

Alfred Baber fonds

Chemistry and Art
More Adventures of a Chemist Collector

Chapter 11 -
Lost Masterpieces and
Hannu Endim...

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES	
LOCATOR	5095.5
BOX	9
FILE	49

Chapter 11

Lost Masterpieces and Happy Endings

In my family's apartment in Vienna there were many paintings, only one of which I liked, a small seventeenth-century Dutch landscape. I know exactly where it was hanging in the salon, and when Mother began selling her belongings during the Depression, it was among the first to go. I missed it. I was already collecting stamps, but had no money, so I often spent my time peering through the windows of the city's art and antique dealers, where there were many interesting canvases. It was the seventeenth-century Dutch paintings that I saw in these shops – and during one or two visits to the Kunsthistorisches Museum and the Akademie – that I admired most. After my escape from Vienna in 1938, however, all connection to this world of painting ended for nearly a decade.

When I went to Harvard in 1947, I had the good fortune of attending a number of lectures by Jakob Rosenberg on Rembrandt and his circle. That was it. I was hooked, and since my first purchase of an Old Master from Dr Paul Drey in New York, my love of paintings has brought me into contact with art historians, museum directors, and curators around the world.



These gifted and zealous experts have added great richness to my life. One such individual was Edward Dwight. In 1956, as director of the Milwaukee Art Institute, he mounted the beautiful exhibition *Still Life Painting Since 1470*. This was the first such exhibition that I saw in Milwaukee; I loved it and introduced myself to Dwight. As a result of the friendship that developed between us and the help and encouragement he gave me, I made my first gifts of art to the institute. Over the years, I donated about forty paintings to its collection. Some of these are masterpieces; some are not so good. It took me years to be able to tell the difference, but exploring this world with so many insightful people has been a wonderful journey. It is this interaction of collectors with directors and curators that has resulted in so many gifts to American museums.

Until 29 May 2001, none of my gifts had been deaccessioned, but on 30 April of that year Russell Bowman, then the director of the Milwaukee Art Museum, sent me a letter with a list of ten that were soon to be auctioned. I replied on 4 May: ...I can understand the need for deaccessioning, but would it not make sense to discuss with living donors what their thoughts are before the decision is made? There is one decision that I really question and that is the one regarding the Berchem.^(fig.) Winters [Laurie Winters, a curator at the Milwaukee Art Museum] questioned whether this painting is really by Berchem, but I have no doubt whatsoever, as explained in entry 4 of *The Detective's Eye: Investigating the Old Masters*, a catalogue for the exhibition that Isabel and I guest curated for the



Milwaukee Art Museum in 1989. I don't know of any art historian anywhere who knows as much about just such paintings as Professor Wolfgang Stechow at Oberlin knew. And he didn't just decide on the basis of a photograph, but had the original painting there for study. If you have sent that painting for auction, then at least I hope that the auction house will have the good sense of referring to *The Detective's Eye* entry and Professor Stechow's clear opinion. The Art Museum has no work by Berchem, so the first question in my mind was: Why do you deaccession it?

Sadly, Mr. Bowman did not write in reply, and on 29 May Christie's East offered the Berchem as lot 108, by "C. Iwry," an unrecorded artist. There was no reference to *The Detective's Eye*, where there is a detailed, two-page description of the painting, with signature and date, 1650. A perceptive buyer paid \$3,760. Unfortunately, I was leaving for England on the day of the sale and didn't have the good sense to leave a bid for this or any of the other paintings.

Laurie Winters, the MAM's Curator of Earlier European Art, has argued that while examining the work she discovered the signature "Iwry" – a "well-known copyist and imitator of Berchem who supplied the English market in the 18th century..." She says the piece would have been offered for sale as a "possible Berchem" if she and her associates had not been thoroughly convinced that it was the work of another artist. She makes the case that once the signature was discovered the museum was morally and legally bound to sell it as an Iwry, that



anything else would have been fraud. Finally, she suggests that she and Russell Bowman decided not to mention *The Detective's Eye* in the sale catalogue so that I would be spared "embarrassment" over my "misattribution."

I would not have been embarrassed at all, because the firm attribution to Berchem came from Wolf Stechow, and the signature is Berchem's.^(fig.) Iwry, the "well-known copyist and imitator of Berchem" Winters refers to, is totally unknown, and the name probably resulted from a misreading of Berchem's signature.

Christie's entry of lot 108 alleged that the painting is indistinctly signed CIWRY and referred to a July 1959 sale at Christie's London, that sold this as "C.IVRY signed with monogram." The 1959 sale preceded Stechow's identification of the signature as Berchem's. The two references to an IWRY or IVRY in the Christie's entries are the only ones I have ever seen.

Another work that was deaccessioned was lot 114, a fine portrait of a Flemish officer, circa 1635, so thickly painted that I thought it might have been done for a blind person. It was in fine condition, and I wondered if it was being removed from the museum's collection simply because there was, as yet, no attribution. I learned that a knowledgeable young collector, Avram Saban of Florida, bought it for \$4,113. At least this seemed to me a happy ending, since Mr Saban was very pleased with his acquisition.



Another happy ending came to lot 119, by Jan van der Venne, also known as the Pseudo van der Venne. Although it too was described in *The Detective's Eye*, Christie's stated that the artist was Dutch rather than Flemish. The H F Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University bought it for \$4,700. The museum's director, Frank Robinson, was an old friend, and he wrote to me in July 2001: "Just a note to say that this museum just bought your beautiful Jan van de Venne, *A Family Making Music*. We are delighted with it; it is full of the tenderness and realism of this exceptional artist." (Perhaps we should have given the painting to Cornell in the first place.)

In addition to these ten paintings that I had given to the Milwaukee Art Museum, several others were deaccessioned. But all of these, I believe, were unimportant compared to a painting that was deaccessioned in October 2001. This was *The Battle of Gibraltar* for which the artist, Joseph Wright of Derby, was paid £420, the largest sum he ever received for any of his paintings. The purchaser in 1786 was John Milnes of Wakefield who had already amassed one of the largest Wright of Derby collections over a period of some twenty years.

With this painting, as with so many of my art purchases, luck had played a great part. In 1967, Milwaukee dealer Tom Lenz and I purchased some eighty paintings from the Laura Davidson Sears Academy of Fine Arts in Elgin, Illinois.



Among these was an enormous *Battle of Gibraltar*, attributed to John Singleton Copley. The pupils at the school had not treated it kindly; all sorts of things, from balls to arrows, had been thrown at it. It had probably been badly restored even before Judge Nathaniel C. Sears bought it in 1923 from the well-known Ehrich Gallery in New York, which had it relined with sailcloth at a cost of \$71.

Tom Lenz and I agreed that he would prepare a handsome catalogue of the Elgin Academy paintings, which he offered in the Lenz Art Gallery between 1968 and 1970. Many of them were photographed, but the oil on canvas *Battle of Gibraltar*, at 61 inches by 93 ½ inches, was too big to be photographed and did not sell, perhaps because of its size. After two years with the Lenz Art Gallery, the few unsold paintings came to me, the Copley *Gibraltar* among them. I was not much interested in battle scenes, and there was certainly no room for the painting on the walls of our home. It went into the basement.

Luck, however, stepped in once again. I had become good friends with Benedict Nicolson, the great art historian and editor of the *Burlington Magazine*, considered the most important art historical magazine in Britain. He was interested in art in all its forms, and had written the definitive books on Terbrugghen, Georges de La Tour, and the followers of Caravaggio. He had recently completed a two-volume work on Wright of Derby, and although I was not particularly interested in this artist, I wanted to read Ben's book. In Chapter 8, I



came upon a lengthy description of a *Battle of Gibraltar*, whose location was unknown. As I read his discussion of this missing painting, I became more and more excited. I wondered: could it possibly be the "Copley" in my basement? Ben had written:

On 13th September 1782 the British garrison at Gibraltar decisively defeated the Spanish floating batteries, thereby restoring some of that British prestige which had been shaken by the loss of the American colonies...The subject was an obvious one for any history painter following in the footsteps of Benjamin West, and most of all for Wright whose specialty was fire, and who could visualize the contribution he alone could make to the events of that memorable day: the firing of red-hot missiles at the Spanish ships; the ensuing conflagration in the harbor; the dramatic feature of the Mole; the proud garrison standing back to survey the blaze...He worked hard on the picture during 1784, as far as failing health and torpor would permit, finishing it on 17th February the following year...He also thought of raffling the picture, but was relieved of this necessity by the appearance of Maecenas in the guise of John Milnes who carted the vast canvas off to Yorkshire, paying him a more handsome sum for it than he had received for any other work.



I now had a great incentive to find out more about this large canvas and decided to send it, without the frame, to Mary D Randall, a conservator in London. I asked her to reline it, to remove the large amounts of overpaint, and then to ask Benedict to look at it. She put a great deal of work into this project over many months. When finally Ben saw the canvas stripped, he could see that it was in very poor condition but came to the conclusion that it was in fact the missing Wright of Derby. He and I talked at length about this discovery – my first foray into the work of this major British artist – and when it was returned to Milwaukee, I offered it to the Milwaukee Art Center (as our museum was then known). In January 1973, they bought it with funds given in memory of Paula Uihlein by the Charleston Foundation, which she had created.

Once *The Battle of Gibraltar* was on view at the Art Center, Professor Damie Stillman, the chairman of the Art History Department of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, became very interested in it and directed one of his students, Biruta Erdmann, to mount an exhibition and to submit a paper to the *Burlington Magazine*. Benedict Nicolson accepted the piece, and it was published in May 1974 (volume 116, pp. 270-272). Ms Erdmann began her paper,

This painting (lent by the Milwaukee Art Center) and Wright's two drawings, the *Sea Battle* and *British Gunboat in Action* (lent by the Derby Museum and Art Gallery), were exhibited at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Art



History Gallery, from 27th February through 27th March 1973. This exhibition was designed to clarify the authorship of the painting, which was previously listed as attributed to Copley.

This paper cleared up everything – or so I thought, until I looked at the Christie's East catalogue of October 2001. There, as lot 46 from the Milwaukee Art Museum, was *The Siege of Gibraltar* listed as a work by a follower of Joseph Wright of Derby, with an estimate of \$8,000 - \$12,000. There was no provenance of any kind, not even a mention of its being a gift from the Charleston Foundation in memory of Paula Uihlein, nothing about Benedict Nicolson's opinion, and no reference to the seminal paper in the *Burlington Magazine*.

Should I try to buy it back? Years earlier, I had helped Queen's University to purchase a collection of seven small landscapes by Wright of Derby. Now I suddenly had the opportunity to add Wright's most ambitious work to the Queen's collection. But would either the Getty or the Yale Center for British Art see this Christie's entry and connect it with the *Burlington Magazine* paper of 1974? To the Yale Center, it would of course have been clear that the painting was historically very important, even in its poor condition. If either institution bid, I believed I would have no chance. Hope springs eternal, however, and I asked my old friend, Otto Naumann, to send his secretary to bid for Queen's up to \$100,000. As it turned out, there was only one other bidder, and the painting was sold to Queen's for \$10,000.



The MAM had shipped the painting without its frame in order to save money; I was delighted to be able to buy it from the museum and reunite painting and frame, which I believe may be the original, chosen by Wright himself. I was very pleased that the museum also gave me its files on the *Gibraltar*, which included some interesting, and to me unknown, correspondence from a very able art historian and collector in London, Dr Gert-Rudolf Flick. Dr Flick had first written to the Milwaukee Art Museum in 1998 requesting a photograph and any assistance they could give regarding the *Battle of Gibraltar* listed in the *Burlington Magazine* of May 1974 as attributed to Wright of Derby. He knew that Judy Egerton of the Tate Gallery believed it was not by Wright, but he hoped he could trace the painting to a sale in 1921. As a result of the documentation he received from Milwaukee, he became convinced that the painting was indeed by Wright of Derby. When I received the file on the painting and read these letters, I contacted Dr Flick and learned that he was working on a book, *Missing Masterpieces, Lost Works of Art 1450-1900*, and had planned to include the *Battle of Gibraltar*, but would not now do so.

In the introduction to his fascinating book, published in 2002, Dr Flick wrote,

As I began to research the subject, it soon became clear that many works of art which were listed as missing had either been destroyed or were in fact

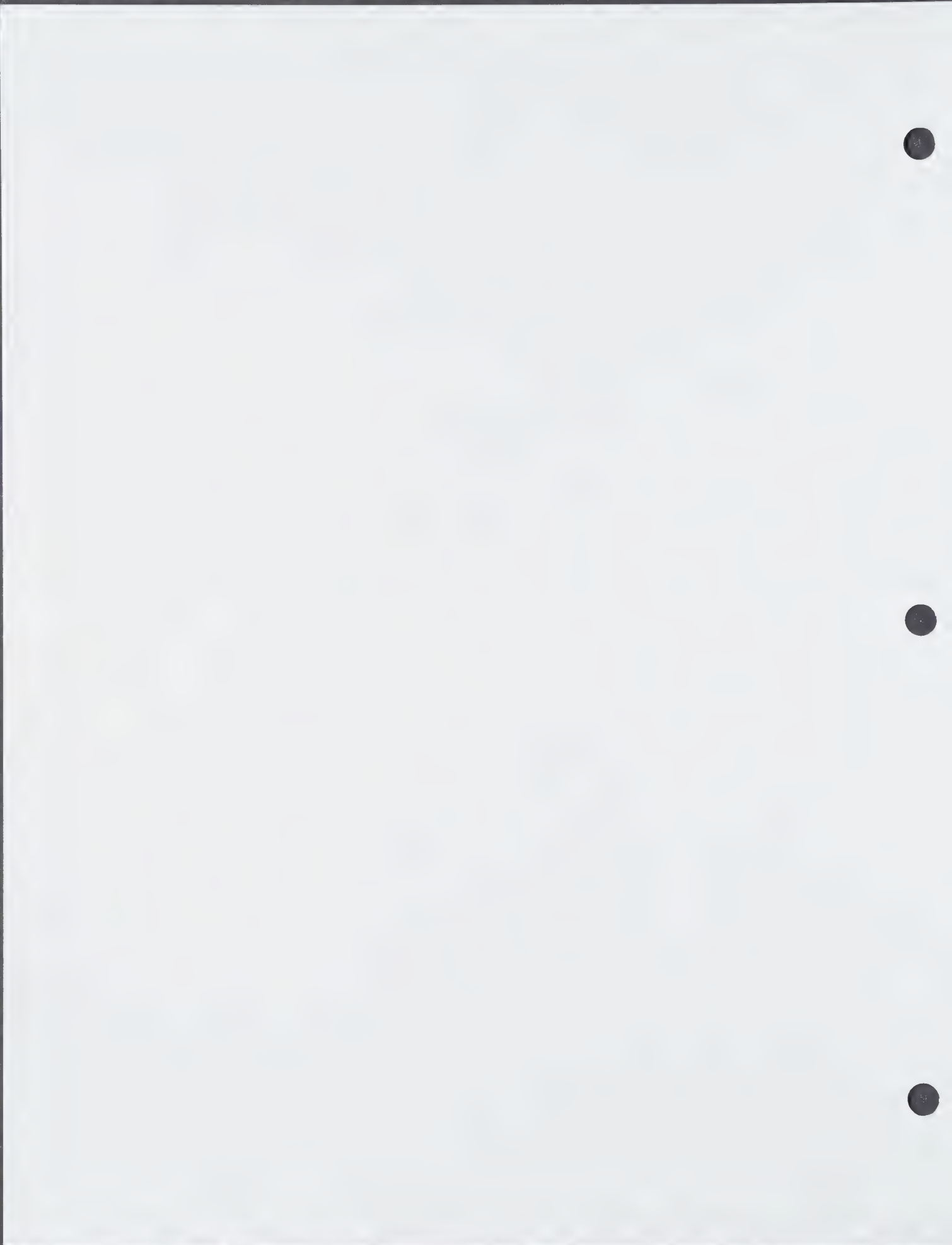


extant. For example, a painting of *The Siege of Gibraltar* in the Milwaukee Art Museum (U.S.A.) was sold recently as by a 'Follower of Joseph Wright of Derby', but has now been firmly identified as the original by Wright of Derby – the very painting that was always thought to be missing. In this case the difficulty in making the correct identification arose from the ruinous state of preservation of the painting, which made a comparison with preparatory drawings hazardous, although not impossible.

Why were these paintings deaccessioned without literature references? Was it the confluence of a director who was just not knowledgeable about the paintings, a hard-working curator, Laurie Winters, who was not experienced in deaccessioning, and Christie's careless omissions?

The Milwaukee Art Museum and especially its curator Laurie Winters have enjoyed great successes in recent years, giving them reason for confidence. She has succeeded brilliantly in bringing a wonderful collection of art, including a Leonardo, from Poland. Moreover, the new Calatrava wing (a 2002 addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava) really put Milwaukee on the art world map.

When I asked her why she did not send literature references with the Berchem and the Wright of Derby to Christie's, she told me that such references



might have undermined her research. This surprised me, because the inclusion in the catalogue of provenance and literature references would surely have increased interest and the prices realized. Laurie had indeed studied the problem of the *Gibraltar*. She had received a letter from Judy Egerton, at the Tate Gallery in London, who had looked at the painting very carefully in 1986, and had written to the museum,

...I cannot believe that it is by Joseph Wright of Derby, even though Benedict Nicolson came to think so. There is a lumpishness about the figures, and a failure to extract maximum light and shade effects from the burning ships, that would never have suggested Wright's name to me, though I agree that now we have to find the missing Wright.

In her 1990 catalogue for a Wright of Derby exhibition, she wrote that it "is now widely thought not to be by Wright." Other art historians concurred, some suggesting Louthembourg as the artist. One of the guiding spirits of our museum is Dr Myron (Ronnie) Laskin, who has great knowledge, particularly about Italian art, and possesses a wonderful visual memory. He told me that he did not believe Benedict Nicolson could possibly have accepted the *Gibraltar*—but in fact he did, both verbally and in writing, and he was the editor of the *Burlington Magazine* when Biruta Erdmann's article was published in 1974. Nicolson's opinion is also included in "Wright of Derby: Addenda and Corrigenda," published posthumously in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1998. As I have said many times, it is possible to be



convinced *and* mistaken. Yet even if Ben and I had been mistaken about the attribution of the *Gibraltar* to Wright of Derby, surely giving the literature references and Nicolson's opinion would have aroused more interest in this work. Surprisingly, Christie's did have the reference to the *Burlington Magazine* article, but Sarah Lidsey, the Vice President of Old Master Paintings, was so certain that the painting could not be by Wright of Derby that Christie's decided not to include this important reference.

It is certainly true that the painting was in very poor condition, but as soon as Queen's University's Agnes Etherington Art Centre received the canvas, the decision was made to search further for information. A provenance researcher in London, James Mulraine, found that the *Battle of Gibraltar*, last recorded as a Wright of Derby in the Overstone Park Collection catalogue of 1877, was sold in a sale of *that* collection in 1921. However, at that time, the painting had no attribution and was sold nameless by the minor auction gallery Curtis & Henson, which simply described lot 982 as hanging in a hall corridor, "A large gallery painting, *Naval Battle Scene at Night*." The Ehrich Gallery in New York, which acquired it, labeled it "Copley" and offered it as such to Judge Sears in Elgin, Illinois, in 1923.

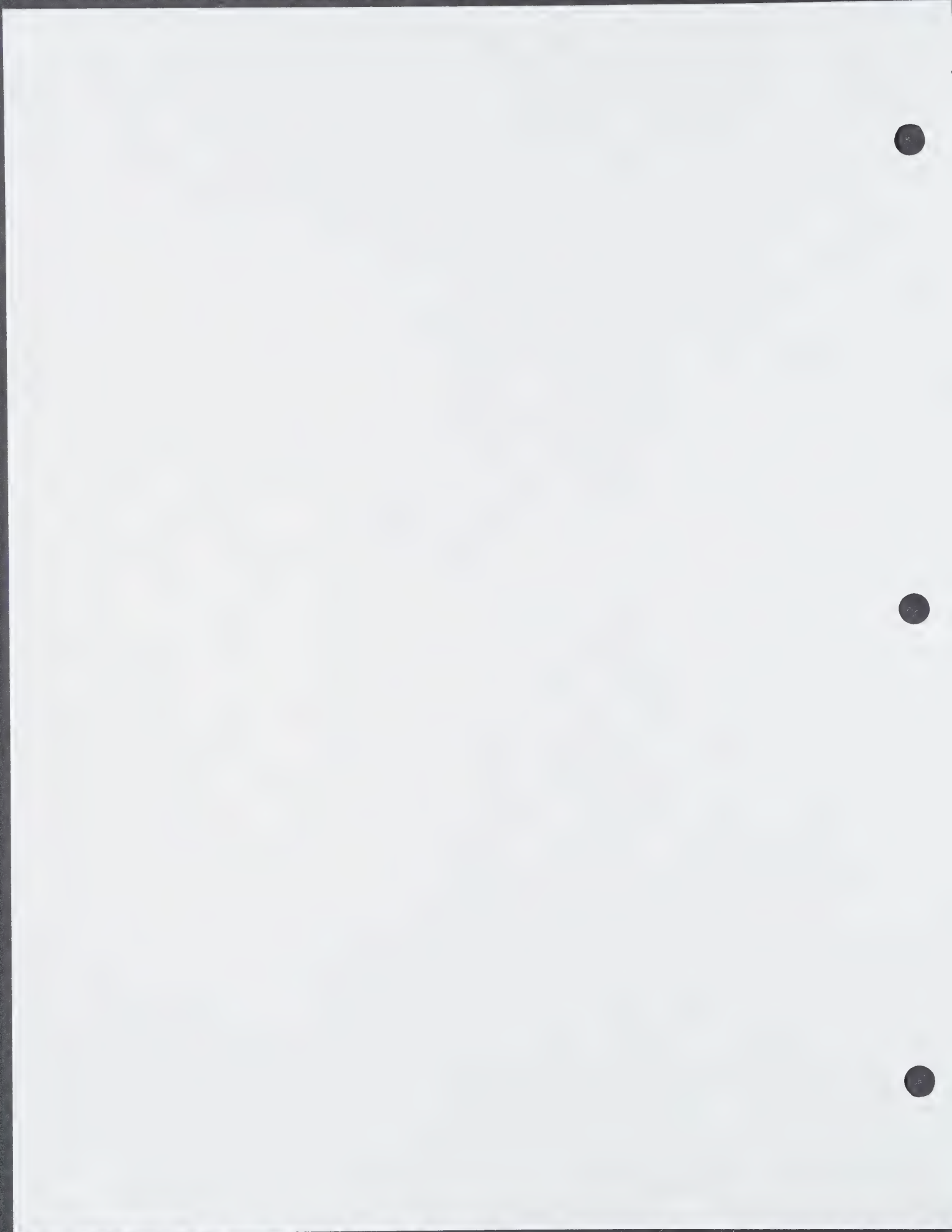
Recently Queen's sent the *Gibraltar* to a Canadian government laboratory in Ottawa for extensive tests, and then employed a conservator, Barbara Klempan, to



continue the process of conserving the painting properly. This painstaking work is now completed. There can no longer be any doubt that this is Wright of Derby's *Battle of Gibraltar*.^(fig.)

As Dr David de Witt, the Curator at Queen's, has written, Even before the cleaning, this canvas reflected Joseph Wright of Derby's sense of atmosphere and monumentality, in the large proportion of the composition given over to the sky, filled with billowing clouds and dramatized with contrasts of light and colour. But the cleaning went on to reveal daring, lively brushwork, with direct strokes and even his characteristic scratches with the butt end of the brush. Most importantly, however, was the revelation of several scenarios of firelight reflected off fabric, wood, figures and faces, in the burning ship at the left edge, the exploding barges at the centre, and especially in the dynamic figures in the boats to the lower right. These remarkable passages showcase the particular achievement of which Wright of Derby was himself proud: the rendering of artificial light in night scenes.

The importance of this painting was stressed in a letter I received from Dr John Bonehill at the University of Leicester in June 2005. He told me that he and Dr Matthew Craske in Oxford were collaborating in a study of Wright's one-man exhibition of 1785 in which *The Battle of Gibraltar* was the centerpiece. Dr



Bonehill had learned from Christie's in New York that I had bought their view of *Gibraltar* by a "follower" of Wright of Derby, and he was interested in this copy. When I sent him our provenance he was very excited to learn that the "copy" is in fact the original, and he now looks forward to seeing the conserved painting.

There is no question that museums have received many gifts – and have even made purchases – that prove less than important (and sometimes embarrassing). These take up space, and money from their sale can certainly be put to good use, but any deaccession should be undertaken with great care. The director, curators, and board of trustees should work together – to share their knowledge, expertise, and their hunches. Members of an institution's brain trust may have decades of experience under their belts, but there is always something to be said for thorough consideration, attention to detail, and open-mindedness. Needless to say, every effort should be made to obtain the highest possible price for items sold. Finally, if donors are alive, I believe they should be contacted to discuss deaccession and to provide their own insights.

The Milwaukee Art Museum has a very fine collection, which today is housed in a spectacular new building. It has taken many daring steps to become one of the world's great art institutions. But along the way it has allowed some of its intriguing treasures to slip away. One of these now resides at Queen's University's



Agnes Etherington Art Centre, to the delight of staff and visitors. And so, at least, we can reflect on yet another painting's long journey, and eventual happy ending.

