me gain the confidence to apply.

6) Have your professional pursuits or focus of study changed since entering graduate school; how?

Nylah: Yes. Prior to this past summer my long term career goal was to be a conservator at a museum. This is still a short-term goal, because I still love museums, but I've been considering private practice more and more because I've been thinking about how to bring conservation to historically marginalized communities. When I graduate I will have a unique set of skills to help preserve cultural heritage and I want to offer those skills to groups who usually do not have access to them. I want to help preserve their heritage so that one day it can be donated to a museum or other cultural heritage institution and we can see more of these underrepresented groups in collections outside of an "ethnographic" framework. Right now, amongst all the statements of solidarity coming out of museums, I don't feel like most of them are serious about making change. The overwhelming impression I get is that they want to save face and keep making money. I definitely don't want to be part of an institution that values dollars and appearances over the actual treatment and experiences of their staff and visitors. That may be wishful thinking, which is why I'm considering private practice more and more.

7) If you could change anything about the application/requirement process, what would it be?

Nylah: I would eliminate the GRE requirement completely because I feel it is unnecessary and another barrier for marginalized groups to get into a conservation graduate program. The test costs \$200 and that is a way too much money to pay for something that has very very little to do with someone's conservation skills. This is for WUDPAC specifically but I would also make their portfolio requirements a lot less specific. With my undergraduate background and pre-program experience I still had to spend money to take a printmaking class because I had never printed before and that was one of the requirements. I did enjoy screen printing but I don't think it gave me anything that I didn't already have in terms of my conservation skillset. And when the paper block came around I was a bit overwhelmed with all the printmaking information but I still managed to get 100% on the exercise we did about identifying different prints. I bring this up not to brag, but to illustrate that it is possible to absorb and understand new art processes without having taken part in them yourself. I think the requirements need to reflect that more than having someone who has past experience in painting, and drawing, and printing, and sculpting, etc. etc.

- 8) Since you mentioned it, would you elaborate a little on your studio portfolio? We know from viewing the WUDPAC Portfolio Day last year, that you included your amazing nail art - what was the response like to adding non-traditional works to the more traditional WUDPAC portfolio requirements list? Do you have any advice related to that for pre-programmers applying this year?**

Nylah: In my pre-program work I always got compliments on my nails, so I never realized it was somewhat taboo to have painted nails in conservation. The nail art was part of the portfolio in "additional work that you feel showcase your skills" or something of that nature. I really didn't think too much about it because I knew being able to paint intricate designs with nail polish (which has different working properties than traditional paints) with both hands was definitely a skill. I think my biggest deviation from the traditional portfolio was a stuffed animal replica I made from a web comic that I love. There's a portfolio requirement that calls for "a replica of a work by a well-known artist" or something like that and I knew trying to replicate a well-known painting or drawing would just stress me out because I would fixate on how different it would inevitably look from the original and the whole process just would not be fun for me. I didn't make the stuffed animal specifically for my portfolio - I was making them as Christmas gifts for two friends who were also fans of the webcomic - and I decided to make one for myself as well. I was worried that it wouldn't technically be considered a replica; however, WUDPAC may not have been the program for me if they insisted I do a painting or drawing instead because to me that would show a lack of flexibility. But I have no idea how interview deliberations went. Maybe no one liked the stuffed animal. My advice to pre-programmers who are applying would be to only stress out a little bit. Applying to grad school is just a stressful process and there's no way around that, but do your best to only make it as stressful as it has to be.

Thank you so much, Nylah, for taking the time to answer our questions. We wish you all the best in the rest of your time at WUDPAC and what's sure to be an outstanding career!

To our audience, stay tuned, as this fabulous WUDPAC grad continues to make important contributions to the field. Please reach out to her with questions about her path, insights, and anything else you can think of. As homework, peruse the WUDPAC program website, come up with an idea for a replica in a completely different medium, and let us know what you think of this Graduate Liaison Highlight series!

Bio

Nylah Byrd is a graduate fellow at the Winterthur/ University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC). She completed her undergraduate education in 2018 at Stanford University where she received her B.A with Honors in Archaeology and minors in Chemistry and Studio Art. Her professional interests include fabrication of inorganic objects, archaeological conservation, creating protective housings, and equity and inclusion in conservation and the broader cultural heritage field. Her long-term career goal is to work as a conservator in a museum that is decolonized or actively working toward decolonization. In her free time Nylah enjoys dancing, elaborately painting her nails, and crocheting.