

DONORS HELP DISCOVER HISTORY BEHIND PORTRAITS

VALPARAISO, Ind. – While much is known about the Picassos and Van Goghs of the art world, many more artists have toiled in relative anonymity and left behind artwork of which little is known. Philipp Brockington and Howard H. Reeve Jr. of Valparaiso, long-time docents at Valparaiso University's Brauer Museum of Art, have spent the last four years doing detective work on such artists whose work is part of a series of 19th century American portraits they purchased for the museum.

After becoming docents several years ago, Brockington and Reeve took special notice of the portraits in Brauer Museum's collection of Junius R. Sloan – an influential Hudson River School painter.

"These portraits had received less attention over the years than Sloan's landscapes, and we were interested in finding a way to give them more prominence in the collection," said Brockington, an associate professor emeritus of Valparaiso's School of Law.

In talking with Gregg Hertzlieb, director of Brauer Museum, they decided the best way to achieve that goal would be to locate and purchase for the museum a critical mass of 19th century American portraits that would provide context to the Sloan portraits. So, starting in fall 2004, Brockington and Reeve began traveling throughout New England and other areas of the country in a search for such paintings.

Since beginning their travels in the fall of 2004, Brockington and Reeve have purchased 13 portraits for Brauer Museum. But finding a suitable portrait is just the first step in their detective work.

Many of these portraits came with incomplete or erroneous information, and Brockington and Reeve said one of the great joys of their ongoing work is identifying the sitters in the portraits and, in some cases, who painted them.

"We use every little clue to find out about the portrait and artist," Reeve said, such as a newspaper that indicates the man holding it came from a wealthy Irish family rather than a poor Irish family, or using the style of a women's dress to determine when her portrait was made.

Though some of the research has been conducted with the help of the genealogy department at the Porter County Public Library, the docents also have traveled across the country to places such as the Chester County Historical Society in Pennsylvania to gather information.

Some of the paintings are notable for their sitters, such as a portrait of James Gordon Bennett, the founder, editor and publisher of the New York Herald and one of the founders of modern American journalism.

Others were purchased because of a special interest in the painter. A portrait by Jane Stewart, for example, is notable because she was the daughter of Gilbert Stewart, widely considered one of America's foremost portraitists and creator of the George Washington portrait that appears on the \$1 bill. While Gilbert Stewart made a tremendous amount of money, he squandered his commissions and left Jane and the rest of his family impoverished.

"It's a tragic story to tell," Brockington said. "She followed in her father's footsteps and copied his style in painting portraits to settle his debts, and each of these

Portraits
paintings has an interesting story behind it. It's so rewarding when you're finally able to put together the puzzle with these portraits to understand the artist and who they were painting. It really brings these paintings to life."

Four of the portraits currently are displayed at Brauer Museum in a show featuring recently-acquired works. This fall, the museum plans to print a brochure that will feature each of the portraits Brockington and Reeve have donated and the history behind each painting.

Hertzlieb said each of the donated portraits is high quality and historically valuable, and they allow the museum's Sloan portraits to be viewed in the greater context of 19th century American portraiture.

But the research of Brockington and Reeve has been just as valuable, Hertzlieb said.

"It's almost unheard for donors to do the intense research that Philipp and Howard have done about these portraits," Hertzlieb said. "Their research has been as big a contribution to Brauer Museum as the paintings themselves."

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