Alexa Beller
From Front Page

Library, and the work has been exhilarating,” Alexa said.
Pierre Pivis de Chavannes was one of the most important European artists in the 19th century, and the BPL has his only mural installation outside of France. The artist was 72 years old when he took this commission and never traveled to see the finished installation. The work consists of eight scenes in panels that surround the grand staircase in the library.

When first encountering the massive murals, they appear to be frescoes. However, Pivis used a special technique to create that appearance by painting with a mixture of wax, resins and oils on canvas.

“As a conservator, I especially enjoyed this project,” Beller said. “Condensation and leaking from an elevator shaft located directly behind this particular mural caused the damage. The mural was restored and then inert aluminum supports were installed to protect it from any further possibility of moisture damage.”

“Since we work so carefully and slowly, I was enthralled to examine the crayon markings that Pivis made back around 1804 when he first started to design this. I could see the changes that he made as he went along ... I could actually see him thinking.”

This single panel measures more than 14 feet tall and 7 feet wide. It weighs about 100 pounds. The Pivis restoration at the Boston Public Library in Copley Square was completed in September and, without a glitch, the massive panel was slipped perfectly back into position a few weeks ago.

“I enjoyed every minute of the work during this project,” Alexa said. “It was incredible to assist and work with Gianfranco Pivone, who is head of conservation at the Gardner.”

Alexa is no stranger to working with projects of this importance.

“I have just returned from Paris where I assisted with the conservation of the Eugène Delacroix murals and decorative motifs in Saint Sulpice’s chapel of the Holy Angel. I also worked on the Adolphe Roger murals and decorative motifs in Notre Dame de Lorettes’ basilical chapel.”

However, one of her most exciting projects involved solving a mystery:

“The wonderful work at Winterthur for our latest project here. It is a brilliant program and mostly beneficial to those living all along the East Coast.”

“Once a month, a clinic is held in the department. Private collectors or perhaps individuals who have inherited artwork, institutions or small museum curators come in and propose projects for preservation. If the work is deemed valuable enough as a student project, and if it meets all the requirements as set forth by the department, then work is commenced and done free of charge.”

“It is always very nice to work with the owners. They come in throughout the project for updates and are always very interested in our findings, progress and sciences behind the job. Their enthusiasm is infectious, and this makes everyone working for us look forward to the work.”

“One of my favorite projects while at Winterthur was the restoration project of an unvarnished landscape in oil and on Masonite board. It was authenticated and had been painted by Grandma Moses sometime during 1940. The paint was flaking, highly sensitive to cleaning and had a sulfured surface. In fact, without the state-of-the-art technology in our department at Winterthur, the painting could have easily been seriously damaged if someone had tried to treat it without first running all the analysis that we were able to do.”

“And I worked so closely on this that I became completely fascinated by the artist.”

Anna Mary Robertson, nicknamed Grandma Moses, was catapulted into fame soon after she took up painting at the traditionally nonconventional age of 76. When her arthritic hands were incapable of hand embroidery and crafting with needle

Left: The 14-foot Pivis mural was safely installed by 28-inch truck onto the wall of the Boston Public Library in Copley Square. Boston, Mass., following restoration by the conservation team from the Isaksen Stewart Gardner Museum. (Photo courtesy of Boston Public Library)

and thread, her sister is credited with suggesting that a paintbrush might be a better outlet for her creative urges.

Grandma Moses was untrained as an artist, and her paintings lacked any true sense of classical perspective. They were considered primitive works of art, simple compositions. She painted scenes of rural life in what she considered old-fashioned, peaceful New England settings using brilliant colors.

At first, Grandma Moses displayed her paintings at the local drugstores and gave them away. However, within a few years and at the height of her fame, her paintings sold for between $800 and $10,000.

“Grandma Moses died in 1961 at 101 years of age. As an artist, she was considered exceptionally prolific. Today her folk art is beloved and featured in major museums throughout the world. The highest auction price for her work on record to date was for a painting titled Sugarin Off. In 2006, it sold for $1.2 million.”

“The landscape that I treated was painted in 1940, and this can be dated due to the painting methods from that time.”

“The work overall is very mat; it was never varnished. Sampling revealed that there were oil and pine tree resin mixed together plus some type of protein. Therefore, we could assume that perhaps she was using some type of egg tempera mixture or maybe casein, but testing also showed this could also be basic house paint.”

“In fact, Grandma Moses was known for using house paints in her artwork. I suspect she used whatever she had on hand. It is also known that she thought the Masonite boards she used were ugly so she often covered them with wallpaper scraps so they would look nicer. She even sprinkled sugar onto some of her paintings, or glitters, in order to accentuate the light in areas such as in wintry scenes.”

“As I treated the painting called Wood Interior, I could see her style and it was obvious that she had used starches in her work just as others have documented. For instance, she would put out horses or other animals from Currier & Ives prints, then stencil around them instead of actually drawing the images freehand.”

One considered typical of Grandma Moses was the design composition in this particular landscape.

“Some of the integral parts of the composition were unbalanced in a manner that was not her usual style. As I realized this, I started researching her work more intensely and found a book from about 1941 with a photograph of what appeared to be the other half of this painting.”

”Later, I juxtaposed the images on my computer, and this certainly appears to be true. I think this is strong evidence pointing to not only the composition but also the fact that Grandma Moses was associated with a whole image found within her work. When I went to look for the whereabouts of the other painting that I found documented in the book, I found that it appears to have gone missing sometime around 1973. It is not registered to be anywhere that I can find, although it is signed. My half is authenticated, but it is nothing.”

Her passion for her work is obvious.

“Grandma Moses had a history of cutting paintings in half, making them into essentially a diptych. In fact, when an art dealer made the appointment to purchase 10 paintings early on in her career, she went into the barn and found that she only had 9. The only solution, she thought, was to cut one in half. I believe that this painting could be another one of a similar story behind it. It is so fascinating how the stories unfold through the work that I do.”

“I love my work. I also feel strongly that the word should be spread about what we do, why we do it and what we do behind the scenes for museums, institutions and private collectors. Conservators are passionate about preserving our history so that everyone can enjoy and experience artwork well into our future. The work we do is also essential for those who want to research the historical methods, successes and failures of the artists’ creations as well. And most of all, we work to make these treasures safe.”

Alexa Beller was supported by several foundations throughout her education. She received a $40,000 fellowship over three years from the Qusters (2014-2017) through Winterthur/University of Delaware’s Program in Art Conservation. She is the most current of the 39 Qusters recipients of 1973.

For more information about the Qusters organization and their support of conservation and historical programs both nationally and in your local area, visit www.qusters1944.org.

Above: Grandma Moses used stencils cut from Currier & Ives prints to draw some of the characters in her paintings en lieu of freehand. (Photo courtesy of Alexa Beller)

Left: Alexa Beller’s discovery of a potentially missing half of a Grandma Moses painting is evidenced here in her photographic juxtaposition of the two. (Photo by Alexa Beller)