

Doors to the Past

The restoration of a pair of 18th-century French doors prompts some reflections on luxury and craft



Conservator Kate Payne de Chavez works on the restoration of a set of 18th-century French doors.

Sometime during the late 18th century, Pierre Rousseau II, an artisan of exquisite taste and talent, decorated a room in a Paris *hôtel* at Nos. 21 and 23 rue Saint-Dominique, now the boulevard Saint-Germain. Despite the political ferment that was to bring revolution down on the old order, demand for elaborate décor remained strong. The Rousseau brothers, who with their father had worked on the Petit Trianon and the apartments of Marie Antoinette, continued to fill orders for doors, overdoors, and panels on canvas mounted in *boiserie* that could transform an ordinary room into a glittering temple to fashion, taste, luxury, and sophistication. In time the decorations from the rue Saint-Dominique made their way into the CMA collection through the generosity of a distinguished Clevelander, Grace Rainey Rogers. The museum then turned to a valued neighbor, the Intermuseum Conservation Association (ICA), for facilities in which to prepare two doors from the room for installation.



The Intermuseum Conservation Association main laboratory

The museum entrusted the work on the “Rogers doors” to Kate Payne de Chavez, objects conservation intern, graduate fellow in the conservation program at the Winterthur University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation, student of history, and idealist. Reflecting on the irony inherent in the efflorescence of the luxury arts in revolutionary France, she has written of the value of craft, of preserving “the beauty and ingenuity of human creation in this world amid so much modern man-made destruction,” and of the importance of the arts in education, to broaden and deepen understanding of the past through authentic experience of its treasures.

On a cold day in March Payne guides us into the ICA lab, housed in a spacious building tucked discreetly into Cleveland’s Near West Side. Dark and petite, Payne’s no-nonsense appearance is quickly transformed by the glow of enthusiasm for her work. Drawn at first to engineering by a desire to contribute practically to the work of the world, Payne found her attention distracted by art, and her scientific background provided insight into “what artists and craftsmen of the past were actually doing.” Certain objects began to speak: gilded frames, with their interaction of surface and structure, captured the fledgling engineer’s interest. “Before graduate school I did some internships in painting,” she says, “but I enjoyed the frames so much—not just their beauty, but the process of creating a three-dimensional form, the layers and the technique of gilding and preparing a surface.” Curiosity about the techniques of ancient artisans led to scientific analysis, and a conservator was born. “I worked in a frame shop for a while. But in most shops you don’t actually create the frame,” she says grimly, “you just cut up molding that’s already gilded—in Italy, where they have workshops that actually create gilded molding.”

The designs on the Rogers doors appeared to be executed in gold leaf. “I wasn’t sure at first, but Andrea [Andrea Chevalier, senior paintings conservator at the ICA] helped me take a closer look through magnification, and you can see some wrinkling of the surface that indicates leaf.” The gold is tissue-thin; it sticks to an oil-based mordant applied like paint that defines the image, and is rubbed away from the surrounding area. With the delicacy of a safecracker, Payne touches the surface. “It must have

Investigation revealed that, sometime in the distant past, a dark-brown faux-woodgrain finish had been removed to expose a light-colored paint layer—completely changing the appearance of the doors from predominantly dark to light while preserving the irreplaceable gold-leaf decorations. The dark brown paint layer is still under the gold surface, which means the operation of removing the paint from around the decoration would have to have been every bit as meticulous as creating the decoration in the first place. Here, QP cards are used to provide scale and color reference in digital photographs of the restoration process.





taken a high degree of skill, and very fine brushes. The gold will stick wherever the mordant goes down. So if you go wrong, just a tiny bit . . .”

The detail is amazingly fine. Delicate lines and precise areas define the ornamental designs, which, Payne points out, include a female figure “holding a staff that may refer to Bacchus; it has a pinecone tip. And on the other door of the set Bacchus is actually depicted, with a little satyr, playing a triangle with jingle rings. These female figures may relate to the friends of Persephone, when she was kidnapped.” The women were turned into sirens by Demeter when they failed to prevent Persephone’s abduction by Hades to the underworld. “And,” Payne continues, “you also see incense burners in the bottom panels, which is a typical neoclassical reference to Pompeii.” Pompeii had been rediscovered about 50 years before the doors were made, and enthusiasm for the first-century Roman ornamental style knocked all the grottoes, shells, and conch-blowing gods of the Rococo into history’s dustbin.

The forms are drawn in red and dark brown paints on the gold, which appears to rest on the nacreous ivory background. But, almost unbelievably, the doors were originally covered in faux brown woodgrain, *over* which the gold leaf was applied. In an exact negative of its appearance today, the gold-based décor would have stood out from the darker brown background. Sometime in the distant past the woodgrain was painstakingly removed from around the gold areas, some little wider than a millimeter, to expose the paint that covers the bottom layer of gesso. This radical transformation preserved the painted decoration, rightly judged to be irreplaceable. Over the last two centuries a knot has risen here and there; despite the knowledge that it would be covered by décor worth a small fortune, the wood was selected for economy.

After our conversation Payne wrote: “When one imagines the hands of the laborers who worked so carefully to craft these amazing objects and the hands of whoever so carefully altered them to remove the overall faux woodgraining around the decorative motifs, one cannot but be in awe of the mastery it represents, the human potential.” Equally awesome are the skills of thoughtful conservators. 🏠