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The Old Masters Detective Agency

By JOHN FREEMAN GILL

PETER SCHWELLER, 38, shares his cramped Gramercy Park studio apartment, which he calls Casa Minuscule, with 10 transient European noblemen and ladies. All tricked out in powdered wigs and velvet finery, Mr. Schweller's British and French roommates have a creepy tendency to stare, and he wishes they would all just go home.

That's because these dukes and baronesses are all old-master oil portraits, and Mr. Schweller is an art dealer who takes particular pride in one aspect of his work: he scours the United States for 17th- to 19th-century paintings of grand personages, does extensive detective work to determine their identity, then tries to reunite these homeless gentry with their families in Europe.

"I'm trying to eke out an existence in the Big Apple," Mr. Schweller said the other day, relaxing in his 250-square-foot apartment under the unblinking gaze of Miss Glover of Bath, the second son of the third Duke of Devonshire, and several unidentified men of letters. "I really need to be in New York because of the research I can do at the Frick and the New York Public Library, and this is where many portraits come on the market."

Growing up in Dayton, Ohio, Mr. Schweller, who carries himself with an upright grace worthy of one of his portraits, developed an appreciation for his lawyer father's collection of portrait miniatures. But a talent for museum research and an eye for fine art are not all that Mr. Schweller needs for the job.

"They tend to come in looking a little shabby," he said of the old-master paintings, which he buys from private dealers as well as at auctions and estate sales. Indeed, one of Mr. Schweller's most successful repatriation projects, a 17th-century portrait of the mannish second Countess of Cork wearing a brown gown and pearls, came out of an attic in Detroit in 2003 so caked with varnish and dirt that it looked as if it had been smeared with crème brûlée.

After hiring an Upper East Side conservator to give the countess a vigorous but respectful scrub, Mr. Schweller was thrilled to welcome her back into Casa Minuscule. And so began her long journey home. Once an expert had confirmed Mr. Schweller's belief that the portrait had been made by Sir Peter Lely, a Dutch painter who worked in England, Mr. Schweller traveled to London to nail down her identity.

At the British Museum, he succeeded. He found her likeness, complete with bold eyebrows and uncompromising nose, among engravings of Elizabeth, the second Countess of Cork. Finally, with the help of the Sotheby's auction house in London, the 350-year-old countess was sold to the Duke of Devonshire, into whose family Elizabeth's great-granddaughter Charlotte had married. The portrait of the countess now resides in Lismore Castle in County Waterford, Ireland.

"What is nice is that in the last 10, 15, 20 years, there's been quite a lot of buying back of art by the families who were selling earlier on," said David Moore-Gwyn, head of British paintings at Sotheby's in London. "I suppose some of those families now are more prosperous than they were, perhaps, in the 1950's."

Old-master portraits began finding their way west across the Atlantic Ocean in increasing numbers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as wealthy American industrialists emulated the tastes of the European aristocracy. The westward migration of the portraits also surged after World War II.

Today the American market for what some call "instant ancestors" is still strong. So although Mr. Schweller would prefer to ship English nobles back to their descendants, they often wind up in Dayton or Cincinnati, where buyers sometimes pay tens or occasionally even hundreds of thousands of dollars for an old master.

Last fall, an anonymous Scottish elder statesman in a powdered wig moved in with Mr. Schweller, who was excited to discover that the old man's red and black robe identified him as the top judge in 18th-century Scotland's highest court. But before Mr. Schweller could try to send him home, a client in Dayton bought the Scotsman for his bedroom after becoming enamored of the judge's red robe.

"It matched a red ottoman," Mr. Schweller conceded with an arch grin. "Sometimes we have to forgo the principle of historic repatriation for the red ottoman."

The void in Mr. Schweller's home has since been filled by a red-nosed dignitary named George Augustus Cavendish, the longest-serving member of the British Parliament in the 18th century.

Lord George looked pensive the other day as he reclined in his gold-buttoned jacket near Mr. Schweller's bed, and small wonder. When the celebrated legislator sat for his portrait near the end of his life around 1790, it is a fair bet that he never expected to find himself residing in a rent-stabilized East 22nd Street apartment so overcrowded with wayward European gentry that a first Earl of Bath would be tucked unceremoniously into a rack just a few feet from a humming refrigerator.

"Hey, it's always a party in my apartment," Mr. Schweller said with a shrug. "And it's an ever-changing parade of faces."

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