ECPN Emerging Conservation Professionals Network

Each month, ECPN is proud to introduce one of our amazing Specialty Group Liaisons.
Specialty Group Liaisons are volunteers who serve as an intermediary between emerging conservation professionals who are interested in or part of the specialty group they represent. To learn more about ECPN liaisons contact the ECPN Outreach Officers at ecpn.aic.outreach@gmail.com or visit ECPN's website.

For our 2nd March feature, we would like to introduce our Wooden Artifacts Specialty Group liaison, Karen Bishop. Karen is an MA student in Conservation at SUNY Buffalo State College and currently spending her third-year internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Photo (right): Karen Bishop using a gouge to remove remnants of a failed leg joint on a desk by artist Barry Yavener, as part of her Master's Specialization Project at SUNY Buffalo State College, Patricia H. and Richard E. Garman Art Conservation Department.

1. Of all the specializations, why did you decide to pursue wooden artifact conservation?
Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, I spent a lot of time in the forest, and I feel that this ingrained in me a natural draw towards wood in general. The aesthetic appeal translated into a tactile one when treating wooden objects, and I've always felt a certain comfort with and respect for the material. Perhaps that all sounds a bit mystic, but I honestly feel that's where my strong enthusiasm comes from. Graduate school is such a unique time to tailor projects and internships towards your interest, and I feel fortunate with the experience I've been able to gain after choosing to focus on wooden artifact conservation.

2. Are there any particular skills that you feel are important or unique to your discipline?
Structural conservation of wooden objects often relies on traditional woodworking techniques, especially with frames and furniture. Knowing how to select, use and maintain tools like chisels and gouges is very important. A familiarity with timber preparation is also helpful in understanding how wood reacts over time. In order to successfully repair an object you have to figure out what caused the failure in the first place, so knowledge of how to properly build something often comes into play.

3. What has been your favorite treatment within your specialty?
It's hard to pick a favorite, but I can remember the treatment that got me interested in pursuing wooden artifacts as a specialty. As a pre-program intern working with conservator Irena Calinescu at Fine Arts Conservation in Los Angeles, I treated a four-piece openwork Huanghuali wood screen. It required structural repairs and filling losses in the fretwork, and cleaning and recoating the whole surface which had been badly damaged in storage. It was a big project. I enjoyed the whole process, and it was very satisfying to make such a radical aesthetic improvement to the overall surface.

4. Do you have any advice for someone interested in specializing in your discipline?
I feel like I'm still in the beginning stages myself, but I would encourage anyone interested in wooden artifact conservation to dive into woodworking as a hobby. There's no better way to understand the properties of wood than to explore it as a medium for making something, whether it be buying a chip knife and watching how-to videos online, or taking carving or cabinet making classes. Sometimes bigger community colleges offer beginning furniture making classes for a good price, and for anyone in the LA area I would highly recommend checking out Cerritos College Community Education program! And of course, if anyone has questions or wants to chat with someone with a current student's perspective, please feel free to reach out to me at wag.ecpn.liaison@gmail.com. You can also join AIC's Wooden Artifacts Group (WAG) or check out the online community to hear about internships and funding opportunities. I'd also recommend looking for wooden artifacts programming coming up at the AIC Annual Meeting.