

# Deborah Collier

## Restoring the Past

By Deb Weissler  
 Photos by Deb Weissler & Deborah Collier



When the painting finally came into my possession, it had suffered through dozens of moves and five decades of exposure to heat, humidity, dust and cigarette smoke. Yellowed and soiled, with peeling paint popping off along the plywood's grain, it was a sad testament to that long ago painter's talents. It required some serious TLC, so I placed it in the capable hands of local painting restorer Deborah Collier, owner of the Corner Cottage Frame Shop in Gloucester Courthouse.

Although better known for her custom framing, mat carving, and glass etching, Deborah's unsung talents lie in art restoration. From attics and basements, garages and smoke-filled homes come the sadly neglected and badly damaged, some from as far away as Hot Springs and Charlottesville. These family treasures no longer resemble works of art and would be destined for the rubbish heap. What they need is some intensive triage under Deborah's careful hands and eyes.

Growing up in Newport News, Deborah attended alternative high school and began college as an art major while still in high school. During a two-year hiatus from college she worked in Smithfield for the Young Adult Conservation Corps, which inspired her to return to Christopher Newport College to pursue a degree in biology, landscape design, and ornamental horticulture.

After graduation she worked on the Busch Gardens landscape crew, mainly as a pesticide applicator and landscape designer. Her own landscape business in Poquoson followed, but the venture was short-lived and in 1989 she walked through the door of the Corner Cottage Frame Shop, owned by Charles "Bill" Tolley, looking for a job. It was serendipitous for them both: twelve years later Deborah bought the business so Bill could retire.

Deborah has been restoring paintings since the early 1990s when Mathews art collector William Grover came looking for an art restorer close to home. Until then he was taking his seventeenth and eighteenth century finds as far away as Washington, D.C. for cleaning and restoration, a costly and time-consuming process. When he approached Deborah with the task of cleaning a painting, she willingly admitted she didn't have a clue.

"Two weeks later he showed up with a couple of restoration manuals and a whole box of chemicals and supplies," Deborah laughs. "So I went up to the Stagecoach Flea Market, bought all the ratty old paintings I could find and practiced on them for a couple of months. I started on his work and when I finished he showed the paintings to some conservators and appraisers," who gave Deborah the thumbs up on her efforts. Completely self-taught, Deborah's diverse background makes her a natural for art conservation.

Restoring 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century paintings is challenging for a number of reasons. Early artists often used linseed oil as a finishing varnish. Not only does the linseed oil yellow over time, it is extremely difficult to remove. In addition, environmental pollutants settle into the paint of both

**T**he small landscape painting had hung in my parents' living room for as long as I can remember. It was acquired in Frankfurt, Germany during the early post-war years under the Allied occupation. Struggling local artists painted on whatever substrates they could find—in this case a piece of quarter-inch thick plywood.

The scene is a bucolic German countryside with rolling foothills, forests, and a field of wild flowers alongside a babbling brook. There is nothing exceptional, except it reminds me of the picnics my family enjoyed on those long ago weekends, our miniature dachshund in tow and a picnic basket filled with fabulous sausages, cheeses and breads from the local markets.





old and new paintings, causing the pigments to discolor and degrade.

"The worst thing you can do to a painting is hang it over a working fireplace, coal stove, in the kitchen, or over a heat register," says Deborah. In addition to the obvious environmental pollution, the extremes in temperature cause the stretcher bars to expand and contract and the old canvases, many made of linen and cotton fibers, absorb moisture and swell. As they shrink back, the canvas pulls away from the paint. Many well-meaning owners attempt to clean their paintings by scrubbing them with water, swelling the canvas. From a tiny Rembrandt self-portrait etching, a racehorse painting worth \$25,000, to a five-foot-by-five-foot portrait, Deborah has seen some of the greats look the absolute worst.

"One gentleman in Middlesex was cleaning his gun and shot a hole through a seascape hanging on the wall, requiring a patch and thorough cleaning," Deborah recalls. "He said he was just thankful it didn't go through the kitchen wall. So was his wife!"

To clean a painting from years of abuse typically takes two or more weeks, depending on the size. Deborah begins with an intense visual inspection, looking for obvious signs of damage and deterioration. Even her sense of smell comes into play, alerting her as to whether she is dealing with coal or tobacco tars, cooking grease, mold, or even road dust.

The frame is then removed and she can compare the painting that was hidden by the frame to that which was exposed, thus hinting at the degree of deterioration and the restoration required. If the canvas or stretcher bars are rotten, the canvas is damaged, or the paint has cracked and flaked, restoration can take months—one painful square inch at a time.

After determining what types of damage or contamination is present, the next task is the

tedious testing of each color with a variety of solvents. Each pigment has its own stability. Cadmium reds and blues are quite soft; in comparison, zinc white is very hard and can withstand a stronger chemical. After the surface grime is removed, the varnish may or may not require removal, but quite often has yellowed and needs to be removed. Layer by layer, the assault of time is stripped away and the true colors as the artist intended re-emerge.

Between cleaning steps the painting must rest, the solvents eventually softening and laying the paints back down to where they can be safely retouched. Deborah either grinds her own pigments or uses commercial artist paint from tubes, provided the oils are drawn out of the pigments beforehand. Too much oil and the retouched paint will turn dark over time. Finally, a new coat of varnish is applied to protect and brighten the paint.

Over the years Deborah has uncovered a few frauds when her cleaning disclosed irregularities in the compositions. And occasionally an artist re-used a canvas, painting one scene over another. As Deborah cleans, scenes from both may appear. This is exciting for her, but often distressing for the art dealer looking for that next rare find.

Since tackling painting restoration, Deborah has also learned to restore damaged antique picture and mirror frames, casting replacement pieces from molds she creates from portions of the original. She has also mastered gilding as part of frame restoration.

As the economy vacillates, her workload varies between custom framing and painting restoration, giving her a healthy backlog of work. Each new project presents a challenge Deborah welcomes. After spending hours bent over her work, she hurries home to her second love, gardening, and a chance to pursue another side of her artistic nature. *pl*