

Alfred Baber Fonds

Chemistry and Art  
More Adventures of a Chemist Collector

Adventures II -  
Milwaukee Art Museum

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES	
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## **David Gordon's suggested paragraphs for a section of Alfred Bader Volume II**

A few days after David Gordon arrived in Milwaukee to take up the position of Director and CEO, I asked a museum staff member who lived near me, Brian Ferriso, to ask David if he had known a woman called Tania Gordon.

I had met Tania in 195\* on a business trip to London. The head of my British company, my good friend Ralph Emmanuel, took me to the Hampstead Synagogue, and introduced me to an extremely lively and outspoken fellow member of the congregation, Tania Gordon. I met her and her husband Sholom several times. Tania's rather larger than life personality made an indelible impression on me and I was eager to know if David knew her.

David knew her rather well. He came to see me immediately and revealed that Tania was none other than his mother. Thus began a new chapter in my relationship with the museum.

David has an unusual background for a museum director and indeed an unusual career, full of unexpected moves. After studying Politics, Philosophy and Economics at the University of Oxford, he did post-graduate economics at the London School of Economics. Economics was not for him – he did not complete his Masters - and so he trained as what the British call a Chartered Accountant (CPA). On completing his training he moved into journalism as a business writer for the esteemed weekly newsmagazine, *The Economist*. Ten years later he was plunged into the management of *The Economist* to sort out the company's ill-judged venture into printing. Having succeeded in extracting *The Economist* from the clutches of the pre-Thatcher printing unions, he was made Chief Executive in 1981. He was Chief executive for 12 years, during which time the circulation went up from 180,000 to over 500,000, profits grew dramatically and new publications were started. Having spent nearly 25 years at *The Economist*, green pastures lured him and he became chief executive of a television news company, ITN (which supplies news packages to the MacNeil Hour on PBS in the US). But the grass was not greener. He and Mr Michael Green, the chairman of ITN, did not see eye to eye on the basic values of a news company, and after two years David left.

David was then approached by the Royal Academy of Arts to become its Secretary – an Eighteenth Century title for a job which has most of the attributes of Director. The Academy had suffered a major fraud and its administration and finances were in disarray. David had been approached by the Academy's exhibitions impresario, Norman Rosenthal, who had met David when *The Economist* sponsored the Inigo Jones exhibition at the Academy. David did an amazingly good job at the Royal Academy. It made a surplus for each of the next five years. An excellent team was assembled. He had a hand in exhibitions both worthy – Van Dyke – and notorious – Sensation (Charles Saatchi's collection of the sort of art for which I have no appreciation). Cobwebs were swept away. New donors and benefactors were brought in.

1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that proper record-keeping is essential for the integrity of the financial system and for the ability to detect and prevent fraud.

### 2. The second part of the document outlines the specific procedures for recording transactions, including the use of standardized forms and the requirement for double-entry bookkeeping.

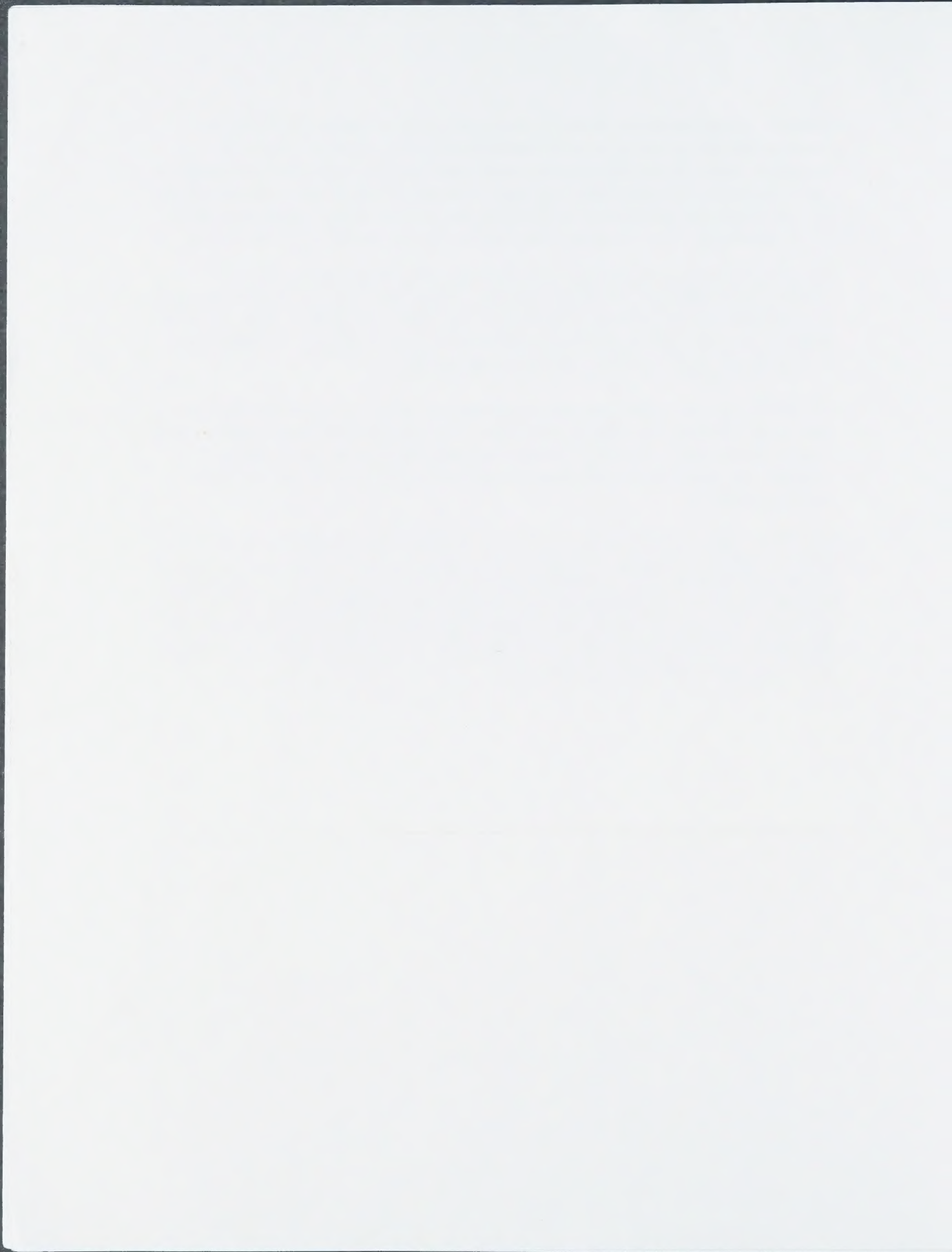
3. The third part of the document discusses the role of internal controls in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of financial information. It highlights the importance of segregation of duties, authorization, and regular audits.

However, this did not please all the Academicians. Since its foundation in 1768 the Academy has been governed by an elected President and a council of artists and architects. While this may have served a small club of artists, by the 1990s the Academy – a business with revenues of \$30m had outgrown its governance. Rather than recognize this, and reform the constitution, the Presidents David served tried to reassert control by the Academicians. After six years of hard labour, David decided enough was enough.

The specialist arts headhunter, Nancy Nichols, found him for the Milwaukee Art Museum, an institution with which I have had a long and not always happy relationship, and we quickly formed a friendly relationship. David loves art but he is not a trained art historian or curator, and would not claim to be deeply knowledgeable. He admits what he does not know and listens carefully to people who do know.

The problem facing the Museum is that the beautiful Calatrava extension and the other works undertaken to reorganize the museum and create the gardens cost some \$25m more than the money raised. The money-raising was going well until the stock market collapsed by which time the project had grown in scope and some aspects cost much more than budgeted.

I decided to make a dramatic gesture to express my gratitude to the City in which I have lived since 1950, and to help out a Director who was trying his best to overcome some of the mistaken procedures of the past (see pages xx on deaccessioning). Since I had given my collection to my alma mater (see volume I of my autobiography), and could therefore not make a significant donation of art, I gave a significant donation of money on behalf of my family. I gave the full \$25m. The Museum was good enough to call the older part of the building the Bader Wing in gratitude.



July 28, 2003

Mr. David Tobias Gordon, Director  
Milwaukee Art Museum  
750 North Lincoln Memorial Drive  
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Dear David,

Thank you so much for your letter of May 28<sup>th</sup> and your proposed addition to my next book. Clearly you put a great deal of thought into this and of course I just could not help laughing and thinking about it, but then just as I stopped laughing, Isabel showed me the article in yesterday's *Journal* which quotes Sheldon Lubar's assurance that he can raise "all \$24.6 million in the next year". Obviously I am not needed for a major contribution, but would like to help you in the future advising you which great paintings the Art Museum should acquire after Mr. Lubar has succeeded.

With all good wishes from house to house I remain

Yours sincerely,

Alfred Bader  
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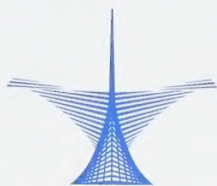
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MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

May 28, 2003

Dear Alfred

Many thanks for your letters of May 22 and 27<sup>th</sup>.

Support groups have in the past limited attendance at "their" events to members. This policy is being changed so that any lecture at the Museum will be open to members and the general public. You deserve a bigger audience.

On your draft chapter: I will share it to Laurie, but I think it should be down to you to send it to Ronnie Larkin.

When you asked me for my resume some weeks ago, I decided to ghost-write that section of your autobiography. You will see that it has a fairy-tale ending - but I hope that some of it comes true !!

Yours in chutzpah

David



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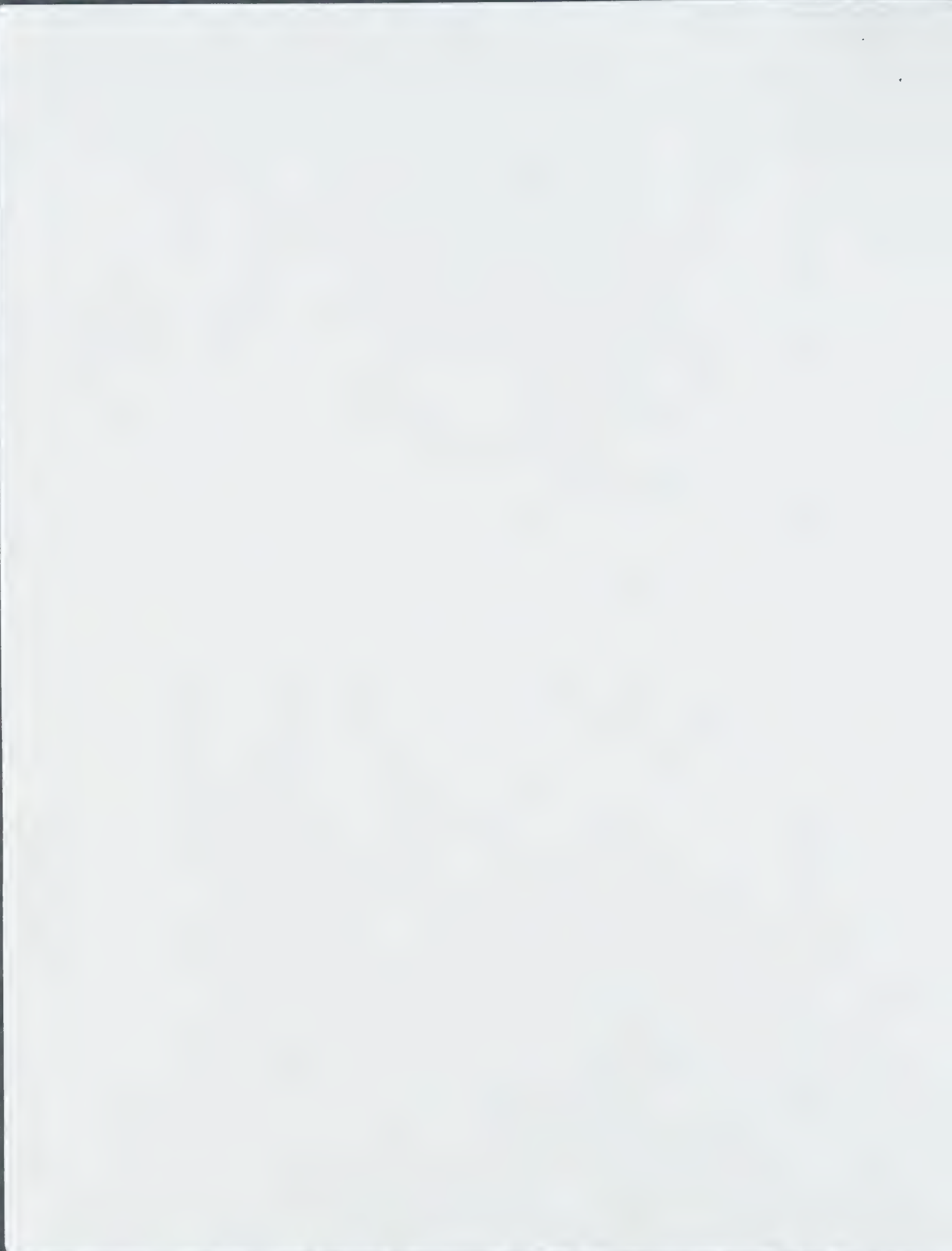
Museums often deaccession paintings, sometimes carefully, sometimes – to put it mildly – without care. None with less care than the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Over the years, beginning in the 1950's, we have given some forty paintings to the Milwaukee Art Museum. Some of these are masterpieces; some are not so good. It took me years to be able to tell the difference. Until May 29, 2001 none was deaccessioned. A month before that date, on April 30, Russell Bowman, then the Director of the Milwaukee Art Museum sent me a letter with a list of ten of my gifts to be deaccessioned. I replied on May 4,

“ . . . 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. Dr. Winters questioned whether this painting is really by Berchem, but I have no doubt whatsoever, as explained in entry 4 of *The Detective's Eye* catalogue. I don't know of any art historian anywhere who knows as much about just such paintings as Professor 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.

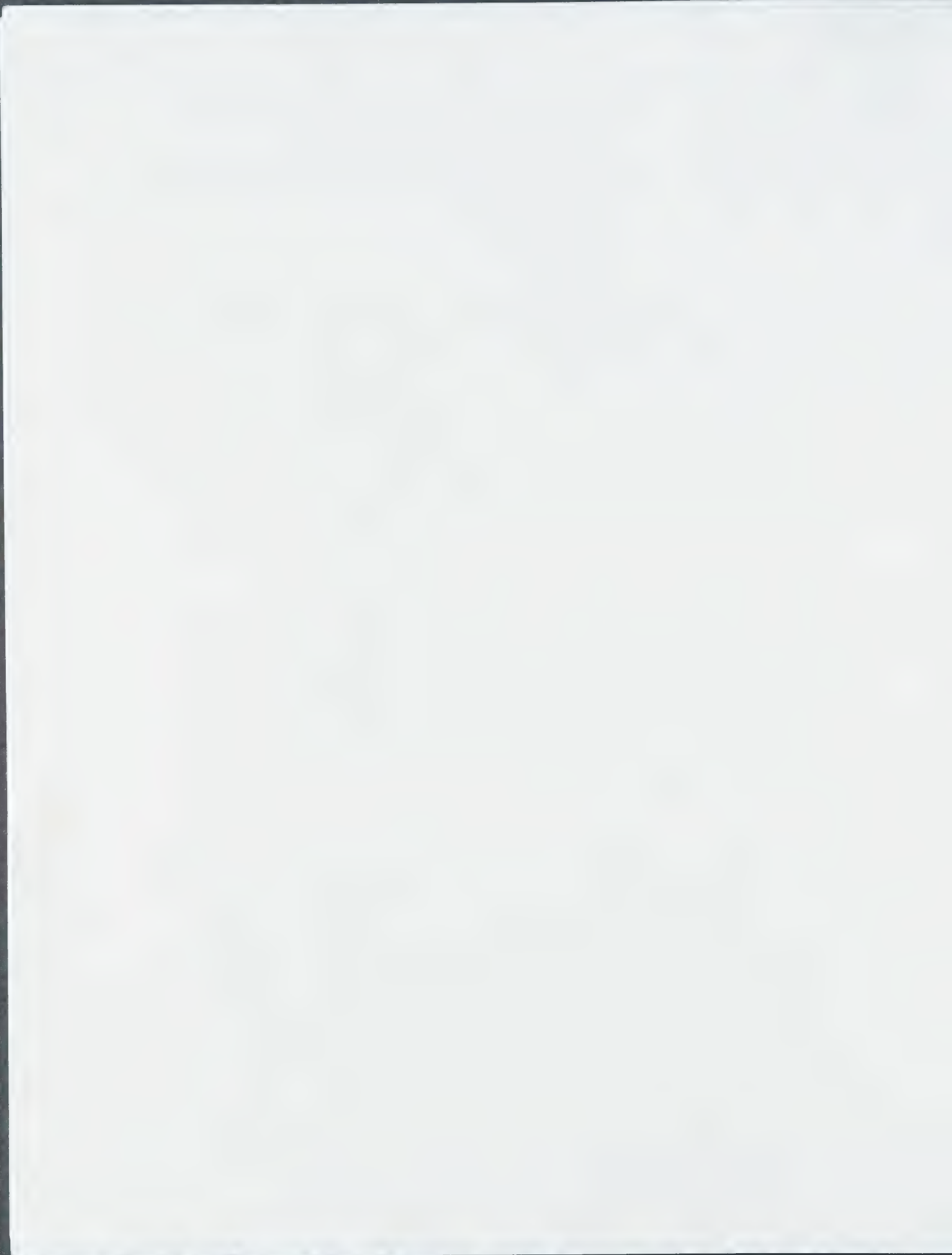


The Art Museum has no work by Berchem, so the first question in my mind was: why do you deaccession it? . . .”

Sadly, Mr. Bowman did not discuss the matter with me and on May 29<sup>th</sup> Christie’s East offered the Berchem without any reference to the Milwaukee Art Museum’s *Detective’s Eye* catalogue, where there is a detailed two page description of the painting, with signature and date, 1650, reproduced. Christie’s offered it as lot 108, by C. Iwry, an unrecorded artist. A perceptive buyer paid \$3760. Sadly, I was leaving for England on the day of the sale and didn’t have the good sense to bid on this and other paintings.

One other painting which was deaccessioned was Christie’s lot 114, a fine portrait of a Flemish officer, circa 1635, so thickly painted that I thought it might have been painted for a blind person. It was deaccessioned simply because there was as yet no attribution, although it was in mint condition, and it was acquired for \$4113 by a knowledgeable young collector, Avram Saban, in Florida.

Sometimes there were really happy endings to these. Lot 119, by Jan van der Venne, also known as the Pseudo van der Venne, had also been described in *The Detective’s Eye* exhibition catalogue. Christie’s stated that this artist was Dutch rather than Flemish and it was bought by the H.F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University for \$4700. The Museum’s Director, Frank Robinson, an old friend, wrote to me in July 2001:



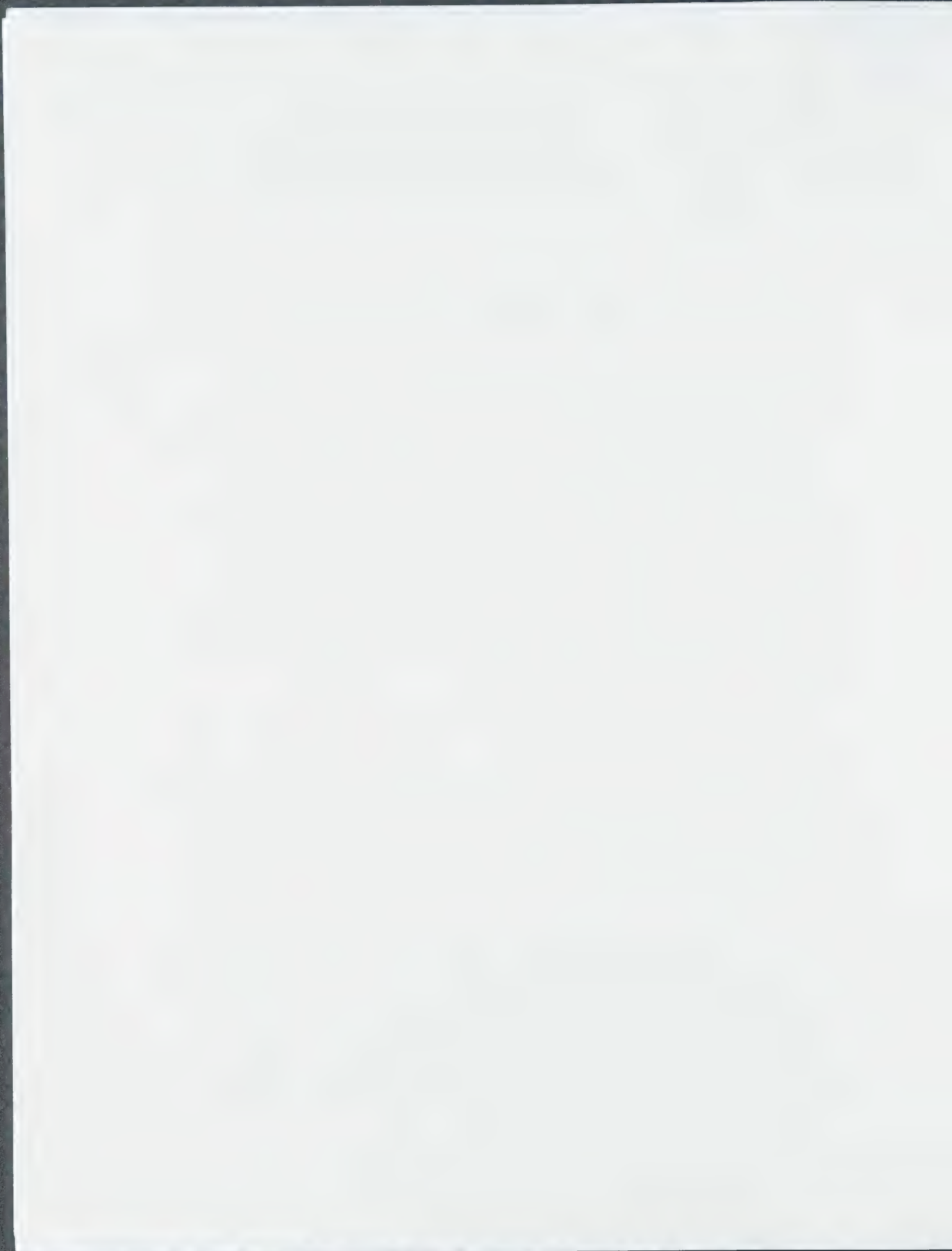
“Just a note to say that this museum just bought your beautiful Jan van de Venne, A Family Making Music. We are delighted with it; it is full of the tenderness and realism of this exceptional artist.”

Perhaps we should have given the painting to Cornell in the first place.

These deaccessions – ten of my gifts and others from some of the Milwaukee Art Museum’s major donors, for instance Mr. & Mrs. William D. Vogel, Mr. & Mrs. Richard Flagg and Mrs. Catherine Jean Quirk - were unimportant compared to a painting deaccessioned in October 2001. This was, I believe, *The Battle of Gibraltar* for which the artist, Joseph Wright of Derby, was paid £420 in 1786: the largest sum he ever received for one of his paintings. It was bought by John Milnes of Wakefield who had amassed one of the largest Wright of Derby collections over a period of some twenty years.

The great art historian and editor of the Burlington Magazine, Benedict Nicolson, was the expert of the works of Wright of Derby. In his book on the artist, published in 1968, he discussed the lost painting on pp. 159 and 160:

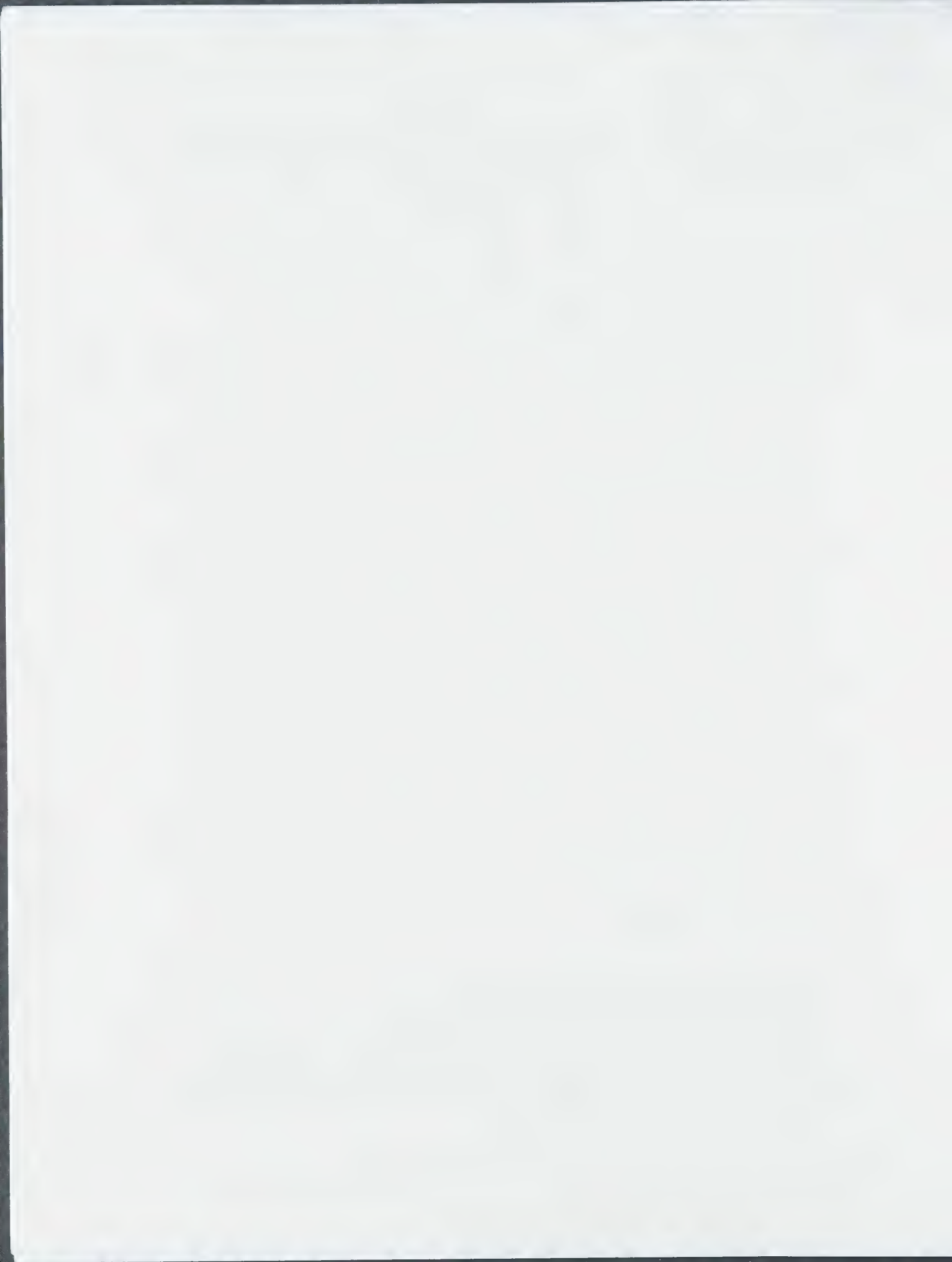
“We know more about the genesis of the *View of Gibraltar during the destruction of the Spanish Floating Batteries* (Cat No 245) than about any other picture except the *Corinthian Maid* and his scene from *The Tempest*, but in its absence it would be depressing to enter into too many details. One is not grateful to, but curses, the guide





who points at the blank walls of the Palais des Papes at Avignon and goes into raptures about frescoes that are no longer there. A few facts only need be recorded. On 13<sup>th</sup> 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 news had the same effect on public opinion in England as the Suez operation of 1956 would have had, if it had proved a triumph instead of a dismal failure. 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 harbour; 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 17<sup>th</sup> February of the following year. . .Wright had the idea of painting two pictures as companions: in the first (the only one executed) 'to represent an extensive view of the scenery combined with the action'; in the second 'to make the action his principal object'. 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 believe that through a real bit of luck I had found that lost masterpiece in 1967, although at the time I did not realize it. A Milwaukee dealer, Tom Lenz, and I purchased some eighty paintings from the Laura Davidson Sears Academy of Fine Arts in Elgin, Illinois.

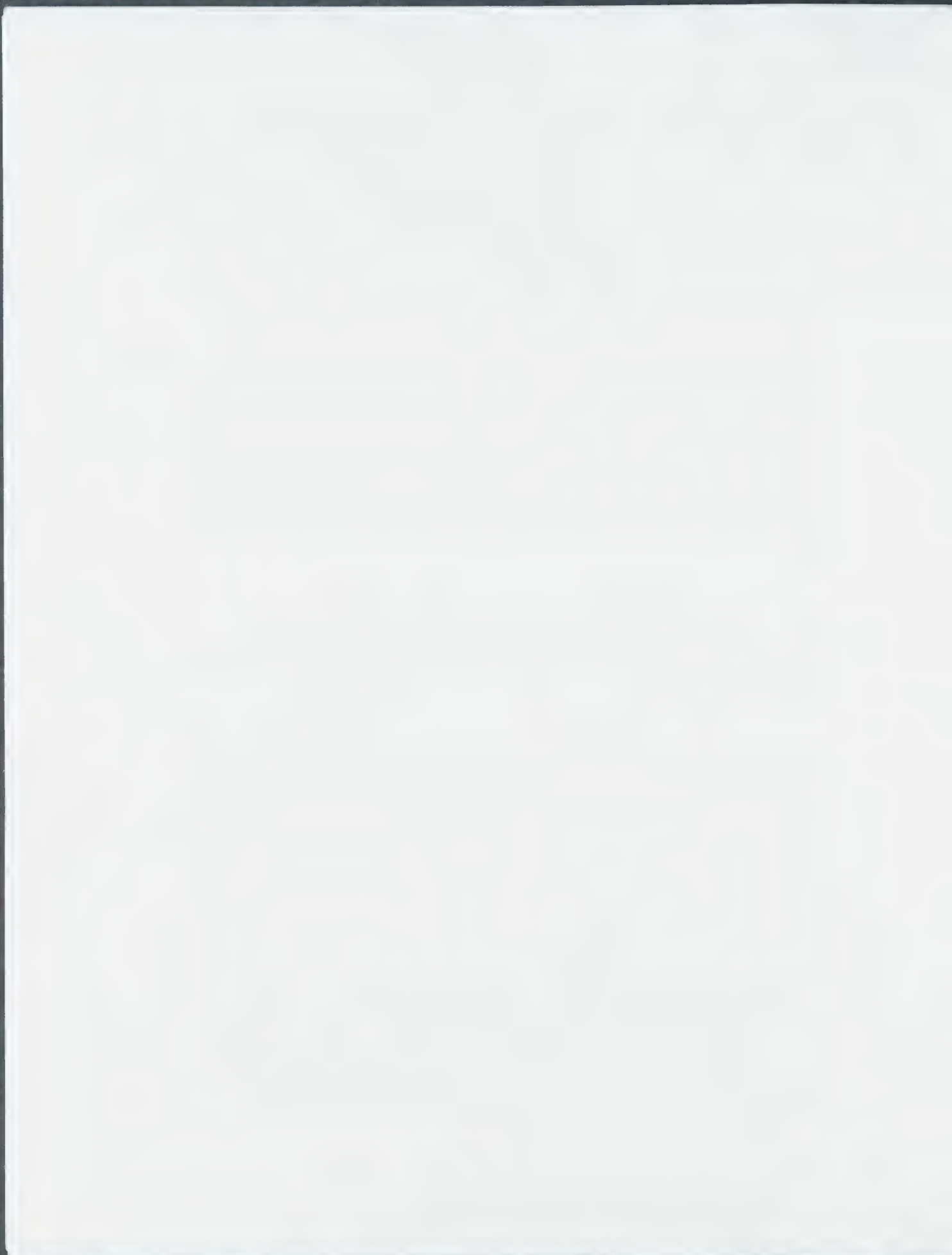


Among these was an enormous *Battle of Gibraltar*, attributed to John Singleton Copley. The students in the Academy had not treated it kindly; all sorts of things, from arrows to balls, had been thrown at it. I believe it had been mistreated even before that with a great deal of overpaint, and when Judge Nathaniel C. Sears bought it from the well known Ehrich gallery in New York it was re-lined with sailcloth at a cost of \$72.

Tom Lenz prepared a handsome catalogue of the Elgin Academy paintings which he offered in the Lenz Art Gallery between 1968 and 1970. Many of the paintings were photographed, but the *Siege of Gibraltar*, oil on canvas, 61" x 93-1/2", attributed to Copley, was too big to be photographed and did not sell, probably because it was so large.

After two years with the Lenz Art Gallery, the few unsold paintings came to me – the Gibraltar among them.

Benedict Nicolson had become a good friend whom I visited when I was in England. I have referred to our friendship in my autobiography, *Adventures of a Chemist Collector*, "We spent only one or two evenings a year together, meeting at his home, and then having supper at a simple Italian restaurant nearby and talking about my recent acquisitions. He was interested in art in all its forms, and had written the definitive books on Terbrugghen, Georges de La Tour, the followers of Caravaggio and Wright of Derby. He was a great wordsmith, and many of his editorials in *The Burlington* still echo in my mind. I always looked forward to his help, which was given with such enthusiasm and

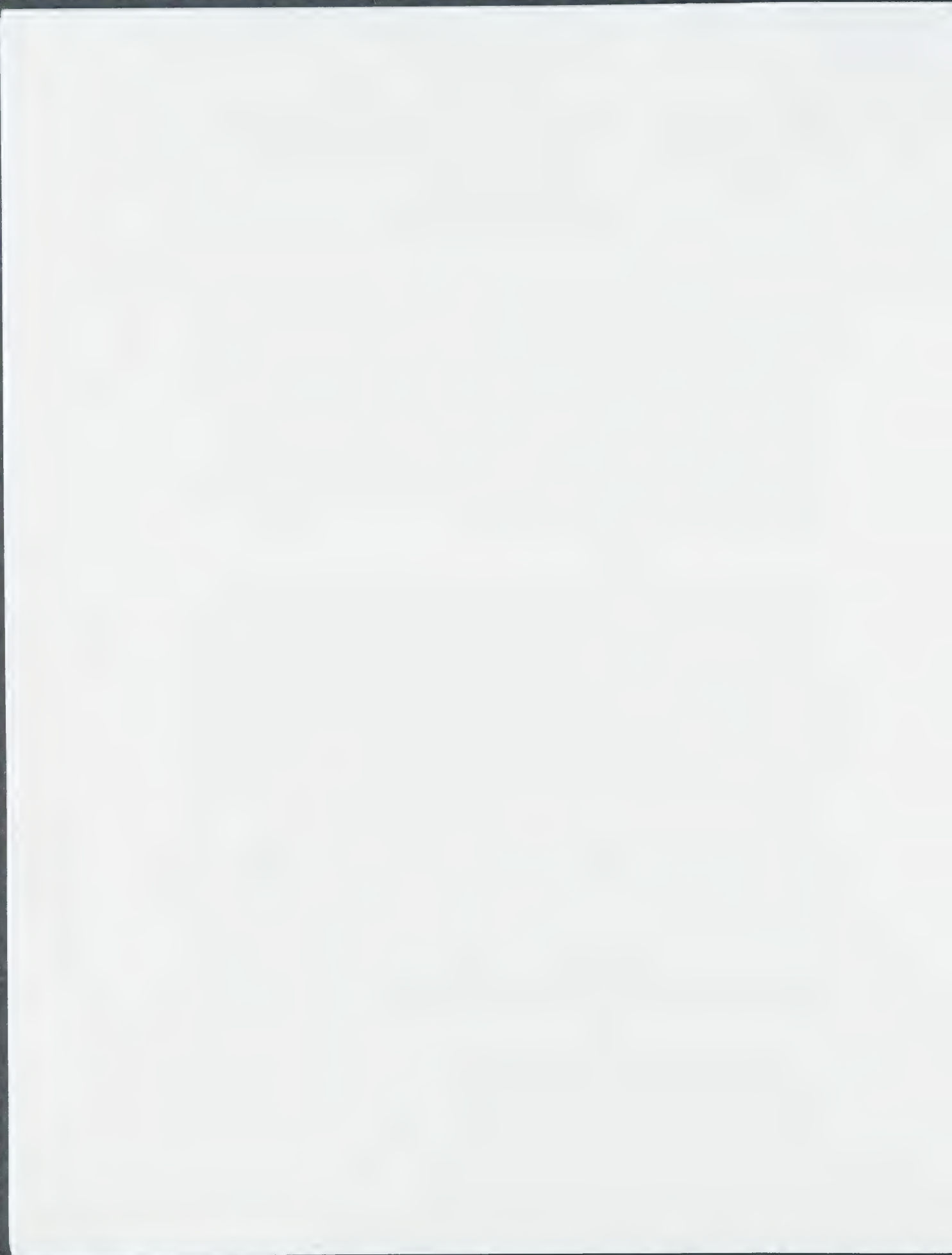


bolstered by his encyclopedic knowledge.” And of course I ordered his two volume work on Joseph Wright of Derby when it was published in 1968. As I read his discussion of the missing *Siege of Gibraltar* the penny dropped: could that be the “Copley” in my basement?

Keeping the period frame at home, I shipped the canvas to Ms. Mary D. Randall, a conservator in London asking her to reline it and to remove the large amounts of overpaint. She put a great deal of work into it over many months. When Benedict Nicolson looked at the stripped canvas he realized it was in very poor condition but believed that it was the missing Wright of Derby.

Once it was returned to Milwaukee, I offered it to the Milwaukee Art Center (as our museum was then known) and in January 1973 our Art Center acquired it with funds given by the Charleston Foundation in memory of Miss Paula Uihlein. The sister of Erwin Uihlein, the long-time president of Milwaukee’s best known company, Schlitz Brewing, Paula Uihlein had created the Charleston Foundation.

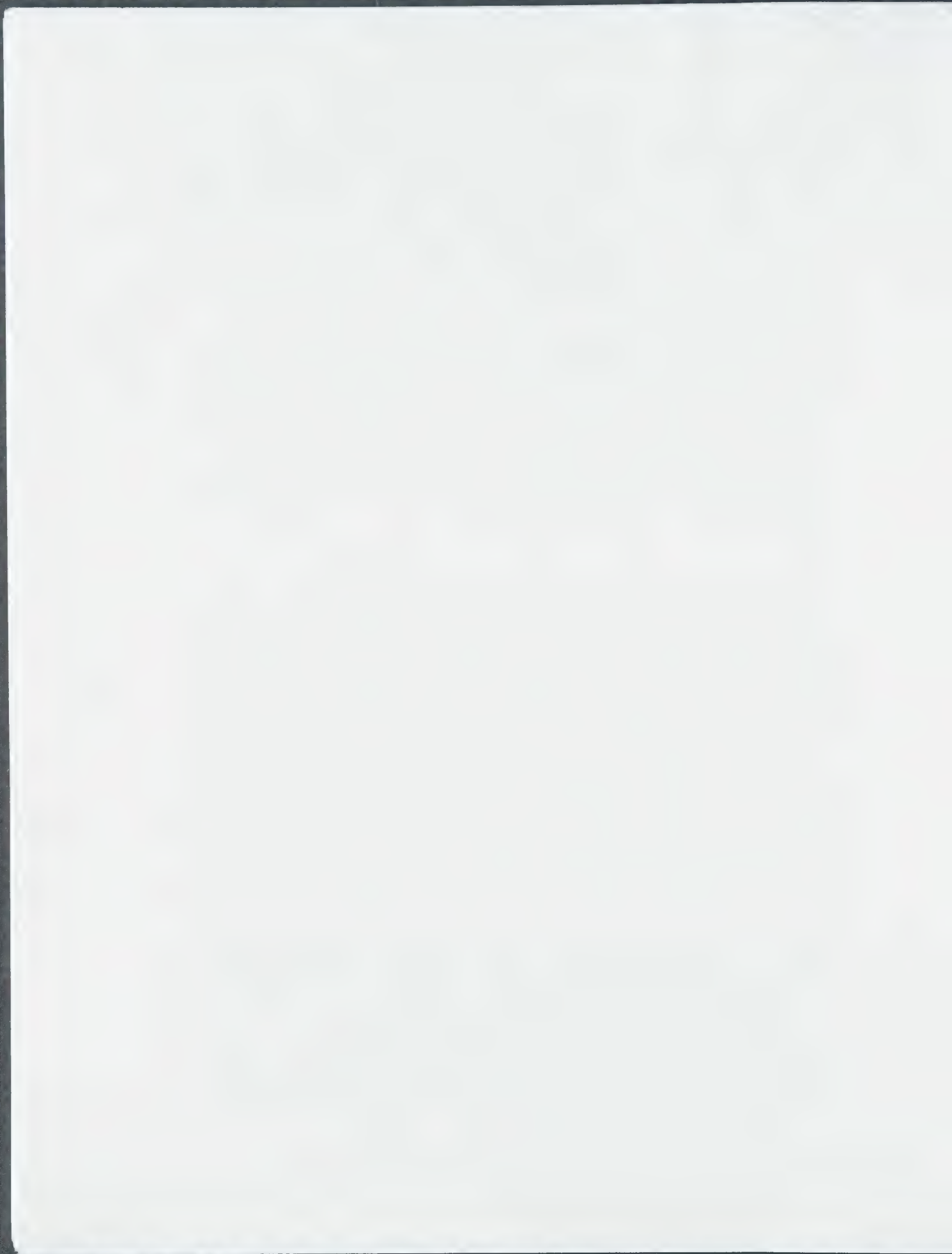
Professor Damie Stillman, the chairman of the Art History Department of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, became very interested in the *Gibraltar* and directed one of his students, Biruta Erdmann, to mount an exhibition and to submit a paper to the Burlington Magazine which Nicolson, the editor, accepted [vol. 116, 1974, 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 27<sup>th</sup> February through 27<sup>th</sup> March 1973. Included in the exhibition were photographs of other artists’ works (West, Copley, and Trumbull), maps, engravings of the battle and the topographical scene, and comparative photographs of other works by Wright. This exhibition was designed to clarify the authorship of the painting, which was previously listed as attributed to Copley. The exhibition was organized by the author for the Department of Art History, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee.”

This paper clarified everything – or so I thought, until I looked at Christie’s East Old Master Paintings catalog of October 10, 2001. There, as lot 46 (from the Milwaukee Art Museum, 1973 to present), was *The Siege of Gibraltar* 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; no reference to the seminal paper in the Burlington Magazine. Wow! How not to deaccession paintings.

Years ago I had helped my alma mater, Queen’s University, to purchase a collection of seven smaller landscapes by Wright of Derby. Wouldn’t it be great if I could acquire Wright’s most ambitious work for Queen’s? But would either the Getty or the Yale Center for British Art connect Christie’s entry with the Burlington Magazine paper of





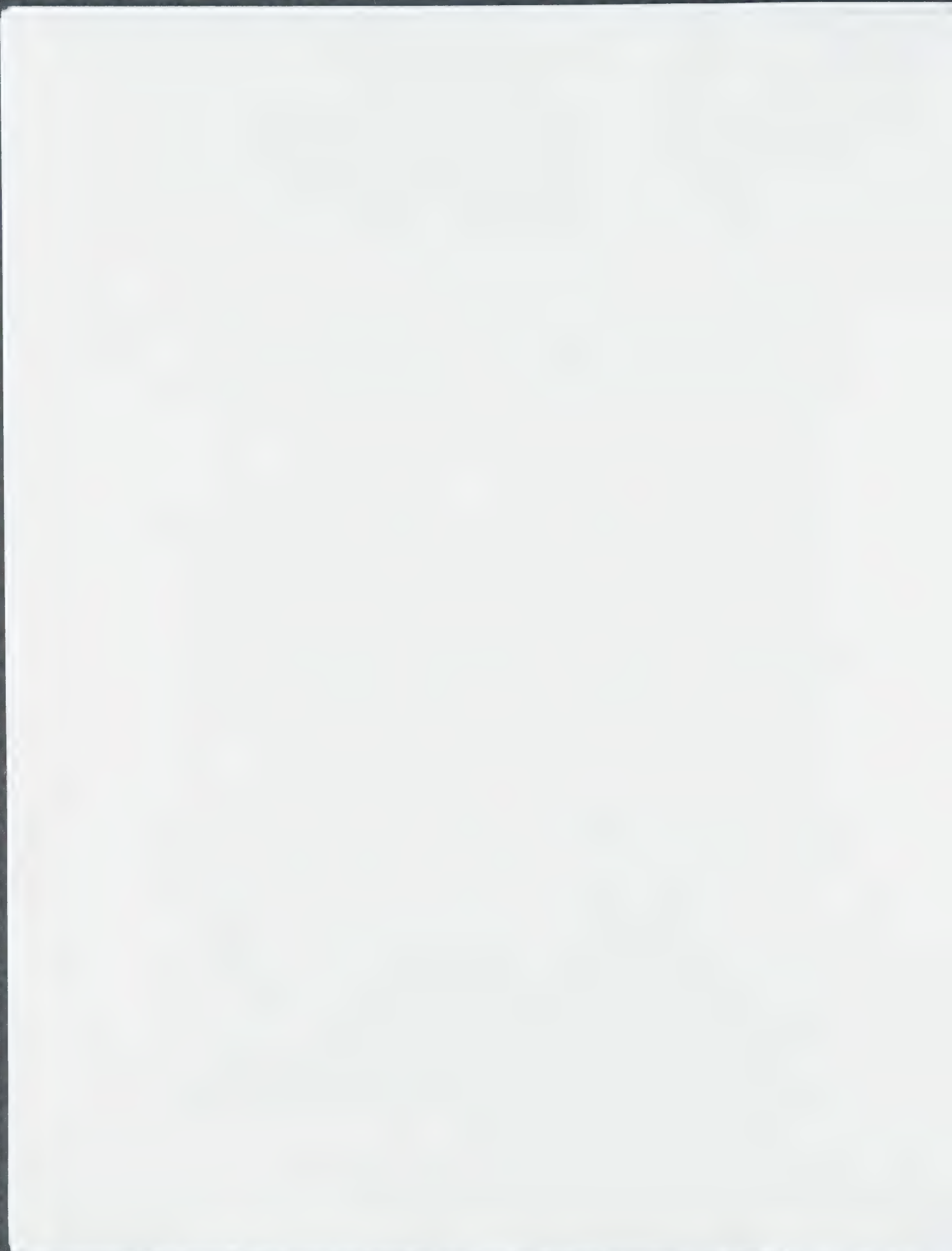
1974? If so, I had no chance. Hope springs eternal, however, and I asked my old friend, Dr. Otto Naumann, to send his secretary to bid for Queen's up to \$100,000. There was only one other bidder and it was knocked down to her for \$10,000.

The Milwaukee Art Museum had decided to ship the painting unframed. To send it with the period frame, perhaps picked by the artist himself, would have cost more.

Fortunately, I was able to acquire it from the Museum for \$6,000, and it was delivered to Queen's.

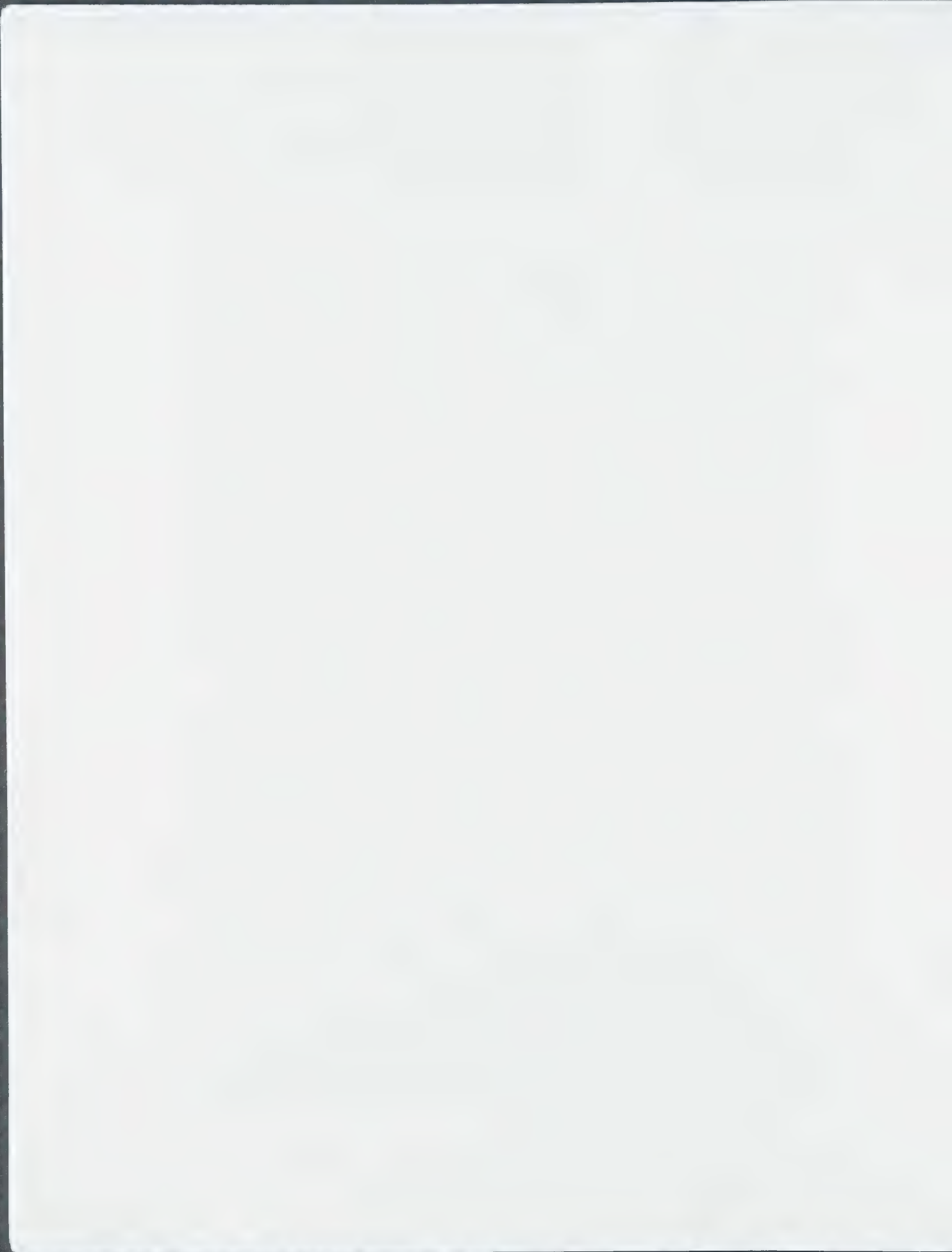
After the sale, the Milwaukee Art Museum gave me its files on the *Gibraltar* and there I saw correspondence with a very able art historian and collector in London, Dr. Gert-Rudolf Flick. I called him to inquire why he had written to our Museum in 1996 and he told me that he was working on a book, Missing Masterpieces, Lost Works of Art 1450-1900, and had planned to include *The Battle of Gibraltar*, until he studied the material sent by the Museum.

In the introduction to this fascinating book, which he 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.”

How could such deaccessions take place? It was the confluence of a director who was just not knowledgeable about older paintings, a hard-working and ambitious curator, Laurie Winters, who was not experienced in deaccessioning, and inadequate oversight from the Board of Trustees. Laurie Winters has good reason to be self-confident: she succeeded brilliantly in bringing a wonderful collection of art – including a Leonardo – from Poland and that, and the new Calatrava wing, really put our Museum on the map. But she was not guided in getting more advice. When I asked her why she did not send literature references to the Berchem and the Wright of Derby to Christie’s, she told me that such references might have undermined her research. It would almost certainly have increased the prices realized. And she had indeed studied the problem of the *Gibraltar*. Mrs. Judy Egerton at the Tate Gallery in London had looked at the *Gibraltar* very carefully in 1986 and had written, “. . . 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.” She had written in a 1990 Wright of Derby catalogue that it “is now widely thought not to be by Wright.” Other art historians concurred, some suggesting Louthembourg. One of the guiding spirits of our Museum is Dr. Myron (Ronnie) Laskin whose parents had left our Museum a large legacy for acquisitions. Dr. Laskin has great knowledge, particularly about Italian art, and he has a wonderful visual

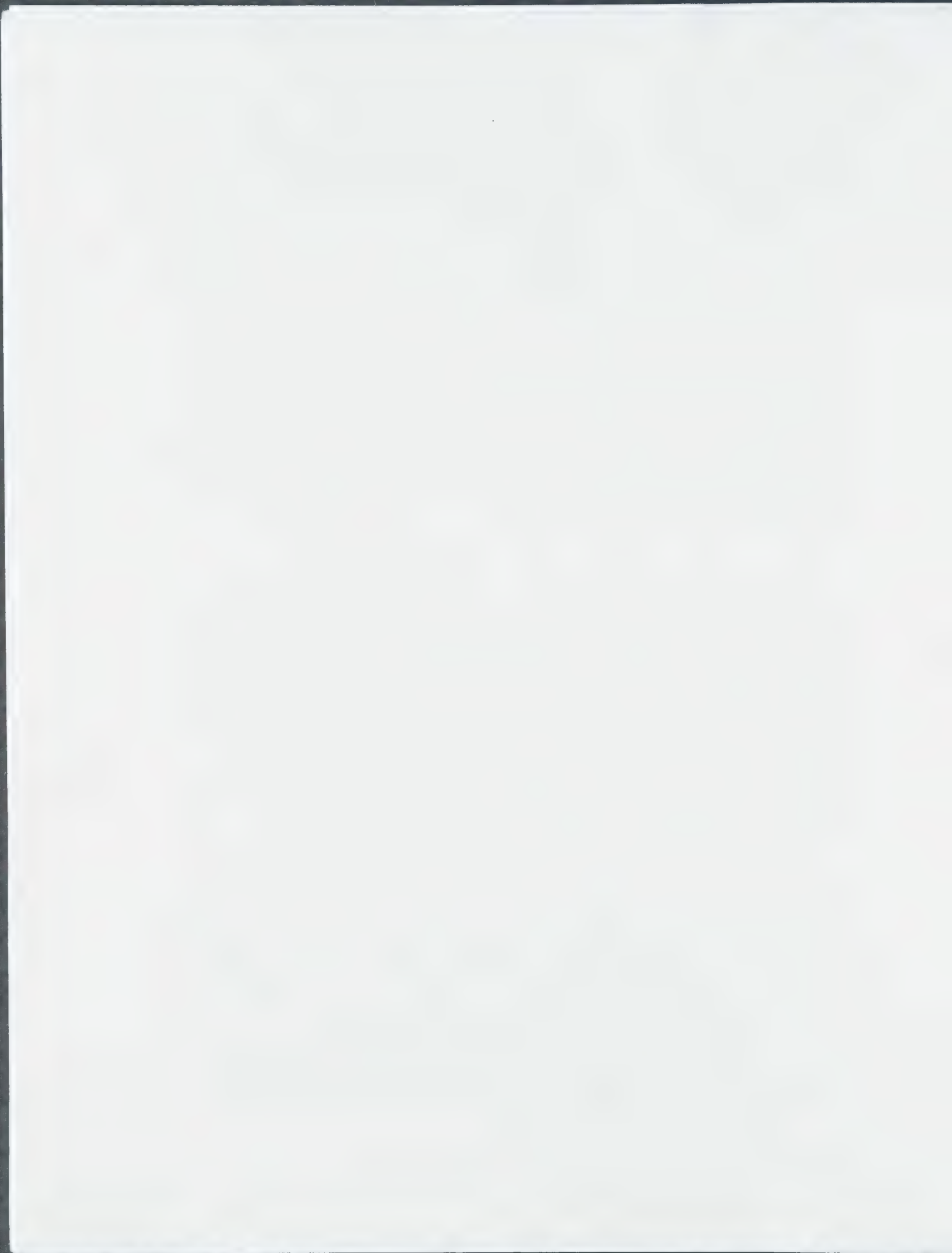


memory. He also has the ability to express himself so strongly that he tends to be believed, even when he is mistaken. He has told me that he does not believe Benedict Nicolson could possibly have accepted the *Gibraltar* and yet he did, both verbally and in writing, and he was the editor of the Burlington Magazine when the article was published in 1974. It is possible to be convinced and mistaken.

Of course, to be convinced and mistaken could apply also to me. What if Benedict Nicolson and I were mistaken about the attribution of the *Gibraltar* to Wright of Derby? No matter who is mistaken, giving the literature references and Nicolson's opinion to Christie's would have aroused more interest.

The Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University has now sent the *Gibraltar* to a Canadian government laboratory in Ottawa for extensive tests, X-ray, UV and IR images and paint sampling to decide how to improve the painting. I hope that the "lumpishness about the figures, and a failure to extract maximum light and shade effects from the burning ships", which Ms. Judy Egerton wrote about, is due to extensive restoration which can be much improved. I am always an optimist.

The basic problem was Russell Bowman's lack of interest in older paintings. Many other paintings were also deaccessioned. Our museum has perhaps this country's finest collection of German and Austrian paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the gift of René von Schleinitz. René, the treasurer of the Harnischfeger Corporation, loved paintings by artists like Spitzweg and Waldmüller and the works he acquired are among the best by



these artists. René and I were good friends. We met regularly and alerted each other to possible acquisitions – he pointing to Dutch old masters and I to works by his favorite artists. Russell Bowman did not like these at all, and eighty of René's paintings were sent to auction in Munich. The funds were used to buy a very expensive and beautiful landscape with Ruth and Boaz, by the Austrian, Joseph Anton Koch. René would never have considered such an Italianate Biblical subject – there was nothing like it in his collection.

Recently there was a beautiful Spitzweg exhibition near Zürich and in Munich and twelve works were borrowed from Milwaukee. Six of these were René's gifts; five to the Milwaukee Art Museum, one to our Public Library. The other six came from a distinguished Milwaukee collector. It would have made good sense to bring the exhibition to Milwaukee, but Spitzweg must have seemed too minor a figure to Russell Bowman. If René knew, he would turn over in his grave.

Of course I am really familiar only with the details of the Milwaukee Art Museum's deaccessioning of some paintings, but I understand that the sale of some Chinese works was even worse. Sotheby's in Chicago put on ridiculously low estimates and, as I understand it, a dealer from London bought many of them and promptly sold them at auction, described properly, at many times the prices he paid in Chicago. It is truly sad that the Milwaukee Art Museum lost a great deal of potential income.

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The second part of the document focuses on the role of the accounting profession. It highlights the need for accountants to adhere to high standards of ethical conduct and to maintain their professional competence through continuous education. The text also discusses the importance of transparency and accountability in the financial reporting process.

The third part of the document addresses the challenges faced by businesses in the current economic environment. It discusses the impact of global economic uncertainty and the need for businesses to adapt to changing market conditions. The text also mentions the importance of innovation and the role of government in supporting business growth and development.



Russell Bowman left the museum in 2002, to do consulting – surely in modern paintings – in Chicago. Our new director, David Gordon, is totally different, probably the ablest, most caring director we have had since Edward Dwight who was forced to leave in 1962. I cannot help thinking what my life would have been like if Ed Dwight had stayed or if David Gordon had been his successor.

Directors and curators have many functions, one of which is to guide local collectors. These then reciprocate by giving or leaving their masterpieces to the museums. But if there is little interest and help, then there are few gifts.

David Gordon knows a great deal about finances – he had been the chief executive of *The Economist* and of the Independent Television News and was on the board of the Financial Times. And he knows so much about museums, having been the secretary (i.e. the director) of the Royal Academy of Arts in London from 1996 to 2002 and a trustee of the Tate Gallery from 1993 to 1998. I think of him as David Tobias Gordon. Tobias was the most courageous man in the Bible. He proposed to a girl whose previous suitors had been killed by a demon. And it takes true courage to become the director of an art museum with an enormous debt. David has reduced this to \$25 million and I am confident that he will succeed in wiping it out altogether. But, most important, he does not disdain old master paintings, listens carefully and expresses himself well, with a great sense of humor. It took the Art Museum's Board of Trustees 40 years to choose a great director.

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