



So You Want To Be a Conservator?

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Interview by BERNADETTE NEGRETE
Junior at Booker T. Washington High School
for the Performing and Visual Arts

Conservation Lab Technicians Nicole and David evenly melting the wax into the surface areas of the bronze figure using hand held propane torches.

Bernadette Negrete, a junior at Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts and a member of our Student Advisory Board, spoke with Conservation Tech Nicole Berastequi to learn more about the field of art conservation.

BERNADETTE NEGRETE: What did you major in?

NICOLE BERASTEQUI: For my undergrad I had a BFA in Theater and a BA in Art History from SMU.

BN: How do you apply those to what you do today?

NB: Well, I am currently kind of a jack of all trades. I do theater at night and I am actually in the middle of a show that just opened [*The Drama Club*]. And with art history there's kind of a natural transition into conservation. So much of that is dealing with the evolution of art, artistic practices, artists and their perspectives and how those have evolved over the years.

Conservation morphs chemistry with art history, and they kind of mush together into one to create this great position where you not only get to work with many different explosive chemicals and paints, but you get to handle a lot of art objects. If you work at a modern museum you get to work with living artists as well, which is always awesome. It's a completely different experience than when an artist has been dead for 500 years and then you have to try to figure out how to fix or treat a piece based on what you think they might approve of.

BN: So, when you are dealing with non-living artists, do you learn different techniques that they used back then?

NB: There is definitely a lot of material out about the evolution of conservation back in the day. There wasn't a lot of science involved, and people often used what they had on hand, which could be anything from lacquers and waxes to whatever the owner at the time decided to put on the artwork. A lot of the time, for example, you'll see a really dark varnish, like on the Sistine Chapel—a protective lacquer or varnish which darkens over time.

Modern artists typically know a lot more about conservation, and some of them are very into it, but they use such a plethora of materials that it's hard to keep up with what they are using. They could be grabbing from anywhere and everywhere—from foods to new types of chemical materials that they are having created—it can literally be anything they just grab and use.

You can go back and look at research by people who were doing conservation in the past—it was called restoration—which is a different branch of a similar field of study.

Conservation is more common find a lot more in museums and institutions. Restoration is found mostly in private work. The difference is that conservation is about following a moral and ethical code based on the practices of the Art Institute of Conservation or the International Institutes of Conservation, where our intent is to preserve the piece as best we can in its original form or the way the artist had intended without compromising the artistic integrity of the piece.

BN: With preventative conservation, do you do check-ups on the pieces?

NB: Yes, depending on how resilient the pieces are, but you know luckily this is not a large institution because it's a lot for one person. Currently I am the only person in the conservation lab and so my responsibilities include all of the pieces outside, all of the permanent collection inside and the exhibitions or traveling shows. Then, at our warehouse, if there are pieces that need some upkeep before they go out on loan to different institutions I have to take care of that too. It's a lot all at once. I try get outside to wash sculptures in the Garden every week or two, and I dust the permanent collection once a week. I'm one person. There are lot of my children and there is one of me.

BN: What would you tell other people who are looking for a job in your field?



Nicole Berastequi working on *Boolean Valley*



Detail: applying wax coating to *Bronze Crowd*

NB: Working at an institution in a conservation lab is a highly specialized area. There are a lot of private studios that are always looking to hire eager students who want to apprentice and learn more in the private world. If you are looking to work at an institution, you should first pursue an undergrad degree in engineering, chemistry, art history or the visual arts, and then look at grad schools and masters programs in conservation. There are only four of these programs, and it's a very important aspect for most institutions for someone to have their masters in conservation.

BN: You've referred to the artworks as "babies" a lot. Do you ever check up on pieces that you have worked on in the past to make sure they are doing okay?

NB: Yeah, absolutely, for sure. When I am going around and cleaning pieces, part of that is cleaning them but also part of that is checking up on them. When I do a walkabout, I check whether the artworks are in the same stable condition that they were the last time I saw them. That's part of the process for sure. I also talk to them. "I'm so sorry; I'm such a bad mom; you're so dirty; I need to clean you." I know they know how I feel.



Nicole Berastequi and Bernadette Negrete

For Additional Information on conservation:

Watch <https://youtu.be/Lft6nxsefT8?list=PLYJ4rig6AMI1bRRydjWTKwuriL7ko0q1j>