

New life for old oils

Posted: Saturday, Jun 10, 2006 - 12:31:23 am MDT

By JOHN STANG The Daily Inter Lake



Working inch by inch, Joe Abbrescia Jr. cleans a grimy, yellowed painting in his downtown Kalispell studio. Abbrescia is known for bringing neglected old paintings back to life. Karen Nichols photos/Daily Inter Lake

Restoring paintings is part chemistry, part art, part delicate instinct

The difference is as distinct as night and day.

The oil painting is at least 55 years old — probably much older.

William Standing, a famous Assiniboine artist who died in 1951, painted the scene of a fox on a small hill watching a long “V” formation of birds fly from the background.

Most of the painting looks like it was stashed away in your grandmother’s attic.

It’s a dingy yellow, like looking through a dirty haze. It reeks of old age and not much else.

Then there is a blatant line where the sky instantly switches from an icky dark to a bright light blue.

That’s the handiwork of Joe Abbrescia Jr.

Abbrescia restores oil paintings at his family’s art gallery and studio in downtown Kalispell.

His craft is part chemistry, part art, part delicate instinct.

The years have many ways to turn a lively, sparkling oil painting into a dusty antique.

Most oil paintings have a thin coat of varnish, a protective layer that yellows with age. Soot from fireplaces and smoke from cigars attach their tiny particles to the paint. The canvas could tear. Chemistry within the oil pigments might cause the colors to fade. The paint could chip and flake — requiring Abbrescia to don magnifying eyeglasses and gently poke dots of the right pigment into the gaps to restore the painting.

Restoring a painting is tedious.

But to Abbrescia, there also is the thrill of rediscovering and reviving the artist’s original vision — the color mixtures, the moods. That makes the dozens to hundreds of hours he spends restoring a painting worth the effort, giving him a sense of accomplishment.

It’s exacting work — dealing with almost microscopically thin layers.

Abbrescia has 20 to 30 chemicals in small jars in his workshop. They are mixtures perfected by trial and error or through his apprenticeship in Chicago under his uncle Dominick, an oil painting restorer.

He won't say what chemicals he uses or how they are mixed. That's because different paintings require different chemicals and restoration techniques. Someone might hear that he used Chemical X on a painting and try that chemical on a different type of painting to find out that it quickly eats through the pigment.

Removing grime and varnish is infinitesimally slow work.

Abbrescia takes a chopstick with one end filed to a point. Then he takes a tiny bit of cotton out of a huge wad and wraps it around the point. He applies a tiny amount of chemical to the makeshift Q-tip and oh-so-gently rubs it or twirls it over a square inch of canvas.

He might use several chemicals on that same square inch — one to remove dirt, one to remove varnish and one to stop the chemical reactions of the other two. A cotton tip might last a minute before it becomes very grungy and has to be discarded.

Abbrescia closely watches each cotton tip for the slightest hint of pigment, telling him to stop immediately.

"A lot of the time, you wanna go fast, but you can't. You've gotta go slow, gotta take your time. It's all layers. It's all taking it down layer by layer," Abbrescia said.

It probably will take Abbrescia 20 to 30 hours to turn the grungy 21-inch-by-15-inch Standing scene into what it looked like more than a half century ago.

Work on a single painting could take a short time or more than hundred hours, depending on its size, the oil paints, the intricacies of the features inside the pictures, and the layers of gook covering it. Abbrescia declined to say what he charges for specific jobs.

But each painting offers a different challenge and adventure to him.

"Sometimes you find stuff underneath that you couldn't see before," he said.

Abbrescia's studio is at 12 First Ave. W. in Kalispell. The phone number is 755-6639. The Web site is www.abbresciafineart.com/artrestoration.htm

Reporter John Stang may be reached at 758-4429 or by e-mail at jstang@dailyinterlake.com