

ARTS

A Lost Painting Is Rediscovered. Have You Checked Your Closets Lately?

By LAURA M. HOLSON APRIL 5, 2018

For anyone who is a fan of “Antiques Roadshow,” this is a story for you.

Two years ago, Robert Warren, the executive director of Hoyt Sherman Place in Des Moines, was searching for a box of Civil War flags in the theater’s upstairs storeroom when he came across a painting wedged between a table and a plaster wall. The surface was scratched and faded, but there was a sticker on the back, a label from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the painting had once been on display.

Mr. Warren had stumbled upon “Apollo and Venus,” an oil painting on wood by the 16th-century Dutch master Otto van Veen. It had been stowed in the storeroom for decades and is now potentially worth millions of dollars.

Instead of cashing in on the prized find, though, Mr. Warren said the theater would make it the centerpiece of its permanent collection, on display July 1 in the theater’s gallery along with 54 other paintings that have been restored.

Such finds are more rare than fans of “Antiques Roadshow” might hope. But they do happen. Recently the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh found more than a dozen treasures hidden in its storage vault, including a prized portrait by the English painter George Romney. Last year, what many people say is a rare Jackson

Pollock was found in an Arizona garage. And who can forget when a painting by a famous Victorian painter was discovered on (where else?) “Antiques Roadshow”?

“We already have a spot picked out,” said Mr. Warren, who, since arriving at Hoyt Sherman in 2015, has shored up the theater’s finances and rehabilitated its art galleries. It will hang on a prime wall in the gallery.

Nason Bartholomew Collins, the scion of a steamship line owner, lent the painting to the Met in the mid-1800s, according to conservators, but brought it with him to Des Moines when he and his family moved there in 1871. In 1952, an heir of Mr. Collins donated it and four other paintings to the Des Moines Women’s Club, which established an art gallery at Hoyt Sherman.

The painting has not yet been officially appraised, but Mr. Warren said theater executives who researched the find have valued it at a minimum of \$4 million. It is currently insured for \$50,000, but since it has been restored and framed, he said he hoped the insurance company would insure it for at least \$1 million. Cameras will be installed in the gallery to thwart theft, he added.

Initially, Federico Barocci, a Renaissance painter and printmaker from Urbino, Italy, was believed to have painted “Apollo and Venus.” But upon closer examination, Mr. Warren said, conservators agreed it was painted by van Veen, a 16th-century Dutch painter and draftsman who became known for altarpiece decorations and his illustrations for emblem books. (It is estimated to have been painted around 1600.) He was born in 1556, traveled to Rome like many of his contemporaries to study the Italian masters, before moving to Antwerp where he founded a studio in the later 1590s.

A formidable artist and teacher in his day, van Veen’s most famous pupil was Peter Paul Rubens, the renowned painter who embodied Flemish Baroque style and whose work is notable for its color, voluptuous form and sensuality.

“This work is important because the artist was the teacher of Rubens,” said Barry Bauman, an art conservator based in River Forest, Ill., who cleaned and restored “Apollo and Venus” to its original vibrancy. “Of course Rubens took it to a different level. But you can see the influence of his teacher unfold over time.”

Van Veen moved to Brussels in 1615, where he remained until his death in 1629.

In the painting, Apollo is holding a lyre while Venus, the goddess of love, is portrayed as an artist painting a landscape, her fleshy backside exposed. There are references to her fertility and beauty, including a basket of fruit, a sprig of roses and a bowl of oysters. Before restoration, the oil-on-wood panel was cracked, its surface dull from layers of discolored varnish. It took four months to clean and repair, the naturalistic figures emerging only after layers of paint from previous restorations were removed.

“It is something to see such beauty revealed,” said Mr. Warren.

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