

Saving Images on Glass | Katharine Whitman

>> A second-year Andrew W. Mellon fellow in the Museum's Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation (ARP), **Katharine Whitman specializes in the conservation and preservation of glass-supported photographs—a rare calling in the field, given others' reluctance to work with the material.** Whitman explains her craft, the benefits of smashing windows, and more.

Close-Up: What brought you to George Eastman House?

Katharine Whitman: After graduating from Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, friends in conservation encouraged me

to apply for a Mellon fellowship. I've studied biology, chemistry, art history, and photograph and object conservation to prepare for my career. Photograph conservation requires knowledge of both science and art, which are my two passions.

CU: Why are glass-supported photographs your conservation specialty?

KW: The field's wide open for me. The few studies that have been made are dated, inaccessible, too narrowly focused, or too broadly conceived to be of much use to the photograph conservator. There's little written on the history of glass for photography, so last year I traveled to Great Britain, Belgium, and France to learn about glass manufacture for photographic purposes.

CU: What projects have you worked on?

KW: The Museum's photograph collection has some gorgeous ambrotypes of Niagara Falls from the mid-1800s, particularly an overlook called

Terrapin Tower that no longer exists. The Falls were breathtaking in those times.

CU: Describe a typical day for you.

KW: In addition to conducting historic research in the library, I experiment with new treatment procedures in the lab, and test materials for chemical makeup and color, to see what's best for the photographs. I have recently consulted with scientists to create a new adhesive for the repair of glass-supported photographs. Breaking glass is also important; I buy old windows from salvage shops, then smash and reconstruct them. My coworkers are used to crashing noises (laughs).

CU: What would be your dream project?

KW: **I've just restored an incredible find: a detailed photographic positive on glass of Abraham Lincoln as a Chicago lawyer in 1860.** It's a ¾ profile of him, one of his personal favorites. I repaired the glass and built special protective housing for it.

CU: What are your plans after your fellowship ends?

KW: Depending on the job outlook, I might work as a private conservation consultant, or apply for a grant to write a book about the conservation of glass-supported photographs. I want to share my glass-repair techniques with other photograph conservators, and open up a needed specialty.



Background: Katharine Whitman surrounded by the tools of her trade in the Museum's conservation laboratory.
Inset: A 1/6 plate ambrotype of an unidentified African American before and after Katharine's restoration. The photograph taken circa 1858 by an unknown photographer was a gift to the Museum by Eaton Lothrop.