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Before-and-after art restoration at Hoyt Sherman Place

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Abstract (summary)

Since the summer of 2012, she's been sending paintings in batches of four or five to Barry Bauman, an art conservator who plans to show off his handiwork during a free lecture Monday at the mansion's theater. The collection started in the years leading up to 1907, when the Des Moines Women's Club moved into the 1877 mansion and opened the city's first public art museum there.

Full Text

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Hoyt Sherman Place/Special to the Register

Sometimes when aging Hollywood stars disappear for a few weeks for some "dental work," they return looking suspiciously younger. Sometimes the "dentist" gets carried away with the stapler and scalpel.

Things are less mysterious when paintings go missing from the walls of Hoyt Sherman Place, but the results are just as dramatic. They return clean and bright as new from a conservator in Chicago.

"It's just like anything else: You get older and you need some work," said Carol Pollock, the historic Sherman Hill mansion's executive director.

Since the summer of 2012, she's been sending paintings in batches of four or five to Barry Bauman, an art conservator who plans to show off his handiwork during a free lecture Monday at the mansion's theater. It's the public's first chance to see the before-and-after results and then, if they choose to, "adopt" other paintings on the waiting list.

Bauman and Pete Sixbey, a framing expert from the State Historical Society, visited the mansion last year and identified 51 works in need of cleaning and repair.

"When I saw the collection, I thought -- geez -- this is wonderful," Bauman said. "It's a hidden jewel. It was astounding to see the quality of art that the collection contained -- and understand, I worked for 11 years at the Art Institute of Chicago."

Bauman mentioned a few of the collection's highlights, including 19th-century landscapes by George Inness and Thomas Moran. The collection started in the years leading up to 1907, when the Des Moines Women's Club moved into the 1877 mansion and opened the city's first public art museum there.

But time took its toll.

"Most of the paintings hadn't been touched for many years," Bauman said. "The varnish darkens, air pollution

builds up, and over time you lose a sense of the original palette."

He cleans the paintings with Q-tips under a microscope, carefully swabbing away layers of grime and yellowed varnish. (Non-yellowing varnish didn't come around until the 1940s.) In the process, which takes three or four months, he's discovered secrets hidden beneath the layers.

In one portrait of a pair of young girls -- one rich, one poor -- he noticed that the trees in the background had been added later. So he wiped them away.

"It was like some other painter said, 'You know what? I think they need some trees there.' But the original background was sort of warm and deep, and (erasing the trees) made the girls stand out even more," director Pollock said.

She looked at another restored painting, called "Children in a Wooded Landscape," and noticed a whole new kid. "Who knew there were three? It was so muddy before."

Bauman has so far restored a dozen of the mansion's 51 targeted paintings, in addition to numerous projects for other Iowa institutions, including Terrace Hill, Salisbury House, Scholte House in Pella, and the state universities in Ames and Iowa City.

His most famous touch-up was for a museum in Springfield, Ill., when he discovered that a portrait of first lady Mary Todd Lincoln was, in fact, someone else. A con artist had painted Lincoln's dress, Lincoln's jewelry, Lincoln's hair bow, and even Lincoln's face over the original subject, whom nobody seemed to remember.

After his 11 years at the Art Institute and 20 more at the Chicago Conservation Center he founded, Bauman now works "for the love of the art." He charges nonprofit clients for materials but none of his labor.

That's good news for Hoyt Sherman Place. Restoration costs for most of its paintings add up to \$800 to \$1,000, because of the costs for new or reconstructed frames, plus transport and insurance for the trip to Chicago. A few of the smaller works can be fixed up for \$350, but the largest canvas, a portrait of a woman surrounded by cherubs, called "The Triumph of Magdalene," will total about \$3,500.

Hoyt Sherman Place has so far raised about half of the targeted \$80,000 for the entire project. The initial funds came from the Des Moines Women's Club, whose members squabbled -- politely -- over which paintings each member would adopt as her own.

"I told them, 'Ladies, don't worry. There are plenty to go around,' " Pollock said.

The remaining adoptions are now open to the public. But just to be clear, "you don't get to take these home," Pollock said. "We'll put your name on a plaque and keep 'em right here."

'For the Love of Art'

Chicago art conservator Barry Bauman will discuss his work for the Hoyt Sherman Place art collection, as well as some of his other projects, during a free lecture at 7 p.m. Monday in the Hoyt Sherman Place auditorium. A reception in the galleries, where visitors can "adopt" paintings for restoration, will follow. \$20 for the reception; call 515-244-0507, ext. 204, for reservations. www.hoytsherman.org

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