I am very grateful for being invited to participate in this conference and for the opportunity to share the history of my professional life, before and after I arrived in Chicago. Unfortunately I cannot be here today and I would like to thank my friend Lissette for presenting this text.

My name is Malgorzata Sawczuk. I am an art conservator, with a specialization in polychromed and gilded sculptures, as well as wall paintings. I have been a conservator for over 25 years. I studied during the 90's in the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow in the Conservation and Restoration of Art Works Faculty.

Conservation has always been my great passion, and from a very early age I knew I wanted to dedicate myself to the preservation of artworks. I love the idea of restoring the beauty in art and searching for their original form, sometimes hidden under multiple layers of over-paintings or lost from damage. At the same time I am fascinated by art in general, especially the attempt to express the artist’s emotion through sculpture. These two directions, conservation as a form of restoring and highlighting art’s beauty and the intentions of the artist, and sculpture as a form of personal creative expression, have been intertwined in my work from the beginning.

I will now describe the beginning stages of my career and how it shaped my interest and current path.
Upon completion of my formal studies, I began a period of conservation work that was full of beautiful and interesting projects in Austria. I had the opportunity to begin the restoration of baroque wall paintings in churches and monasteries dispersed throughout small villages in the Austrian Alps. I spent 10 years there building a rich portfolio, gaining valuable experience, and contemplating some of the most precious and glorious frescoes and wall paintings in the world. During this time, I came to the conclusion that I feel best when in the presence of the sacred arts like baroque altars and gilded sculptures.

When I arrived in Chicago, I was immediately challenged with the opportunity to work for churches and continue to develop my craft by restoring Christian art brought here from Europe in the 19th century.
Now I would emphasize a few experiences that are associated with the Polish community or Polish art.
First, St Stanislaus Kostka Church in Chicago is, without doubt, the most beautiful and contemplative among Polish parishes in the city. This church has an extraordinary collection of very high quality artifacts which truly distinguishes it in the first Polish community in Chicago. My first project there was the gilding of a massive new wooden sculpture of Madonna with two angels. In this case, I was able to utilize traditional gilding techniques as well as the oil polychromy on gold leaves - original technique from the 15th century. This initial project led to further work with the parish including restoration of both wooden, polychromed and gilded side altars, the upper part of the High Altar, murals just under the ceiling, and the high class oil paintings on metal support representing the stations of the cross.

In the neighboring regions of Ogden and Pulaski, there is also an incredibly beautiful Epiphany church, different in its simple and austere interior character. It has hidden inside its sandstone walls with golden decorations in niches, soaring high altar covered with gold leaves, and majestic wooden and polychromed sculptures originating in Germany, which I had a pleasure to restore. But first of all the church has frescoes of one of the more interesting American painters, Melville Steinfels. This artist was fascinated in the Italian wet fresco technique, and painted the stations
of the cross there, which around 7 years ago was destroyed from water leaks. The paint layer became damaged and soiled, which greatly diminished their artistic beauty. I spent many months cleaning the paint layer as well as reconstructing the missing fragments.

By the way, the same artist, painted the magnificent stations of the cross, employing the same technique at the Madonna della Strada Chapel in Loyola University in Chicago. A few years ago our studio spent there several months covering a beautiful art deco frames around these frescoes, with white gold. I would like to mention also about the colorful mosaic by Steinfeld, which I restored during my engagement with the University.

Among many other projects that I have undertaken in Chicago, there is one very special place also worth mentioning. This is the St. John Cantius Parish, a historic church known for its solemn liturgies and rich program of sacred art and music. With its many polish accents and art works inside, the church is the perfect place to experience the highest level of artistic interior design and meditation. I took a great pleasure in conserving the wall paintings and gildings of this magnificent church.