

# A family heirloom



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**J**erry Litmer built a career out of preserving family heirlooms. Now, he's been asked to preserve a family business.

"There was always an assurance that it was going to go on," said Litmer, general manager and chief paintings conservator for Wiebold Studio in Terrace Park.

The 12-employee company has a global reputation for restoring prized works of art. But its future was in doubt after the 2004 death of its second-generation owner, Bill Wiebold. With two teenagers at home, the owner's widow, Catherine "Cae" Wiebold, leaned on Litmer and other veteran employees to run the family business.

When she passed away last April, Cae Wiebold left the company to a family trust. Ownership won't transfer to the next generation for 14 years, when Andrew Wiebold turns 35. In the meantime, the company



is in Litmer's capable hands, said Paul Sittenfeld, a portfolio manager for Robert W. Baird & Co and trustee of the Wiebold's family-business trust.

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**Jerry Litmer**  
Wiebold Studio

"He's doing an amazing job," he said of Litmer.

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Restoring portrait miniatures is a specialty of Wiebold Studio.

**Trusted caretaker maintains Wiebold art-restoration company until next generation can do so**

"Both Cae and Bill were very admiring of Jerry, and with good reason," Sittenfeld said. "He's special."

Andrew Wiebold agreed. The Ball State student, now pursuing an engineering degree, hopes to take over the family business someday.

But he doesn't feel ready for the job yet.



## WIEBOLD: Special arrangement gives college-age heir more than a decade to learn family business

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"I'm constantly thankful for him being there."

### AN OLD-WORLD SENSIBILITY

Wiebold Studio is a tiny company by monetary standards, with 2008 revenue of \$920,000 and a goal of reaching \$1 million this year. But its impact looms larger when measured by other standards. It has restored works of art and artifacts for the White House, the U.S. Supreme Court and the Smithsonian Institution. It's widely known

for its restoration of churches, including Old St. Mary's Church in Over-the-Rhine and the Cathedral Basilica in Covington. It has an international reputation for restoring portrait miniatures, palm-sized water-color portraits painted on thin sheets of ivory. It's delicate, painstaking work that many restoration firms won't do. Bill Wiebold was known for pursuing work that interested him — the more difficult, the better.

"I think he felt the work he did was a

chance to bring back and preserve things of historic consequence," said Sittenfeld, a longtime friend. "I think he saw it as kind of a mission, respect for the past."

That is evident in how Wiebold Studio operates, with an old-world system of apprenticeship in which artisans gain centuries-old knowledge over decades of experience and instruction. Andrew Wiebold, for example, is learning to be a metalsmith from Dave Davis, whose 17 years in the craft included nine under the stewardship of Bill Wiebold.

"I've never met anyone quite like him,"

said Davis, who admired his former boss for his work ethic and directness.

### 'BEATING PEOPLE ON EXCELLENCE'

But Litmer knew the company would need a different kind of stewardship if it was to survive long term following the death of its charismatic owner.

Patient and unassuming, Litmer is an Oakley native and graduate of the Cincinnati Art Academy. He aspired to be "a starving artist" when hired by founder Charles Wiebold in 1966 and has remained with Wiebold Studio since. He takes his management duties seriously, but it's not really how he wants to spend his time. It's the restoration work that matters most to him.

"It's what everybody loves about working here," he said. "You're working on something that's unique and interesting."

That passion for the work is the "connecting point" between Litmer and the Wiebold family, Sittenfeld said.

"Wiebold isn't committed to beating people on price. They're committed to beating



A. Wiebold



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**At Wiebold Studio, experienced craftsmen train up-and-coming conservators.**

people on excellence. That hasn't varied from person to person," Sittenfeld said.

"He's an artist first," agreed Andrew Wiebold. "He's an astoundingly talented conservator. But he's been extremely adept at running the business."

### CARRYING THE COMPANY FORWARD

Among Litmer's more astute decisions was to rely on the organizational skills of Jennifer Burt, who joined the company as a metalsmith in 2005 and gradually moved into the role of business manager.

Burt has helped Wiebold Studio standardize its systems for estimating work, tracking costs and exploring new markets. By retaining a public relations firm, the Deciding Factor, it now promotes its restoration expertise in newspaper stories that coincide with the appearance of Wiebold restoration specialists at antique shows.

The company has turned a profit in each of the last two years, after posting losses in 2005 and 2006.

"We have a great crew of people," said Burt. "We see that we can carry this company forward and that we can be the people who are in their 50s, 60s and 70s teaching that next group."