Calendar

Local Events *page* **67**

Classical Music *page* **79**

Art Museums & Galleries *page* **81**

Theater *page* **84**

Pop Music *page* **90**

Movies *page* **120**

Restaurants *page* **130**

Canvas Bloodline

Stories Behind the Art

Property of a lady. Or: *Property of a gentleman.* These quaint phrases are often used in auction-house catalogs when sellers of paintings want anonymity.

Sometimes, though, a piece's provenance — or bloodline — must be explored and exposed. It happens when attribution is questioned. Is it really a Monet? Well, then, let's trace it, with its bills of sale, back to the artist's studio. Ownership controversies start experts sleuthing, too. An artwork's lineage may be murky not because it was forged but because it was stolen.

At the Timken Museum of Art, a new exhibit explores the idea of provenance for other reasons. "There is no question about ownership or about who painted the pieces in the show," says Hal Fischer, director of exhibitions and publications. Nor is the Timken interested in the extra dollar value that an illustrious provenance can bestow. "What we want to articulate," he says, "is that these paintings link up to history in extraordinary ways."

The Timken's *Mrs. Thomas Gage* was painted by John Singleton Copley in New York in 1771. At the time, Margaret Kemple Gage was the new American bride of the British Army's Commander-in-Chief. When the Revolutionary War was lost, the Gages retreated to England, and with them went the portrait, where it hung in one of Britain's "treasure houses" for the next two centuries.

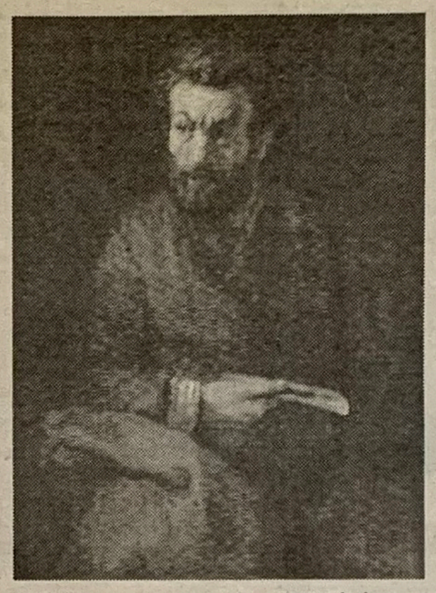
LOCAL EVENTS

"The Gages always intended for it to be sent to the family estate," says Fischer. "That was planned." The portrait was the young wife's introduction to her inlaws and to London society. Her reputation and visage were supposed to precede her. But it wasn't in the plan to lose the painting someday.

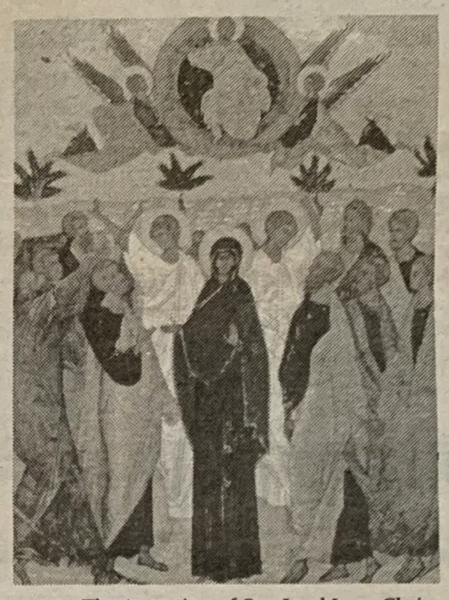
Changes in British inheritance taxes have forced many such estates to disperse their holdings. "The treasure houses were broken up and lots of art went on the market," says Fischer. "The Copley was sold to repair the roof. There was a direct relationship, and the family felt this was unfortunate but needed the money." And so it came to the Timken, through a purchase, in 1984.

That's a relatively simple story of provenance. It can get more complicated, particularly with older paintings. *Portrait of a Lady in a Green Dress* was painted by Bartolomeo Veneto in 1530. But only from 1851 to today's ownership by the Timken can the provenance be traced. "Someday there may be more archive information that comes through," Fischer says. In the meantime, the elaborately dressed woman, who is wearing a hawking glove, looks out at her viewers with a gaze that's as inscrutable as her whereabouts for 321 years.

Mrs. Thomas Gage



St. Bartholomew



The Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Portrait of a Lady in a Green Dress

Death of the Virgin

Death of the Virgin, painted by Petrus Christus in mid-15th-century Bruges, came to the Timken as another purchase, the museum's first, in 1951. Not only is its provenance incomplete, but so is the piece itself. What the Timken has is the center of this former triptych. "But we don't have the wings," says Fischer, who included it in the show to illustrate what may happen to art during wartime.

According to historians, the side pieces went to Berlin in the 19th Century; at the end of World War II, they presumably were destroyed in a famous fire, along with other stored art. "But things that were claimed to have been destroyed have turned up," says Fischer. "Perhaps the wings really do exist somewhere."

A Russian icon from the 16th Century, *The Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, underwent a physical transformation, too. "It appears that it was once a rectangle, then was cut into an oval, and then was turned back into a rectangle," says Fischer, who believes the initial alteration occurred during the time of Peter the Great (1672–1725), when religious art was secularized — put into oval gilt frames as decorative art. For Fischer that's the most eloquent part of its provenance story: "How an object can literally change when ownership changes and how that relates to history."

Rembrandt's *St. Bartholomew*, which dates from 1657, has had two famous owners. Each brings historical interest to this portrait of a martyr, who, flayed alive, was pictured by Rembrandt holding a knife. One owner was Sir Joshua Reynolds, the 18th-century British portraitist; the other was art collector Henry Goldman, a member of the family that founded Goldman Sachs. Says Fischer, "It came to the Timken through a dealer pretty directly from the Goldman estate in 1952."

Fischer was asked why these ownership links are important to many of us. What is it in our psyches that values a significant provenance so much that an already remarkable object is enhanced by it?

"Actually," he says, "provenance is much more valued in Asian art than Western art." At a recent auction in Hong Kong, he notes, Chinese collectors vigorously competed for Ming Dynasty items because they had been owned by an emperor.

"In East Asian art," he adds, "the owner's name is stamped right on the front of the painting. It's a very visible thing."

— *Jeanne Schinto*

"Every Picture Has a Story: Looking at History Through Art"
Timken Museum of Art
1500 El Prado
Balboa Park
Tuesday – Saturday,
10:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.
Sunday, 1:30 – 4:30 p.m.
Free
Info: 619-239-5548