

## A Conservation Success Story

By Gwyneth Mac Murtrie



*Chair 1, Before*



*Chair 2, Before*



*Both Chairs, After*

Conservation work is not like dropping off dry cleaning - you can't simply send a museum object out and pick it up in a week or two. Not only do you have to research and vet the conservators you want to work with, but you also must be able to afford the often-costly repairs and brace yourself for the possibility that a piece may be more damaged than you realized. Usually, multiple work schedules, budgets, and other issues extend original project timelines. This is certainly true for the red throne chairs in the Front Hall of the Davis Mansion. The chairs were sent out in November of 2016 and returned to the site last month.

This conservation project began in 2015 when Julia Brennan, owner of Caring for Textiles, performed a textile furniture assessment in the mansion and identified the red velvet collection as being "in great need". The red velvet pile flaked off with the slightest touch, making them difficult to clean, and wooden features showed evidence of previous pest infestations that had weakened the wood. Adding to the difficulty of the project was that Julia works on textiles only and we would need to find a conservator who works on wood, metal, and upholstery to help complete the project.

Even though we have a large list of conservators who do this type of work, it is always good practice to get three bids to ensure quality of work and to remain within budget. Many conservators have packed schedules, so collecting all three bids took almost a year. Ultimately, in the summer of 2016, Thomas Snyder, owner of Williamsburg Art Conservation, was selected for the project.

A quick summary of the completed work:

- Thomas ordered new velvet for the throne chairs and foot stools and new hand-sewn ball fringe from France.

- He removed the metal gold leaf from the throne chairs and replaced it with true gold leaf.
- B-98 (a special resin) was used to fill any small cracks or "exit-holes" from previous pest damage.
- A silicon nail head had to be created to match the other large nail heads that were missing from the seat of the chairs.
- New velvet, trim, and metallic tapes (decorative metal textile borders) were attached to the chairs.
- Julia built up the foot stool padding with archivally safe foam and removed the (delicious to insects) horsehair that was previously used to make the chairs plush and comfy.
- Julia also carefully cleaned the tapes, stitched protective mesh screening around them, and found replacement tapes similar to the originals to fill in missing gaps.

An interesting note on professionally-done conservation work -- it is designed to be reversible to ensure easy removal of any products that might be deemed destructive or improper in later years. What seems good today might have negative effects later or need to be replaced with a safer product. (Think about all the times on Antiques Road Show you've heard an expert tell someone that they never should have used Pledge on their grandmother's rocking chair.)

To help future Morven Park staff understand what the conservators did to the chairs, small sections of the previous velvet and pom-pom fringe is stitched into interior pockets of the new fabrics. This documentation educates future collections employees about the original construction of the object. Morven Park also keeps paper and electronic files of all the proposed work, work completed, before and after photos, samples of textiles, and cost breakouts.

The renovated chairs were brought back to the Davis Mansion on Oct. 19, 2017 and, as you can see from the photo above, conservators truly are magicians! They take objects that have lost their original luster and shine and breathe new life into them so that they can be enjoyed for generations to come. If you would like to see the finished product for yourself, visit the mansion during our weekend hours (Saturday and Sunday, 12-5 p.m.)

FYI: We have **seven more** red velvet pieces that need to go through similar conservation efforts in order to be put on display again, but we cannot do it without your help. Please consider donating today to help us with our preservation and conservation projects. Visit [www.MorvenPark.org/DONATE](http://www.MorvenPark.org/DONATE).