

## CONSERVATION

Laura D'Alessandro

One of the highlights of the past year was the conclusion of the year-long project to conserve the coffin of Ipi-ha-ishutef and return the coffin to public display. The conservation treatment, led by Assistant Conservator Simona Cristanetti, was generously supported by the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE). Associate Conservator Alison Whyte also played a significant role in the project, which concluded in August. Conservation was ably assisted by Erik Lindahl, Head of Preparation and Exhibit Design. Erik developed an innovative platform for the coffin that allowed conservators to actually work inside the coffin while they stabilized the interior painted surface. The return of the coffin to the Joseph and Mary Grimshaw Egyptian Gallery was a process that involved many of the museum's staff (fig. 1). A more complete description of the project, with detailed images of the process, can be found on the Oriental Institute's website in the Conservation Laboratory section: <http://oi.uchicago.edu/collections/coffin-project>. At the end of summer, just as the coffin project came to a close, Simona announced that she and her family would be returning to the East Coast, where Simona had accepted a position at the Arthur M. Sackler and Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Institution. We were very sorry to see Simona leave but wish her all the best in her new position.



Figure 1. The Conservation Department works with other museum staff to install E12072, the coffin of Ipi-ha-ishutef



Figure 2. OIM E9385 before (left) and after (right) being treated and moved to a new mount

A significant portion of conservation's focus for much of the past year has been on activities associated with the Gallery Enhancement Project. This ongoing project, which entails the replacement of the older Kensington cases in the museum galleries and a refurbishment of the newer Guenschel cases thanks to a generous donation, involves the entire collections staff. As the objects are removed from their display cases, each one is brought to the Conservation Laboratory where their current condition is assessed and any needed minor treatments are carried out. This may also include modifying the mount (fig. 2). As hundreds of objects may be de-installed at any one time, this creates a significant amount of work. Another important component of the Gallery Enhancement Project is ensuring that the products and materials used inside the display cases do not give off harmful vapors that may contribute to the degradation of the artifacts. Conservation is responsible for ensuring that all the materials used inside the display cases meet established conservation standards. Alison is in charge of conducting testing of any materials that have not previously been approved for such use.

This project also provides us with the opportunity to confirm the identification of the material from which an object is made. In the past, many of the stone and metal objects were identified solely by means of a visual assessment. As we have learned, many materials are difficult, if not impossible, to correctly identify by this method. With the help of the Oriental

Institute's Bruker Tracer, a handheld portable x-ray fluorescence spectrometer, Conservation has been able to correct many of the historically misidentified materials. The new information is entered into the Museum's database and the labels in the display cases are corrected as the cases are reinstalled with the newly designed labels. One of the more dramatic changes in identification concerned the composition of the Chicago Stone (A25412) on display in our Edgar and Deborah Jannotta Mesopotamian Gallery. Look for a *News & Notes* article later in the year about the results of this analysis as well as some of



Figure 3. Shaheen Chaudhri uses the Bruker Tracer XRF spectrometer to analyze clay tablets from Persepolis

the more interesting work that Conservation is doing to support the Gallery Enhancement Project.

Various researchers have taken advantage of the Bruker Tracer over the course of the year, both our own faculty and research associates as well as outside researchers. In addition, we are indebted to the work of Shaheen Chaudhri, working on behalf of Matthew Stolper and the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, for his patient work in gathering data on the clay content of the Persepolis tablets (fig. 3). This ongoing analysis project, spearheaded by Bruker Application Scientist Lee Drake, will help to identify clay groupings among the thousands of tablets in the collection. As the project moves forward, the ultimate goal is to identify the location of the clay sources from which the tablets were made, allowing researchers to better understand the context of the texts and the history surrounding the tablets.

Over the past year, Alison was kept busy traveling with the Tracer in support of two research projects: the Neubauer Expedition to Zincirli in Turkey, directed by Virginia Herrmann and David Schloen, and a research project in Israel on behalf of Yorke Rowan. At Zincirli, Alison carried out analyses on glazed ceramics, copper alloys, iron objects, and other materials. While in Israel, Alison analyzed Chalcolithic ossuaries excavated from Peqi'in Cave in the 1990s as part of a larger research project (fig. 4).

Alison was able to take time away from her busy schedule to attend an advanced XRF workshop on quantification and calibration techniques for the analysis of archaeological and historic metal objects held in Buffalo, New York. Closer to home, Alison presented her work on the exhibit "A Cosmopolitan City" at the November Breasted Society event. She also gave a workshop on art conservation-oriented science topics to high school science educators at the December STEAM event.

Alison continued in her role as lead conservator for special exhibits. She has been working with the exhibit team to make preliminary assessments of objects considered to be critical to the upcoming exhibit, "Book of the Dead." This will be followed by a more formal conservation review of all the objects requested for the new exhibit.

Conservation also assisted our photographers with the handling of the more fragile and delicate objects requiring photography for projects ranging from the Achemenet website project to the numerous gallery guides currently under production.

The wonderful textiles from the Semna South Nubian excavations, conducted by Louis Žabkar in the 1960s, were brought to the museum a few years ago. Beautifully conserved and housed by Louis' wife and colleague, Joan, they have been temporarily stored in the Conservation Laboratory awaiting registration. These textiles represent all the distinctive textile



*Figure 4. Alison Whyte carries out XRF analysis in Israel*

features found during the Semna South excavations and as such are an important resource. They are being registered in the lab by the assistant registrar, Susan Allison. Due to the textiles' fragility, the fragments are only handled by Conservation. Each textile is carefully laid out so that the new registration number can be assigned in conjunction with the field number and then both numbers and the textile fragments are photographed. Conservation and Registration then place the fragments in state-of-the art textile cabinets in Museum storage.

While most of the collections staff focus remains on the Gallery Enhancement Project, a few active loans were made during this period. Alison acted as the courier for the Islamic bookbindings on loan to the Art Institute of Chicago for their new Islamic galleries. Earlier in the year, Alison and Susan couriered the return of loaned materials from the DuSable Museum. Laura traveled to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in January to escort a baked clay barrel cylinder from Khorsabad from the OI's Tablet collection on loan to UPenn for their exhibit "The Golden Age of King Midas." The trip was also an opportunity to bring home a long-standing loan of King Tut's funerary cache of vessels that had been at UPenn for over thirty years.

Laura was also involved for much of the year with arranging for the delivery of the last of the chemicals, archival rehousing supplies, shelving, and cabinets for the OI-NMA joint project at the National Museum of Afghanistan. Ordering and overseeing the movement of supplies from a variety of manufacturers and locations (including chemicals from Italy) to Kabul made for a very interesting experience. She thanks all of her colleagues at the Oriental Institute who assisted in this process.

The past year has been a busy one for all. I thank Alison and Simona for all their hard work. Particular thanks go to Alison for her assistance with this report. We look forward to the new year and eagerly await the arrival of Jean Evans, the new Chief Curator, to take us into the next year and the exciting projects that await.

---