PART THREE

Tales and Techniques of a Great Restorer

Mario Modestini is a rare, and maybe unique, being: an excellent restorer, he is also, rather unusually, a great connoisseur of paintings with an infallible eye.

Federico Zeri, "Cronaca di un colpo mancato.
La Vergine dei falsi," *La Stampa,* April 13, 1986

CHAPTER 20

New Clients and Friends

Mario's Studio

Mario continued to work with the Kress Foundation until the paintings were dispersed to their final locations, the records were filed, and the mission of the foundation redefined. The latter changed from a primary focus on building collections of old master paintings for Washington, the regional museums, and the study collections[1] to "advancing the history, conservation, and enjoyment of the vast heritage of European art, architecture, and archaeology from antiquity to the nineteenth century"[2] through a grants program. This new type of philanthropic work was, however, primarily administrative, and the foundation no longer employed conservators and art historians directly.

For many years, Mario continued as a consultant for the foundation, but he no longer needed the large studio at 16 East 52nd Street. Many of his assistants retired or returned to their

lives in Italy, and those who remained had sufficient experience to work on their own. By the time all the loose ends with the Kress Foundation, the National Gallery, and Huckleberry Hill were tied up, Mario was tired of administrative and management tasks. The satisfaction he had experienced acquiring paintings on the art market had been enough to persuade him not to undertake so many other activities foreign to his nature. Without the goal of creating an art collection, he had little interest in the many peripheral tasks that it entailed. Indeed, apart from his work for Kress, he had never been an organization man. Quite the opposite. He missed the luxury of sitting at his easel in front of a great painting, teasing out its secrets with patience and intuition.

Mario had been gone from Rome for so long that he no longer had a professional presence there. Because of Italy's strict export restrictions, the art market had become more or less stagnant. In

102. Mario in the early sixties.

addition, restorers in Italy did not enjoy the same status as they did in England and the United States. He considered establishing a studio in London, in one of the wonderful nineteenth-century ateliers that were available there.

Instead, he decided to stay in New York. He rented an apartment at 434 East 52nd Street, which had a double-height living room with a great north-lit window. Fifty-Second Street is a cul-de-sac between First Avenue and the East River, and is characterized by a peace and quiet rarely found in Manhattan. The mysterious Greta Garbo lived in the adjacent building; no one bothered her as she went to the post office and shopped at the fish market. When Mario did cross paths with her, he would gallantly say, "Good day, Miss Garbo," and her head, always masked by a large hat, would incline ever so slightly. Federico Zeri was wildly titillated by the mere idea of Garbo's presence on the street and fantasized all his life that he had formed a close relationship with her.[3]

Mario's studio was also his living room, and he worked at two easels placed near the windows. The natural light sometimes needed to be supplemented by powerful photo lamps. He had a tabouret and a small stool with a hole in the center that conveniently held a mahlstick. Bottles of varnish and pots of African violets shared the deep window ledge. A small second bedroom was used as an office and supply storage.

Mario seems to have retained a couple of assistants only for a transition period after leaving the large Kress studio. The back room was too crowded with files and materials for anyone to do restoration work, and Mario, for the most part, enjoyed working alone. Those outside the field might assume that a great deal of scientific equipment is necessary for the restoration of paintings. While analytical tests will always provide interesting information about materials and the artist's process, the most important part is the understanding that restorers develop in their privileged relationship to the picture. Many things are necessary: a knowledge of artists' materials and techniques and a high level of skill, but above all, innate sensitivity, intuition, and intelligence. When he set

up privately, Mario dispensed with all the technical paraphernalia that he had at Huckleberry Hill so that he could concentrate on the paintings themselves. All the intelligence, knowledge and skill that he had used in his former position for a plethora of less relevant matters he now focused on the picture on his easel.

As curator and conservator of the Kress Foundation, Mario had made many contacts with potential clients for this new phase of his professional life. Within a short period of time many of the most important Italian paintings that passed through the art market came to his studio. In addition to his impeccable work, Mario was easy to deal with, intelligent, and straightforward, qualities that inspired confidence. At the height of his career he was considered the finest restorer of Italian paintings in the world, and because he was secure in his knowledge, he did not behave in a grand way as others in his profession sometimes did. From counts to carpenters, he treated everyone with the same courtesy and respect. He was renowned and trusted by his peers from all fields in the art world.

William Suhr

Another legendary restorer had a studio in New York at this time, the German Wilhelm—or William—Suhr (1896–1984). Suhr was a decade older than Mario. A handsome man, he had an unusual background: both his parents were actors, and as a youngster he performed with his mother's company. First apprenticed to a stonemason, he subsequently enrolled in the Royal Art Academy in Berlin, where he was encouraged to restore paintings (like Mario, he was an autodidact). He came to the attention of Wilhelm Valentiner, an assistant of von Bode, the director of the Prussian museums. When Valentiner took the post of director at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1924,[4] he offered Suhr the position of restorer. Suhr made his home in the United States and worked for Duveen, as well as for other dealers, collectors, and museums. He ultimately moved his studio to New York and became the restorer

for the Frick Collection, where he worked on many of its great masterpieces.

'Billy' and Mario were both friends and rivals. Mario had made the acquaintance of Rudolf Heinemann, the highly venerated dealer of old master paintings, when he identified Knoedler's Caravaggio as a copy. From then on, Heinemann gave Italian paintings to Mario for restoration, while continuing to entrust northern European paintings to Suhr. Prior to this, Rudolf had engaged Suhr almost exclusively, so there was sometimes a bit of an edge to his relationship with Mario. Suhr was an excellent painter and could imitate certain artists—Holbein, for example—to perfection, including the mordant gilding. Even experienced restorers have, at times, been confused about the actual state of paintings restored by Suhr, as another of Mario's stories will illustrate.

Rudolf Heinemann and Baron Heinrich von Thyssen

Although Mario went through a period of hesitation about his future after his time with the Kress Foundation ended abruptly, there were aspects of this transition that he welcomed. One was the close relationships and partnerships he formed with some of the most important dealers in old master paintings.

Rudolf Heinemann was born in 1901 in Berlin, where he attended university, and after obtaining his doctorate, like Valentiner, he became the assistant of Wilhelm von Bode. Bode recommended Heinemann as advisor to the German-Hungarian industrialist Baron Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza (1875–1947), who was collecting paintings for the Villa Favorita, his estate on Lake Lugano in Switzerland. Heinemann helped Thyssen add to his collection, making a number of important acquisitions. In 1934, paintings from one of the great Roman princely collections came on the market. After years of wrangling, an agreement was formulated between the Barberini heirs and the Italian state, the *fedecommesso* Barberini. Similar to the later settlement with the

Contini Bonacossi heirs, some of the paintings were granted an export license in exchange for the donation of the Barberini Palace and part of the collection to the state. Heinemann acted quickly and was able to purchase such rarities as portraits by Carpaccio, Raphael, and Domenico Ghirlandaio, as well as Caravaggio's *Saint Catherine* and Dürer's *Jesus among the Doctors.* Also in the mid-1930s, he acquired from other sources Frans Hals's *Family Group with a Negro Servant in a Landscape*, Sebastiano del Piombo's *Portrait of Ferry Carondelet and His Secretaries*, and Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII.

Not all of Heinemann's purchases were of equally high quality. Along with Bode, he fell for one of Van Meegeren's fake Vermeers—a ridiculous portrait of a woman in a blue hat wearing what appears to be a blanket on her shoulders. He was also taken in by the portrait of Giuliano de' Medici attributed to Botticelli, which Mario considered a forgery (Chapter 9). Heinemann continued to advise Heinrich Thyssen and his son, Hans Heinrich, known as Heini (1921–2002), for many years, even after his 1935 move to New York, where he worked in partnership with several important firms, such as Knoedler's, Rosenberg & Stiebel, Frederick Mont, and Agnew's.

Mario worked closely with Heinemann, and it was undoubtedly through him that he was introduced to Heini Thyssen's circle. Heinemann had a villa in Lugano, and he persuaded Mario to buy a small apartment there, where he could work on the paintings in the Thyssen Collection during the summer.

Heini Thyssen dominated local society, jet-setting with his coterie of hangers-on and a succession of wives, and Mario became part of this small, incestuous group. Rudolf and his wife, Lore (1914–1996), entertained dealers, collectors, and curators, who hoped to procure some of the paintings that Rudolf had kept for his own collection. Lore Heinemann was a handsome woman, blond, tall, and blue-eyed. Her classic Aryan appearance notwithstanding, she was from a Jewish family in Mannheim. After the war, she came to New York where she worked at Lord & Taylor, the elegant department store on Fifth Avenue. She and Rudolf

somehow met, he fell in love with her, and they married. Mario told me that for many years, Rudolf had been in a relationship with an older woman, who was also his patroness and advisor. This woman owned the villa in Lugano and a country estate in Westchester's Mount Kisco—both of which she left to Rudolf after her death. Mario said that Rudolf never told her about Lore and continued to keep a weekly appointment with her in New York. On these evenings, at Rudolf's request, Mario often took Lore to dinner, and they became involved. Their relationship lasted for many years, although, over time, Mario grew increasingly restless. Lore was socially ambitious and reveled in the company of the rich and famous, like Heini Thyssen. Mario was charming and comfortable with any group, and was a convenient social partner for Lore. However, celebrity and fame had never held much attraction for him, and he wearied of playing a role every evening. He also was repelled by Heini Thyssen's decadent lifestyle; he drank heavily and his behavior became increasingly erratic. Also distressing to Mario was the fact that Lore was a miser, famously so—a fact that was commented on even at her memorial service—and was ungenerous to those who worked for her. Perhaps the best times the two shared were weekends at Lore's property in Mount Kisco. Sandrino Contini Bonacossi nicknamed Mario "the Count of Monte Kisco." Billy Suhr and his wife, Henriette, lived nearby on a twelve-acre farm called Rocky Hills, which they had transformed into an extraordinary garden. Despite the tensions, Lore and Mario remained together until he met me in the mid-eighties.

Whatever Mario truly felt about the company he was in, the bon vivant side of his personality helped him to join wholeheartedly in some of the extravagances that took place in Lugano. He recalled an anecdote that gives a taste of his life in high society:

I knew several of Heini's wives, and we had many amusing times together, although his turbulent personal life was always cause for concern among his friends. One summer afternoon in Lugano, Heini said, "Why don't we go to Harry's Bar in Venice for dinner? We'll take my plane. I'll pay for the fuel, and Mario, you pay for the meal."

I accepted. There were six of us. Cipriani's most famous invention is the "Bellini" cocktail, made from champagne and the fresh juice of white peaches. Everyone began ordering them, to my alarm, and dozens of Bellinis were consumed as well as a great quantity of Harry's exquisite but expensive food. When I got the bill I nearly fainted. I think Heini got the better end of that deal.

Geoffrey Agnew

Mario and Geoffrey Agnew, the head of the pre-eminent London firm, Thomas Agnew & Sons, became great friends, and together with Heinemann, they made important purchases—some of which were significant discoveries, such as the portrait of Giacomo Dolfin

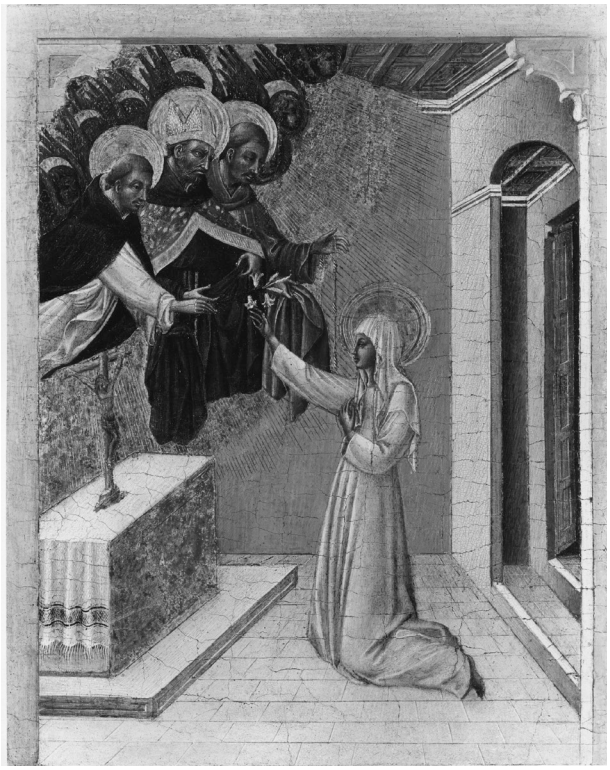
103. Titian, *Giacomo Dolfin,* ca. 1531, oil on canvas, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, 104.9 × 91 cm.

by Titian. When the painting was offered at auction at Christies in 1977, it had been much repainted. A red drape had been added to the background and it appeared to be in such a battered state that most buyers were leery. Mario saw at once that it was a masterpiece by Titian and not as damaged as it appeared to be. He convinced Agnew and Heinemann to bid on it, and it went for a reasonable price. After Mario had secured the crumbling paint and removed the overpaint and varnish that had accumulated over centuries, the painting emerged in wonderful condition, and Agnew sold it to the Los Angeles County Museum where it is one of the masterpieces of the collection.

Eugene V. Thaw and Giovanni di Paolo

Eugene (Gene) Thaw (b. 1927) was a generation younger than Mario, Heinemann, and Agnew. After graduating from Columbia University, Thaw opened a small business dealing in twentieth-century prints. At that time, this period was not as popular as it is today. He entered the then more important old master market around 1965, when he acquired six predella panels by the Sienese painter Giovanni di Paolo from the Stoclet Collection in Belgium. As Thaw tells the story, he went to Rudolf Heinemann, whom he did not yet know, to ask if he would like to be his partner in the purchase. Rudolf contacted Mario, and the three men met at a bank on Madison Avenue to look at the panels, which depicted scenes from the life of Saint Catherine of Siena. They were beautiful but required a lot of work. Mario cleaned them and sent them to Christian Kneisl, a specialist in Vienna, to be transferred to a stable support. After the panels returned to New York, Mario began the restoration, which took quite some time, and Gene was beginning to grow desperate, because he had borrowed part of the money for his share from one of his wife's relatives. Finally, nearly at his wits' end, he got a call from Heinemann that the paintings were finished and he could see them in Mario's studio.[5]

The Giovanni di Paolos were just the beginning of Thaw's activities in the field of old master paintings. Over time, he, Rudolf, Geoffrey Agnew, and Mario worked closely together acquiring paintings, mainly at auction, and obtained wonderful examples that in those days could still be found in New York and London and were sometimes unrecognized. After Heinemann's death, Eugene Thaw succeeded him as the foremost dealer of old master paintings in New York. Thaw often says that he sold many paintings directly off Mario's easel by bringing prospective clients to see them while they were being cleaned, a technique that he learned from Rudolf Heinemann.[6]



104. Giovanni di Paolo, *Saint Catherine Invested with the Dominican Scapula*, 1461, tempera on panel, 24.6 × 39.2 cm. After Mario's restoration. (See also Plates x and xi)

Frederick Mont and *The Burning of the Heretic*

Another close friend of Mario's was Frederick Mont (1894–1994), a distinguished dealer with exquisite taste. Born in Vienna as Friedrich Mondshein, he embodied the cosmopolitan refinement that the city retained, even after the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the First World War. He was an accomplished pianist and had studied with the famous composer, Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951). His Galerie Sanct Lucas was very successful. By the mid-thirties, the atmosphere in Vienna began to change under the influence of Adolf Hitler, whom many Austrians admired. Fred, or Fritz (as he was sometimes called), was Jewish, and wisely emigrated to the United States in the early thirties. When the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938, Aryan friends ran the gallery there for him while, in New York, he opened a business in the Ritz Tower and changed his surname to Mont. Fred had many clients in Vienna—including the famous Czernin Collection, for which he was sole agent—and the Kress Foundation bought a number of paintings through him.

Mario wrote about a painting he and Fred bought around 1975 that came from a mysterious source, an occurrence that exemplifies the anonymous provenances in the art world that were prevalent at the time. This phenomenon still exists to some extent today but has been tempered by a greater awareness of the legal problems that can arise, sometimes causing the buyer to lose the artwork. Illegal exportation is one issue, and a provenance that indicates theft or Nazi plunder is another grave matter. This incident illustrates how varied and surprising are the ways in which important works come to light.

One day, Fred came to my studio and said someone would be arriving with a painting at ten o'clock. We waited and the bell rang from downstairs, admitting a person who came into my studio and opened a paper-wrapped package revealing a small panel. I thought it was by Sassetta (ca. 1400–1450), and, sotto voce, advised Fred to buy

105. Sassetta, *The Burning of the Heretic,* from the predella of the Arte della Lana altarpiece, 1423–1426, tempera on panel, Art Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, 24.6 × 39.2 cm.

it immediately. We were a bit taken aback by all this. We had no idea who this man was. He said he was selling the painting on behalf of a priest who had owned it for many years. We asked him to show us some kind of identification, which he did—he was Italian. I always wondered if he himself was the priest, disguised in civilian clothes. It was one of the strangest acquisitions I have ever seen take place. At that time, Federico Zeri was in New York, working on the Metropolitan Museum catalogues, and he came to my studio almost daily. I showed him the painting, which I had begun to clean. Zeri, without hesitation, said that this was one of the predella panels from Sassetta's 1423 altarpiece made for the Arte della Lana (the wool guild). [Painted for the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Siena, it was dismantled in 1777 and subsequently dispersed. Although the central panel is lost, other compartments are scattered among twelve museums, including the Louvre, Berlin, and the National Gallery in London.] How this panel [of the Burning of the Heretic] ended up in the hands of a priest is a complete mystery. In any case, Geoffrey Agnew ultimately sold the painting to Melbourne.

To this day, the provenance the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne provides for this picture gives the ownership prior to Agnew's only as "unknown private collection," followed by "bought by an unknown dealer."

Julius Weitzner and Canaletto

Julius Weitzner (1896–1986) was another legendary dealer whom Mario knew well. Weitzner had a gallery in London and one in New York on 57th Street between Madison and Park Avenue. He was notorious for cleaning paintings himself immediately after they came into his hands. His gallery was on the mezzanine floor with a large window facing the street, which Mario often frequented, and he said that passing by, you could look up and see Weitzner cleaning pictures in the light from the big window.[7] Mario wrote:

One morning, I was walking across 57th Street, and I happened to see him working on a large Magnasco, an artist with a style so characteristic that it is easily identifiable even from a great distance. I went up the stairs to his premises and saw that, in places, he was removing original paint. The artist had made certain changes, known as 'pentimenti', or 'changes of mind' in Italian, correcting the initial conception, and Julius was scrubbing away at these passages to reveal the underpaint. I pointed out to him that he was ruining the picture, and he had to admit that I was right. I asked him the price, and, in fact, he sold it to me for a very reasonable amount, considering that he had partly spoiled it.

Julius was an extraordinary man. He had begun as a violinist and loved music. His wife was an excellent pianist, and they often invited a few friends to musical evenings. Their beautiful daughter was a gifted painter, who later moved to Rome to a studio in my old haunt, the Via Margutta. Recognizing that his career as a concert violinist would be limited due to his abilities, he decided to abandon the instrument and began to deal in old master paintings, his second passion. In this field, he enjoyed more success than he had with music. He went to auctions in London and Paris and with his acute ear[8] *managed to buy paintings of a certain interest and at a cheap price,*

which he then sold in New York at a considerable profit. But he also purchased many important things; at a London sale, he bought a beautiful Duccio di Buoninsegna that he sold to the National Gallery of London, and an important Rubens that he sold to Norton Simon. The most amazing of all his purchases was the great Titian, Diana and Actaeon, which appeared in an important sale in London. Many dealers, including Rudolf Heinemann and Geoffrey Agnew, were considering the purchase, but everyone knew it would fetch a huge price. There was much discussion about the painting but Weitzner kept his own counsel. To everyone's surprise, on the day of the sale, carried away by the beauty and importance of the painting, he was the highest bidder at a record price of around £4 million (then over US$11 million), which he was actually not able to pay. The next morning, in a panic, he began to call around to all the dealers who had been interested in the picture, asking them if they would like to buy a share. Before the morning passed, the news arrived that the National Gallery of London wanted the painting, which, under English law, they had the right to buy at the adjudicated price and deny the work an export license. Julius was delighted to be off the hook—he had hardly slept the previous night.

Another time he bought a magnificent Canaletto, a view of the Grand Canal with the church of the Salute, a large canvas about two meters wide. Robert Lehman was interested in the painting, and he went to Weitzner's shop on 57th Street to see it. To his horror, he found him cleaning the painting. "Stop immediately," he said. "I will buy it on one condition; that you stop cleaning it and send it to Mario Modestini."[9]

Harold Wethey

In addition to the various individuals involved in the commercial side of the art world, Mario also came to know many art historians and scholars. The American art historian, Harold Wethey (1902–1984), was an expert specializing in Titian and El Greco. Once a scholar becomes the acknowledged authority on a particular artist, his opinion is crucial for the attribution, without which a painting, however beautiful, cannot be sold for its true value. Mario first encountered Wethey in connection with El Greco's portrait of his brother, Manusso Theotokopoulos, that he had purchased from the Contini heirs and sold to Norton Simon. Mario had worked on

many paintings by El Greco and possessed specialized knowledge of the artist. He wrote:

A few months later [1962], Wethey's book on El Greco was published, and in it he described this portrait as "Italian school, 17th century." I had restored many paintings by El Greco, including the Laocoön in the National Gallery, and The Vision of Saint John in the Metropolitan Museum, and I was absolutely convinced of the authenticity of this portrait. I gathered together various x-radiographs of paintings by El Greco, including the portrait of the man in fur [Manusso Theotokopoulos], made an appointment to see Dr. Wethey at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he had taught for many years, and took Sandrino Contini Bonacossi along with me. When Sandrino and I showed him all the comparative material we had collected,

106. El Greco, *Manusso Theotokopoulos*, the artist's brother, 1603–1604, oil on canvas, Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California, 47.0 × 38.7 cm.

Dr. Wethey changed his mind, agreed that the painting was indeed by El Greco and wrote me a letter to that effect for Norton Simon.

Wethey was the author of the complete catalogue of Titian's work. With his great love and understanding of Titian, Mario had close collaborations with both Wethey and the Venetian scholar Rodolfo Pallucchini (1908–1989), a close friend. Mario and Pallucchini were usually in agreement about attributions, while Wethey was often the odd man out. In his frustration with his American colleague, Pallucchini wrote to Mario in 1970 that he had just seen Wethey's first volume on Titian, which he found, "really absurd, [as] he continues to give the Prado panel as well as the Glasgow adulteress to Giorgione, and dates the Thyssen Madonna to 1515! This book on Titian helps one to understand the stupidity of the author of the El Greco book!" Wethey was a fine scholar but academic art historians are sometimes out of touch with the objects themselves, whereas Pallucchini was steeped in the splendor of the art that he encountered daily just by walking the streets of Venice.

Mario's files contain dozens of letters from Wethey, which he frequently marked with a red pencil; nevertheless, from that contentious beginning, by the time the art historian died in 1984, they appeared to have become quite fond of one another.

John Brealey and the Metropolitan Museum

When I met Mario, toward the end of 1983, in connection with the Kress Foundation, I was a conservator in the paintings conservation department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. My education in restoration, connoisseurship, and many intangible and subtle matters began there. I was hired during an interregnum between two department heads. Hubert von Sonnenburg (1928–2004) had just left the museum to head the Doerner Institut in Munich, a center for research into art materials. Thomas Hoving (1931-2009), the

107. John Brealey during a seminar for museum directors and curators.

flamboyant director, wished to appoint a man who had been trained in the same tradition as von Sonnenburg and held similar views, particularly regarding the all-important issue of the cleaning of paintings. John Brealey and von Sonnenburg had both been trained by Johannes Hell (1897–1974), a German restorer from Berlin, who had fled Hitler's regime and established himself in London just a little too late since, when he arrived in 1937, his former boss at the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Helmut Ruhemann (1891–1973), was already firmly ensconced at the National Gallery. Ruhemann had been dismissed from the museum by the Nazis as early as 1933, and Hell, whose wife was Jewish, lost his position somewhat later, as the racial laws tightened.[10] When the cleaning controversy over the treatment of the pictures in the National Gallery broke out in 1946–47, Ruhemann and Hell found themselves on opposite sides of the debate over what defined acceptable cleaning, as opposed to the "over-cleaning" of which the museum was accused in the press (see Chapter 24). Ruhemann was a radical cleaner and believed that every particle of foreign material should be removed from the

paint layers—an approach that John Brealey termed archaeological or hygienic, since no thought was given to achieving an equilibrium of the formal aspects of the composition. Hell preferred a conservative approach, which he had described in a 1933 article that rejected radical cleaning.[11]

As a young man, John Brealey, influenced by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (1884–1979), the dealer of Picasso and Braque whom he met in Cambridge before the war, was primarily interested in modern painting. John spent the war in India, after a medical examination declared him unfit for active service, and traveled around the subcontinent giving lectures, including radio broadcasts, on cubism. After demobilization, he returned to London, where he made the acquaintance of Anthony Blunt (1907–1983), the great Poussin scholar (many years later, unmasked as a Russian spy), who suggested that John become a picture restorer and referred him to Johannes Hell.[12] Brealey worked as a private conservator in London and many important paintings were entrusted to him, including works from the Royal Collection, the Wallace Collection, Prince's Gate and the National Trust, which oversaw numerous country houses, such as Petworth, where John gained experience with the paintings of J. M. W. Turner, whose technique made his works very difficult to clean.

Brealey was exceptionally intelligent and miraculously articulate in front of a work of art, a rare gift. He expounded ideas about the restoration of paintings that seemed revolutionary to me and my peers at other institutions, all young enough to be impressed. His passionate advocacy for understanding the relationships within

108. John and I share a light moment while his portrait is taken for the *New York Times* in the early 1980s.

a painting and respecting its intrinsic values during the cleaning process was enlightening, first for a few staff at the Metropolitan, then for an ever-widening group of professionals. It was as if John had been rehearsing his entire professional life, readying himself for the opportunity to assume the role of leader of a movement. He was a gifted and generous teacher.

With his highly quotable remarks, John became famous and was lionized by the press. In reality, he was a socially awkward, lonely, and deeply insecure man, who could be prickly, difficult, and even rude, but his self-deprecating humor and innate humanity made up for his flaws. He arrived in New York alone (his wife having refused to come) in an emotionally battered state. He knew few people in the city and quickly came to depend on me and his two other staff members for companionship—a sort of alternative family. For example, before finding an apartment, he was keen on the idea that we might all rent a townhouse together. Sometimes being a member of the department felt a little like belonging to a cult.

Insecure as he was, John felt jealous of Mario and indeed their first meeting was not propitious. Not long after John was appointed at the Met, Mario asked him to lunch at his apartment. John had recently visited the Cleveland Museum and admired their two predellas by Giovanni di Paolo, which Mario had restored many years earlier, though evidently John was not aware of this. When Mario showed John the cleaned state photos, he was shocked by the condition and exclaimed, "Naughty boy!" On returning to the museum, he told us that he had lunched with Modestini, who was "a very dangerous man." There were several similar incidents and on at least two occasions John effectively blocked the acquisition of paintings Mario had restored. Eventually, Mario had his revenge. It was unusual behavior for him but he once told me that he was like a crocodile, immobile in the water, but if something really angered him, he could strike at lightning speed.

Mario's Revenge

John was the consultant to Ted Pillsbury, the director of the Kimbell Art Museum, at the time actively acquiring old master paintings, and they were keen to buy something from the legendary Heinemann Collection. Lore Heinemann owned a Holbein portrait that she wanted to sell. The painting had been restored by William Suhr many years earlier and was a masterpiece of the restorer's art, but the thick varnish had become dull and discolored. Mario had

109. Circle of Hans Holbein, *Thomas Lestrange*, 1536, oil and tempera on panel, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 39.4 × 26.7 cm. Before cleaning.

always advised Lore not to touch the painting, because he knew the condition. He instructed Lore to insist that John and Ted could examine the Holbein in her apartment for as long as they wished, but that she should not send it to the museum until the purchase had been confirmed. The two men accepted her conditions and the Kimbell purchased the painting, after which it was sent to the Metropolitan for restoration.

Once the painting was in the studio, John began to grow concerned. Under the microscope, it became obvious that it was covered with tiny, modern brushstrokes, typical of Suhr's restorations. Maryann Ainsworth, an art historian and member of the conservation department, had examined a number of Holbeins with infrared technology and expressed her doubts. John decided not to clean the painting but to just revarnish it with a light spray. As he did this, the varnish layers suddenly reacted violently, blanching and contracting into a gel-like mess. There was no other solution except to clean the picture and Suhr's entire restoration—including the sitter's gold chain—disappeared. What remained was a work of indifferent quality that was definitely not by Holbein. Although Ted Pillsbury complained to Gene Thaw who brokered the sale, because of the agreement, it could not be rescinded.

This was the background of John's relationship with Mario when, a few years later, John heard through the grapevine that Mario and I had been seeing each other. He came up to me in the studio one day and said there was something he wanted to discuss. This was often the preamble to an awkward conversation that usually took place in the lining room, unless someone was working there, in which case the stairwell served. I followed him to the lining room where he whispered, "Don't pay any attention to what those old bats are saying," and wished me well in the most heartfelt way. I was deeply touched by this episode, which is embedded with astonishing clarity in my memory. It was entirely characteristic of a side of John that few people were aware of: his deep affection and loyalty to his staff and friends, and his belief in romance, even though, unhappily, such happiness was never to be his lot.

CHAPTER 21

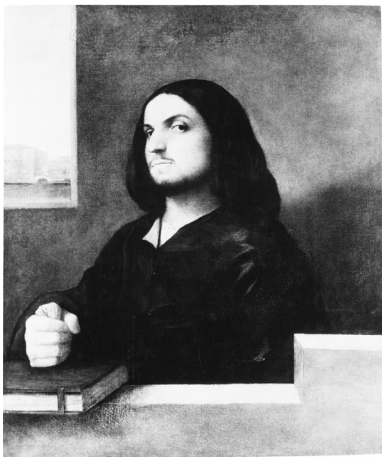
Notable Restorations

Giorgione

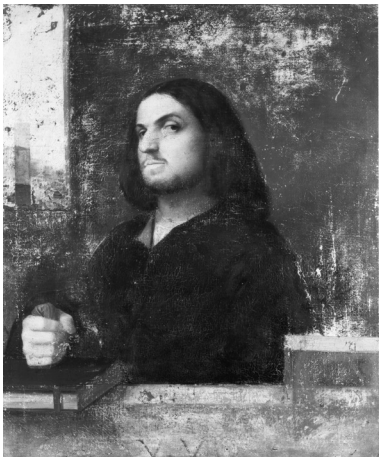
The remarkable work Mario carried out over the course of his long career, restoring hundreds of important paintings, was widely considered to be a model of the art of restoration. The *Portrait of a Venetian Gentleman* by Giorgione is a perfect example of how Mario maintained the delicate balance between competing responsibilities—the obligation to facilitate the viewer's appreciation of the work of art and the equally compelling obligation not to falsify it. When the Kress Foundation purchased the portrait, the sitter's black silk brocade jacket, among other passages, had been completely overpainted to conceal severe abrasion. Mario cleaned the painting, removing the overpaint, and carefully retouched the myriad of tiny losses to make the pattern of the brocade legible again. Otherwise, he made no attempt to disguise the condition of this badly damaged, yet still imposing, picture by one of the rarest of all painters.

The pentimenti of the knife the sitter once held in his fist and the changes in the architecture of the parapet had been partly exposed by a previous savage cleaning and the view through the window is in ruinous state. The losses that spoil these passages have been slightly subdued so that they do not disturb the whole. As I have already stated, the most difficult part of restoring old master paintings is knowing when to stop. That is the mark of a great restorer.

After it entered the National Gallery, the painting was catalogued as by both Giorgione and Titian and, more recently, inexplicably reassigned to Cariani. These changes in attribution annoyed Mario, who had studied both artists closely all his life. He always pointed out to me that Giorgione could be recognized by certain stylistic traits: the small hands and the well-preserved folds of the white fabric, which are like bent steel—quite unlike Titian's painterly treatment. Nonetheless, the two artists worked closely together in a rapidly evolving style so it is difficult to distinguish between them and opinions about authorship fluctuate.[1] (See Plates XII, XIII, XIV)



110. Giorgione, *Portrait of a Venetian Gentleman,* before cleaning and restoration.



111. The Giorgione with the overpaint removed.

El Greco's *Vision of Saint John*

During the 1950s, although primarily employed by the Kress Foundation, Mario occasionally took on other work, including a picture that presented an exceptional restoration challenge. In 1956, Ted Rousseau bought a late painting by El Greco, *The Vision of Saint John*, which is thought to depict the Opening of the Fifth Seal from the Apocalypse. Although it is a large canvas, it is only the lower half of a towering altarpiece commissioned from El Greco in 1608 for the church of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist Extra Muros in Toledo. It was returned to El Greco, perhaps because he had not completed it, and is listed in the 1614 inventory of his possessions made after his death in that year. It passed through several hands and was relined in 1880 at the Prado.[2] At that time, the top half of the painting, which may have been the part left unfinished when El Greco died in 1614, was removed and probably discarded. In 1905, it was purchased by the Spanish artist Ignacio Zuloaga (1870–1945) for one thousand pesetas, under circumstances that make for a fascinating story—as Mario related it—although it doesn't align exactly with the known provenance:[3]

Zuloaga went to a church to which a convent of nuns was attached. Entering the sacristy, he saw a canvas hanging over a door, curtaining off the passage to another area. Being a painter, he recognized that this canvas was the back of an antique painting. Curious, he got closer and turned over one of the corners and, in fact, as he suspected, there was a painting on the other side. He immediately realized that it was a work by El Greco and he asked one of the nuns why the canvas was hung with its face turned in toward the door. She said that there were some nudes in the center of the painting and so they had used it to cover the door as if it were a curtain. Unfortunately, the painting had been damaged by being continually moved as the sisters went in and out of that door. The painter asked the sister if he could speak to the mother superior because he would like to make a donation to the convent. He was introduced to the mother superior and told her that he would like to buy a proper velvet drape to cover the door, in whatever color she preferred, and offered one thousand pesetas in exchange

for the old canvas. The offer was accepted. Zuloaga, after a while, returned to the convent with the velvet drape and the money, rolled up the painting, and brought it to his studio. He mounted it on a stretcher and restored the damages with oil paint and a big brush, doing his best to imitate El Greco's style.

Given the ill treatment it had received, the picture presented daunting restoration challenges. In his attempt to cover up the myriad losses due to the crumbling of the brittle paint in response to the crinkling of the canvas, Zuloaga repainted it rather generously and exhibited it in his Paris studio, to which the young Pablo Picasso was a frequent visitor. Picasso's biographer, John Richardson, wrote that the painting "had an incalculable influence on his style, beliefs and aspirations; it reconfirmed his faith in his *alma Española* (his 'Spanish soul'); and it played a key role in the conception of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, not only in its size, format and composition, but in its apocalyptic power."[4]

When the painting arrived at the Met, it was examined by the conservator, Murray Pease, who made x-radiographs that revealed the extensive loss of original paint under Zuloaga's reworking. Approximately one quarter of the picture seemed to be missing. Mario said that Pease declined to work on it, and he and Theodore Rousseau, the chief curator, were at a standoff. Shortly after, Mario and Ted were lunching at Le Veau d'Or and the subject of the El Greco came up. Mario agreed to have a look at it and later recalled the situation:

Murray Pease, the staff restorer, came to examine the picture, bringing some x-radiographs. He and Ted Rousseau were not on good terms and, although he had refused to work on the painting, he was nonetheless rather put out that I had been called in. In one of our discussions, he pointed to a beautiful green drapery passage of thick copper resinate, vitreous as enamel, and, to my surprise, insisted that it should be removed as it was part of Zuloaga's repainting. I pointed out to him that in one of the x-radiographs, the drape was held up by a fragmentary hand belonging to one of the angels, so it could not be modern.

112. El Greco, *The Vision of Saint John*. Details of damaged passages.

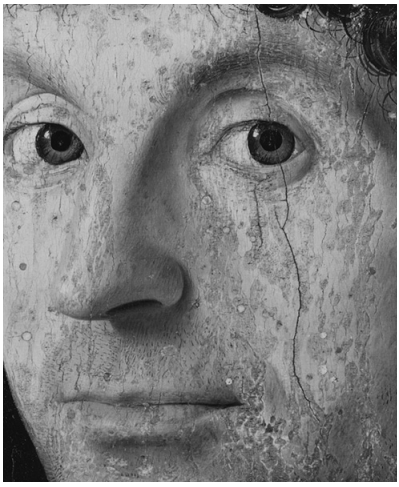
Mario and two assistants worked on the canvas for seven months in a large space in the attic with good light. They removed Zuloaga's repainting, revealing extensive losses of paint and preparatory layers down to the bare support. (See Plate XV)

After removing the repaint, the back of the original canvas—a damask checkerboard pattern like a tablecloth, often used in Venice during this period—was cleaned and the painting was relined with wax resin. Mario must have chosen this adhesive because it would consolidate the brittle paint layers. Once the painting was on its new stretcher, the restoration began. El Greco customarily laid out his pictures in the bold and efficient manner of Tintoretto, putting a red ground or priming over the entire canvas. Mario and his assistants used a filling material of the same red color for all the losses and pressed a canvas texture into it to imitate the original surface. Carefully carried out, this phase quieted the noisy distractions of the fractured losses. The successive delicate and exacting phases took many months and were finished in 1958. Despite its sad history of neglect and mutilation, the painting looked wonderful. Theodore Rousseau was delighted and inscribed the *Bulletin* devoted to the new acquisition, "To Mario Modestini, to whom the Met and El Greco owe so much." The painting has been loaned all over the world, and everyone marvels at how well Mario's work has held up. It is a great tribute to him. (See Plate XVI)

Antonello da Messina

One of the qualities that made Mario such a great restorer was his ability to adjust to problems, finding the right material and method to address the issue, as well as the skill to actually bring his ideas to fruition. Among the most stunning examples of this is his restoration of a portrait by Antonello da Messina, the great Sicilian artist and one of the first Italian painters to both use oil paint and exploit its unique characteristics in the way of the great Flemish painters.

This particular painting had languished on the market, since scholars did not accept the attribution to the master, believing it to be by his follower Antonello de Saliba. Rudolf Heinemann decided to take a chance and bought it, hoping that Mario would be able to do something with it. Mario cleaned the painting and said that after the varnish and repaints were removed, it looked like it had a horrible skin disease. He noticed that darkened repaints and



113. Antonello da Messina, *Portrait of a Man*.
Detail of the worm tunnels before restoration.

shallow fills had been carefully applied into long channels where the original paint had caved into the extensive worm tunneling in the wood. After carefully removing this later material, he found, to his surprise, that the original color remained at the bottom of the worm tunnels, below the rest of the surface. He did not want to cover the original paint again, but the surface irregularities made the painting look terrible. (See Plates XVII and XVIII)

After mulling over this problem, he decided to use his reliable resin medium, polyvinyl acetate, to fill the depressions, building it up until it was the same level as the surface. It was a finicky procedure that took a great deal of time and patience, since resin shrinks after the solvent has evaporated, and each depression required multiple applications. When this was finished, by an optical trick, the paint in the depressions looked as if it was at the same level as the rest of the surface. After that, very little retouching was required, because the painting was otherwise in reasonably good state. It was purchased as Antonello da Messina by Baron Thyssen and is one of the masterpieces of that collection. This was a rare find, as there are very few paintings by Antonello and many of them have been spoiled by cleaning. (See Plate XIX)

The Kress Ghirlandaio

In addition to his specialist knowledge based on his study of the stylistic features of Giorgione and Titian, Mario was also expert in distinguishing among works by Verrocchio and the talented painters of his studio in the late 1470s and early 1480s: the young Leonardo, Ghirlandaio, Perugino, and Lorenzo di Credi. There is much disagreement among scholars about the work of these artists, and he enjoyed discussing the vexing problem with Everett Fahy, Federico Zeri, and, of course, with me.

A beautiful *Madonna and Child* was included in the final Kress purchase from Contini, who had bought it in London as a work by Verrocchio. When it was acquired, the background was colored

battleship gray, and the rest of the painting was covered with prominent darkened retouches. It looked dreadful, but Mario could see the quality that would emerge if it was properly restored. After he cleaned it, both Berenson and Zeri immediately published it as early Ghirlandaio. To everyone's surprise, under the modern gray paint of the background, traditional gold leaf over red bole emerged. In High Renaissance Florence, gold backgrounds were not only archaic and out of fashion, but were explicitly condemned by such influential aestheticians as Leon Battista Alberti. All the other Madonnas from Verrocchio's studio have landscape backgrounds. Although still occasionally questioned, there was no doubt that Ghirlandaio's use of water gilding in this painting was deliberate, perhaps in response to a request from a patron. Ghirlandaio knew

114. Ghirlandaio, *Madonna and Child*. Before cleaning: the background had been painted gray. (See also Plates xx and xxi)

how to use gold; he came from a family of goldsmiths and had been trained in his father's shop. His nickname means "little garlands," referring to the gold ornaments that were fashionable in the 1470s to adorn ladies' hair. Although he gained fame as a fresco painter, Ghirlandaio's few works on panel are executed with egg tempera rather than oil, and he embellished them with lavish amounts of the most refined mordant gilding imaginable. The mordant is colorless and imperceptible, and the patterns are so precise that, until the presence of gold leaf is confirmed under the microscope, one assumes that they were done with gold paint.

After the Ghirlandaio was cleaned, even though the painted passages were in better condition than they at first appeared, the gold leaf was badly damaged and completely missing on the left side of the panel, although most of the bole was intact.[5] Mario replaced the missing gold using a wax mordant and distressed it so that it looked much like the right side. When he visited the National Gallery, he took great delight in playing a guessing game in front of the painting, asking whoever was with him which side was original and which was not. It is very difficult to tell.

Rubens's Self-Portrait

Rudolf Heinemann's nemesis was the French firm, Wildenstein & Co. The rivalry was so bitter that Mario had to be careful in his dealings with them so that Rudolf would not take offense, although he surely knew that Mario restored paintings for them. Even before moving to New York, Mario knew Georges Wildenstein (1892–1963) through the São Paulo museum and continued to work with his son, Daniel (1917–2001) and later with Georges' grandson, Guy (b. 1945). The family's wealth was legendary, as was the secrecy that surrounded their stock, which one writer estimated at ten thousand paintings in 1978.[6]

Over the years, Mario worked on a number of masterpieces for Wildenstein's. Perhaps the most important was an ex-Rothschild

picture, a Rubens self-portrait that he restored in 1977, also playing an essential role in its authentication.[7] He wrote:

Daniel Wildenstein called me one morning and asked me to come to the gallery to look at a painting by Rubens. When I got there, he showed me into one of the private viewing rooms. The walls were upholstered in red velvet and hung with red velvet drapes. He drew back one of the drapes and I saw a large painting that appeared to be by Rubens. It portrayed the artist, dressed in elegant black silks and a wide black hat, together with his young second wife, Helena Fourment, and their infant child. Daniel said, "Mario, I'm going to leave you alone with this picture. Please look at it carefully because there are several different opinions about the condition and the authorship. I would like to know what you think." He gave me a file containing reports and photographs and left. Alone in the room with this great work of art, because it was, even at first glance, a masterpiece, I examined the panel itself, which seemed in good

115. Peter Paul Rubens, *Rubens, His Wife, Helena Fourment, and Their Son, Frans.* The two heads and two hats are plainly visible.

116. Peter Paul Rubens, *Rubens, His Wife Helena Fourment and Their Son Frans*. A detail of the head during cleaning, revealing the wide cracks caused by the underlying bitumen black of the first hat. Some of the fissures are so deep that they were filled with white putty. Mario told me he had restored some of the cracks in the face, making them narrower, before this photograph was taken, so that they would not look so terrifying.

condition. The back of the oak panel had been cradled in England in the last century. Apart from the head of Rubens, which was completely repainted, everything else seemed well preserved. I began to read the file. A conservator on the West Coast [Ben Johnson of the Los Angeles County Museum] had examined the painting and written a report saying that it was in ruinous state and that, as proven by the x-radiographs, the head of Rubens had been repainted in the eighteenth century by an English artist, possibly Joshua Reynolds.[8] *Daniel came back and asked what I thought. I replied that the painting seemed to me to be a masterpiece by Rubens, and that the only problem was the head, which had been repainted. Daniel asked me if I would clean it. I agreed and he sent it to me right away.*

In the light of my studio, I could see that the flesh tone of Rubens's head, under the repainting, had wide cracks, indicating that the artist had reworked the area while the paint underneath was still fresh. In fact, in the x-radiograph, it was obvious that

there was a major pentimento: at an early stage, the artist had changed his mind about that part of the composition and moved the head to a different position. Originally, Rubens was looking down at the child, and in the subsequent revision he looked toward his wife. I can easily imagine that when she saw the painting, she reproved him, saying, "Why don't you look at me!" Whatever the reason, the change had been made when the first head was already substantially complete, so that the second head was painted over the original's black hat. Rubens used a beautiful, rich black color called bitumen that is made from tar. It never really dries, especially when it is thickly painted in an underlying layer. In this case, it had begun to slip under the final version of the face, causing the flesh tones to shrink, leaving exceptionally wide, black contraction cracks that separated areas of wrinkled, shrunken flesh tone. For this reason, the entire face had been painted over in the nineteenth century. When I removed this repainting, the original head emerged with its wide black contraction cracks, one of which was in the center of the face. They were so deep that they have been filled with gesso putty. I surmised that Rubens had also done the initial sketch with bitumen, because there were drying cracks in other passages, especially in the area of Rubens's legs. The rest of the painting did not present any difficulties.

After removing the old yellow varnish layers, I called Daniel over to see how the work was progressing. When he saw the picture cleaned of the repainting, with its wonderful coloration that had been obscured by the yellow varnish, he realized that he was in the presence of a great work, entirely by the hand of Rubens. He told me that it had been offered to Norton Simon, the Getty, and the Los Angeles County Museum, who had all turned it down on the basis of the report by the restorer. I said to Daniel that the painting belonged in an important museum, and he immediately thought of the Metropolitan. Daniel called John Pope-Hennessy, who was a friend and advisor of Charles (1895–1986) and Jayne (b. 1919) Wrightsman, great collectors of old master paintings and eighteenth-century French decorative arts, and the principal patrons of the Department of European Paintings. When John came to see it, he immediately told the Wrightsmans that they had to buy it. In the meantime, I had restored the cracks in the head and the painting was in its full splendor. John returned with Mrs. Wrightsman, who was enthusiastic about the painting and indicated that she would like to see it at the Metropolitan one day. She asked if it were possible to send it to Palm Beach so that Charles, who was ill and unable to travel, could see it. Daniel's gallery director, Harry Brooks, took the painting down to Florida in a climate-controlled truck. Charles was very excited and immediately was in favor of

the purchase for a price of around $3 million. When the painting came back to my studio, many art historians came to look at it, having heard that the Wrightsmans were buying it for the Met. A few were embarrassed, as they had to revise their former opinion, but others, I believe, remained skeptical for many years. Norton Simon often told me how much he regretted not buying it when it was offered to him, but that he trusted the restorer who had condemned the painting. It is now one of the glories of the Metropolitan Museum. It takes great courage to buy a disputed work; the fact that it is hanging on the walls of the Met is due to the knowledge, sensitivity, and courage of John Pope-Hennessy and the Wrightsmans.

117. Peter Paul Rubens, *Rubens, His Wife Helena Fourment and Their Son Frans*, ca. 1635, oil on panel, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 203.8 × 158.1 cm.

CHAPTER 22

A Few More Forgeries

Rudolf Heinemann was, on several occasions, the beneficiary of Mario's expertise with forgeries. Mario wrote about some of these experiences in his memoirs.

One morning [in 1961] Rudolf Heinemann called and asked me if I would come by his place to look at the London auction catalogues [for the June 14th sale] that had just arrived, because there was a painting that he was interested in buying. It was a Benozzo Gozzoli [Saint Nicholas of Bari Providing the Dowry for Three Poor Maidens] that, judging from the reproduction, looked intriguing. He asked me if I could go to London to see the painting before the sale. When I arrived at Sotheby's early in the morning, the sale room was empty. The art dealers, who usually are the first at the viewing, hadn't yet arrived. I examined the painting, and realized that it was a fake by my old friend, Federico Joni. I asked one of the attendants to call Mrs. Carmen Gronau, one of the vice presidents, and an expert in the old masters department. She came down to the gallery to greet me—we had known one another for a long time—and I told her my impression. She took the news rather badly, and

told me that John Pope-Hennessy had confirmed the attribution and considered it to be an important work by the artist. Was I certain in my assessment, she asked? I replied that I even knew who had painted it. The provenance of the painting was said to be an English gentleman, who had inherited it from his father many years earlier. This story must have been invented. In any case, I don't know what finally happened between the owner and Sotheby's, but the picture was withdrawn from the sale.

Another incident illustrates how some especially clever forgeries get passed along to other ill-informed buyers.

One time [in 1974], Dr. Heinemann came to me with a small panel painting of Christ at the Column [actually 'Man of Sorrows'].[1] *At first glance, it appeared to be late fifteenth-century French, very rare and therefore important. He asked me if it should be cleaned and what I thought of it. I looked at it carefully and told him that it was a fake. You can imagine the reaction of the most famous art dealer in the world! "It cannot be," he replied. "Absolutely, I have not the slightest doubt," I answered. He must have paid a great deal of money for the painting because he turned white and began to tremble. He repeated many times, "Are you absolutely sure, Mario?" and I continued to reply, "Absolutely, I have no doubt." Finally, he accepted my judgment and was convinced that he had been cheated. "Now, what can be done?" he asked. "Very simple," I replied. "Put it in an auction in New York, since you bought it in London, and act quickly." So, he took it to Parke-Bernet, which was on Madison Avenue at that time. The day of the auction, we both went to see if the picture would sell. To my great surprise, who should we see but the director of a famous museum and his curator? They sat in the front row, whispering to each other like conspirators. I was sure that they were there for Heinemann's picture. In fact, they were the successful bidders and immediately got up and left the room, clearly delighted with their purchase. I can only imagine what happened when the painting went to the museum's restoration department, where, after quite some time, it was pronounced a fake. It has never emerged again, nor was it returned to Parke-Bernet, probably because the two museum men were too embarrassed to admit their mistake.*

Being the victim of a con is humiliating, and when a famous museum is taken in by a forgery, the embarrassment clings for years. For the public, there is a delicious sense of schadenfreude

when elite experts, given to making lofty pronouncements, make clamorous mistakes. The story of the purported fifteenth-century French panel was quietly put to rest, but the memory of certain cases can linger for decades. One of the most famous examples is a painting depicting Saint Catherine, supposedly by the rare German artist, Matthias Grünewald, that appeared in 1974. Mario tells the story:

In the summer of 1974, I was vacationing in Lugano, where I looked after the Thyssen Collection, and one morning went to Dr. Heinemann's villa. He had just received the mail and there was a letter from Sherman Lee, the director of the Cleveland Museum, with a photograph of a standing female saint that was supposed to be one component of a large altarpiece. A cursory glance revealed some resemblance to Grünewald, although closer examination showed it to be a rather crude fake. Heinemann and I both exclaimed, "This must be a joke!" He said, "The director wants my opinion about this painting but I cannot answer him. I will have to pretend that I never received the photograph. The painting is too obviously fake." The museum had purchased the painting for $1 million from a dealer in New York, my old friend, Fred Mont. When I returned to New York, I found a message from Sherman Lee inviting me to come to Cleveland, ostensibly to consult about a restoration. The truth was that he wanted me to look at the Grünewald, and he showed me the painting when I visited several days later. I told him what he, at that point, already knew—the painting was a modern forgery.

Grünewald is one of the rarest masters; his surviving works are few and this purported to be a lost painting that was recorded as having disappeared in a shipwreck. [According to Grunewald's biographer, Joachim von Sandrart (1606–1688), three of his altarpieces were taken by Swedish troops as war booty in 1632 and were lost when the ship sank.] Using this story as a source, the forger had used a Grünewald drawing of Saint Catherine to fabricate a painting that conformed to a hypothetical sequence of events—the original wood panel was waterlogged and the paint layers had been transferred to a canvas support. It had been done in the clumsiest way imaginable. It was painted on canvas prepared with a stiff, brittle ground. When dry, the canvas was removed from the stretcher and rolled first in one direction and then in the other to make the cracks. Then it was glued to an old board and patinated with a dark color, which had stained the cracks, making them look old. The museum returned the

painting to Fred Mont, who refunded their money. It was a strange story all around. Fred was an excellent connoisseur. Sherman Lee also had a good eye and had bought very well for the Cleveland Museum, of which he was director for many years. It had been cleaned in New York by William Suhr, a great restorer specializing in northern painting, who did not notice there was anything wrong with it. It was really a very clumsy forgery, and I can only assume that everyone wanted it to be a lost Grünewald so much that they were blinded to the reality.

118. Fake Grünewald of Saint Catherine.

Later Hubert von Sonnenburg carried out analytical tests, which confirmed it was modern, and even traced it to the forger, a fellow Bavarian called Christian Goller, who, like Joni, claimed that he had painted it for his own pleasure and neither knew nor cared what happened to it after that.

CHAPTER 23

Misattributions, Studio Replicas, and Repainted Originals

The acquisition of old master paintings is complicated by many factors, and, as we have seen, mistakes have often been made. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that many collectors now prefer modern and contemporary works with more straightforward attributions. Forgeries are, of course, the most famous of the art-world pitfalls. Another difficulty is presented by the existence of multiple versions of a painting—either replicas by the artist himself or copies by his contemporaries. The poor condition of a picture can sometimes disguise its true authorship, or deceptive repainting by a restorer can enhance an attribution, although, like forgeries, time usually reveals the truth. Mario's skill in deciphering paintings was one of the qualities that made him so valuable to his clients.

In the past, the supreme importance of the expert's opinion has favored dubious attributions. Many of the greatest scholars were engaged in the ambiguous practice of becoming paid advisors

for dealers, as discussed earlier in relation to Bernard Berenson. Roberto Longhi, a passionate poker player, handed out expertises of dubious accuracy as payment for his gambling debts to three less than scrupulous art dealers, Vittorio Frascione, Pasquale Falanga, and Dino Fabbri. Federico Zeri, who may have heard this story from Mario, later accused Longhi of authenticating fakes. Mario told me that Longhi sometimes furnished inflated attributions to artists who were followers or imitators of a famous name. Mario baptized these as the "*Pressappoco* (more-or-less) Masters."

Unrecognized Originals: A Claude Lorrain and Others

As amazed as Mario was by fakes that passed for originals, he was even more astounded when original paintings went unrecognized. He often talked about one particular example, a painting by Claude Lorrain (1604–1692) in the Kress Collection at the National Gallery. *The Herdsman* was acquired from Wildenstein in 1945. The painting had a distinguished history. It was featured in an important exhibition of landscape painting in Paris in 1925, where it was deemed "an incomparable masterpiece," unsurpassed by any Claude Lorrain in France, and was accepted by a succession of scholars. At that time, it was in the collection at Houghton Hall, Norfolk, property of Lady Sybil Sassoon (1894–1989), wife of the Marquess of Cholmondeley, who had inherited it from her grandfather, Baron Gustave Salomon de Rothschild (1829–1911). The first doubts on its autograph status were cast by the Claude expert Marcel Röthlisberger, who conjectured in his 1961 catalogue raisonné, that it was by a skillful imitator of Claude, a Dutch painter in the circle of Jan Both (1618–1682). His assertion was based partly on the uncharacteristically large figure of the herdsman and the format of the picture. Mario was flabbergasted by the notion that the painting wasn't autograph. In discussions with John Walker,[1] he pointed out that the original painting had been pieced out with additions on all four edges,[2] probably in the early nineteenth

century. The seven-inch-wide addition on the left included most of the herdsman figure. Röthlisberger noted that the edges looked different but interpreted the join between the original canvas and the addition as an indent made by an earlier frame. He did not understand that they were not part of the original. Mario cleaned the painting in 1968 and told me that the central part was beautiful and in perfect state. When Röthlisberger saw it after cleaning, probably in Mario's studio, he changed his mind[3] and confirmed it as an early work by Claude of around 1635, praising the complex composition and the capture of the atmosphere of a specific hour.[4]

The painting's authenticity has again been questioned in the most recent museum catalogue in which it is attributed to a seventeenth or eighteenth-century follower of Claude.[5] Regrettably, the reader cannot study this interesting issue of connoisseurship for themselves, as the picture is no longer exhibited.

119. Claude Gellée, known as Claude Lorrain, *The Herdsman*, n.d., oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 120.7 × 160 cm.

120. Claude Gellée, known as Claude Lorrain, *The Judgement of Paris*, 1646, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 112.3 × 149.5 cm.

This was not the only genuine painting by Claude in Mario's experience that was mistakenly spurned, this time as the work of a nineteenth-century imitator or forger.

Geoffrey Agnew was one of the most important art dealers in London, a man of fine appearance with a deep baritone voice that intimidated people who didn't know him. He was outspoken about his opinions. In other words, he had a strong personality. We were good friends, not only professionally but also because we liked one another. I did a lot of work for his gallery. One of the paintings I restored for him was a Claude Lorrain, The Judgement of Paris, now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Ted Rousseau saw it at Agnew's in London and asked for it to be sent to the Metropolitan Museum as a possible acquisition. After it was cleaned it was extraordinary and in perfect condition. Perhaps for this reason, when it arrived in New York the chief restorer, [Hubert von] Sonnenburg, claimed that it was a nineteenth-century fake and the museum

didn't buy it. Shortly thereafter it was published as Claude by the expert, Marcel Röthlisberger.

Optimistic Attributions: Raphael's *Portrait of a Woman*

1970 marked the centennial of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. On December 15, 1969, on the eve of the celebrations, the director, Perry Rathbone, made the sensational announcement that they had acquired a small panel by Raphael, a portrait of a woman. The appearance of a new Raphael filled the headlines of the national and international press, but problems with the acquisition began almost immediately. Rathbone and his most trusted curator, Hans Swarzenski, had purchased the work from a dealer in Genoa, Ildebrando Bossi, who claimed that it had belonged for centuries to an aristocratic family in that city, descendants of the Dukes of Urbino, one of whom had been among Raphael's early patrons. It had been studied years earlier by Pietro Toesca, a well-regarded art historian whom Mario had known in Rome in the 1930s; Toesca had accepted the attribution, and no one had seen it since. Competition among museums for increasingly rare masterpieces was at its peak. In 1961, the Metropolitan Museum had purchased Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* at auction for a record price, and the National Gallery had scored an even greater coup by securing Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* a few years later.

The most coveted paintings were still in Europe, and some countries, Italy in particular, had enacted draconian statutes governing the export of works of art. Nonetheless, Rathbone and Swarzenski were willing to take the risk if the portrait was indeed by Raphael. To determine this, they asked the opinion of an eminent Raphael scholar, John Shearman, who, after studying the photographs, accompanied Rathbone and Swarzenski to Genoa to see the painting in person. As Belinda Rathbone writes in a recent book about her father, "That [the painting] was previously

unknown to him added to its promise, for it was only such an unknown work that could stand a chance of export from Italy . . . it could have come from anywhere."[6] Shearman accepted that the painting had belonged to Pope Julius II, as the dealer claimed, but rather than the traditional identification of the sitter as Maria Della Rovere, argued that the painting was instead a portrait of the young Eleonora Gonzaga made before her marriage in 1505 to Francesco Maria Della Rovere, the nephew of Pope Julius II, whose 1506 portrait by Raphael belongs to the Uffizi. The painting was judged to be in reasonably good state for a work of the period. When it arrived in Boston, it was immediately put on exhibition, and Shearman published his discovery in the February 1970 issue of the *Burlington Magazine*.[7]

The complexities surrounding the arrival of the painting in Boston are detailed in Belinda Rathbone's book. In brief, Swarzenski carried it through customs in his briefcase without declaring it, and this set off a complicated series of events that ultimately caused the return of the painting to Italy, as well as Perry Rathbone's resignation.

Rodolfo Siviero had been in charge of the commission to recuperate art stolen by the Germans. He had a volatile temper and hungered for recognition after his office and importance were downgraded in the postwar era. One of his spies informed him that the little painting in Boston had been illegally exported from Italy, and he seized the chance to regain the spotlight. Pursuing the case with great tenacity, in a short time he had uncovered all the details, including the fact that it had been imported into the United States in violation of customs law.[8] This was supposed to be one of his greatest triumphs, though unfortunately rather short-lived. It did not take long after its appearance and publication for the art historical knives to come out. Some experts considered it a fake, while others simply questioned its attribution to Raphael. Mario had followed the controversy, but he hadn't seen the painting while it was in Boston. He first had occasion to examine it after its return to Italy. He wrote:

I knew Siviero well, having once helped him recover a stolen work, and as soon as I came to Italy for the summer, he called with great excitement to tell me that he had the painting, and would I come and look at it. I went to his office in the Palazzo Venezia in Rome. After the usual pleasantries, he handed me the little portrait, which I took over to the window to look at in good light. I immediately thought that the painting was not by Raphael, but rather by a northern Italian painter in the circle of Francia or Costa. Some restorer had tried to make it look as much like Raphael as possible but without much success. In fact, in my entire career, I have never seen a successful transformation of a school painting into the master, although there have been many attempts. Every falsification—such as those Lazzaroni had commissioned from his restorer, Verzetta, in Paris—reflects the taste of the time in which they are painted. Unconsciously, the forger puts the flavor of his own period into his work.

121. The Boston Raphael, on deposit at the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, 27 × 21.5 cm.

Siviero asked me what I thought of the recovered painting. When I told him my opinion, that it was a painting of the Emilian School aided by a restorer, his face turned scarlet and he screamed at me that I didn't understand anything. Fortunately, at that very moment, there was a knock on the door and Giuliano Briganti, the great art historian, entered. He had also been invited by Siviero to see the Raphael. I was still holding the portrait, and I handed it to Giuliano. His opinion was the same as mine: that it was by a mediocre master. Siviero was naturally furious, so Giuliano and I decided it would be best to leave him alone. It was a great embarrassment for him after all the work [he'd done] and the publicity he had generated. The director and the curator of the Boston Museum had no recourse; the money that had been paid for the painting was lost, and they were both fired by the board of trustees when the scandal broke.

After the painting was returned, it was cleaned at the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro. As Mario noted, it was a badly abraded painting from the period, and it had been very much repainted to make it more closely resemble a work by the young Raphael.

Portraits seem to be particularly susceptible to shaky opinions and interpretations. As John Shearman wrote: "Famous names and distinguished provenances grow on portraits as casually as barnacles on a boat's bottom, and they are rightly regarded with suspicion."[9]

Primary Versions and Studio Replicas: Lorenzo Lotto

Another type of misattribution involves the relationship of secondary versions or copies of the original, or first version, of a picture. Mario wrote about one such discovery that he and Rudolf Heinemann made in London in 1960:

Rudolf and I were looking through the London sales catalogues and noticed a painting by Lorenzo Lotto, [Virgin and Child with Saints Jerome and Nicholas of Tolentino]. It had been published by the expert Cecil Gould as a copy after a work in the National Gallery, London. I went to London and became convinced that the painting in the sale was the original one [and the National Gallery version a copy of it]. When it arrived

in New York, I cleaned it (it was in very good state) and Rudolf immediately sold it to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston as a Lotto. Naturally, the director, Perry Rathbone, was very happy to have the painting, since the only other Lotto they owned was a battered replica.

After Mario cleaned the Lotto, Gould immediately changed his mind, convinced that it was the original and the London version, which is in poor state, was a replica. When a technical study was made of the two paintings in the late 1990s,[10] light was shed on the very interesting relationship between the two works. Both paintings were examined with infrared reflectography, which uses electromagnetic wavelengths from 700 to 2,500 nanometers to penetrate the paint layers and reveal the initial drawing. In the Boston painting, the underdrawing was freehand and it was obvious that the artist had planned the composition directly on the canvas, as many alterations were made, some even after the initial lay in of paint. The most important change was to the position of the

122. Lorenzo Lotto, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, detail, oil on canvas, transferred from original canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 94.3 × 77.8 cm.

123. Lorenzo Lotto, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, detail, signed and dated 1522, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London, 91 × 75.4 cm.

Child's head, which was shifted from a frontal pose to the final one where he looks at Saint Nicholas.

When the infrared reflectograms of both paintings were compared, the drawing of the London painting proved to be simpler, more mechanical than that of the Boston picture, perhaps made from a cartoon,[11] although it was not an exact copy. The conservators noticed that when a change was made in one painting, it was also made in the other. The build-up of the paint layers was also the same. They concluded that the Boston painting was begun first, but soon after, perhaps at a client's request, Lotto or one of his assistants started another version and the two paintings were worked on simultaneously. Apart from the underdrawing, the biggest technical difference between the two paintings is the choice of blue pigment. For the Boston version, the expensive ultramarine made from lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone, was used while the blue in the London painting is the less costly azurite.

The technical examination proved that Mario was right in his assessment that the Boston painting is the first version. I have seen both paintings many times since Mario told me this story. Aside from the blue, there is a great difference in the quality of handling between the two, suggesting that an assistant may have worked alongside Lotto to paint much of the second version, which is usual studio practice.

Repainted Originals: A Lazzaroni Botticelli

A third instance of misattribution concerns a painting that was a superb example of a master's work in good condition, but so extensively repainted that the attribution was not apparent.

In the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for restorers to cover up the original with their own work, sometimes to conceal damage but occasionally just to alter the painting according to their own view of what would be attractive to the market. Some collectors are tempted to buy such reworked paintings in the hope

124. Sandro Botticelli, *Virgin and Child with the Young Saint John* before its acquisition by Michele Lazzaroni. The photo from the Frick archive showing the painting before it was reworked. (See also Plate XXII)

125. Detail during cleaning. The mordant gilding was modern.

that there is a reasonably well-preserved original underneath the modern paint, while others shun them unless the results of a full technical study are available.

Mario always kept an open mind and used his own judgment.

Many years after I bought Barone Michele Lazzaroni's archives from his son, Cesare Canessa, a Roman dealer, wrote to tell me that the daughter of the baron was trying to sell a painting by Botticelli. When I returned to Italy for my summer vacation, out of sheer curiosity, I accompanied Canessa to the Palazzo Lazzaroni to see the painting, sure that I would be shown another of Verzetta's fabrications. The painting was in fact heavily restored but well-conceived, worthy of the master. The heads of the Madonna and Child were beautiful and I concluded that the painting was absolutely right. I told Rudolf Heinemann about it but when he heard the name Lazzaroni he said that he didn't want to waste his time. I finally convinced him to look at it but he was particularly out of sorts since he had caught his finger in the car door, and he

126. During cleaning. Lazzaroni had added strands of hair as well as a scarf.

said he wasn't interested. I told him that in that case I would buy it myself. Then he changed his mind.

I sent it to New York and cleaned it. The Madonna's mantle was completely new, repainted, and had been embellished with elaborate mordant gilding—a specialty of Verzetta. Under Verzetta's "restoration", the original drapery emerged. Part of the sleeve had been scraped down to the preparation, which retained the original incisions to indicate the design.

I showed the painting to Everett Fahy, a brilliant connoisseur who knew this corner of the quattrocento better than anyone. He was director of the Frick Collection at that time and knew the photo archives extremely well. He remembered seeing a photograph of the painting before the sleeve had been scraped off, and shortly thereafter sent me a print, which I used to restore the missing yellow drapery. The restored painting was accepted by all the experts. Dr. Heinemann showed it to Sherman Lee, who bought it for the Cleveland Museum. I think it must be the only authentic painting by a master of the Renaissance to have come from Lazzaroni. It is very difficult to understand why he was not satisfied with a beautifully preserved painting by a great artist and felt compelled to 'improve' upon it by scraping down the sleeve, repainting the mantle, and adding extensive mordant gilding so that, in the end, it resembled the fakes he usually dealt in. (See Plate XXIII)

Norton Simon's Botticelli

Duveen Brothers' last remaining branch on 18 East 79th Street ended its business activities in 1964. The London and Paris galleries had already closed, as had the previous New York showroom—a glorious thirty-room edifice on the northwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 56th Street, the design of which was inspired by a wing of the Ministère de la Marine in Paris.[12] The California industrialist and collector Norton Simon, while negotiating the purchase of a small painting by Giorgione with the then owner of the firm, Edward Fowles, decided to buy the 79th Street building, the library, and whatever was left of the stock for $4 million.[13] Among the eight hundred art objects, Simon's interest was caught by a panel of a Madonna and Child, purportedly by Botticelli, that had been

completely repainted. Mario said that the collector was convinced there was a real Botticelli under the modern paint. For years, he begged Mario to clean it, until finally Mario agreed. No one could resist that much pressure from Simon, who was famously insistent. From under the repaint, a beautiful but badly damaged Botticelli emerged. Most of the flesh tones had been worn down to the green underpaint by past cleaning with harsh solvents, and there were numerous losses—especially in the heads of the Virgin and Child. Everett Fahy again followed the restoration, and Mario told me that on one of his visits he said, "Mario, stop. That's enough."

127. Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna and Child with Adoring Angel*, ca. 1468, tempera on panel, Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California, 88.9 × 68 cm.

Fahy's comment and Mario's openness to it raise several important issues about performing restorations of this kind on such a heavily damaged picture. Laymen (or "lemons," as Mario used to pronounce the word) often ask conservators how they are able to match the colors. Color matching is a skill that can be mastered with application and patience. Apart from matching the paint's hue and tone, many other techniques are needed to give restored losses the hard, vitreous look of antique paint with its patina and cracks. It is important to have a good teacher—and it is difficult to find one. Creating a retouch that imitates the original is, nonetheless, just mechanics. The greatest challenge is in knowing how far to carry a restoration. What is acceptable for a conservatively restored painting or for one that is more fully retouched, but with taste (that indefinable, elusive quality) and respect, is somewhat fluid. Behind these parameters lurks the danger of an over-restored painting, which has lost the character of the original and taken on the personality of the restorer.

Knowing when to stop is the most difficult part of a restoration, especially when the painting is very damaged. There is a fine line between a presentable restored picture and one that has been muffled by excessive retouching, and it can be crossed in an instant without the restorer being aware of it. Drawing one crack too many, adding one small speck, can tip the balance. It is a challenge to maintain a critical eye as the work goes on, and the fresh perspective of a colleague—such as Fahy in the above account—can be invaluable in preventing the original paint from being overpowered by retouching. The goal is to allow what is left of the artist to dominate. I do not believe that one-size-fits-all systems with specific rules are helpful. Every painting is different, so the decision is necessarily subjective, and, for this decision to be well-informed, it is essential to look hard at as many paintings as possible over one's career, to solicit discussion and advice from colleagues, and to always be critical of one's own work.

Reflections on the Art of Restoration

An essential quality for a restorer is therefore a delicate balance between caution and self-confidence, which is different from ego. Mario, as his surname implies, was always humble in the presence of a painting. He regarded paintings as the manifestation of the artist's mind rendered with such ordinary materials as oil, egg, or gum mixed with some minerals. At any stage in a restoration it is all too easy to manipulate these materials so that they no longer conform to the author's vision. Sometimes it is necessary to be bold and remove ancient repaints and embellishments that distort the creative intent while simultaneously clinging to the perishable remains of the original.

Mario wrote his reflections about the cleaning process, at my request, in the 1990s:

I have been asked to describe my approach to paintings, not an easy question to answer since every painting presents its own problems. I always approach paintings with great respect, humility, and a certain fear to touch them with solvents, afraid to spoil them. I begin cleaning by making a small test in a corner, or some unobtrusive place, never making a cleaning test in the center of a painting. I try to remove the varnish as evenly as possible over the entire composition, not only the highlights. This is particularly important with baroque paintings. You have to stop before going too deep, and always leave a little patina. Many times I have been criticized by dealers, who would say that the painting wasn't clean enough for Americans. I prefer to use solvents that evaporate quickly. Very rarely I use dimethylformamide, only to remove tough overpaint. Sometimes you have to use ammonia, diluted of course.

The cleaning of gold grounds is a very delicate operation. My father was a gilder, a frame maker, and a restorer of polychrome sculpture. Since the age of fourteen, when I went to work in his shop, I have worked with gold and have had a lot of experience with gold-ground paintings. Many, like the Paolo di Giovanni Fei [see Chapter 11], haven't been cleaned for centuries and are covered with a black crust consisting of oil, soot, glue, and grime that are extremely difficult to remove. Sometimes, if a gold-ground painting has never been cleaned, under the dirt and varnish there is a gray

patina, original to the painting, consisting of a sealant made from beaten egg whites or else a little bit of absorbed dirt. This should never be removed. Sometimes it can also be found over the gold ground [which would have given it] a slightly matte quality to subdue the newly burnished gold.

Many paintings have been ruined by the use of strong alkaline cleaning agents, such as caustic soda, or lye, used extensively in the nineteenth century. I like Secco Suardo's unguent for softening hardened dirt and oil. It consists of melted ox fat (grasso di bue), linseed oil, Marseilles soap, and very little water. It requires patience, as it does not work immediately. One of my earliest experiences as a restorer was with the Rospigliosi Collection in Rome, before its dispersal. Many paintings from the Palestrina villa had never been cleaned and were covered with a hardened black crust of smoke and soot from the fireplaces, which could only be removed with the pomade. [For cleaning gilding] anything containing water has a ruinous effect, since the gold leaf is bound to the bole preparation with a mild gelatin solution, easily undermined by moisture. I also avoid solutions containing alcohol [because it's chemically close to water]. Acetone mixtures I have found to be safe. Sometimes I have used acetone and linseed or mineral oil [to avoid blanching that occurs as the varnish breaks up]. Unguents, as long as they are an emulsion containing mainly oil and just a touch of soap, can also be used safely.

Often, the punched decoration of the gold ground is clogged with dark-brown, discolored varnish, left behind by previous cleaning. Usually I try to remove these deposits, softening them with a waterless paint remover, applied with a tiny brush, and then cleaned mechanically under the microscope, dot by punched dot, which takes a lot of time and patience. This product does not harm the gold. I like to use very thin varnishes and hate shiny surfaces, especially for early paintings. The gold ground should never be varnished; if there is blanching from the cleaning, put a bit of linseed oil into some mineral spirits [put it on a cloth and go over the gold] and immediately dry the surface completely. Early paintings need very subdued surfaces, otherwise they look sticky. Artists have always had good taste, and I don't believe they ever liked their pictures to look glossy.

As Mario knew, the problems of over-cleaning stem, in part, from the illusion that there is such thing as a clear and unequivocal line separating original surface and later accretions, and from an oversimplification of the complexities involved in the way a picture changes over time [see Appendix].

Retouching Controversies: Alfio Del Serra

Retouching is a contentious issue in restoration circles and the debate over how to treat areas of damage and paint loss became one of the dividing lines between the approach of traditional restorers and that of Cesare Brandi, who wanted the viewer to be able to distinguish between original and restoration. Mario often felt that this idea had been carried too far when the losses became more visible and important than the original. Everyone agrees on the essential premise that the artist's vision should never be camouflaged by the personality of the restorer.

128. Raphael, *Pope Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi*, 1518–1519, oil on panel, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, 155.5 × 119.5 cm. For comparison see Figures 129 and 130.

In this regard, nothing raised Mario's ire more than the work of a famous Florentine restorer, Alfio Del Serra, who retouched so obsessively that many of the paintings he worked on looked airbrushed, changing the entire character of the painting. Mario could spot Del Serra's work from the far end of a gallery the minute he walked in. Every painting had the same spongy quality. Oddly enough, in a culture of restoration that had invented, then imposed, visible retouching throughout the country, this man's work was exalted, and he always worked on great masterpieces. It was a complete contradiction, but no one in Florence seemed to notice.

Del Serra was an intelligent and sensitive man. His 1985 article in the widely-read *Burlington Magazine*[14] about the cleaning

129. Raphael, *Self-portrait with a Friend*, ca. 1518, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 99 × 83 cm.

of tempera paintings and the importance of original varnishes was of great importance. I thought that he had done lovely work on several important paintings in the Uffizi, particularly Duccio's *Rucellai Madonna* and Botticelli's *Venus.* But when it came to other Renaissance works, and particularly to Venetian painters, I had to agree with Mario that something had gone wrong. The final straw for Mario came sometime around 1995 at an exhibition at the Uffizi devoted to Florentine mannerist painters of the sixteenth century. The famous Raphael portrait, *Pope Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi,* was on view after a recent cleaning and restoration by Del Serra. Mario flew into a rage and literally began to yell, *"Assassini!"* ("Murderers!") right in the galleries, which, luckily, were fairly empty. Eventually a guard took notice, and shortly thereafter, someone came down to find out what was wrong. Mario said, "Don't you see what has happened to this painting?" and so on. It is a wonder we were not thrown out or even arrested!

Commenting on this experience, Mario wrote:

To my horror, the character of the sitter had been completely changed by the restoration: the head and hands were puffy and grotesquely simplified, as if Botero rather than Raphael had painted them. The portrait looked like one of those reproductions painted on porcelain—evidently, he wished to improve on the artist's work! I can recognize the work of this restorer from two hundred yards away. I would like to suggest to the art historian in charge of this restoration and to the director of the museum that they should have this painting cleaned of the excessive retouches that camouflage this masterpiece of the Renaissance.

Mario was not the only one who was unhappy with Del Serra's work. While other critics were reluctant to speak out, Mario, as he often pointed out, could say whatever he wanted at his age. The role of the restorer is to stand aside and not put himself between the viewer and the artist. A colleague told me that the way Del Serra restored paintings was quite unorthodox: he cleaned the painting piece by piece and, as he cleaned, he glazed the highlights, or areas he thought were too bright, with watercolor, and retouched every

130. Raphael, *Andrea Navagero and Agostino Beazzano*, 1516, oil on canvas, Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome, 76 × 107 cm.

tiny imperfection. One consequence is that no photographs exist of the cleaned state of the highly important paintings entrusted to him. The results have been particularly calamitous for Titian, whose great nude, the *Venus of Urbino* in the Uffizi, now looks as if her body has no bones, and all sense of anguish in the *Penitent Magdalene* in the Galleria Palatina has been extinguished. Fortunately, I am certain that the paintings are perfectly fine underneath the fanatic retouching. Unfortunately, it will be several generations before they will be seen again free of the smothering watercolor additions.

CHAPTER 24

Cleaning and Controversies

Mario's passion for works of art and their appearance caused him to become intensely upset when he witnessed the results of ignorance, arrogance, and poor judgment. This sensitivity was illustrated when we visited the National Gallery in London in the late 1990s to see the group of seven panels by Sassetta, the magical fifteenth-century Sienese painter who had been so important in Mario's life. The paintings are not in optimal condition. Over the centuries, they have suffered from flaking paint and are worn, as they have been cleaned and restored several times since the Borgo San Sepolcro Altarpiece, to which they originally belonged, was broken up and the compartments dispersed in the early nineteenth century. The panels belonging to the National Gallery were restored by Stephen Pichetto, Mario's predecessor at the Kress Foundation. Pichetto thinned the wood supports, applied the usual cradles, and would almost certainly have varnished them heavily with alternating layers of dammar/shellac to achieve a smooth surface,

as was his practice. London's National Gallery acquired them in 1934. In 1974, they were again cleaned and restored. The panels have not been gently treated. For over a century, the National Gallery has been criticized for its strong cleaning, and the Sassettas are something of a poster child for this approach as far as many Italian experts are concerned. The National Gallery is not to blame for all of the condition problems, however, there is no doubt in my mind that if they had been cleaned and restored by Mario, for example, they would not look as raw as they do presently.

Paintings are infinitely complex, composed of many thin layers all of which play an essential role in the conception the artist initially achieved. As John Brealey, the former department head at the Metropolitan Museum, constantly emphasized to those who diminish the importance of cleaning and restoration as merely cosmetic: "The way the picture looks *is* the picture." The restorer, often in conjunction with the art historian, determines a painting's appearance—that is, its very meaning as a work of art. It is a terrifying responsibility, which is why the subject is so emotionally freighted.

There are two poles in the debate about the cleaning of paintings. The first supposes that it is possible to be completely objective in removing everything from the paint surface that is not part of the original: dirt, varnish, retouching, regardless of how the painting looks. The second is necessarily subjective and holds that while cleaning a painting, the conservator must be constantly attentive and strive to maintain the relationships among the formal values of color, value, tone, line, and shape so as not to disrupt the illusion of space and form, which has often been affected by various alterations that have occurred over time. Mario was interested in how a painting ultimately looked—whether it was in "balance", as he described it. He was devastated when he saw paintings that had been scrubbed until the whites gleamed bright and the surface enamel (that is, the exudation of the medium that occurs as the pigments settle), as he described it, eroded to reveal fresh colors.

Mario played a major role in a bitter controversy surrounding the cleaning of a Rubens and a Rembrandt at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. It was not the first controversy regarding the cleaning of paintings. In the mid-nineteenth century, a flurry of protests resulted in resignations and dismissals at several European museums in response to public criticism of newly cleaned paintings. In London, in October 1846, a letter to the *Times*, signed 'Verax', complained that four paintings from the National Gallery "had been subjected to a terrible ordeal at the cleaners' hands." The ensuing debate lasted from 1846 until 1853, when a Royal Commission of Enquiry was appointed to investigate the charges. In the intervening period, Sir Charles Eastlake, the keeper of the museum, resigned his position, partly in response to the storm of criticism. A thousand-page report was presented to the House of Commons. In 1855, Eastlake was reappointed as the museum's first director, and for the rest of his tenure he adopted a cautious approach to restoration, "because the cleaning of pictures is a subject which admits of no proof, and it is one on which the public mind may be easily unsettled."[1]

Virulent attacks on the Louvre's cleaning policies erupted in 1793 and again between 1848 and 1860, when, ultimately, the curator of paintings, Frédéric Villot—who had initiated the cleanings—resigned. An outcry arose in Munich in 1861 about cleaning at the Pinakothek. A commission was formed and the controversy was resolved by the intervention of Dr. Max von Pettenkofer, a distinguished chemist and a pioneer of modern hygiene. Pettenkofer invented a process for regenerating old varnishes using solvent fumes. This method, or variants of it, became famous in the following years, and was used extensively on the continent as well as in England, with the result that very few paintings were cleaned in Europe until the mid-1930s.[2]

For many years, the subject of the cleaning of paintings lay quiescent, until another controversy developed at the National Gallery in London just after World War II, when paintings that had been cleaned while in storage returned to the galleries.

Again, there were many letters to the press, and an exchange of views by professionals was published in the *Burlington Magazine*. This time the museum responded by mounting an exhibition in 1947 accompanied by a catalogue, *An Exhibition of Cleaned Pictures*, which sought to address some of the issues regarding varnishes and their removal. When this failed to allay public discomfort, a commission of inquiry was again established. The report of the Weaver Committee recommended that an adequate conservation department be created, to work in concert with an internal chemical laboratory staffed by scientists.

Linking scientific research to traditional conservation was not a new idea. During the second quarter of the twentieth century, the study of historic painting techniques and materials, and the identification of new, stable substances to replace the traditional ones, became a subject of interest to chemists. Several countries had already formed institutes for this new approach to the study and conservation of works of art. Harvard's Fogg Museum was among the earliest and one of the most active centers from which a generation of a new type of conservator emerged.[3] The traditionally trained restorer did not, however, disappear and two schools developed, becoming increasingly polarized. In a 1982 lecture, the influential Belgian aesthetician, Paul Philippot, son of a renowned restorer at the Institut Royale du Patrimoine Artistique in Brussels with whom he often collaborated, as well as a supporter of Cesare Brandi and the Istituto Centrale di Restauro, recognized that two tendencies existed, which he labeled the technological-scientific camp and the historical-humanist school. He noted, "The meeting of these two evolving components would inevitably give rise to conflicts," and noted that the two positions were deeply entrenched.[4] In addressing the problematic nature of varnish removal, Philippot had earlier written that restoration necessarily involves critical judgement because the irreversible alteration of the materials of the painting over time precludes a precise determination of the original state. Therefore, an approach that claims scientific objectivity is illusory

and in itself subjective because it chooses to ignore the aesthetic reality of the work.[5]

The National Gallery of Art

In 1971, J. Carter Brown III made an important acquisition for the National Gallery, the first for the new director: a life-size group portrait by Peter Paul Rubens of the family of Balthasar Gerbier, begun while the artist was staying with Gerbier at York House in London in 1629.[6] Gerbier brought the painting with him to Brussels when he served as King Charles I's agent from 1631 until 1640. When Gerbier returned to England, Rubens' widow, Hélène, presumably purchased the painting from him since it is recorded in her collection in 1646. There is a gap in the provenance but by 1724 the picture was back in London at Lord Radnor's house in St. James's and subsequently passed through several English private collections until it was acquired by the London dealer (and Mario's friend) Geoffrey Agnew. The painting was considered to be among Rubens's finest works.

Agnew's sold it to the National Gallery for $2.5 million, a record price for a Rubens at that time. Brown was anxious to secure the painting and, although it needed attention, it went to Washington before it had been cleaned. Agnew naturally assumed that the painting would be sent to Mario, who had a long association with the museum, but that is not what happened. The newly appointed assistant director at the National Gallery, Charles Parkhurst, had a background in conservation, and the responsibility for this had been largely assigned to his portfolio.[7] The National Gallery had never had its own department.

On July 30, at Carter Brown's request, Parkhurst wrote to Mario to ask if he could undertake the necessary restoration work, adding that the National Gallery intended to get at least one other proposal for treatment. Mario was away for the summer and did not receive the letter; however, Geoffrey Agnew was aware of its contents and

became rather concerned. He wired Mario and made sure that he had a copy of the letter. Mario immediately sent a telegram to Parkhurst saying that he could look at the painting soon after he returned to New York on September 30th. Not wishing to delay the cleaning of this major acquisition, and perhaps pleased with the opportunity to introduce the technological-scientific approach to the National Gallery, Parkhurst sent the painting to Oberlin where, as director of the Allen Art Museum, he had set up a conservation department in 1953 under the direction of Richard Buck (1903–1977), from the Fogg Art Museum, a leading exponent of this school of thought. Buck was particularly interested in structural work and decided to remove the old glue lining and replace it with a wax lining, considered by most American conservators to be a superior method. The relining required a great deal of time. In addition, three scientists were engaged to analyze the materials of the painting. In any event, the process took the better part of two years. In the meantime, Parkhurst formed a small conservation department at the National Gallery, appointing Victor Covey, a specialist in packing and shipping, with "incredible hands",[8] as its head and, as chief paintings conservator, Kay Silberfeld, a pupil of Richard Buck; both came from the Baltimore Museum of Art where Parkhurst had been director prior to his appointment in Washington.

After the *Gerbier Family* returned to the National Gallery in 1973 and went on display, whispering began among the cognoscenti. Geoffrey Agnew was shocked and angry when he saw the picture and began complaining forcefully to his client and friend, Paul Mellon, the president and principal patron of the museum, that the painting had been ruined during its two-year treatment in Oberlin, as he had feared it would be.[9] Michael Jaffé, a Rubens scholar and professor at Cambridge University, shared this opinion, and they continued to protest to Mellon over the next several years.

In May 1977, another of Paul Mellon's advisors, the British restorer, John Brealey, recently appointed to head the paintings conservation department at the Metropolitan Museum, stumbled

into this explosive situation. Brealey was an impassioned and articulate advocate of the historical-humanist approach to the cleaning of paintings with a gift for garnering publicity for his views. He had already antagonized the American conservation establishment. Parkhurst decided to invite Brealey to visit "the lab"—a term John detested—in Washington, reasoning that one should "know one's enemy."[10] Brealey accepted the invitation, assuming it had been extended at Paul Mellon's behest. Two paintings were being cleaned at that moment: Rembrandt's *The Mill*, and *Soap Bubbles* by Chardin. The paintings were lying on tables, under fluorescent lights, the usual method for cleaning used by the scientific school to guarantee objectivity, rather than on easels as John and Mario did, in order that the effects of the varnish removal on the pictorial values could be observed.[11] John had a volatile temper and flew into a rage, provoking a nasty altercation with the defensive Kay Silberfeld. He returned to New York in a state of agitation, convinced that he had let Paul Mellon down. Early Monday morning he called Mellon's office intending to apologize for his behavior only to learn that Mellon knew nothing about the visit.

In September, an article appeared in the *Washington Post*, describing the cleaning of *The Mill*. Both Paul Mellon and former director, John Walker, were astonished by the news. Mellon later recalled that Walker "went white with rage, saying, 'They'll absolutely ruin it.'" Mellon later wrote:

> I became very disturbed and angry to realize that as President of the Gallery I had been left to find out about the cleaning of the Rembrandt in a newspaper article. I also wondered why the conservators should have begun with, above all, what many considered one of the Gallery's most important and perhaps most controversial paintings.[12]

Deeply worried, Mellon overcame his reluctance to interfere with the professional staff and wrote to Carter Brown in October:

"The Trustees, you and your Staff, and myself will be held responsible for the maiming, if not the destruction, of some of our own masterpieces."[13] In March 1978, he invited Geoffrey Agnew, Michael Jaffé, and Mario to visit the conservation department, see the paintings, and give their views. Before the meeting, Mellon declared a moratorium on the cleaning of paintings. From May 2nd until May 5th the three experts looked at the paintings that had been recently cleaned and prepared to give a preliminary report on their findings at the end of the visit.

Mario described to me what transpired. A meeting was held in the conservation department, attended by the director, various staff members, and the trustees, including Franklin Murphy, whom Mario knew well from the Kress Foundation. Except for the unfailingly gracious Paul Mellon, the three men felt that they were regarded as adversaries and the atmosphere was hostile. Murphy was especially angry and demanded that someone explain exactly what was wrong with the cleaning of *The Mill*, which had become the center of the controversy. Mario said that Agnew and Jaffé remained silent and it was left to him to address the group. With the painting finally on an easel, he tried to put the problem into plain words. First of all, he said, the darks in the foreground had become much darker than they were when originally painted and much of the detail had been lost.[14] The slight opacity and discoloration of the old varnish had made the landscape appear lighter and had subdued the sky. Now that it had been removed, the bright sky, which had decolorized from the original blue to a light gray, nearly white, was blindingly evident while the landscape was dark and illegible. There was no spatial connection between the two halves of the composition; the cleaned painting was completely out of balance.

Murphy understood what Mario was saying and asked what could be done. Since all the old varnish had been thoroughly removed, Mario recommended that the only way at this point to bring some harmony to the picture was to glaze the sky with watercolor so that it would recede and give the painting a thin,

saturating brush varnish to bring out whatever detail remained in the dark foreground. (The latter might seem obvious, but it was not something that American conservators would normally have done at that time, preferring to spray surfaces with high molecular-weight synthetic polymers that had none of the properties of traditional resins like dammar and mastic.)

Agnew and Jaffé wrote reports to Paul Mellon that were highly critical of all the paintings they had seen and of the staff, calling their work "amateurish" and recommending that they be replaced. Mario's report was somewhat more diplomatic. Agnew advanced the idea that a new conservator, someone with the requisite experience, be appointed. He suggested Mario's former pupil, Gabrielle Kopelman, a Belgian trained by Albert Philippot in Brussels, who was at that time the restorer of the Frick Collection, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and other public and private collections. Mario himself would act as consultant. Mellon was in favor of this idea and Kopelman's appointment was given serious consideration. However, during her preliminary visit to the conservation department she was tactless and overbearing, angering Silberfeld who declared that she would not be able to work with her.[15]

Understandably, Covey and Silberfeld turned to their colleagues for support and letters from American conservators and art historians poured in. Sheldon Keck, considered the leader of the American conservation establishment, wrote to Mellon, excoriating him for his interference and alluded to a "commercial connection linking Jaffé, Agnew, and Modestini that merited greater attention."[16] The records of the controversy are laced with prejudicial remarks of this sort on both sides. As in this case, members of the "scientific" camp dismissed their adversaries' concerns as a mere mask for financial motives and there was a tendency to distrust "self-serving non-Americans".[17] For their part, the critics often displayed contempt for American conservators, called them naïve, and inferred that their backgrounds rendered them incapable of sophisticated thinking.

In August, Mellon wrote to Mario, Geoffrey Agnew, and Michael Jaffé:[18]

> I'm afraid my investigation of the National Gallery conservation work and your visit (to say nothing of John Brealey's earlier visit) have stirred up a hornet's nest. Articles have appeared in the Washington papers describing, rather inaccurately, the two conflicting approaches to conservation; the present staff is up in arms, claiming that they have not had "due process" and are accused of wrong-doing without the possibility of defense; they have written not only to the press but also to various heads of conservation bodies (such as Sheldon Keck); and Parkhurst has produced a huge volume of correspondence from their partisans in which the Trustees and myself are accused of putting the advances in conservation back hundreds of years! … We have decided to invite a panel of approximately nine American directors, art historians, and conservators to give us their opinions … I certainly am still greatly disturbed by the extremely damning evidence produced during our meeting last May.

Each panel member visited the conservation department and filed reports. Even though not all their statements endorsed the work that had been carried out, particularly regarding the seventeenth-century Dutch paintings—several were in fact quite damning[19]—Parkhurst was nonetheless able to deftly bowdlerize the panel's findings in a summation for the trustees submitted in October, concluding that the staff had worked according to the highest professional standards. The controversy was damaging the museum's reputation and the reassurance was welcome even if the outcome was imperfect. The staff resumed work on the collection.[20] New procedures were put in place that required the board of trustees to sign off on all restoration proposals, a solution of questionable value since trustees are usually not experts

and their position precludes challenging the professional staff, an issue that had been an important part of the debate.

Sometime later, at a lunch with some staff and trustees at John Walker's house in Washington, Mario remarked that *The Mill* looked much better now that the sky had been toned down. Someone angrily denied that anything "cosmetic" of that sort had been done. Andrew Robison, the curator of drawings, came to Mario's defense and said that he was correct—that he himself had seen the sky being glazed. This was considered an important point by the scientific side, which did not approve of "glazing over the original" to mitigate aesthetic dissonance, as Sheldon Keck emphasized in a talk about cleaning controversies presented at the annual meeting of the American Institute for Conservation in 1983.[21]

131. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Mill*, 1645–1648, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 87.6 × 105.6 cm.

Both Mario and John Brealey felt let down by the conclusion of the controversy. Mario washed his hands of the National Gallery. The feisty president of the Kress Foundation, Mary Davis, wrote to Carter Brown, "I am telling you right now that no permission will ever be given to touch a Kress object, period…you are not going to ruin the Kress Collection."[22]

However, the museum still had the problem of the *Gerbier Family*. Michael Jaffé's expressed his views on the appearance of the painting, which he had known since 1962, in an essay he wrote for an Agnew's publication:

> In the *Corpus Rubenium* … published in 1977, that is some years after the painting had undergone treatment by the late Richard Buck, Frances Huemer wrote that: 'In addition to the careless peripheral painting, the painting and drawing of the heads is unconvincing, often with a splotchy overpainting. Not only is the hair stringy and fussy (compare the impressionistic hair of the little girl in the *Peace and War;* in Madame Gerbier's hair the background is a flat gray with superimposed reddish locks), but the brushstrokes on the face are dry and hard. The irises of the eyes are painted so that they appear almost a solid brown with circular centers, with even lighter outer parts. This is contrary to the way Rubens paints … The Washington painting may be a workshop copy never completed … Its weaknesses are in the painting itself, a deadness of areas, and a certain deadness of expression. It has a fatal lack of unity in the construction of forms.'
>
> Deadness and lack of unity are thus seen in the aftermath of a cleaning imprudent in approach to the problems actual or potential … and correspondingly insensitive to the optical effects … After 350 years, the boldly and freely painted surface of the Washington version was in all essentials well preserved; but something needs to be done to bring its parts into keeping again. A clumsy relining calls attention to the

> joins in the canvas; insufficient appreciation of the way in which Rubens matched his ground tone on the added strips to the nodal piece is another cause of the present lamentable discontinuity of impression; the dryness and hardness, remarked by Miss Huemer, are functions of unskilled varnishing. Much could be remedied.[23]

Paul Richards, the Washington Post journalist whose article about the cleaning of *The Mill* had begun the controversy, was also displeased by the painting's generally discordant appearance and returned to the subject in October 1978.[24] He wrote: "The [gray] underpaint with which Rubens sketched his faces, and which he later covered over, is now visible again so that the eldest daughter looks as if she has not shaved."

In January 1979, Carter Brown asked Mario if he would be willing to take on the restoration of the Rubens, at Mr. Mellon's request. Mario waited until April to reply:

There is not much I can do. My idea was to put back some glazes and try to restore the harmony . . . as has been done with the Rembrandt. . . . That however is against the ethical conception of scientific restoration and the National Gallery would not like it. . . . The only thing that should be done is to change the varnish. . . . Considering that confidence in your restorers has been re-established, I think they could easily revarnish the Rubens.[25]

It took over a year for Franklin Murphy to convince Mario to accept the *Gerbier Family*. He agreed on the condition that it would be sent to him in New York where it arrived in December 1980.

His restoration report notes that the varnish applied by Oberlin less than a decade earlier was already gray and slightly opaque and had not saturated the paint layer. It was thick, rubbery, and disagreeable to remove. The retouching, especially of the heads, was excessive and, in some passages, unnecessary. Mario observed that patches of the old discolored varnish remained in the darkest areas. After he finished the cleaning the appearance of

132. Peter Paul Rubens, *Deborah Kip, Wife of Sir Balthasar Gerbier, and Her Children*, 1629–1630, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 165.8 × 177.8 cm.

the painting immediately improved. He considered relining the canvas again but decided that the slight gain didn't justify such an intervention. Of the actual state, he wrote that the gray priming was exposed in the mid tones of the flesh so that, as Paul Richards observed, all the figures, including Madame Gerbier, sported a five-o'clock shadow. The red curtain had lost its final glazes and the sky was patchy with some areas darker than others due to chemical alterations. Mario gave the painting a brush coat of a synthetic varnish with characteristics that resembled those of the natural resins, but which yellows only slightly over time.[26] Many passages had to be glazed to replace the final modeling that had been removed; the blond hair of the children had been rubbed

down to the white underpaint. (Mario said that they looked like albinos.) The confusion due to a pronounced pentimento of the red curtain, the dissonance caused by the different preparations of the central section and the additions,[27] and the abraded state of the sky were attenuated with retouching.

The painting returned to the National Gallery on March 3, 1981 and was installed in the galleries without fanfare. Few people realize that it was once the subject of a scandal, which is as it should be.[28]

The Sistine Chapel

Not all cleaning controversies have merit. The most contentious and highly publicized of the past century revolved around the restoration of Michelangelo's frescoed vault in the Sistine Chapel. In the course of the fourteen-year-long endeavor, Mario and I became friends with Gianluigi Colalucci, the chief restorer of the Vatican, as well as Fabrizio Mancinelli, the curator; we were part of a group of conservators who inspected the finished result in April 1987 and issued a statement to the press, praising the work on the vault.[29]

The cleaning of the lunettes began in 1980 when the frescoes on the entrance wall in the series of the twenty-eight popes were about to be finished.[30] The papal portraits occupied the uppermost register, above the scenes from the life of Christ. A vertical scaffold had been erected, and the restorers found themselves just below Michelangelo's lunette of Eleazar and Mathan. From the scaffold, Colalucci could see the black crust composed of centuries of dirt, soot from the candles and braziers used to light the chapel, and the layers of animal glue and resinous wine applied centuries earlier. Unlike the vault, the lunettes had never been cleaned and were much dirtier.[31] It was very difficult even to make out the colossal images. The fact that they could be seen at all from the floor of the chapel was only due to the powerful artificial lights that were trained on them.

Colalucci could not resist making a small, hesitant cleaning test, which revealed that there was bright color under the black coating. In his recently published book about the restoration, *Io e Michelangelo*, he describes how, after further tests, he, Fabrizio Mancinelli, and Carlo Pietrangeli, the director of the Vatican Museums, made the momentous decision to clean the entire lunette and show it to their colleagues. Colalucci, who had been trained at the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro under Cesare Brandi, whom he revered, had been at the Vatican for thirty years and specialized in wall paintings. It was serendipitous, because at that moment, there were three intelligent, courageous, and experienced men at the Vatican, who shared a long professional history. Colalucci, Mancinelli, and Pietrangeli respected one other and were to collaborate closely in all the decisions taken during the epic enterprise. From the first cleaning tests, they were keenly aware that this restoration would change art history and that the responsibility for all that entailed was theirs.

The Eleazar and Mathan lunette emerged completely transformed, with unexpectedly brilliant colors. The cleaning confirmed that the paintings had been executed in true fresco, an exigent technique that Michelangelo mastered during his apprenticeship with Domenico Ghirlandaio. It consists of painting the color—pigments ground in water with no binder—onto fresh plaster where it calcifies, becoming part of the wall. Great skill is required, because the artist has only one day to work on each area before the plaster sets. Changes can be made only by removing the layer of plaster itself and starting over again. One of the great advantages of this method is its permanence; fresco is not subject to the alterations that most other techniques undergo. In the Sistine, the state of preservation was superb with the exception of a few passages that were marred by insoluble black encrustations of mineral salts caused by the infiltration of water into the wall over the centuries. The drawing and modeling of the figures was boldly executed without any hesitation and enhanced by the colors Michelangelo had chosen: brilliant yellows, reds, purples,

and greens. When the cleaning of the Eleazar and Mathan lunette was finished, a group of experts convened to discuss the results. Their opinion was overwhelmingly positive, and Pietrangeli with his two colleagues decided to proceed.

In 1982, I spent several weeks in Rome, helping with the preparations for the exhibition, *The Vatican Collections: The Papacy and Art* that opened at the Metropolitan Museum in February 1983. The cleaning of the lunettes was underway in the Sistine, and as a guest of the Vatican, I was invited to visit the scaffold where the restorers were working, a privilege that I will remember for the rest of my life. The scaffold was in front of the lunette of Roboam–Abias. The two images were colossal, and I could get up to within a foot away—except that it is not the best way to look at them. The colors, of course, were glorious, bold and vivid, but what struck me most was the assurance and speed with which they were executed. Marks made by a brush as wide as that of a house painter swept across the plaster, at the same time rendering the modeling with absolute perfection. Although the first to be cleaned, the lunettes were the last to be painted, and the mastery that Michelangelo had achieved by then was breath taking—one of the huge lunettes had been painted in its entirety in a single day. Unlike many other sections of the Sistine ceiling, there are no incisions or evidence of the image having been transferred from a cartoon, only black charcoal drawing under the paint. But apart from this sublime virtuosity, the painting exhaled otherworldly genius. It was preternatural. I felt as if I should be on my knees.

I was able to follow the progress of the restoration from the scaffolding many times after that, but the first time, as with everything, was the most poignant. The last time I visited, in 1987, the cleaning of the vault was finished. I was with a group sponsored by the Kress Foundation, and we had lingered on the scaffold until after closing time. By the time we descended, the lights had been turned off and from the floor of the Sistine, the ceiling appeared to be filled with sculptures, not paintings. The strong artificial lights flattened the images so this effect was not

normally apparent. In the past, the extra illumination had been necessary but now that the ceiling had been cleaned, the natural light in which the great cycle had been conceived was in perfect harmony with the vibrant palette, and the forms resolved into a perfect three-dimensional illusion.

Not long after the first cleaned lunettes were exposed, Frank Mason, an American academic painter, began to voice hysterical accusations that Michelangelo's paintings were being over-cleaned and ruined. I had had a previous encounter with Mason, whose group of academic painters picketed outside the Metropolitan Museum after Rembrandt's *The Noble Slav* was removed from the galleries to be cleaned by John Brealey, not long after his arrival in 1975. John went outside and confronted the small posse. He convinced them to hold their fire until the painting was back on the walls, at which time he promised to answer all their questions. During

133. Jacopo della Quercia, *Ilaria del Carretto*, detail, ca. 1405, marble, Church of San Martino, Lucca, 88 × 244 × 66.5 cm. Before cleaning.

those discussions, it became clear that none of them understood anything about materials or technique. When the episode was over, the "Masonites," as John called them, gave him a sort of diploma with a seal of approval and were never heard from again.

By the time Mason attacked the Sistine cleaning, he had enlisted James Beck, a professor of Renaissance art at Columbia University, who gave the group credibility, and they had a new name, Art Watch International. A few years before the Sistine ceiling controversy commenced, Beck had publicly criticized the cleaning of the funerary sculpture by Jacopo della Quercia of Ilaria Del Carretto in the cathedral of Lucca, one of the most beautiful sculptures of the Renaissance. Ilaria died when she was still only a girl, and her tomb is particularly moving, depicting her supine young body with her pet dog at her feet. Mario and I loved it and went to see it many times. The marble had taken on a beautiful patina over the centuries and looked like old ivory. When we saw it after the cleaning, we were heartsick: the marble was stark white and granular, as if it had been freshly cut.[32] We agreed with James Beck, who had been sued by the restorer for defamation although he was ultimately acquitted.

In the case of the Sistine, the Art Watchers were ignorant about frescos and unwilling to engage in a discussion and look at the evidence. The controversy sprang from an emotional attachment to the terribilità of the old Michelangelo, tonal and somber, which we now know was a complete distortion of his intentions. However, the controversy made good copy for a number of years, and memories of it linger. There was no lack of accurate information about the restoration of the Sistine. The Vatican openly shared the discoveries being made not only with specialists but also members of the general public. The scaffold was open and was visited by over one thousand people in the course of the restoration. Mancinelli and Colalucci traveled the world giving lectures, holding conferences and press briefings; every minute of the cleaning was documented with photographs and film. The arguments advanced in this period are too complex to address here. Briefly, the critics

believed in the notion of a "final layer," the *ultimo mano*, referenced by contemporary sources and which Vasari specifically identifies as an embellishment of the frescoes with gilding and details painted *a secco* with pigments bound with animal glue. Vasari notes that these were never completed due to the impatience of the pope. Beck and his supporters imagined that the *ultimo mano* was a final black glaze with which Michelangelo toned down his work. There is no evidence for this, either historical or material.

More than halfway through the cleaning, the restorers discovered something decisive about Michelangelo's final intention.

134. The Sistine Chapel ceiling before cleaning.

135. After cleaning.

All the interventions on the Sistine ceiling are documented. The first was in 1566 when a painter, Domenico Carnevale, consolidated some cracks, filling them with new plaster. Embedded in this ancient repair was a small piece of original fresco that had been buried for 420 years. The color was exactly the same as the adjacent passages that had been cleaned. It did not have a black glaze that Beck and his followers insisted was the final layer. The fragment was carefully left in place and not cleaned. However, even this did not impress Art Watch, who continue to insist that Michelangelo's "shading" has been removed.

I am by no means opposed to responsible criticism of restorations; indeed, I lament the lack of scrutiny. Among the interpreters of the various arts only restorers intervene on the actual materials and change their nature forever. This is why the subject is taboo: no one wants to be responsible for spoiling a work of art nor is there any restorer who has never made a mistake.

CHAPTER 25

Please Do Not Varnish This Painting

"Crimes Against the Cubists"

In the late 1970s, the issue of varnishing impressionist and modern paintings became a much-discussed subject in the paintings conservation community. It originated with the report of an inscription that had been found on the back of a painting by Camille Pissarro. On the reverse of *Paysage à Chaponval* was written, "Please do not varnish this painting," in the artist's own hand.[1] John Brealey was immediately intrigued. The Metropolitan's great collection of impressionist paintings was temporarily off-view while the galleries were being rebuilt, and the entire department began to remove the old varnish coatings, which usually leaves behind blanched residues, so that previously varnished pictures could not be left without any varnish. At first, we began to apply a thin varnish. As our taste for matte surfaces developed, we used various techniques intended to leave a minimal amount of varnish

to achieve this look. A few paintings had never been varnished, and they became the touchstone for our efforts.

In 1980, an important Picasso retrospective at MoMA moved the artist's biographer, John Richardson, to publish a scathing denouncement of how many of the cubist paintings in the exhibition and elsewhere had been spoiled by varnish and wax relining, especially those from American museums.[2] John Brealey, and many others, joined the crusade to raise awareness of this irreversible problem, more dire in its consequences than the right amount of varnish on an impressionist painting. Picasso and Braque, in their cubist period, used porous, absorbent materials and played with the juxtaposition of matte and shine, smooth and granular, and even began to collage pieces of newspaper onto their paintings. These delicate effects were obliterated when the pictures were relined with wax and varnished because these alien materials penetrated the canvas, the ground, and the paint layers, darkening them and obscuring the original texture.

As previously mentioned, Mario worked on numerous paintings for Wildenstein's, which included not only old masters but also more modern works. Beginning early in their history, the firm cultivated a specialty in impressionist and early modern paintings and, as they continued to add to their stock, sent some of them to Mario for his attention. He did not agree with their ideas about varnishing. Mario said that on one occasion they returned a Monet to him after he had cleaned it, saying that it needed more varnish. Reluctantly, he gave it another coat. The next time Wildenstein's sent him a Monet, he decided to do a superficial cleaning just to remove the dirt and send it back. He said they were ecstatic over how wonderful it looked!

Wildenstein's predilection for varnishing impressionist paintings had historical precedents. Paul Durand-Ruel (1831–1922), the first art dealer to promote works by the impressionist painters, including Monet from whom he purchased over one thousand works,[3] would tone down some of the brightest Monets with a tarry glaze and have them generously varnished so they would be

more appealing to collectors unaccustomed to the impressionist aesthetic.[4]

One disagreement Mario had with Wildenstein over varnishing particularly upset him. Daniel Wildenstein sent him a neoclassical-style Picasso, a portrait of his first wife, Olga Khokhlova, a former dancer with the Ballets Russes. Mario was impressed by the tonal quality, the drawing, and the speed of the unerring brushwork. He said it was really just a very large sketch. He removed a yellow coating and brushed on a thin coat of diluted varnish, just enough to saturate the slight blanching always left by the removal of a varnish so that the surface remained semi-matte; he was convinced that the appearance was suitable for the picture, similar to how it looked when Picasso finished it. Once again Wildenstein sent it back to him, complaining that the surface should be evenly glossy. Mario was obliged to give it more varnish but said it spoiled the whole effect. Later, when someone complained about the varnish—as must have happened when everyone finally came to accept the importance of matte finishes—Wildenstein's doubtlessly blamed Mario!

Van Gogh's *Irises*

Every painting presents a unique problem. In 1980, through Wildenstein's, the Joan Whitney Payson Museum at Westbrook College in Portland, Maine, sent Mario one of Van Gogh's masterpieces, *The Irises*. The painting was on loan to the museum, along with other works that had been inherited by Mrs. Payson's children upon her death in 1975. She had purchased the painting from Knoedler's in 1947 for $10,000. Mario said that it had never been varnished but was covered with thick dust and grime, and it took him a long time to remove this build-up from inside the thousands of brushstrokes, many of which had become very brittle. The canvas had never been lined and was full of bulges, since the linen had not been strong enough to resist the weight of

the passages of thick impasto as they dried, and it was falling off the stretcher.

For many years, Mario had worked closely with a reliner in New York, Francis Moro, for whom he had great respect. After lengthy consultation and experimentation, they devised a system using a bed of sand to protect the impasto during the relining.[5] It was very successful. After the painting was re-stretched, Mario brushed on a bit of Talens Rembrandt Retouching Varnish diluted with odorless spirits, because he felt the darks were badly sunk and needed to be saturated, and sent it back to Maine. As the decade of the eighties passed, prices for impressionist paintings rose to vertiginous heights. In 1987, the sale of one of Van Gogh's sunflower paintings for $32 million at Christie's in London caused a huge stir both in the art world and in the public imagination.[6]

The Payson *Irises* was a much more important painting, and in 1989, John Payson decided that he could no longer afford to keep it. Amidst wild speculation and excitement at Sotheby's, the hammer dropped at just under $54 million, setting another record. The successful bidder was an Australian businessman, Alan Bond, who declared bankruptcy not long after and never paid for the picture. In 1990, Sotheby's sold it privately to the J. Paul Getty Museum for an undisclosed price.

The head of paintings conservation at the Getty, Andrea Rothe, heeded the recent trend for unvarnished paintings and decided to "de-varnish" it completely, even of the tiny amount that Mario had added. When we visited a couple of years later, Mario was disappointed with the result, because he thought that the shadows, painted with pure Prussian blue, looked dead and desiccated.

Van Gogh worked with ready-made tubes of paint made of pigments ground with drying oil. Typically, he squeezed the color directly from the tube, without using any diluent, to achieve the high impasto. For the darks, he habitually used pure Prussian blue. This blue-black pigment is very finely divided and requires a lot of medium to wet it out. Over time it becomes dry and crusty so that passages painted with it scatter the light, robbing the shadows

136. Vincent van Gogh, *The Irises*, 1889, oil on canvas, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California, 74.3 × 93.3 cm.

of their true depth. This also happens to black paint and other dark colors. The "wetness" of paint is one of the elements that affect our perception of distance, and painters are very conscious of different levels of gloss and how they affect not only color but the illusion of space in a composition.

The idea that all modern paintings should be left without varnish has now given way to the idea that certain passages may require a bit of adjusting to account for the changes in gloss that occur over time. Pissarro's request 'not to varnish' his own high-key paintings is not necessarily applicable to every impressionist and post-impressionist painting, because not all painters of the period held that view.[7] For example, Vincent's letters to his brother, Theo, often contain instructions for caring for his pictures after they arrived. He requested that the surfaces be oiled[8] after the paint was completely dry, but Theo, who died not long after his brother,

was not able to do this for the hundreds of canvases stored in rolls everywhere in his house.

Au Lapin Agile

During the period when Mario and I were working together in his studio, Wildenstein's sent him another Picasso, also from the Payson family: the 1905 *Au Lapin Agile*, named after a cabaret and bar in Montmartre where Picasso hung out, settling his bills with paintings.[9]

The picture depicts an ill, unhappy-looking Harlequin and a woman in profile having a drink, while a musician plays in the background. It was painted on a commercially prepared canvas with a thin, white ground. By the time Mario received the painting, it already had an old glue lining and was swamped with unevenly applied, thick, yellow, deteriorated varnish, which made the thinly painted image nearly illegible. Mario let me work on this haunting picture, while he hovered in the background, offering his advice on what turned out to be a problematic cleaning. The varnish was a natural resin, either dammar or mastic, and dissolved easily. After the first passes with swabs dipped in volatile solvents, the painting began to reveal itself as a loosely painted sketch in excellent condition. I doubt that it had ever been cleaned before. The background was painted in washes directly on the white preparation, which stood in for the highlights in some passages—for example, the flesh tone of the face and hand of the woman—creating a sharp contrast with the thick impasto of the features and the high collar of the red dress. At one point the red and yellow paint began to bleed. This unsettling occurrence, not uncommon in paintings of this period, would prove problematic in attaining an even surface. After letting the paint settle for several days so that any residual solvent would be released, I went back to the red and yellow using a mixture that evaporates instantly, removing as much varnish as I could in one pass, which did not disturb the color. All

the same, the surface looked blotchy and blanched because of the unevenly distributed residues of old varnish. Because of the way Picasso incorporated the white ground into the composition, it is clear that *Au Lapin Agile* was never intended to be varnished, so it was necessary to devise some way of achieving a matte look.[10] With local varnishing and wax spray, the result was as satisfactory as it could be under the circumstances, and the painting was returned to Wildenstein's. We heard nothing more about it until it appeared at auction.

The sale was accompanied by great publicity. It was 1989, the end of a glitzy decade fueled by junk bonds and leveraged buy-outs, when the frenzied market for impressionist, post-impressionist,

137. Pablo Picasso, *Au Lapin Agile*, 1905, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 99.1 × 100.3 cm.

and early modern paintings was at its peak. Art had become a currency. The late Robert Hughes reported the results of the sale in the cover story of the November 27 issue of *Time* magazine:

> Up to last Wednesday night, Picasso's 1905 *Au Lapin Agile* was widely expected to become the most expensive painting ever sold at auction. … It was a far better picture than the Picasso self-portrait, "Yo Picasso", that had made a freakish $47.85 million last May. … *Au Lapin Agile* could go, said rumor, to $60 million. But in the end, publishing magnate Walter Annenberg bought it for $40.7 million, and two or three people clapped. … Only $40.7 million. And was that less or more than the GNP of a minor African state? On the other hand, wouldn't it buy only the under-cart of a B-2, and maybe the crew's potty? Or a dozen parties for Malcolm Forbes? That a night's art sale could make a total of $269.5 million and yet leave its observers feeling slightly flat is perhaps a measure of the odd cultural values of our fin de siècle.[11]

The painting now belongs to the Metropolitan Museum, and whenever I visit the Annenberg Galleries I sidle up to it to scrutinize the surface. So far it hasn't altered. I used to be quite pleased with it, but I now find that the surface is too even and lacks liveliness without the contrast of gloss and matte passages. I am reminded of one of John Brealey's maxims, that "pictures always make a fool of you."

CHAPTER 26

Retirement

In early 1987, I resigned my position at the Metropolitan Museum because Mario and I wanted to spend more time together in Italy. Since moving to the United States in 1950, Mario had always spent his summers in Europe and made several other trips throughout the course of each year, mixing business with leisure, visiting friends and family. As a full-time employee, I couldn't accommodate this schedule, so I rearranged my life and left the Metropolitan with regret. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done. I loved the institution and, after thirteen years, it had in many ways become a surrogate family.

At that time, Mario's own career had slowed down. He suffered from acute pain in his right shoulder and arm, due partly to arthritis and to the wear on his joints and nerves from repetitive movements. He winced every time he put on a jacket or coat. Many of his old clients had retired, and the younger dealers worked with restorers of their own age. Although he couldn't keep up the pace that the

138. At our farmhouse in Troghi, 1994. (Photo by Sonja Bullaty)

market demanded, Mario still occasionally took on projects while I continued to survey the dispersed Kress Collection.

In 1988, a colleague from the Met, Margaret Holben Ellis, asked me to teach the core course in painting conservation at New York University's Conservation Center. Eventually, I combined teaching with the conservation needs of the Kress paintings in the regional galleries and, in 1989, with the support of the Kress Foundation, began the Kress Program in Paintings Conservation, which offered study and restoration of Kress paintings to museums that did not have their own conservation departments. Mario's interest and collaboration in this endeavor was invaluable to me, the students, and the Kress Foundation. We also found that with a more flexible schedule we were able to look for a country house not too far from Florence.

Troghi

We chose Florence because Mario's friend, Renzo Ravà spent 6 months of the year there. The two men were inseparable. Finding a house that suited us turned out to be more difficult than we expected. The cost of *case coloniche* (old farmhouses) had risen, and they were becoming scarce. After much looking, we found a *casa colonica* with a large *fienile* (barn) in the Val d'Arno near a town called Troghi in the commune of Rignano sull'Arno. The house was structurally sound but had been abandoned for many years and required a great deal of restoration.

The simple farmhouse is very old. It is indicated on a sixteenth-century map, and church documents record two families living there or, in one entry, twenty-seven "souls" so it must have been quite crowded. The original dwelling probably consisted of two rooms, one over the other, with the ground floor for the animals. There is a typical common room upstairs, with an enormous fireplace furnished with stone benches so that people could keep warm after the fire was spent. Rooms had been added over the centuries, so that it is a bit crooked.

Someone had begun to restore the house twenty years earlier. The *geometra* (surveyor) told us that the local council had halted the work on the house, because the owner had opened a large window (no alterations to the existing structure of these farmhouses are allowed). In Italy, there is a remedy for such situations called the *condono*—a sort of pardon for building violations, declared every so often when the government needs money. There had been a *condono* since the window violation, which we were able to satisfy by paying a fine.

Like most farmhouses in Tuscany, ours had been part of a large estate that consisted of the main house, Villa Antica, situated on the top of a hill, whose origins date back to at least the eleventh century when it was a branch of the Cistercian community of Vallombrosa, and twenty-four tenant farmers' houses like ours in

the valley below. On the crest of another hill, there is a church, San Cristoforo in Perticaia, which has been rebuilt many times over the centuries. The Lombards colonized the area in the fourth century and Troghi is probably a Germanic name. It is thought that the original sanctuary dated from the eighth century. A neighbor found a holy water font in the woods, with a primitive image of a man that resembles some of the carvings in the ninth-century church in Gropina, just across the river. Perhaps it came from the first San Cristoforo.

From the church, there is a breathtaking bird's-eye view down the Valley of the Arno, the landscape that Leonardo often painted. Mario said, "The priests always pick the best locations" (*"Vedi, i preti hanno sempre i posti più belli!"*). An aged farmer still worked the land nearby and told us that before the war, hundreds of farm workers came from miles around to walk up to the church on Sunday. There were once shortcuts, well-trodden trails through the woods, but most of them are now overgrown.

Apart from its proximity to Florence, we liked this area because it was not overrun by foreigners, like the Chianti. Mario drove into town every morning to have coffee, buy his favorite newspaper, *La Repubblica,* and chat with the owner of the bar and the *pensionati* who hung out in front of the local recreation association. He was perfectly content chatting with the carpenters and construction workers, and preferred their company to that of more fashionable people. The townspeople knew that he was a famous art restorer and liked him all the more for his simplicity and ease with them, a quality described as being "alla mano."

Mario had a special rapport with the stonemasons and liked to plan improvements to the property. He had a large circular wall constructed to make a garden and visually connect the two buildings. Renzo, who liked to tease Mario, called it 'the Pincio', one of the seven hills of Rome. Mario, however, was undeterred and continued to design more walls, a courtyard, several stairs, and finally the swimming pool, once we had the necessary permissions. Since the surrounding countryside has been designated as part of

the Italian cultural patrimony these were not easy to obtain. Many government agencies had to be consulted. When the pool was ready to be tiled, he chose a classic blue color, and the workmen, taking advantage of the clement weather, quickly began cementing them in place. When an inspector visited to make sure the work was according to the landscape regulations, the tiling was more than half finished. He informed Mario that only muted green, gray, and ivory color tiles were allowed. Mario thought this was nonsense and said to him that he was eighty-five years old and had seen many houses in his lifetime, and the swimming pools were always *blue*. Had the inspector ever seen a *gray* swimming pool, he demanded? "Ridiculous!" Mario said firmly, with considerable indignation, and brushed him off. We never heard anything about it again.

After living in New York for so long, Mario had little patience for Italian bureaucracy. If a foreigner criticized Italy, he would have been offended, but he himself exploded from time to time saying, "*Che paese di merda!*" ("What a shit country!") Or when someone cut corners or took off the extra days that bookended a holiday, called the *ponte*, he would mutter cynically, "*Il paese di Bengodi!*", referring to the town in the *Decameron* where the grapevines are strung with ropes of sausages, the mountains are made of parmesan cheese, and the river is the best Vernaccia wine.

On July 16, 1991, we were married in Rignano. Our close friends, Renzo Ravà and Katharine Baetjer, were our witnesses. Katharine's husband, Jim, acted as photographer and their two sons, James and George, joined in the proceedings. The boys had always called us "Dianmario" and the youngest one told his mother that he did not understand why we were going to the town hall because we were already married, which was true. It was a very casual ceremony and took place in the library of the *comune*, which featured a large rubber plant. The mayor, in a polo shirt and khakis, officiated. When it was over we went home and had lunch.

"Senza Fine"

Mario and I had a favorite song, one that we heard being played on a piano one night in the piazza of Bergamo Alta during our first summer together. It is a waltz called "Senza Fine" (Without End), which is not well-known, even though it is by Gino Paoli, perhaps the finest composer of Italian popular music of the postwar period. Mario told me that Paoli had written the song for the seventeen-year-old Stefania Sandrelli, with whom he had fallen in love. When their story ended, Mario said, the songwriter had attempted to kill himself. It was romantic and tragic, and I knew that Mario was thinking of the bittersweet aspect of our relationship due to the difference in our ages. He seemed to have tears in his eyes. Even though it is an obscure tune, since Mario died I occasionally hear it being played, often in the most unlikely contexts, and it always makes my heart stop.

There is a tree of black figs behind the *fienile,* and in late August, there is an abundance of the succulent red fruit in their dark purple skins. The birds competed with me to get the ripe ones. One day in 2002, I spotted a good crop at just the right stage.

139. Mario at ninety-five. (Photo by Pasquale Galasso)

I climbed onto the roof to pick them, and arranged them on a plate. I brought them to the studio, where Mario proceeded to paint a wonderful still life, tonal and hushed, in just a few hours. It was the last painting he ever made.

New York

As much as we loved our house, it was rather isolated and a bit gloomy in the winter. Mario's health was beginning to fail, and I thought that he could get better care in New York. In 2001, I found a two-bedroom apartment on the Upper East Side. It was in terrible shape and had to be completely renovated. We had a wonderful time choosing wall colors, bathroom tiles, and cabinets, hanging the paintings and buying a few pieces of furniture at auction. As usual, Mario engaged with the workmen, who adored him.

Soon after we moved in, Mario decided that he no longer wanted to go out. He was too short of breath to walk and too proud to be seen in a wheelchair. I brought him exhibition catalogues, which we looked at together and he later studied, and that seemed to be enough for him. The apartment is on a high floor, and he loved watching the sunsets over Central Park. In the summers, we still went to Troghi, where Mario said to me one morning: "Do you know how much I love you?" I said, "I love you more." I can see and hear him now, looking at me with his extraordinary blue eyes.

Mario died in our apartment in New York on January 28, 2006. He was almost ninety-nine. I thought I was prepared, but I wasn't. I felt like my heart had been ripped out.

Mario liked to quote old adages. One always broke my heart slightly every time he said it, even though for him it was just a silly rhyme:

L'insalata vien nell'orto
Maramào, perché sei morto
(There is salad in the garden,
Maramào, why did you die?)

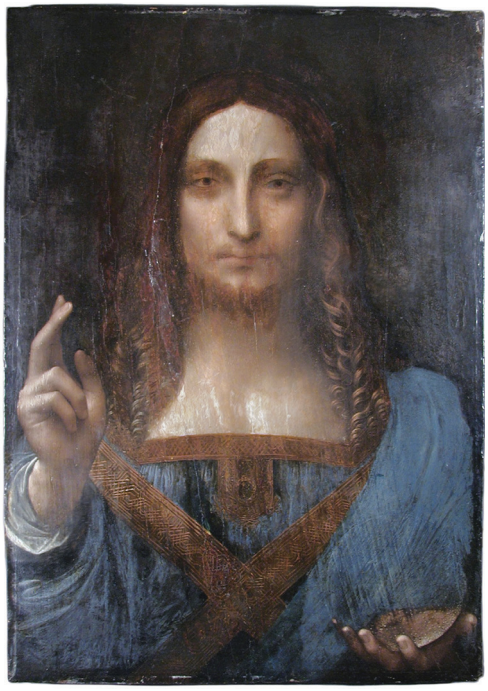
EPILOGUE

The *Salvator Mundi*

In April 2005, an old friend, Robert Simon, a Renaissance scholar and dealer in old master paintings, called and asked if he could stop by with a painting. At that time, I had an easel at home, because I thought that it would interest Mario if I were working on a painting. Robert arrived with the picture, which portrayed Christ as the *Salvator Mundi*, the Savior of the World. I put it on the easel, and he pointed out the exceptional quality of the blessing hand, a passage that was well-preserved and not repainted like the rest of the composition. I rarely worked on paintings that were not part of the Kress Collection and, evidently, I wasn't all that impressed at first, because I suggested he take it to one of my former pupils. Robert said, "I think this needs a grown-up," so I went to fetch some cotton wool and some solvents. I prepared a mild mixture of acetone and mineral spirits, commonly used to remove natural resin varnishes, and, rolling some cotton on a stick to make a large swab, began to clean the painting. The varnish was

gloppy and thick and dissolved easily, as did most of the weird retouching that made the head of Christ look like a clown's mask. While I was working, a broken-up pink shape emerged, just to the right of the thumb of the blessing hand. Robert had already seen what he suspected might be a pentimento in that area in a photo he had taken with his digital camera on the night setting, which uses infrared wave lengths that penetrate the upper layers of paint.

The sixteenth-century panel was very thin and had an irregular surface, partly due to the thin ground that revealed the marks of the tools used to dress the wood. It had been glued to another board, which had been reinforced by a nineteenth-century cradle. Once the varnish was removed, a wide, off-white fill made of gesso and glue was exposed, running from top to bottom, and covering



140. The *Salvator Mundi* as I first saw it in 2005, after the Cook Collection restoration had been removed.

some of the original paint. I softened the gesso putty with moisture and pushed it off with a blunt knife, recovering a modest amount of original paint. It became apparent that the generously applied fill material concealed a check in the wood and a disfiguring knot. The two sides of the check had sprung at some point, leaving not only a gap but also a significant step. The sloping fill had helped conceal this difference in level but, unfortunately, it was not the only measure that had been taken to level the uneven surface: at some point in the past the step had been shaved down from the front with a sharp plane. Raw wood was revealed along the check, and adjacent areas of paint that were not affected had also been shaved away. It was shocking. (See Plate XXIV)

After Robert left, I showed the painting to Mario. I didn't know how he would respond to it, but he immediately took it in his hands and looked at it for a long time. After a while, he said that it was by a very great artist, but he didn't know who—a painter a generation after Leonardo—and that part of its power derived from the fact that it was just slightly larger than life. It was the first time I heard

141. Leonardo da Vinci, red chalk preparatory study of drapery folds, Windsor Castle.

the name Leonardo mentioned in connection with the painting. In retrospect, I realized that the Leonardo that Mario knew was the young artist of *Ginevra* and the Uffizi *Baptism*—he had never focused on the few late works, which are quite different. When I next spoke to Robert, he showed me images of some of the many versions of the *Salvator Mundi* by pupils and followers of Leonardo, of varying quality, and an etching of Leonardo's painting made in the early seventeenth century. The original painting by Leonardo had been lost for centuries. Two beautiful drawings in red chalk on red paper, studies for the right arm and the drapery, were preserved in the English Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.

Robert's painting had been in a famous English collection formed by Sir Francis Cook in the late nineteenth century, where it was catalogued as "after Boltraffio," and had been sold in the 1950's for £48, or about $135. It was not difficult to understand why it had fetched so little, since the head was almost entirely repainted. Other passages, however—especially the blessing hand—had not been covered up, and I still find it strange that of the many experts who combed through the Cook Collection when it was sold off after the war no one noticed this.

I didn't see the painting again for almost a year. For many months, it was with a panel restorer, who freed it from the marouflaged board and cradle, so that the gap along the check could be realigned. Mario and I went to Troghi, which turned out to be a terrible journey because of Mario's compromised health, but he was always happy there and I didn't know what was the best decision to take. We returned to New York in September and in late January 2006 Mario died.

My grief was profound and unrelenting. For months, I could do nothing but cry, although I had two courses to teach, which forced me to pull myself together a bit. I subsisted on white wine, sedatives, and sleeping pills—a dangerous combination. Even though Mario was almost ninety-nine when he died, we had become almost the same person over our twenty-three years together. Half of me was gone. He had been a lover, companion, father figure, and

mentor, and became, at the end, like a child over whom I hovered anxiously every moment. I was completely inconsolable. I couldn't look at his photograph or read his memoir without sobbing. My friend, Katharine, who had introduced us and been a witness at our wedding, helped me through this awful period.

The *Salvator Mundi* returned to me in November 2006. The surface was much improved. I knew by then that the painting could possibly be the lost Leonardo and, in hindsight, it should have been obvious the moment it was cleaned, but there is a vast gulf between possibly and probably. There are many paintings that circulate in the art world that the owner believes to be by a great master. Accompanied by huge dossiers of opinions and scientific tests, they travel from one expert to another for years, often

142. The *Salvator Mundi* as it looked when it was in the Cook Collection. Note the hands and the wonderfully preserved curls hanging over the left shoulder.

decades. Occasionally, one of them is alleged to be a Leonardo, by whom there are only fifteen or sixteen paintings. For such a rare and famous artist, the bar of authenticity is set very high, and no serious person wants to risk making a fool of themselves by proposing that a painting is by Leonardo unless they are 100 percent certain and can make an airtight case. From the material standpoint, indications of the painting's autograph status were, from the beginning, implied by the number of changes the artist had made. Apart from the pentimento of the thumb, it became obvious that other shifts had occurred before the composition was finally realized. Notably, the stole had been moved down and to the left, and where the paint was worn, a first idea for the embroidery decoration could be seen quite clearly.

Perhaps I didn't want to fully believe that the painting was by Leonardo as a self-protective measure. I was working on it by myself, with Robert's excellent eye as an advisor, as if it were any ordinary, battered-up, sixteenth-century Italian painting whereas a restorer working on a painting by Leonardo in a museum would

143. Infrared reflectography (IRR) detail of the blessing hand showing a pentimento of the thumb.

have extensive backup, or even a committee overseeing the work. Fear, like over-confidence, is detrimental to a complex restoration.

I worked slowly on the losses in the face, using a vibrant pink, similar to the actual undercolor of the original flesh tones, to cover the exposed white preparation and wood that had been revealed when the painting had been planed down. This gave me a better understanding of the structure of the face. With tiny brushes, I began to add the upper layers. One fear was useful to retain: that of covering some of the original, thereby losing small clues about the final modeling. I wasn't entirely alone. As I worked, I carried on a conversation with Mario in my head. Everything he had ever taught me came into play and, when I made a mistake, I could hear him say, "The nose is crooked," or, "He looks like he has a toothache." I began to yearn for this voice and worked sometimes for eight-hour stretches, as if in a trance. I became friendly with the guard in my studio at the Conservation Center, with whom I had worked out a deal to stay until the very last minute. I went home exhausted, and Mario stayed with me until I fell asleep. I had conjured him into being, and I know that I couldn't have done the restoration without his help. The mystical power of Leonardo's conception added to this sensation.

One evening, in late 2007 or early 2008, as I was nearing the end of the restoration, I was working on a particularly difficult area in the damaged upper lip. The transitions were so subtle that they were invisible up close and only resolved from a distance. There were no brush marks in the original paint—it looked as if it had been blown on. The Louvre had published a book called *Mona Lisa: Inside the Painting* with high-resolution images of details of her features. I was studying her mouth, and all at once, I could no longer hide from the obvious. The artist who painted her was the same hand that had painted the *Salvator Mundi.* It was the first time that I had permitted myself to entertain that notion. My breath caught, and with trembling hands, I covered the painting with a black cloth from the photo studio. I went home and wrote to Robert. He had evidently already decided that the painting was

by Leonardo, and my announcement that I was completely sure that it was, indeed, by him did not come as a surprise.

Of course, Robert's opinion and my epiphany did not make the painting into a Leonardo. Only the experts could decide. One of them, Carmen Bambach, a drawings specialist, was at the Metropolitan Museum, and we asked her to look at the painting. She sat in front of it for a long time, then asked us what we thought it was. Robert remained silent, and, having nothing to lose because I am not an art historian, I finally said, "I think it is by Leonardo." She paused and said, "Well, it's not by Boltraffio." Boltraffio is Leonardo's best pupil, an infinitely refined artist, but he has his own personality, which is different from the master's. Just invoking his name meant that the only other possible painter was Leonardo himself. I finished what I had to do over the next two weeks, had the painting photographed, and Robert took it back to his gallery—this time in a fitted case. He showed it to a friend, Nicholas Penny, the director of the National Gallery in London, who agreed with him about the attribution and told Keith Christiansen, curator of paintings of the Metropolitan Museum, an excellent connoisseur, that he should have a look at it. Although distressed by the picture's state, Christiansen agreed with the attribution. Neither Penny nor Christiansen were Leonardo specialists.

As fate would have it, the National Gallery was planning an exhibition of Leonardo at the court of Milan for 2011. Penny suggested that Robert bring *the Salvator Mundi* to London where it could be viewed and evaluated. The painting was set up on an easel in the conservation studio where, one by one, Leonardo experts from around the world came to study it. They all concluded that the *Salvator Mundi* was the lost Leonardo, which is something of a miracle, given how contentious scholars can be.

When the painting returned to New York, I saw it on many occasions and became increasingly dissatisfied with my hastily concluded restoration. This is inevitable, especially when the painting is a damaged work by a great artist. Although I was aware

of this, I itched to have it back. Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* in London had just been cleaned, and I made an appointment to see it. It is relatively well-preserved and, at that time, was the only late Leonardo that was not encumbered with centuries-old, thick, yellow, decayed coats of varnish like the *Mona Lisa* and *Saint John the Baptist* in the Louvre. When I saw it, I was struck by the richness and depth of Leonardo's blacks and realized that the principal problem of the *Salvator Mundi* was that the image was imprisoned by the nineteenth-century, sludge-colored repaint of the background. In a few areas, mostly around the contours of the figure, the original deep black was visible, and I knew from one of the cross sections that Leonardo had paid great attention to it, building it up with four layers consisting of two different blacks, and black mixed with vermilion. I explained this to Robert, who immediately understood.

The *Salvator Mundi* was returned to me, and I was overjoyed to see it again. There were two solutions for the background: either to glaze the brown sludge to make it darker, or to remove it, on the chance that a good portion of the original background could be recovered. With great apprehension, I decided to remove the overpaint, not only because of its color but also because it was extremely thick in comparison to the original paint. I slowly removed the muddy brown under the microscope with a small scalpel. Some of the original black paint had survived, although, as I continued, I found that there was not as much as I had hoped. Most of the background had been harshly scraped and smeared unevenly with gesso putty, which explained the thickness of the repaint. It looked horrifying, with exposed wood and gesso and only small islands of the original black. It was the first time in the course of the restoration that I was truly terrified. There was no alternative. I would have to repaint much of the background.

For retouching, I use high-quality dry pigments, and I had a number of different blacks to work with—bone black, which Leonardo was known to favor, and a sixty-year-old tin of finely ground, pure ivory black that I had inherited from Mario, which is no longer made. I had never used it but suddenly remembered

Mario talking about how special it was. All the leftover colors from Mario's studio were in boxes, because there was not enough cabinet space for them. With fingers crossed, I began to search for it, and it appeared, just as he had told me. After I had polished and distressed my new paint, the result was reasonably satisfactory, at least when compared to the previous iteration. The difference it made to the painting was astounding: the great head surged forward and became much more powerful. I allowed myself to think that the decision I had taken was not so terrible after all. With the figure now more prominent and three-dimensional, some minor areas of loss and wear began to clamor for attention. This sequence is an essential part of the process of restoring a damaged painting.

Luke Syson, the curator of the National Gallery's Leonardo exhibition, asked to borrow the painting, notwithstanding some caviling from colleagues about exhibiting a work that was on the market. The discovery of a lost Leonardo was too important to ignore. In August 2011, *Art News* broke the story of the painting's discovery, after which articles appeared everywhere. CNN International made a short documentary called *The Lost Painting*, which was shown concurrently with the opening of the exhibition in early November, *Leonardo: Painter at the Court of Milan.* Robert and I figured prominently in the film. The correspondent spoke with me about the painting in the studio at the Conservation Center. He asked me how I felt when the painting was finished, after I had worked on it for such a long time. I paused. The answer that came spontaneously was that it was like a death, because I had felt so close to Mario while I was working on it, but I stopped myself and said instead, "It was like a break-up."

I arrived at the opening at the National Gallery in London in a state of great anxiety about how the *Salvator Mundi* would look in the company of other, better preserved, paintings by Leonardo. It was in the very last gallery. I caught my breath when I finally saw the painting through the crowd of people viewing and discussing it. It was beautifully lit and seemed to glow from within, as if with pride at the fact that it had survived so much abuse and ignorance

and was finally taking its rightful place. At that moment, my doubts disappeared. I saw the *Salvator Mundi* again a number of times before the exhibition closed in February. The power of Leonardo's image of a divine being, a god, affected many people. I received messages from people unknown to me, saying that the painting had touched them and that I was holy because I had brought this image back. Some people wept in front of it. I understood perfectly why this painting could stir such emotions. I believe that, before it was damaged, it was Leonardo's supreme achievement as a painter. Pietro Marani, a Leonardo scholar in Milan, now believes it dates from the last years of Leonardo's life, around 1515. (See Plate XXV)

I had hoped the painting would stay in the United States, but unfortunately there was a great deal of chatter about the condition, many curators and dealers disdaining it as a "wreck." After a few false starts, it became clear that there would be no American buyer for the painting, one of only sixteen easel paintings, by my count, fully accepted by the majority of scholars as primarily from the artist's hand. Sometime in April 2013, Robert told me that the painting was being sold to a European who wished to remain anonymous and was acting through Sotheby's private sales division.

It subsequently emerged that Sotheby's buyer was a Swiss shipping and storage tycoon, Yves Bouvier, who was flipping paintings to a Russian billionaire, Dmitry Rybolovlev, at a fifty percent markup. By the time that Rybolovlev learned the truth, the middleman had pocketed one billion dollars.[1] The Russian collector appointed a new agent to look after his interests, the New York art advisor, Sandy Heller, and launched numerous lawsuits against Bouvier, which continue to wind their way through the courts in several countries. Rybolovlev's humiliation and chagrin at being fleeced, as he saw it, caused him to sell a number of the purchases he had made through Bouvier, often at a loss, it has been said.

In July 2017 I received a message that someone wanted to talk to me about Leonardo. I was occupied with other things and at first ignored it until, later in the day, I deciphered the name of

the caller, which had been misspelled: the Sandy Heller Group. I called immediately and was told that the *Salvator Mundi* would be arriving in New York shortly and I was not to inform anyone. On Wednesday evening, July 19, the painting was delivered to the Conservation Center under guard in great secrecy and was stored in the vault. On Thursday, two young men from Christie's, Loïc Gouzer and Alex Rotter, co-chairs of the Post-War and Contemporary Art department, came to look at it. Despite the fact that it was somewhat difficult to see the painting because of the reflections from the glass, Loïc was clearly moved by the image.

Apparently, the *Salvator Mundi* would be sold once the details had been worked out. I was pleased because since the National Gallery exhibition had closed in January 2012, no one had been able to see the painting and I hoped that this time the owner would share it with the public and scholars. Rybolovlev, as everyone knew by now because of the lawsuits, had paid 127 million dollars for the painting. A deal was brokered: the *Salvator Mundi* would be auctioned at Christie's on November 15 as the highlight of the modern and contemporary sales with a 100 million dollar reserve, which meant that the consignor would receive that amount whether or not the painting sold. The news was successfully kept under wraps until the announcement was made at a press conference on October 10th. Christie's sent the painting on a two-week world tour, about which I had some concerns, but various precautions had been taken: it was shipped and exhibited behind glass in special packaging that controlled the relative humidity and an exceptionally well built double crate had been constructed to cushion the vibrations. A museum would not have agreed to this but the painting was on the market, and I realized that it was essential that prospective buyers in far-flung locations could examine it in person. My Kress Fellow, Shan Kuang, and I supervised the reframing and packing at Christie's. The crate was painted black. Tears came to my eyes as I watched the lid go on.

Hundreds of thousands of people lined up to see it in Hong Kong, London, San Francisco and New York. Most of them had

never seen a painting by Leonardo in their lives and might never see one again. Christie's produced a video of viewers looking at the *Salvator Mundi* called "The World is Watching." A camera mounted under the frame captured the reactions of faces in the crowd: enraptured, tearful, meditative as they gazed. I was elated that so many others shared the emotions that I felt about the *Salvator Mundi*.

It was inevitable that a storm of criticism and mud-slinging would erupt, mainly from social media, but also fueled by articles in such responsible print outlets as the *New York Times* and *New York Magazine*, which quoted self-described "experts" who knew nothing either about Leonardo or restoration. Robert Simon, Christie's, and I weathered this together and refrained from responding in kind although at times the remarks about the restoration were wounding. Even though cleaned state images had been published in Christie's catalogue, a former museum director who should have known better posted that 80 percent of the painting was by me! I might have been flattered by the idea that I could imitate Leonardo da Vinci well enough to fool the experts if it were not so patently absurd. I knew precisely what I had done and no one was more critical of its flaws than I was myself.

The night of November 15, the auction room was filled to overflowing, and many people had been turned away. The *Salvator Mundi* was the ninth painting in the sale. I held my breath, fearing that the reserve might not be met, but the bidding swiftly overtook the 100 million dollar minimum. The price climbed, sometimes by small increments, punctuated by dramatic pauses, to 200, 300, 350 million dollars. Christie's experts on the dais manned the phones, tending to two clients who continued to vie with each other up to 370 million dollars. In a stunningly bold move, the next bid vaulted to 400 million and the auctioneer gaveled the lot down. In less than ten minutes every record for a work of art sold at auction had been shattered.

"Vindication" was the word on everyone's lips at Christie's. For weeks the auction house, the painting's attribution, and its restoration had been questioned, mocked and vilified, but nothing

could change the fact that the *Salvator Mundi*, which had been nearly lost to the world, had triumphed.

Weeks passed. Everyone wondered who had bought the picture. On December 7, the *New York Times* reported that a minor Saudi prince was the buyer of record. In less than 24 hours the *Wall Street Journal* published a scoop: US intelligence had confirmed that the little-known prince had merely acted as a proxy for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. The purchase of an image of Jesus, no matter who had painted it, had potentially dangerous political ramifications and the Saudis hastened to issue a denial, claiming that the Crown Prince was actually a stand-in for the Emir of Abu Dhabi where an acclaimed new museum, planned in collaboration with the Louvre, had just opened. The Louvre Abu Dhabi immediately corroborated this news.

I was relieved that the *Salvator Mundi* would be in a museum rather than a bank vault and in the days before the sale I had rather hoped that the Louvre Abu Dhabi, with its vision of representing all cultures and religions, would provide a home for this most universal of all western paintings. As Emmanuel Macron said at the museum's opening, beauty can fight against hatred even when all else has failed. I know Leonardo would approve.