

Art experts contend

Hall treasures 'being destroyed' by neglect

By SHELLEY EICHENHORN

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In the midst of Detroit's culture-conscious northern suburbs and on the grounds of a major state university, experts say valuable art treasures are literally being destroyed by neglect at Meadow Brook Hall in Rochester.

Three other paintings in the Tudor mansion remain falsely attributed to artists three years after university officials were informed of the misrepresentations.

These and other facts about the hall's contents were brought to light in two documented reports prepared by experts in May and June 1972. They contend historical accuracy is in jeopardy at the hall, willed to Oakland University as a cultural center and conference facility by the late Maillie Dodge Wilson, heiress to John Dodge's automotive fortune.

Meadow Brook Hall functions as a living museum to the opulence of another era," according to last press releases. The 100-room mansion has attracted more than 186,000 visitors, conference guests and participants in semi-private and private affairs.

Lowell Eklund, hall administrator, in an earlier statement, saw the hall's potential as a regional center for adult education. At this time, Eklund, president of Oakland University, said, "The hall is unusable for its intended purpose."

THOSE CONCERNED with preservation of the hall and its contents have charged that:

•Valuable paintings and tapestries on display there are in danger of destruction and in urgent need of restoration.

•Paintings are falsely identified on hall markers, tape recorded information and in the guide book, even though experts in the 1972 report brought this to the attention of university officials.

•Shifting of contents without expert consultation and markers to record the changes could destroy the historical value and cultural experience of Meadow Brook Hall for the future.

•Routine precautionary care of paintings and rugs to guard against wear by hall visitors has not been taken.

•Hall contents are sold before expert appraisal of their historical and monetary worth is known.

Although the hall receives no public funds or endowment, in its first year open, it operated at a profit and in the last two years, has made more than \$70,000 set aside in a reserve fund. This is beyond the approximately \$200,000 operating budget.

According to the Internal Revenue Service, Meadow Brook Hall enjoys tax exempt status as an "exclusively educational institution."

Oakland University received \$275,000 from the Matilda R. Wilson Fund and \$180,000 from the Kresge Foundation when the hall opened in 1971.

VISITORS WHO pay \$3.50 and \$2 (senior citizens) were invited in a recent press release to enjoy the hall where "true worth lies in the priceless and irreplaceable examples of building artistry found in abundance throughout the house."

In 1929, Meadow Brook Hall cost about \$3.5 million to build and \$9 million to furnish. Yet nearly all the recommendations made by experts three years ago to preserve the hall have not been followed. The maintenance of the mansion built principally by American craftsmen, is the responsibility of the hall administrator and the university.

In May 1972, Charles Brownell, then an assistant professor in the Oakland University Art Department urged that professional consultation was needed at the hall. Brownell was appointed to a Meadow Brook Hall Advisory Com-

mittee by Eklund, hall administrator and dean of continuing education. According to those appointed, the committee has never met.

BROWNELL EARNED a masters degree from the Henry Francis DuPont Winterthur Museum in Wilmington, Del., the former residence of H.P. DuPont, now the principal center of study of the American decorative arts.

When he left Oakland University in December 1972, Brownell took an appointment to the Maryland Historical Society and is a PhD candidate at Columbia University. He is considered an expert in American art and architecture and widely consulted.

Brownell urged Eklund to seek advice either from the Henry Ford Museum or the Detroit Institute of Arts, the only major conservation laboratory in Michigan. He received permission from Eklund to invite Frederick J. Cummings, director of the Detroit Art Institute to the hall. Cummings did not accept a fee for his consultation.

In an extensive memo sent to the hall administrator, Carl F. Barnes Jr., chairman of the university art department, and Donald D. O'Dowd, president of Oakland University, Barnes reported the serious condition of the hall.

He was praised for his work by all three officials. In a memo of June 5, 1972, Eklund wrote: "I'm most grateful for the obvious amount of time and service as well as his going into the preparation of this report."

And while there are some disappointing revelations, I agree that we should take due consideration of the quality and historical significance of the pieces that are here."

O'Dowd on June 20, 1972, wrote: "Unfortunately we will be forced to make compromise between the hall's characteristics as a conference center and as a museum. Nevertheless, the values that you emphasize must be given as much attention as possible."

YET, THE deterioration and preservation problems noted in the May 31 memo and a second report made by the chief conservator of the Detroit Institute of Arts have not been corrected.

The May 31 memo, which included Brownell's consultation with Cummings, reported that the oil painting by Jean-Francois Raffaelli, "The Woodcutter," was "the finest work I have seen by this important painter. The picture is in danger of destruction if not properly treated as soon as possible," according to Cummings.

The Raffaelli currently hangs in Alfred Wilson's study, now Eklund's office. It is warping in a concave away from the wall and splinters of the panel are breaking away from the surface, according to trained observers.

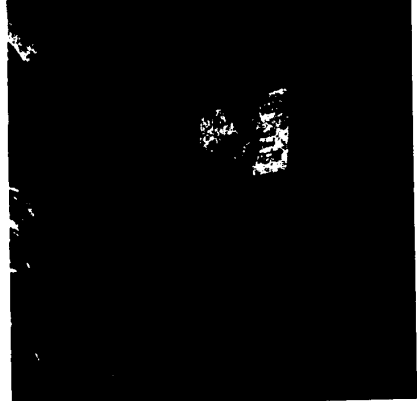
There is no mention of the painting anywhere in the Meadow Brook Hall Guide Book including the section on the study. Instead, the guide book points out that the study has "probably the most intriguing feature of the entire house—the Secret Staircase."

According to Cummings, a specialist in French and European paintings, the Raffaelli is of the highest quality and among the two most valuable paintings in the mansion.

THE MOST current world auction house figures available, recorded in the "World Collectors Annual, 1972," indicate a top-quality Raffaelli brought nearly \$40,000.

In a June 20, 1972 memo to Brownell, Eklund forwarded a request from the Wilson Trustees concerning the repair of the Raffaelli. Eklund wrote: "We would like some idea of the projected cost, length of time, etc."

The Trustees of the Matilda Wilson Fund, who have indicated that they may be willing to pick up the cost for



After the Observer & Eccentric began its investigation, "The Woodcutter" by Raffaelli was taken down for repair, three years after experts reported it was splitting on the wall. The painting is fixed yet.

such a repair job have also asked about the approximate current value of the painting in order to determine whether it would be worth the investment.

In a three-page memo of June 21, 1972, Brownell detailed the rising value of Raffaelli's work. Like other French painters of the late 18th century, Raffaelli's works had been shadowed by the Impressionists only to be re-evaluated in the last 10 years.

According to prices available to Brownell, three years ago, a top quality Raffaelli sold for \$9,125 in 1969. In the June 21 memo, Brownell advised Eklund: "I believe restoration of the Raffaelli to be a prudent financial investment."

To further examine the condition of the painting and other works in the hall, the art professor got permission from Eklund for Jane Greaves, chief conservator at the Detroit Institute of Arts, to inspect the paintings on June 29, 1972. His visit cost the hall \$27.

In his report to Eklund, the conservator wrote of the Raffaelli: "Condition: severe splitting of original panel with some loss of paint, varnish is discolored, overpainting evident. Conclusion: Top priority. I believe an estimate of \$2,000 would cover a complete job."

ALTHOUGH NELSON L. Meredith, president of the Matilda R. Wilson Fund, requested the report from Eklund on the Raffaelli's value, he said he did not receive it.

"I never saw the June 21, 1972 memo on the painting's value," he said. "I was never given a copy of the May 31, 1972 report on the condition of the hall's art work, and I never saw the report from the conservator of the art institute."

Eklund has refused comment and O'Dowd was unavailable for comment.

A second work of art of considerable value was judged top priority by the Greaves report and appears likely to have been left to deteriorate. The report three years ago notified the hall administrator about a 17th century style Flemish tapestry on the first landing of the grand staircase.

"Condition: Extremely bad hanging arrangement in critical condition is weak and dirty. Recommendation: An accurate appraisal of the tapestry's monetary and historic worth should be made because if its value is great enough this piece should be given top priority."

"At present, it is literally being destroyed on the wall and proper treatment and hanging techniques must be employed if it is to survive."

THIS is the way a curator knowledgeable in tapestries from the Detroit Institute of Arts found the Flemish work still hanging. In response to an inquiry by the Observer & Eccentric, she volunteered to examine the tapestries at the hall without accepting a fee.

The Flemish scene on the landing, one in the ballroom, and a French work on the back staircase were judged "artistically significant and though certainly not masterpieces, deserve preservation."

The Flemish scene on the landing is now almost beyond repair," the curator said. "The deterioration could be stopped if immediate conservation was given."

She also reported that, in general, the tapestries at Meadow Brook Hall are improperly hung and in danger of serious and irreparable damage.

In most cases they are subject to too much light, they are dirty and tattered, and because they have been hanging too long without an opportunity to rest, most are separating and will continue to do so.

If nothing else, all the tapestries should be allowed to rest and be superficially cleaned and lined," she said. "This would cost between \$2,000-\$3,000 a piece and should certainly be done for the three artistically valuable tapestries."

IF NO conservation attention can be given, the tapestries should be taken down, rolled and stored to prevent further deterioration," the curator urged.

As conservation measures have been disregarded, information verifying the false attributions of three paintings in the hall also was not acted upon. The May 31 memo informed university officials of these documented conclusions reached by Brownell and Cummings.

Yet in the newly installed tape recording guides and hall markers, these false attributions remain. They also remain in the current guide book, revised twice since the Brownell report was sent to university officials.

The report concludes that: "The would-be Sir Anthony Van Dyck 'Hundredport' was, according to Cummings: 'Not a Van Dyck but a very high quality indeed, the work of such an important French painter as Jean-Baptiste Oudry or perhaps Alexandre-Francois Desportes. Brownell said: 'The attribution was 100 years and hundreds of miles off.'"

John Constable's "The Farm by the River" is in Cummings' opinion, "absolutely not a Constable." In Brownell's view, "an inept imitation of Constable but also an inept painting."

The Joseph Mallord William Turner "Rocks at Colgate on the Ganges" judged not a Turner by Cummings.

In the guide book drawing room section, it states: "Two of the more important paintings in the Meadow Brook Hall collection hang in this room: 'The Farm by the River' by John Constable and William Turner's 'Rocks at Colgate on the Ganges.'"

But the guide book praises its own accuracy in special acknowledgments. "The accuracy and thoroughness of the booklet and not have been possible without the many contributions from... others who have become historians as well as friends of the Hall."

DISPERSED DISCOVERY of these errors, Brownell urged university officials to take heart in the authentic works of great value that remain in the hall.

"If, perhaps, you are somewhat disheartened by unexciting news, such as the paintings that can't live up to the attributions jammed onto them, then take a renewed, good look at what Meadow Brook Hall is and has, such as the Murillo, the Raffaelli, the Greuze, the Reynolds, the 'Gilt' Van Dyck by some excellent 18th century French painter, the works by 18th century artists who only now emerge from neglect, the Tiffany glass which in quantity would sink a good-sized boat and the Tiffany water colors, the carpets, the ensemble which constitutes a major American monument."

These sentiments were pressed by Alfred Wilson in a letter written in 1962 to a friend: "We consider that we have a nice collection of pictures, some beautiful woodwork and carved plaster. Sometimes after we are gone, possibly the hall may be called the Wilson Art Hall."

Of the paintings left in the hall, those mentioned by Brownell are judged to be major works of value. In momentary value, paintings of groupings comparable to the Wilson collection were listed in the "World Collectors Annual 1972":

- A top quality Raffaelli brought \$40,000.
- A Reynolds of high popularity brought \$40,000.
- An average range Murillo went for \$25,000.
- Dupont's work sold from \$1,000-\$15,000.
- Greuze brought between \$6,000-\$10,000.

Ranking them according to artistic value, Cummings lists: the Murillo, the Raffaelli, the Greuze, Reynolds and Dupont.

These paintings were among those not sold by the estate at Park-Bernet in New York in 1970. Then, nine paintings brought \$178,000.

BECAUSE THE Wilson Rembrandt "Portrait of an Officer" didn't bring a high enough price, and the estate and university officials could not arrive at a plan to safeguard the masterpiece at the hall, it was given to the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Although Mrs. Wilson had a dispute with the institution many years ago, the trustees decided the Rembrandt's placement there was the most reasonable option left to safeguard the painting.

Of the works that remained in the hall, Brownell recommended their movement from original locations be done only for good reason and that changes be documented with hall markers.

Although many changes have been made, no action has been taken on Brownell's recommendation made in the May 31 memo to change the placement of the valuable Murillo.

"The Murillo, a masterful painting... is virtually inaccessible and almost invisible behind the piano," Brownell wrote.

"At the hall, where I have noticed seemingly arbitrary adjustments since January (1972), the policy must be that nothing is shifted about without good reason, both to preserve the surviving Wilson placements and to protect the objects themselves."

"Beyond any whisper of a question, Meadow Brook Hall is a major document in the history of 20th century taste. Ideally, to prevent the ensemble from turning into a forged document, every object in the house ought to be where the Wilsons had it."

The needs of a new, functioning conference and cultural center together with the dispersal of a number of the paintings require compromise, but that compromise must aim at the greatest fidelity to the Wilson's use of the house... or the mansion will turn into an interesting non-historical set that might as well not be connected with the Wilsons or the name Meadow Brook Hall at all."

OF THE changes made since Brownell wrote this to the administrator of the hall in 1972, the shifting of paintings and furniture is evident, according to trained observers. Many changes have been made in the Wilson family bedrooms where beds have been set up for conference guests, including Mrs. Wilson's Louis XIV suite where the silk wall covering now is water stained and frayed.

More drastic changes have occurred in sun-drenched rooms. Observers report almost none of the original furniture remains. The room was closed for 12 years to every one except Mrs. Wilson after Darny's tragic death at the age of 21.

Two films recording the original placements at the hall were made: one features Mrs. Wilson on a tour. This film was shown at commencement in 1968 at Oakland University. The film is said to be at Meadow Brook Hall.

Of the changes in the hall recommended by Brownell, only the correction of the attribution for the Gainborough Dupont thought to be a Gainborough was made.

Brownell urged that the painting be moved from its position in the great hall because it was being damaged by the air flow behind the velvet drapery it hung on. The change was made, but a year after the recommendation.

Besides guidelines for the changes in the hall's contents and preservation, other general recommendations were made in the reports of 1972.

THE CONSERVATOR'S report included recommendations for the care of all hall paintings. He advised:

"Oil paintings lightly vacuumed on the reverse side and all debris removed from between canvases and stretchers."

"Each painting should be backed with cardboard, featherweight mounting board... to prevent damage from the back. 'The Handbook for the Care of Paintings' by Kiek, illustrates these procedures."

The conservator estimated all the paintings in the hall could have been cleaned for a few hundred dollars. "There was discussion of us coming out, setting up a table for keying (lightening) and cleaning and doing the whole job. This was never done."

At this time trained observers say the paintings remain uncleaned and in the condition reported three years ago.

Also not cared for was a painting judged routine priority in the conservator's report. The condition of the Jean Baptiste "Still Life of Flowers" was described as "Scattered small scale loss of paint and cleavage, especially in the lower half; cleaning would improve the appearance."

Needed to repair this painting, Greuze estimated at most \$550. "Nothing was ever requested after the report was made," he said. And the Ford Museum was also not contacted. "We have done no consulting for Meadow Brook Hall and no restoration work," said Edward Gilbert, chief conservator of the Henry Ford Museum.

AS NONE of the general advice in the conservator's report was followed, other general recommendations in the Brownell memo of 1972 were also not heeded.

Brownell in the May 31 memo urged officials to protect the oriental rugs throughout the house. "The solution is one that I learned... at the Winterthur Museum, where conservation standards are second to none in the world."

"There, runners of neutral color and inexpensive commercial make are laid across the carpets in the end as opposed to the much cheaper thin mats which serve very well," Brownell wrote.

"The carpets and from an historical point of view that included the gorgeous red carpeting of the drawing room (may be as a whole among the most valuable objects in the house," Brownell urged professional appraisal of the carpets in an interdepartmental memo to Eklund on June 1, 1972.

He suggested the experts didn't have to be from the art institute. "The Henry Ford Museum can certainly provide a specialist," he wrote.

For the first time, since July 1, Meadow Brook Hall has been opened for tours every day of the week through the end of the summer, increasing the traffic and wear on the carpets, already worn down by hundreds of thousands of visitors.

YET IN 1972, Brownell pointed out the conservation problems at the hall were probably due to the newness of its status and the lack of professional counsel. He wrote to the administrator then:

"The problems are not yet imminent and lack immediately they will resolve swiftly. Some advice costs money, and much does not. Free source of information... is the Winterthur Museum which has devised excellent procedures for handling tour groups."

According to the head curator at the museum, Winterthur has never been called by officials of Meadow Brook Hall, despite the fact that visiting Winterthur experts once offered suggestions, a Brownell's urging.

The lack of professional advice affected not only contents of the hall but those items sold in numerous auctions, according to Brownell.

He claims expert advice was rarely sought before private and public auctions were held to raise money. Among major sales were those of September, 1970, October 1972 and November 1972.

At that time, Brownell examined some of the furniture to be auctioned and found it historically valuable. In an appeal to O'Dowd, Brownell succeeded in having removed nine pieces of Swedish furniture. It was placed on loan to the Oxford Historical Society.

EARLIER THAT year, Brownell sent a memo dated June 27 to Eklund regarding the sale of objects at the Carriage House, later continued in the gardener's room in the hall and now in the basement of the hall, according to trained observers.

Brownell wrote of the Carriage House sale: "I was appalled almost beyond words to discover that major items of furniture from the Boston Boulevard residence are to be offered for sale once a committee prices them. These are items which should on no account leave the hall... they record developments in taste within one family group over a period of nearly a full century and thereby record the developments in North American taste."

"At the same time, furnishings of this kind as yet command no significant market, least of all when offered in a souvenir shop to souvenir hunters and when priced by non-professionals," he said.

At one furniture sale, Brownell himself bought John Dodge's arm chair for \$45.

Besides the sale of furniture without expert consultation, Brownell claims books were sold without professional appraisal in the July sale of 1973. "I can remember the sale of many historically valuable books and travel magazines as well as personal travel photos have been on sale. One observer bought one of Mrs. Wilson's European travel photos for \$125."

And besides selling valuable historical documents Brownell contends others are even given away.

"As I was leaving the hall one day, when it was being renovated for public use, I gave a carpenter a lift home."

"He told me of a scrapbook which he said had been given to him by a hall staff member. It was a scrapbook kept by Mrs. Wilson on the great architect Frank Lloyd Wright."

"It is unthinkable to give this kind of document away," Brownell said.

Although he acknowledges it takes money to run the hall, he urged and still urges compromise.

There have to be necessary compromises to keep money coming in to the hall," he said. "But there is a difference between doing this and ruthlessly running the building and its contents into the ground by huckstering anything that can be huckstered on one hand and on the other, refusing to take proper care of what is there."

"Crying poverty is a nice noisy way of trying to cover up the refusal of individuals at the hall to apply any money to anything that does not turn a large, quick profit."

Not by Turner.

