“The Demise of Mary Lincoln: An Artistic Conspiracy”

On April 14, 1865, First Lady Mary Lincoln witnessed the assassination of her beloved husband, President Abraham Lincoln, as the two sat holding hands during a play at Ford’s Theater. The president died the next morning, leaving his wife and an entire nation in shock. In fact, Mary Lincoln, one of the most controversial first ladies in America’s history, would never be the same.

In 1929, a portrait of Mary Lincoln by Francis Carpenter was offered for sale in New York and its image appeared in The New York Times. Carpenter was the same artist who lived in the White House for six months while painting his iconic masterpiece, The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Mary Lincoln’s granddaughter, Jessie Harlan Lincoln, purchased the portrait and it was kept in the family until 1976 when Abraham Lincoln’s last living descendant, Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith, donated the painting to the Illinois State Historical Library, now the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

It was displayed for three decades at the Governor’s Mansion in Springfield, Illinois, when officials at the library sent the portrait to me for treatment. During my work, I discovered that the painting was not what it appeared to be.


In this illustrated presentation, I will explain how the discovery was made and detail the fascinating history of this now-famous forgery.
“The Conservation of Paintings: Historical and Technical Discoveries”

The conservation and restoration of art can sometimes be a subject of drama and mystery. Like a Chinese box, each artwork in need of restoration carries within it layer after layer of meaning—sometimes obscured or distorted, and often puzzling. It is the conservator’s job to understand and reveal what the master painter set down or intended.

In my discipline of treating and conserving paintings, I have made numerous historical and technical discoveries. These include uncovering hidden signatures, dates, and even whole paintings hidden beneath other works.

This discoveries lecture has been one of my most popular, especially for a university or college audience, where majors in art, art history, chemistry, physics, history, and museum studies all overlap with conservation concerns. Most students are not aware of the conservation field and the rewards it has to offer.

In this presentation, “The Conservation of Paintings: Historical and Technical Discoveries,” I will share some of my most remarkable experiences.
“Solving the Cranach Mystery...well almost”

Conservators sometimes make startling discoveries during the treatment process. For example, a painting may be found to be a fake instead of an original or, just the opposite, an original instead of a copy. Whole sections of paintings may be overpainted, hiding long-forgotten original intent. Only bits and pieces of information may remain after centuries of former restoration work and damage.

The latter situation occurred during my treatment of two 1537 portraits owned by the Muskegon Museum of Art in Michigan. The paintings, attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder, depict Martin Luther and his wife, Katharina von Bora.

This presentation focuses on the treatment of the Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora portraits, as well as the forensic scientific work that led to the recovery of missing information, and how, after a long pursuit, the artist’s original intent was rediscovered...well, almost.

The research behind this presentation was accepted into the Cranach Digital Archives in Düsseldorf, Germany.
“Gerhardt Nollen: Iowa’s Greatest Artist... That No One Ever Heard Of”

In 2007, Central College in Pella, Iowa sent four portraits to me for treatment. The portraits were all from the hand of Gerhardt Nollen, an artist with whom I was unfamiliar. I said to myself, “Who is this guy?—These are really fine paintings.” The following year, the Scholte House Museum in Pella heard of my offer of free conservation services and sent me their badly damaged Nollen Pastoral Scene. The painting was an extraordinary work of art and, once again, I asked myself “Who is this guy?”

In 2011, I discovered that Nollen’s 1857, 6’ x 8’ masterpiece, A Dream of Arcadia, was in the Iowa State Historical Society’s collection. Since this museum was already a client I asked the curator if we could schedule the painting for treatment. It was sent to my studio in July 2012.

The painting was coated with three layers of discolored varnish, which flattened the three-dimensional quality of the scene and falsified the intended palette. The stretcher was warped, causing overall surface cracking. Canvas waves and pinpoint losses were extensive. Several large tears were poorly repaired. The painting, to use a medicinal metaphor, was in “critical condition.”

It took eight months to save this painting. The cleaning process involved the use of organic solvents to swell and remove discolored films without injury to the paint surface. A background in chemistry is required for these procedures. Because of the painting’s overall instability, the cleaning of A Dream of Arcadia was a delicate process, but the final results were spectacular.

Gerhardt Nollen is a true Iowa master artist, arguably the state’s greatest, and yet, somehow, he remains an undiscovered jewel. “Gerhardt Nollen: Iowa’s Greatest Artist...That No One Ever Heard Of” showcases the delicate procedures that saved an Iowa treasure and brings to light Gerhardt Nollen’s extraordinary abilities.
“The Empty Sleeve: John Singer Sargent’s Portrait of General Lucius Fairchild”

This presentation examines the historical context of John Singer Sargent’s Portrait of General Lucius Fairchild. During the Civil War, Fairchild rose from the rank of private to brigadier general. He fought in major battles at Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. In June 1863, his regiment was moving toward Gettysburg when they were caught in a surprise attack. A rifle shot shattered Fairchild’s left arm. He was transported to a nearby home, where his arm was amputated just above the elbow. Shortly thereafter, Abraham Lincoln commissioned him brigadier-general as a reward for his service.

Fairchild returned to Wisconsin and the Republican Party chose him as their candidate for governor. In 1866, he was elected governor of Wisconsin and served three terms. He then turned his attention to becoming a national statesman for the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). In February 1886, he was elected to the organization’s top position, national commander-in-chief.

Here the lives of General Lucius Fairchild and John Singer Sargent intersect. After receiving artistic accolades in Europe, Sargent generated a scandal when he exhibited his Portrait of Madame X at the Salon of 1884. The scandal forced Sargent to flee from Paris to England. He then traveled to America where, in 1887, he received two of his most important early portrait commissions: one from Isabella Stuart Gardner and the other from the GAR for a portrait of Lucius Fairchild.

At that time, Fairchild was one of the most recognized names in America, though today he’s a forgotten hero. His reputation as a man of virtue, courage and strength, and as a man of reverent loyalty to the Union and “the boys in blue” is untarnished. His memory is also held intact by Sargent’s artistic monument. It was considered an honor to be painted by John Singer Sargent, but in the case of Lucius Fairchild, it was an equal honor for the artist.

“The Empty Sleeve: John Singer Sargent’s Portrait of General Lucius Fairchild” reviews the painting’s historical context, its treatment procedures, and several iconographic discoveries. It is one of the finest portraits I have ever had the privilege of conserving.
In May 2007, I was offered a painting for treatment by the Flint Institute of Arts in Michigan. Titled *Boy with a Drawing in His Hand*, the painting was attributed to Sir Joshua Reynolds. Attributions to Reynolds are complicated by the fact that he routinely painted only the hands and faces on many of his portraits while employing assistants to fill in the landscapes, clothes, and details.

In his 1819 *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, Joseph Farrington states, “The school [workshop] of Sir Joshua resembled a manufactory, in which the young men who were sent to him for tuition [apprenticeship] were chiefly occupied in copying portraits, or assisting in draperies and preparing grounds.”

In 2000, David Mannings and Martin Postle published their iconic two-volume, 1,200-page *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*. The difficulty in preparing their entries cannot be overstated. Copies of Reynolds’s paintings originating from his studio and copies by other artists, during and after his lifetime, explains Mannings’s acknowledgment, “The word ‘original’ has largely been avoided in the catalogue.”

The catalogue raisonné listed the Flint painting as a possible copy of a lost original. Using art historical research, forensic examination techniques, treatment findings, X-rays, and analytical reasoning, I discovered the painting’s true origins. “Sir Joshua Reynolds: Boy with a Drawing in His Hand—Original, Copy, or Studio Version” reviews these findings.
“A 1938 Portrait of Adolf Hitler by Heinrich Knirr”

During the summer of 2004, I realized how little I knew about World War II, the war my father fought in but never talked about. My only evidence that he was actually there was the fine charcoal portrait a German war prisoner had drawn of him. This mysterious image ornamented a wall in our home my entire youth and now it graces one of my walls. My mother, so affected by the conflict, wouldn’t buy German products.

Determined to learn more about the war and Adolf Hitler, I decided to read *Mein Kampf* and William Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. At this same exact time, Joe Brunson, curator of the WWII Victory Museum in Auburn, Indiana, called to ask if I would conserve the museum’s *1938 Portrait of Adolf Hitler* by Heinrich Knirr.

A man so despised in my parents’ home would now be residing in mine, but conservators don’t get to choose which paintings come their way. I have always felt the medical profession’s Hippocratic Oath also applies to the conservation field. One painting is not preserved over another. There aren’t two lines. History cannot be sanitized.

During the Third Reich, Heinrich Knirr, photographer Heinrich Hoffman, and architect Albert Speer held the Reich’s most prestigious artistic positions. Speer referred to Knirr as “Hitler’s official painter.”

I have researched the Knirr portrait to understand the impact of the Third Reich on this artist and on art in general. During this lecture, I will ask attendees to adopt the same historical perspective. My illustrated presentation offers a biographical examination of the artist, a review of the painting’s treatment, a breakthrough discovery of the painting’s origins, and its present-day ownership.
In Christian iconography, almost no other saint owns as many symbolic attributes as Mary Magdalene: a red egg, an alabaster jar, a skull, a book, a mirror, and others. The Repentant Magdalene theme has been represented by artists throughout the history of art including Giotto, Caravaggio, Titian, and El Greco.

After the Resurrection, writings record that Mary Magdalene retired to a life of self-reflection, asceticism, and repentance for her sins. She is normally depicted in an isolated setting, an outcast living in a grotto or in open wilderness. It is the classic tale of redemption and absolution leading to sainthood.

One 7” x 4 ½ ” version of The Repentant Magdalene, attributed to Leonardo da Vinci’s teacher, Verrocchio, was gifted in 1925 to the Hoyt Sherman Place, a theater and art museum, in Des Moines, Iowa. Hoyt Sherman was a successful Des Moines businessman. Two of his older brothers—the Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman and Senator John Sherman, known today as the author of the Sherman Antitrust Act—had rather illustrious careers.

Four months of work were required to return the painting to its pristine visual appearance. In an illustrated presentation, I will document the painting’s treatment stages and dramatic cleaning change. I will also review the painting’s art historical roots, its proper attribution, and its provenance, including my discovery that the painting once hung at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
“Thomas Sully’s Portrait of George Washington”

There’s probably no American painting more iconic than Gilbert Stuart’s Portrait of George Washington. Gracing the one-dollar bill, this image is in circulation every day. Stuart liked the painting so much he didn’t want to give it up. He amusingly and deliberately told Washington that the painting “wasn’t finished yet.” After Washington’s death in 1799, Stuart used the painting as a model for numerous replicas. He referred to the image as his “hundred-dollar bill,” the price he charged for a copy.

Thomas Sully first encountered Stuart’s painting when he studied and worked with him in 1807. Realizing there was a national market for the image, Sully must have made a copy for himself. His personal records document twenty-one Washington paintings after Stuart originals.

The provenance of the treated portrait is seamless. It has had only one owner, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. In 1854, the Society acquired the painting through an ingenious idea: they offered Sully an honorary museum membership in exchange for a painting. Sully suggested a copy of Stuart’s Washington, a suggestion the Society easily accepted.

One of the greatest rewards for a conservator during treatment is the discovery of something hidden or unknown. This occurred during my treatment of Sully’s Portrait of George Washington. In this presentation, I will review the painting’s historical context, its unfortunate treatment history, and disclose my surprising find.
“Dutch Orphans Reunited by Charles Ficke”

In a most unusual presentation, I assume the role of Charles Auguste Ficke, a wealthy Des Moines businessman and art collector. In 1908, Ficke purchased a Dutch seventeenth-century oil titled *A Group of Figures*, attributed to Govaert Flinck, a student of Rembrandt.

In 1916, Ficke was reading *Aesthetics*, a journal published by the Hackley Art Gallery in Muskegon, Michigan. (In 1980, the Gallery was renamed as the Muskegon Museum of Art.) *Aesthetics* published an image of a newly acquired painting attributed to Gerbrand Van den Eecout.

Like Flinck, Eeckhout studied under Rembrandt for a period of time. What caught Ficke’s eye was the astonishing possibility that his Flinck might actually connect to the Muskegon painting—that the two could be fragments of a larger whole.

In 1925, Mr. Ficke donated the Flinck painting to the Davenport Municipal Art Gallery, today’s Figge Art Museum.

In 2009, after 101 years of waiting, the two “orphaned siblings” were reunited in my conservation studio. In an illustrated program titled, *Dutch Orphans Reunited*, I will disclose the lurid histories—full of double dealing, intrigue, and mystery—that were behind these paintings.
“Historical Rewards: A Dutch and a Flemish Discovery”

In 2008, I had an opportunity to treat two early seventeenth-century paintings. The first was a Rubens studio painting titled *The Crowning of St. Catherine*. The panel painting, owned by the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa, came to me in three pieces.

The second, owned by Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, titled *Barn Interior*, was attributed to the Dutch artist Egbert van der Poel. While the painting was unsigned, an almost identical signed work resides in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

In each instance, historical discoveries were uncovered during treatment. In fact, the *Barn Interior* discovery was so remarkable, it was picked up by the Associated Press and appeared in newspapers and magazines throughout the world.

This presentation will review the paintings’ treatment procedures and the art historical research that led to some remarkable revelations.
“A Triple Discovery: Hoyt Sherman’s Apollo and Venus”

All of the offered presentations share a significant historical discovery—finding a hidden signature, recovering a lost date, correcting an attribution, uncovering overpainted areas, or rectifying provenancial errors.

But what are the chances of discovering a 420-year-old painting that you never knew you had? This just doesn’t happen—except it did to Executive Director Robert Warren at the Hoyt Sherman Place, a theater and art museum, in Des Moines, Iowa. Robert was searching for some Civil War flags, when a staff member mentioned there were some collection materials that were in a little-used storeroom beneath the auditorium’s second floor balcony.

While looking through the room, Robert caught sight of a painting wedged between a table and the wall, a painting that had been lost in the shuffle and unknown to the staff for decades. Imagine how excited he was to uncover an early Baroque (ca. 1600) panel painting.

When it arrived at my studio, the painting was coated with layers of discolored varnish and former restoration work falsifying the artist’s original palette. Numerous areas of paint were lifting and former losses had occurred.

During treatment, two additional discoveries were made: a hidden inscription was brought to light using x-ray and infrared analysis, and the original artist was verified as Otto van Veen, the teacher of Peter Paul Rubens.

The extraordinary discoveries related to this one painting are detailed in the presentation: “A Triple Discovery: Hoyt Sherman’s Apollo and Venus.” For anyone who is a fan of the Antiques Roadshow, this is a presentation for you.