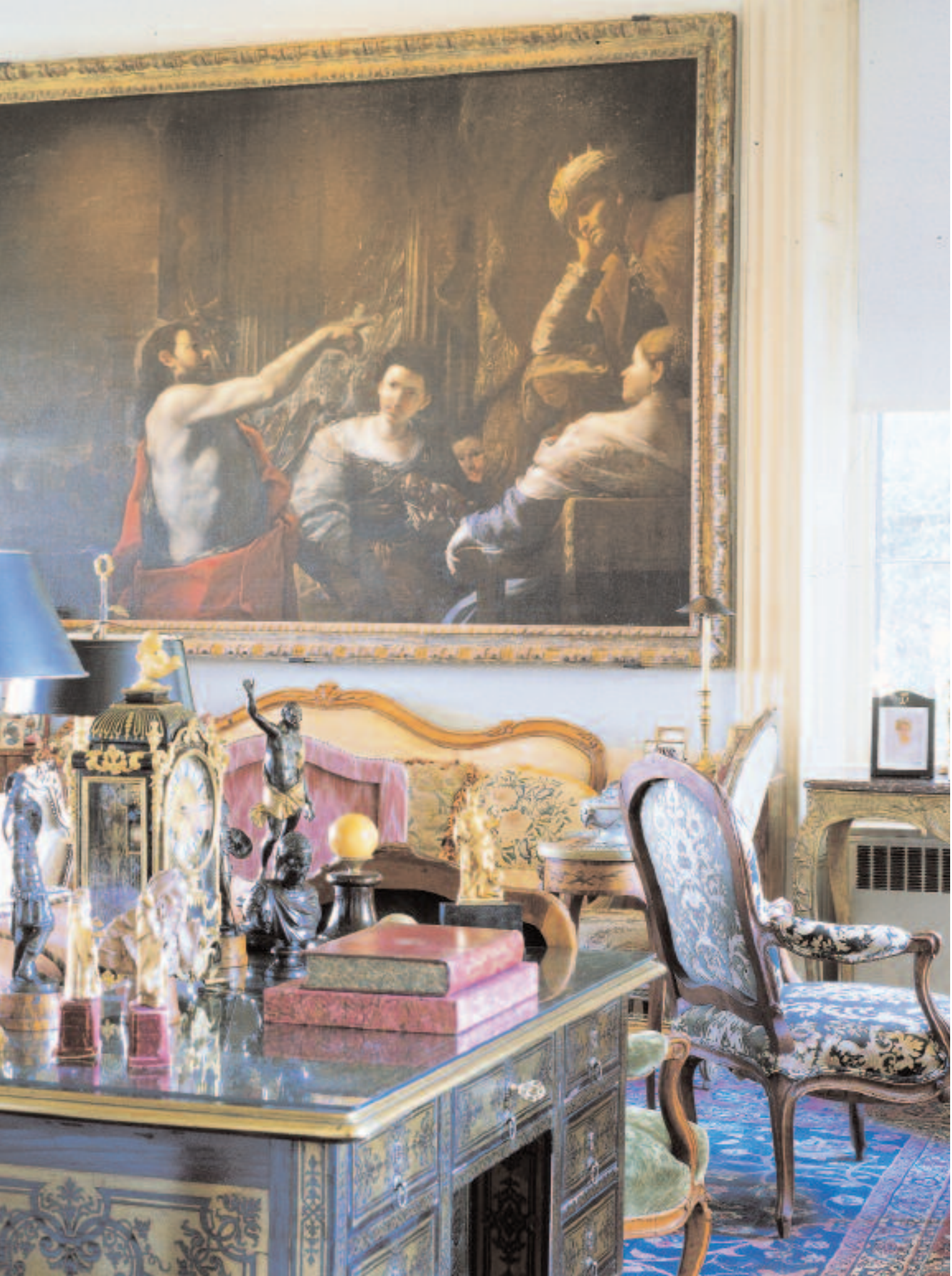
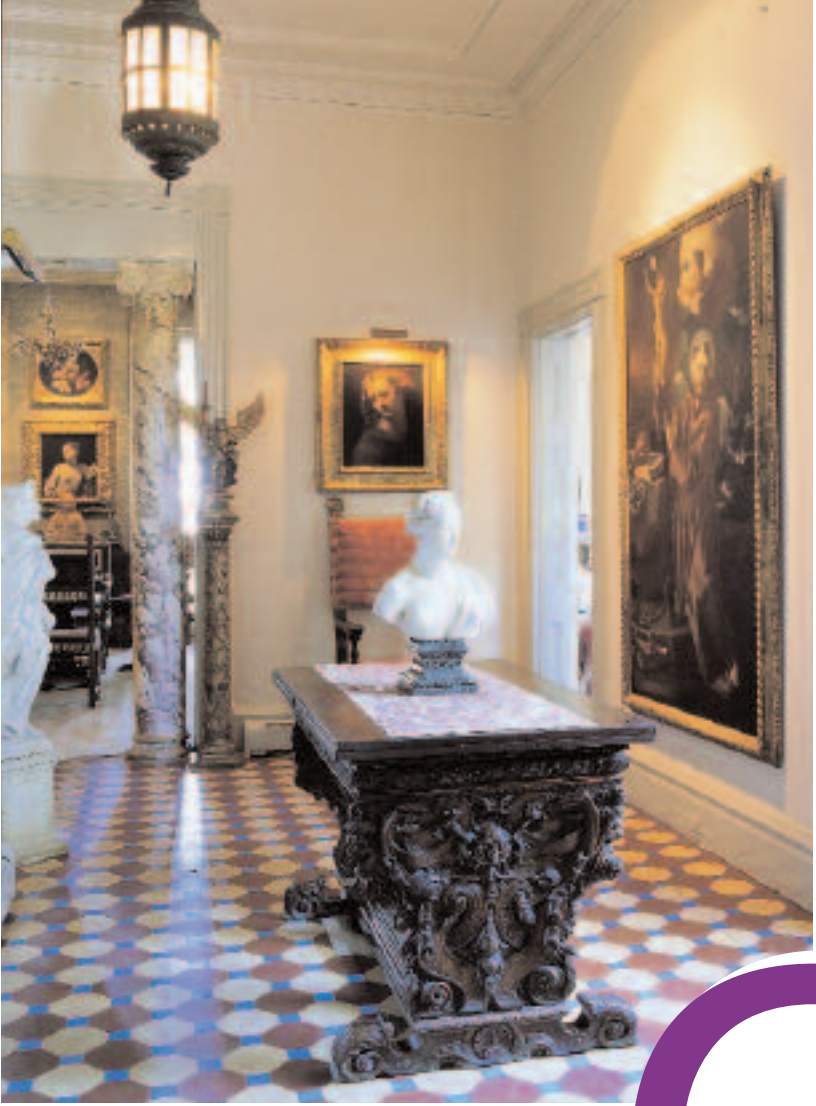




Romancing the Masters

Preeminent American painter and collector Nelson Shanks discovers masterpieces through research and serendipity.

By Christopher Hann 0 Photography by Gridley & Graves

Over the fireplace in the living room hangs a painting by the Renaissance master Dosso Dossi, "Venus and Cupid Before Vulcan at the Forge," that is believed to have been commissioned by the Duke of Ferrara in 1524. Across the room, the influential Baroque artist Mattia Preti's "Saint John the Baptist Before Herod and Salome"—8 1/2 feet wide and 6 feet high—all but consumes an entire wall. In the adjoining parlor, Bernardo Strozzi's nearly 400-year-old "Saint Christopher with the Christ Child" looms over another fireplace. And beside the Strozzi is the painting that the homeowner, renowned artist Nelson Shanks, considers the jewel of a collection nearly a half-century in the making: "Madonna and Child with Saints Lucy, Dominic and Louis," completed around 1594 by Annibale Carracci, one of the handful of artists who defined the Italian Baroque. Shanks bought the Carracci for $300,000 at a Christie's auction in London in 1997; today he believes it could fetch $4 million. With characteristic bluntness, he describes it as the most important Baroque painting in America. "This," he says, "is the one I go for in a fire."

Dosso Dossi, "Venus and Cupid Before Vulcan at the Forge" c. 1524, oil on canvas. The foyer (top) features a Francesco Solimena painting (right), a c. 1550 French Renaissance table and c. 1550 French Renaissance bust.

FACING: Mattia Preti's oil on canvas "Saint John the Baptist Before Herod and Salome" dominates the music room.

Sixty-eight-year-old Shanks lives with his wife, Leona, and their children, Alexander, 10, and Annalisa, 12, in a three-story stone manor built in 1859 overlooking the Delaware River in Pennsylvania. To step inside their home is to encounter a trove of artworks that museum curators long have envied—and from which they routinely borrow. Rare European furnishings and sculpture abound: bronzes and marbles from the 15th century, furniture from the Italian and French Renaissance. But the true measure of the home's bounty is drawn from its store of paintings, dominated by leading Italian artists from the late Renaissance through the Baroque. Besides the Dossi, the Pretti, the Strozzi and the Carracci, Shanks owns paintings by Guido Cagnacci, Bernardo Cavallino, Carlo Cignani, Giuseppe Crespi, Giovanni Lanfranco, Pietro Navarra, Guido Reni, Sebastiano Ricci and 10 works by Francesco Solimena. "Clearly one of the finest Baroque collections in America," proclaims Shanks. His assertion gets no argument from Joseph Rishel, the curator of European paintings and sculpture before 1900 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who hopes to present an exhibition representing the best of the Shanks collection. "Most of the kinds of things Nelson has are being collected by museums internationally," Rishel says.

Yet Shanks is best known not for what he's acquired but for what he's produced: an oeuvre that places him among the world's foremost portrait painters. Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, Luciano Pavarotti and Denyce Graves, King Gustav and Queen Silvia of Sweden all have sat for Shanks. Over a four-month period in 1994, working in the same Tite Street studio in London once used by John Singer Sargent and James Whistler, Shanks painted both Margaret Thatcher and Princess Diana, at the time perhaps the world's two most famous women. This month his second

Annibale Carracci, "Madonna and Child with Saints Lucy, Dominic and Louis," oil on canvas. Preti, "Saint John the Baptist Before Herod and Salome" (detail, top), oil on canvas.

painting of Pavarotti will be unveiled at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. When it reopens in July, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., will feature his second portrait of Clinton, this one 8 feet high. His 2002 rendering of Pope John Paul II, shown offering benediction at St. Peter's Basilica, now hangs at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center at the Catholic University of America. D. Dodge Thompson, the chief of exhibitions at the National Gallery of Art, calls "Portrait of His Holiness" "our most enduring painted image" of the late pontiff.

Although Shanks paints in a style very different from those of the Old Masters he reveres, in his all-consuming approach to his work there is something of the Old World. He insists that his subjects pose for him; rarely does he paint from photographs. For her two portraits by Shanks, Margaret Thatcher sat for 80 hours. At his studio adjacent to his home, Shanks paints only by the natural light provided by a wall of west-facing windows. Four years ago, sufficiently troubled by the direction of the art world, he founded Studio Incamminati in Philadelphia, dedicated to the teaching of realist painting. The school was named after the academy founded more than four centuries ago by Annibale Carracci. Like its namesake, Studio Incamminati represents an unapologetic rebuke of what Shanks considers the "absurd excesses" of modern art. "Although there are certain lessons to be learned from it," he says, deadpan, "just like there are lessons to be learned from an automobile accident."

Under the mantle of acquisitor, Shanks will pore over art history books or auction catalogs late into the night. After 45 years of collecting, he still has a nose for the thrill of the chase. "Rubens and Rembrandt apparently were both fanatical collectors," he says. "It is a kind of insanity that seems to go along with the profession sometimes."

Shanks nurtured the insanity early on.

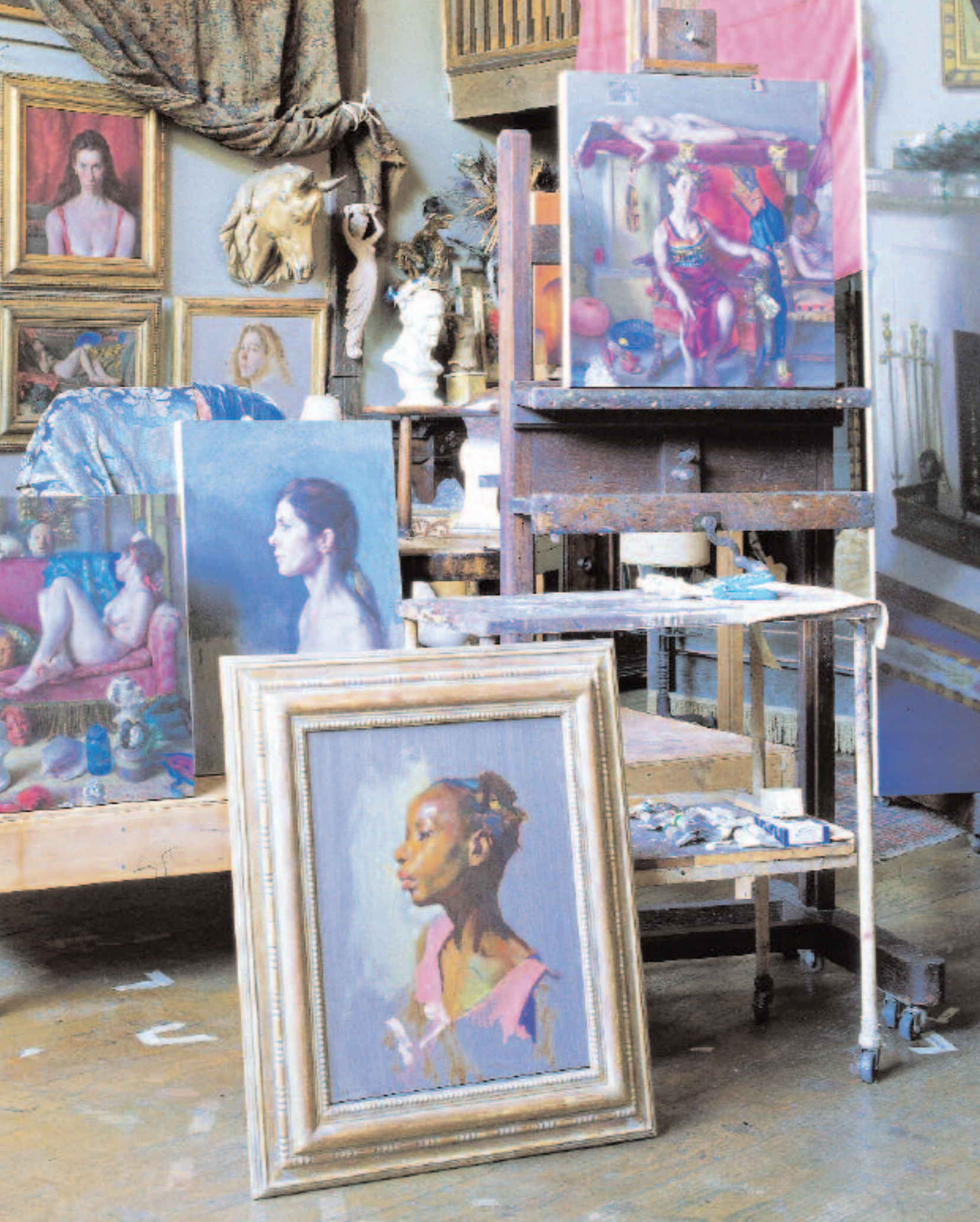
Chelwood was designed in the Victorian Italianate style by Napoleon LeBrun and built in 1859.

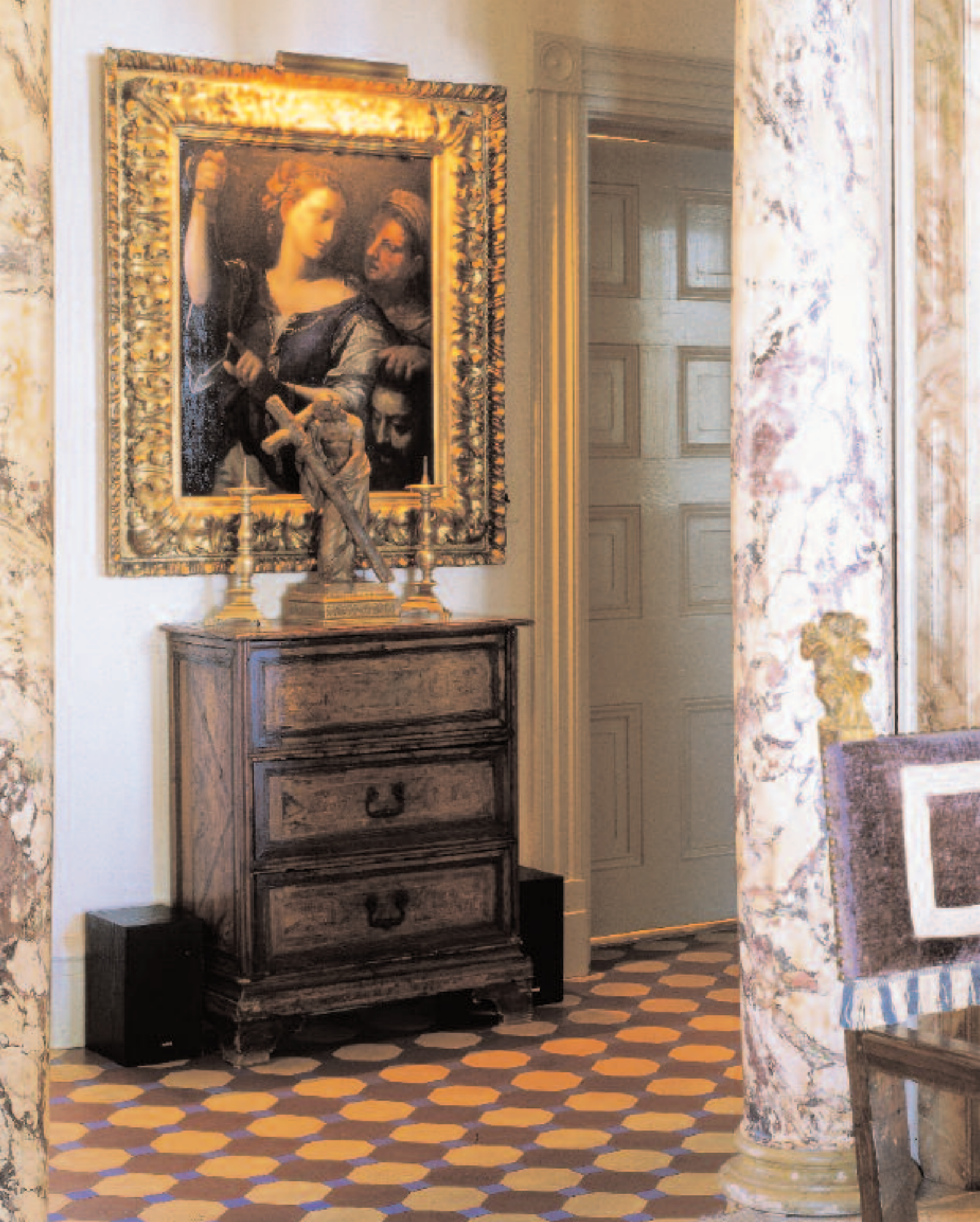
In Shanks' studio: "Portrait of Natalie" (left) oil on canvas; "Show Biz" (lower left), oil on Masonite; an oil-on-canvas portrait of Shanks' favorite model, Connie (on floor); and "Peacock" (far right, on easel), oil on canvas.

As a 20-year-old student at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, he traveled throughout Italy and to France, Germany and Holland, studying the artists whose works he would one day covet. He began to frequent antiques shops—his parents had collected American and English objects—a practice he continued when he returned to the States. As a young teacher at the Art Institute of Chicago, still learning his way around an auction house, he bid on a large painting depicting a procession of monks by Alessandro Magnasco (1667–1749). "I just about scraped the bottom of the barrel—seven or eight thousand dollars," Shanks recalls. "I didn't get it. But I was on the right track. Even to this day, it's one of the greatest works of Magnasco I've ever seen."

As his collection expanded, Shanks' eye sharpened. No longer is he satisfied with any Renaissance-period bronze. "I'm only interested in one out of a thousand," he says, "because I just don't need more metal around the house." For a time he pined for a painting by the Baroque artist Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734). Thirty years later, his yearning having long subsided, he recognized a Ricci at Christie's, whose catalog, he says, had misidentified it. "The Feast of Baal" now hangs in his entry hall. "I have a much better idea now of what is good, what is rare and what is extremely desirable," Shanks says. "It helps to be from the vantage point of not *needing* anything, really." Not that his buying days are over; he's still seeking "exactly the right Guido Reni" and "the right Guercino," he says, referring to the Italian painter Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591–1666). "I've had opportunities to buy a number but not quite the right one yet."

Shanks can sometimes parlay his expertise in two centuries of painting to score a rare treasure at a bargain-basement





Scarsellino, “Judith with the Head of Holofernes” (far left), c. 1570, oil on canvas; Bernardo Cavallino, “Saint Anthony of Padua” (left), late 1630s, oil on canvas; statue of Saint Barbara, c. 1510–20, by an unknown German sculptor. Bernardo Strozzi (1581–c. 1644), “Saint Christopher with the Christ Child” (below), oil on canvas.

price. One day in 1973 he set out to buy firewood at a nearby farm auction, only to come across a still life that he recognized as a masterpiece by Navarra. No one else did, apparently, and Shanks bought it for $125. International art critic John T. Spike calls the painting “one of his masterpieces,” and Shanks estimates its current value at $200,000. “I've always tried to arm myself with knowledge,” Shanks says. “It always amused me that maybe with smarts I could get what museums had to pay gigantic amounts of money for.”

The Dosso Dossi, bought at a small American auction house in 1983, went on sale as an orphan—“no history, no nothing,” Shanks says. “I *absolutely* knew what it was. I was trembling almost out of control. I had just envisioned chartered planeloads of bidders arriving from all over Europe.” Those bidders never materialized,

and Shanks secured the Dossi for what he describes as "very little." He knew that Dossi had painted for the courts of 16th-century Ferrara, but he wasn't aware of the painting's provenance until he received a phone call from Burton Frederickson, a research curator at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. "I had to sit down," Shanks says, recalling the conversation. "I couldn't believe it. It turned out it was in three royal collections." In 1998 and 1999, he loaned the painting to a major exhibition of Dossi's work at the Civiche Gallery of Modern Art in Ferrara, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Getty.

Last November Shanks paid nearly $400,000 for a 400-year-old painting he describes as "profoundly brilliant, magnificently done." The San Francisco auction house Bonhams & Butterfields had identified the work as "Lot and His Daughters" and traced the artist to the School of Artemisia, referring to the Italian Artemisia Gentileschi, one of the few women among the leading Baroque painters. Yet Shanks was convinced that the painting instead depicted Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, and that the artist was in fact Giovanni Antonio Galli, better known as Spadarino (circa 1585–1651). The purchase thrilled Shanks. Although Spadarino's work enhances some of the oldest collections in Italy, Shanks knew of not a single Spadarino in America. "A lot of museums have a lot of things," he said shortly after returning home with the painting, "but *nobody* has one of these."

Within weeks, however, his own research convinced him that the painting was not the work of Spadarino after all, but of a Neapolitan contemporary named Filippo Vitale. To Shanks, the discovery is hardly deflating, so certain is he that the work was delivered from the hand of a master. "A great painting by Vitale is a very, very important thing to have," says Shanks, who is already trying to figure out where on his crowded walls it will hang. ❖

Christopher Hann is a New Jersey–based visual arts and culture writer.

"Self Portrait," oil on canvas.
FACING: Oil-on-canvas paintings along staircase include those by Giovanni Morandi, "Holy Family with Saint John"; Giuseppe Maria Crespi, "Mary Magdalene"; and Baldassare Franceschini, "Sleeping Cupid." Chair and limestone statue, both c. 1700 from Venice.

Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734), "Feast of Baal," oil on canvas.