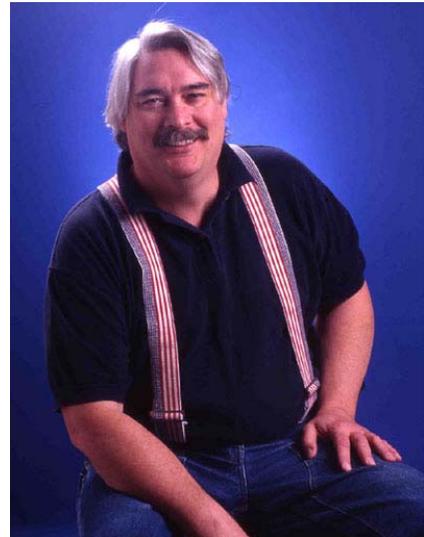


Don Williams, Senior Furniture Conservator at the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Materials Research and Education (SCMRE) near Washington DC, is co-author of *SAVING STUFF* with Louisa Jaggar. He is a conservator, educator, scholar, and all around inquisitive guy, having worked on some of the most interesting objects in our "Nation's Attic," public and private collections, and historic buildings. He has developed, managed, and presented educational programming on an array of subjects in the fields of conservation, woodworking, and wood finishing, and has published and presented scholarly research on subjects like ancient coating materials, and created pioneering uses for modern materials, including some of his own invention. In his spare time he passionately pursues his interests, including economics, metal casting, collecting obscure books and tools, and Japanese gardening, all of which usually occur against a backdrop of either classic jazz or talk radio. He and his wife of 24 years have two charming teenage daughters who lovingly accept that their eccentric Dad has lots of weird tools and two dozen different kinds of shellac in the basement, which will someday have a place of honor in his restored vintage timber framed barn, just alongside their cabin retreat in the mountains of rural Virginia.



Conservator

Don's first experience in the woodworking trades was as a truck driver/repairman for an interior design firm serving Palm Beach County, Florida in 1972. His journey took him through a series of jobs and shops in the restoration trades with work on everything from clocks and piano cases to classic European furniture and decorative arts, and at levels from apprentice to master finisher. As a foundry pattern maker he honed his craft of precision wood working and developed a lifelong love of the art of metal casting.



Pursuing a career in museum conservation led him to the University of Delaware and one of the world's premier collections at Winterthur Museum, where he got his first real hands-on experience in the museum approach to caring for historic objects. Armed with education, practical skill, and the knowledge imparted by mentors and



friends, in 1984 Don joined the vast backstage works of our nation's most important cultural institution, the Smithsonian Institution, as a furniture conservator.

His day to day work included caring for, and repairing, the Smithsonian's treasured possessions, from the Wright Brother's Flyer to Archie Bunker's chair, and involved a mastery of skills ranging from traditional woodworking and finishing and gilding, to the precise removal of individual layers of historic finishes. In the studio, it might be designing and building climate controlled transport cases one week, and restoring the most delicate veneer and inlay work the next.

Educator



First as a co-founder and faculty member, then as Director of the SCMRE's graduate Furniture Conservation Training Program, Don trained dozens of prominent specialists in furniture preservation. He was also instrumental in designing innovative multi-media instructional materials on furniture conservation and secondary science curricula, and was invited to present numerous lectures for dozens of museums, and institutions including Eastern Michigan University; the Universities of Minnesota, Maryland, and Delaware; the George Washington University, Parsons School of Design, and the Johns

Hopkins University. Don's next series of challenges came during his six year tenure as Coordinator for Education at SCMRE, when he helped create education programming for hundreds of professionals who are now responsible for caring for some of the most important artifact collections in America.

He also conducts dozens of short courses and seminars across the country in small studios, community colleges, and even retail stores, to bring the message of preservation



and appreciation for historic materials and techniques, to the widest possible audience. He has consistently reached out to non-traditional audiences including professional refinishers to find common ground and build lasting relationships. Among his favorite and most popular course offerings are marquetry, which is the precision cutting of very thin sheets of precious woods into tiny shapes to create elaborate patterns and scenes; gilding, using centuries old methods as well as

modern materials; and the use of shellac, a natural resin coating upon which he is one of the world's leading authorities. Don may have lost count of the number of folks who have heard his entertaining sermons on shellac, though he can recount precisely the historic books he has collected on the subject (hint: it's more than anyone else!).

Scholar

While directing and teaching at SCMRE, Don continued his own education, and pursued his own research in conservation materials and techniques, particularly those dealing with the nature and preservation of coating materials like paints and varnishes. This includes studies of emulsions, polymers and solvents, and Don continues his inquiries into these and many more subjects at an advanced level. And he has published and presented



numerous scholarly papers on the various ways that they relate to conservation. One example is “The Past and Future History of Natural Resins as Coating Materials” which was given in Scotland, and others on subjects like the use of adhesives in wood conservation, and the conservation of paintings on plywood. These scholarly lectures have taken him to many international venues and most of the lower 48 states. To quote Don, “My strongest technical interest lies in coatings technology, particularly film

formation mechanisms and solvent effects.” Still, he is just as likely to translate it for a non-technical audience by saying, “I am fascinated by all of the cool stuff we can use to make wood brown and shiny”.

In addition to pursuing his own educational goals, Don has turned his scholarship to helping direct and create some major projects while at SI, including a large exhibit titled *Santos: Substance and Soul*, which involved the conservation, repair, documentation, and presentation of a group of historic and modern objects of Hispanic folk art based on religious themes. This popular bilingual exhibit was installed at the Smithsonian in 1999, and was very well received on its travels to other museums before being retired.

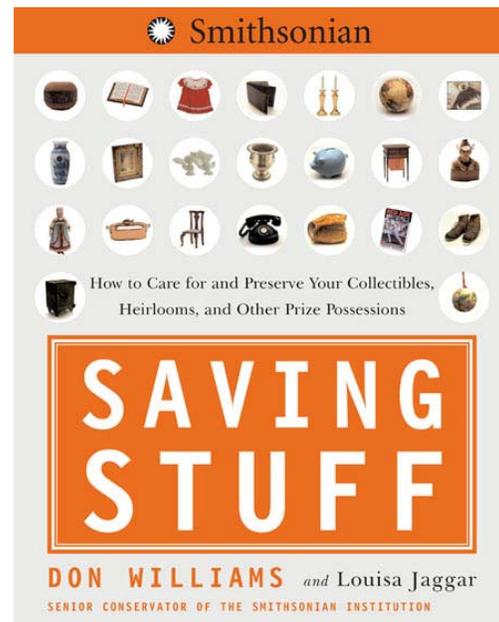


Author

Readers of *SAVING STUFF* are already well acquainted with Don’s vast knowledge and easy to read style, which he began to develop back in his college days. He has written and published articles in popular magazines like *Fine Woodworking*, as well as scholarly pieces in a number of professional publications. Among the highlights are “Conservation of an 18th Century English Japanned Surface” written with his colleague Mel Wachowiak of SI, and described in one of the “Smithsonian Stories” in *SAVING STUFF*. “Preserving and Restoring Furniture Finishes” is a detailed treatise written for the SCMRE website www.si.edu/scmre. Don consistently threatens to produce the world’s single greatest collected volume of knowledge on shellac, as only he can!

His article titled “Finding Common Ground: Refinishers and Conservators” was published in *Professional Refinishing* in 1999, and marked the first time that a museum conservator reached out to these professionals who care for the vast majority of furniture in daily use. Don continues to contribute written materials, training and advice to a number of groups in this industry. As he often quips, “Anyone interested in the things I am interested in is okay by me.”

Somehow, Don has also found time to dabble in mystery fiction. Completely undeterred by the rejections of his first completed novel, he continues patiently working



on a several stories including one which unsurprisingly revolves around the adventures of a modern furniture restorer who discovers world-changing secrets hidden in an antique cabinet, and another whose handyman protagonist is an idiot savant.

Personal

Don's hectic professional schedule and busy family life do somehow leave bits of time for other pursuits, including an active private practice in conservation and consulting under the name *Artisans Studio*, which allows him to indulge his passion for problem solving in areas like decorative finishes, metal casting, minimally intrusive upholstery and Boulle work. This 17th century technique incorporates delicate metal and tortoiseshell inlays, and was used on some of the most elaborate furniture ever produced. Don's interest in this field led him to invent "tordonshell," a whimsically named substitute for endangered sea turtle shell, made from all natural ingredients, which looks, performs and even smells like the real thing!

Don was able to solve the problem of a horribly damaged frame on this antique couch, by using modern materials to create a custom upholstered "cap" which was attached to the frame using only a handful of small fasteners instead of thousands of individual tacks. This approach allowed the original frame to be preserved without additional damage, and for the couch to be both displayed and used.



When he is not reading in his Eames lounge and ottoman (bought for \$5 at an auction) he enjoys watching the two greatest television series' ever – *The Prisoner* and *24*. Even at his peaceful retreat in the Virginia hinterlands, Don's curiosity is fully engaged as he is busy planning to use his stream and pond to power a fully functional small hydroelectric generator to provide electricity to the property, and to enlist local craftsman to help with an old fashioned barn raising for his new studio. He will however prefer to

erect the perfectly hand planed timbers of his proper Japanese teahouse, all by himself, one of these days.

And yes, he really does always wear suspenders. At last count he had 42 pairs.

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