

BIO



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Rachel Sabino is an objects conservator with a specialization in nonmetal inorganics. She is currently director of Objects and Textiles Conservation at the Art Institute of Chicago. In this role, she also oversees both preventive conservation and mountmaking. She has held previous positions at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, National Gallery London, and Chicago Conservation Center; internships at Metropolitan Museum of Art and the J. Paul Getty Museum; and a sabbatical at the Corning Museum of Glass. She is a fellow of both the International Institute of Conservation and the American Institute for Conservation.

ABSTRACT

Out of Thin Air: Mounting and Installing Tiffany Studios' Hartwell Memorial Window at the Art Institute of Chicago

In May of 2021 the Art Institute of Chicago unveiled a major acquisition: the monumental Hartwell Memorial Window by Tiffany Studios. From acquisition to conservation to installation, this project was four years in the making and represents a groundbreaking approach to the display and mounting of stained glass. Over 25 feet high and 16 feet wide, the Hartwell Window is among the most complex stained glass landscapes produced in North America. Practically unknown for 100 years, it was housed in the sanctuary of the Community Church of Providence, Rhode Island until the congregation decided to relocate the window to the Art Institute of Chicago, where it could be conserved to ensure its long-term stability and remain on public view. The window sat 25 feet above the ground and was found to comprise 48 individual panels of heavily-layered glass – in places up to five plates thick. Deinstalling, conserving, and reinstalling a stained-glass window of this size and intricacy called for an unprecedented plan—one that would maintain the historic integrity of the Tiffany Studios craftsmanship while showcasing the range of the studio's achievements in glass to full effect. Every step of the way, Art Institute colleagues worked internally and with external leaders in the fields of conservation, engineering, fabrication, and mountmaking to create an infrastructure for the window where there was none and to bring it to life in a new manner. Often, it was necessary to revisit the window's history as a means to envision a new future—toggling back and forth to determine what to keep and what to reinvent. A noteworthy achievement of the new presentation, heretofore not realized elsewhere, is the complete reintegration of each and every moveable piece of the original setting detail—such as t-bars and saddle bars—into the mounting scheme, not as decorative elements but as functional units that accord with their original purpose. Additionally, the mounting solution – unlike its original housing in the church – allows each individual panel of glass to be removed and accessible for future study or conservation. This talk will describe the challenges, thought processes and execution of mounting the glass panels themselves but will also share the conservation engineering solutions designed and fabricated to accommodate and mitigate risk for both the glass panels and staff during a formidable process of installation that would have been otherwise intimidating and cause for concern.