

22 study where several “suits” were having a conference with the painting’s owner. Several
23 minutes went by before they even acknowledged my presence. I stood there waiting with my
24 thumb, figuratively, up my ass when one of them finally turned my way, and with thinly
25 disguised disdain ordered, “Why don’t you look over the painting while we finish our
26 discussion.”

27 “Where is it?”

28 He glared at me somewhat incredulously. “You just passed right by it!”

29 I thought *this is not going to be fun.*

30 Not hiding his irritation, he got up to point out a large painting of Christ on a cross —
31 just beside me in the living room, by the entrance to the study — and dismissed me with, “We’ll
32 talk to you later.”

33 * * *

34 Without much more credibility to lose — and thinking that at least I should put on a
35 show for the two grand — I went into my appraiser’s dance of measuring, photographing, and
36 examining the painting with a magnifier. For extra credit, I pulled out a black light to see what
37 kind of previous restorations may have been done. Clients tend to be interested in the kit I carry
38 with me. The suits and painting’s owner were no exceptions. Attracted by the flash going off,
39 and to break up the tedium of their discussion, they came out to watch my performance.

40 The painting was large and dark, hardly the frolicking *zaftig* nudes that I had in my mind.
41 The damage the owner was concerned about was simply mildew. Now in front of an audience
42 — for my *pièce de résistance*, and to the accompaniment of gasps — I applied some spit to one
43 of the heavier mildew incrustations. It was all that was needed to remove it and reveal a detail in

44 the bottom margin that would prove important. Obsession with hygiene in not a virtue to
45 appraisers.

46 Oil paintings are protected with a coating of varnish. The varnish, with time, turns brown
47 and periodically has to be replaced when the painting is cleaned. The most this painting needed
48 was a good professional cleaning. On the other hand, it was not *right*. Right is a term used by
49 art dealers to describe a painting whose characteristics are consistent with other works by the
50 artist. The first thing to draw my attention was the craquelure. The paint on old paintings
51 shrinks with time forming superficial cracks. An early lesson I had in identifying old paintings
52 was, that ones painted prior to the 19th Century cracked in a brick like pattern of horizontal and
53 vertical lines. Newer paintings cracked in a spiderweb pattern. This painting had spider web
54 cracking. Additionally, there was no readily apparent signature. In the lower right margin,
55 partially obscured by the frame, and under the mildew that was the object of my spit some red
56 paint peeped out.

57 I wanted to see if the red paint might have been part of the artist's signature but was
58 reluctant to handle the painting alone. If something happened to the painting when I pulled it
59 away from the wall, anyone else hanging on to it would share the liability. A lawyer would be
60 perfect.

61 "Can someone help support the frame while I pull the bottom away from the wall and
62 check for a signature?"

63 Two of the suits rose to the occasion. While they held the frame — I reached behind, put
64 my fingers under the stretcher, and raised the painting in the frame — enough to see that the red
65 paint was indeed a signature. Unfortunately, it didn't look anything like Rubens'.

