

Like New

A skilled art conservator saves six prize-winning Basset Hounds.

By Mara Bovsun

Sometime before 1900, Mrs. Mabel Tottie decided she wanted a painting of her Basset Hounds, which were among the best in Britain, if not the world. So it was only natural that Mrs. Tottie, a woman of high society, would seek out the talents of a well-respected dog painter—Maud Earl, who counted among her many patrons Queen Victoria and the Prince and Princess of Wales.

The subjects of the three oil paintings are six of the Basset Hounds of Coniston Hall, the Yorkshire estate of Major J.B.G. Tottie and his dog-loving wife.

On one panel we see the rough-coated Ch. Tambour and Ch. Pervenche, both imports from France, and on another, a pair of Tottie's prize-winning bitches, Zitta and Gravity, who took top honors at Crufts as best smooth-coated bitch.

The third and most striking of the paintings showcases Solomon and Rowena, who together won 30 prizes, including best dog and bitch at Crufts in 1896. Solomon is staring straight ahead, alert and focused, as if he has caught an irresistible scent or has heard the voice of his mistress. He appears to be looking right at you.

Mounted on an carved three-panel oak

parlor screen, the paintings were displayed in the drawing room at Coniston Hall, as was recorded in a photograph that ran in *The Stock-Keeper*, December 21, 1900.

And that is where the screen most likely stayed—through two world wars and the death of Major and Mrs. Tottie and their son Richard, until the sale of Coniston Hall in 1969.

No documentation exists regarding the screen's whereabouts for the subsequent 40 years, although there are indications that it came up for auction at least twice. One thing is certain: The hounds had not received the best of care. They had been jostled about and dripped on, perhaps under a leaky roof in a dusty warehouse or attic.

Then, in February 2009, they showed up, along with details of their history, in the catalog of "The Dog Sale" held by Bonhams auction house in New York. There, they caught the eye of Jim Dok, of Castlehill's Basset Hounds in Shelton, Washington.

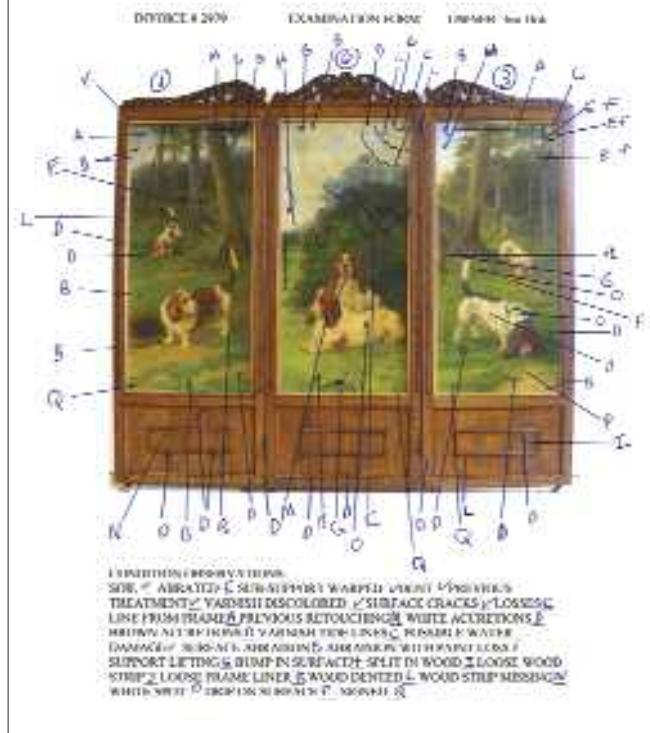
Dok, a Basset fancier for three decades, was impressed by the art, the provenance, and particularly the dogs, especially Solomon.

"These are beautiful dogs. The one of the male and female in repose, it's breathtaking



Conventional wisdom holds that an antique should stay as close as possible to its original form, in this case, mounted on the oak screen. But several details, like the canvas preparer's stamp (above), suggested to Castagna that Earl originally had them on traditional stretchers—the screen came later—so removing them would not reduce their value.

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to look at this. ... Anyone would be happy to own these dogs today," he says. "It's stunning. Just stunning."

Less impressive was the artwork's condition. Water, warping, soil, scrapes, and bumps had marred the surface. Added to environmental damage was the inexorable degradation that comes with age to works of art—yellowed varnish, cracks, and clumsy former attempts at retouching.

Still, Dok decided to take a chance and placed a bid over the Internet. "I never thought my online bid would win," he says. It did.

Under Glass

Dok paid more than \$26,000 for Maud Earl's *Rough and Smooth Basset Hounds*. Now, the new owner had to figure out what to do with them.

Wisely, he called in a specialist—Lawrence Castagna, an expert in art conservation and restoration with a special

interest in dog art. Over the past 15 years, Castagna, whose studios are in East Hampton, New York (lawrencecastagnaaartconservation.com), has restored many paintings in the American Kennel Club's collection as well as the AKC Museum of the Dog.

Castagna's first step was a thorough inspection to assess the damage, which included examining the painting from all sides, under magnifiers and ultraviolet lights. He is particularly fond of a device known as the OptiVISOR, a headband with a pair of binoculars attached.

"Not very chic," Castagna acknowledges, but they are extremely useful for zeroing in on imperfections.

After his inspection, Castagna prepared a condition report, a detailed assessment of the damaged areas (see illustration). This is standard practice when working with a conservator. "It's like a health report on a baby," he says. Castagna then offered an equally detailed proposal on how he planned to fix the damage, and what it would cost.

Warped and Dangerous

It didn't take a spyglass to reveal the biggest problem and greatest threat to the future of these paintings—the oak panels on which they were mounted. Artists call these the "sub support," a term given to the structure that holds painted canvases. In most cases, the sub support of the paintings will be wooden bars upon which the canvases are stretched.

For these Maud Earl Bassets, the paintings simply had been glued down onto the oak panels. Over the century, the panels had warped into the shape of a bowl. "If you laid it down, it could hold a gallon of water," Dok says. "It was that warped."

The warping was destroying the painted surfaces.

Dok and Castagna carefully weighed the pros and cons of taking the paintings off the screen. It was risky, because the simple act of removing them might have damaged the paintings beyond repair. But leaving them as they were made further destruction inevitable. Castagna conducted a few tests, and determined that the glue had weakened and

pre-restoration



Age Spots: The kinds of problems encountered in old paintings include (left to right) water damage, scratches and abrasions (center) and dirt (far right). The blue spot in the left-hand corner shows the results of a cleaning test. Above: A restorer will offer clients a detailed condition report with descriptions of every trouble zone.

the process



Castagna in his East Hampton workshop (left) prepares the painting for a new lining by applying heated liquid adhesive to the canvas back. Instead of the wood panels, stretchers (center left) will support the paintings. Castagna assembling the stretchers (center right). An artist's skill is essential in the final step (right), retouching.

become brittle.

With the glue eroding, it was fairly easy to free the paintings from the sub supports with the use of flat spatulas and, where necessary, solvents. Castagna treated delicate areas with Beva 371, an adhesive designed for art restoration, to prevent loss of paint during the process.

Spitting Images

The next step was cleaning away decades of grime, and, for this, the primary tool is decidedly low-tech. Human saliva contains enzymes, but in low concentrations, making for a very gentle cleanser that is popular among art conservators. “It’s mild. Put a little bit on a Q-tip swab, rub it on the surface, and see what you get.” Saliva, followed by a distilled water rinse, effectively removes surface grime.

For some paintings, saliva is all that’s needed. “I like to start with the lightest technique and move on to a solvent process,” Castagna says. If more cleaning power is required—as in cases of deep soiling, smoke damage, and old varnish—

there are soaps and solvents, designed specifically for cleaning oil and acrylic paintings. Yellowed varnish will generally yield to acetone.

Back Up

Next came the delicate process of relining the canvas, vital for stabilizing the painted surface. For this, conservators use a “vacuum hot table,” a special device that consists of an electrically heated tabletop attached to a vacuum pump. The painting was spread face up on top of a gently misted blotter before Castagna turned on the vacuum. The treatment relaxed the canvas, easing any distortions.

There’s also a good deal of work that goes into preparing the new lining. Castagna uses a delicate but extremely strong fabric—Belgian airplane cloth, the same stuff that went into making the dogfighting flying machines of World War I. This traditional linen has a fine weave texture and high tensile strength. Plus, he says, “It looks nice on the back of the painting.”

before & afters



Brightened and Whitened: The weather looked cloudy and gray before cleaning (far left), but the Bassett were really romping under blue skies (center left). The unsightly yellow coats of Solomon and Rowena (center right) were returned to a creamy white through the use of solvents to remove discolored varnish.

Castagna pores over the backing canvas as carefully as he does artwork itself, using a tiny scalpel to remove imperfections, no matter how small; any little wrinkle, dimple, or nick can cause problems later on.

"We call it the Princess and the Pea effect," he explains. "Something the size of a grain of sand can come out to be a good sized bump when an air pocket forms around it. ... Picture everything as nice, flat, and clean."

For relining, Castagna inserts a mylar interleaf, with adhesives on both sides, to attach the linen backing to the old canvas. This prevents the paintings from expanding or contracting if there's a change in ambient temperature and relative humidity. It also protects the art from punctures and tears. The relined paintings were then stretched on the new sub supports, traditional wooden stretcher bars.

Once on the stretchers, the paintings were ready for the final, and most sensitive, part of the repair-retouching. Previous retouching was removed with acetone. Any abrasions or scrapes in the paint had to be filled with gesso and repainted, in the style of the original artist.

"In terms of the brush stroke and texture, you're supposed to try to mimic it. You have to pick up where [the artist] left off. You have to try to become him," he explains. Castagna has restored several Maud Earl paintings, so he's accustomed to her style. "She's not too difficult to mimic."

The last step was spraying the painting with a non-yellowing varnish to protect the surface and bring out the colors.

The facelift took nearly three months, but Dok's gamble on the beaten-up old screen has paid off. He estimates that

the restoration, which cost more than \$9,000, has tripled the value of the paintings. Dok, however, says he has no intention of selling them. Today, they grace the walls of his home on Puget Sound.

Thanks to careful restoration, Solomon and his kennel-mates will be frolicking, sniffing, lounging on the grass, or gazing after some long-gone scent or sound for decades to come. 

A Job for Professionals

Most antique artwork will require restoration. Sometimes it will be just a simple cleaning; other times, as in the case of paintings that have been damaged by fire or floods, there will be extensive work required. No matter how small the job, it is best to seek out a professional who has the training, know-how, and tools to restore a work of art, and to preserve it for the future. Trying to do-it-yourself can do more harm than good.

Dok found Castagna through word-of-mouth, a referral from the AKC. Other good sources for referrals include local museums and the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (conservation-us.org). They provide a list of experts, as well as advice on picking a conservator, who works to restore and preserve works of art. The group also offers fact sheets on what to expect when working with one.



Life Imitates Art: In reviving the paintings, Castagna became attached to Mrs. Tottie's dogs, especially Solomon. "He was looking at me every day," he says. "His gaze got to me." Castagna is now considering opening his home—and heart—to a flesh-and-blood Basset Hound.