'Best Work Invisible'

Grime Of Centuries Cleared Away From Art By Skilled Conservators

BY GERALD WHITE

A rare and rewarding career awaits patient, talented Cincinnati students.

If the students are willing to study for 10 years . . .

If they can draw and paint as well as most artists . . .

If they can learn to use x-ray machines with the skill of a doctor or a dentist . . .

If they can learn to determine hard resin from soft resin, white lead from red lead, organic from inorganic glue . . .

If they can amass more knowledge about wood than a carpenter, more about paint than a painter, more about chemicals than a chemist . . .

Then, they may have a chance to become a conservator in the arts and follow three Cincinnatians into an elite group, the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works.

Members are Harry Gothard of the Cincinnati Art Museum; Miss Janet T. Weigel, Taft Museum, and Charles Wiebold, Terrace Park.

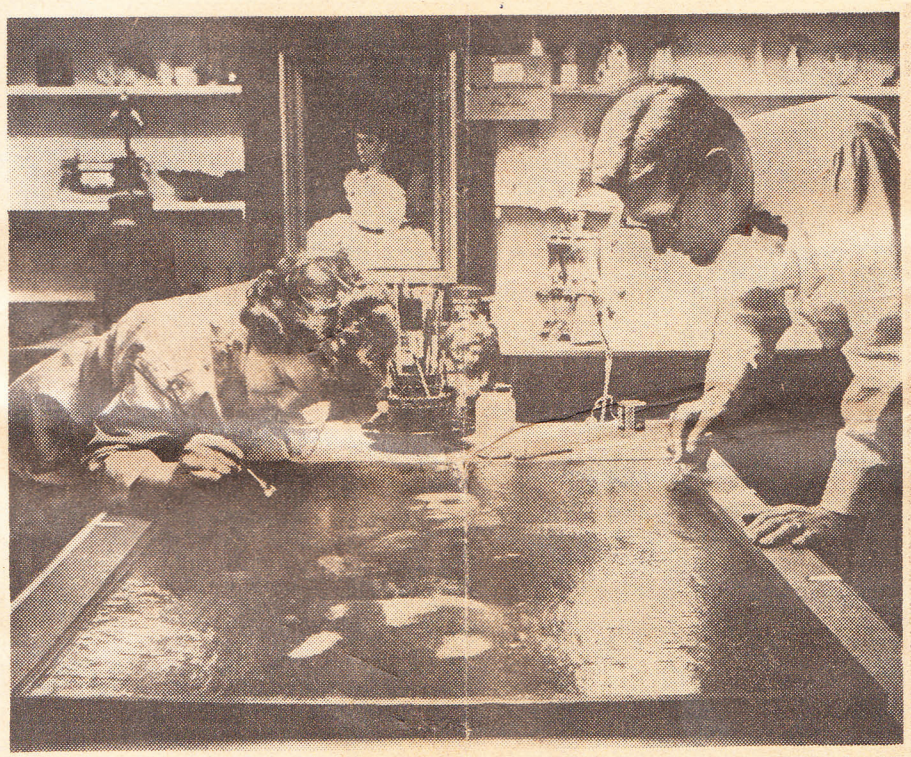
"THERE DEFINITELY is a shortage of trained conservators," Mr. Wiebold said as he and three assistants worked in his basement studio. "It should be a pretty interesting field for young people, but not many know of the need or of the course given in the subject in New York."

Mr. Wiebold said students take four years in undergraduate work before they enter the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. There, they take four years of graduate study in the Conservation Center before they obtain a master's degree in fine arts and a special diploma in conservation.

After two more years as an apprentice to a master conservator, the student is then prepared to tackle the difficult career.

"Simply said, we try to put back a work of art into as near the original condition as we can," Mr. Wiebold said.

Simply said . . . but extremely difficult to execute.



—Enquirer (Kain) Photo

CHARLES WIEBOLD and Cincinnati Art Academy student Anne Murray restoring portrait of a French commander by Antoine Vallin, painted in 1820, formerly of the John Wanamaker Jr. collection.

THE CONSERVATOR must carefully clear away the grime of centuries without marring the artist's inspiration. He must reunite ceramic fragments and leave no mark of his handiwork. He must mend ragged tears in canvas, iron out waves in the backings, fit old pictures into new frames—and never leave an obvious mark of their work.

"Our best work is invisible," Mr. Wiebold explained.

He and the others in the International Institute constantly learn more and better ways to perform the conservator's art.

CLUES TO THE skill, patience and knowledge of the conservator were evident in functions performed recently by Mr. Weibold and his assistants upon an 150-year-old portrait of an unknown French ambassador.

"The picture looked as it had gone through the War of 1812, feet first," Mr. Wiebold explained. "There were several big holes in it. There had been some bad retouching done about 100 years or so ago. The picture was cracked and wavy because of the drying action of paint and glue. It was a mess."

Encouraged by an understanding owner, Mr. Wiebold and his assistants started the year-long fight to restore the oil painting to the state it was when Jacques A. Vallin, 19th century French painter, added the last brush stroke.

Their steps:

• First, they authenticated the work, seeking to amass as much information about the work, the artist and the subject as possible.

• Then, they took the four-by-eight foot painting to a Cincinnati radiologist's office. There, the doctor used large and dental-sized machines to x-ray the picture. This x raying should have showed structural features. Nothing happened because the painter had used paint with high lead content. X rays will not penetrate lead.

THIS WAS NOT a total failure because we knew what sort of cleaning materials we can use with lead paint," Mr. Wiebold said.

• The conservators then took the painting to the Art Museum where ultraviolet and infrared photographs were made.

"This showed how much work had been done and where," he said. "The newer paint—the retoucher's jobs—showed darker than the untouched painting in the pictures. You couldn't see any difference with the naked eye."

• Then, they analyzed the paints used by the original artist and the previous retouchers. They then knew what fluids could be used safely to clean the painting.

• Their work was far from done. They had to remove the old rotting canvas from the back of the picture. Formerly, this would have meant six months of painstaking work. But modern chemistry came into play: Mr. Wiebold used enzymes, microscopic bacteria, to attack the old glue. But he had to be careful because the enzymes also eat paintings. The whole project took seven hours.)

• Then, they carefully put on a new backing, ironed out waves in the painting and remounted the painting on masonite.

• Finally, they took up the artistic work—the in-painting, the repair of time's wounds and scars.

"It's hard but rewarding," Mr. Wiebold said. "And it's important work. If an artist wants to make sure his work will live, he better have a good conservator."