

In the history of art, the man's name is not worth remembering. He is cited in certain obscure books, but only as the Master's father.

The man restored paintings with a dwarf's tools, brushes of a single taut feline whisker, chisels as small as matchsticks. He corrected colors dulled by age and tweezed pinpoints of dust that had the audacity to gather on paintings catalogued as masterpieces. He was sought out to reapply blush to the cheeks of Renaissance maidens who had (understandably) blanched over four hundred years, or seal a decayed fissure that severed a sea monster from one of its many heads.

The man was a master of anonymity. A restoration artist has no signature. He is great because he leaves no insinuation of himself on a canvas.

The patience and precision of his trade made the man old before his time. His most cumbersome tool was a pair of eyeglasses containing lenses thick as a deck of cards. The weight of the glasses wore his face into shelves of bone and sunken skin. With strange synchronicity, the more masterpieces he restored to their youthful vigor, the more quickly his decrepitude advanced.

When the woman who was his wife descended into his workshop to announce her pregnancy, he received the tidings with an absent nod. He thought vaguely it was a small miracle that such an elderly man could still sire a child. He was painting a toe on the Madonna's swaddled infant that had been amputated by time. The restoration of the nativity triptych consumed him for almost seven months, at the end of which, a son was born.

The boy was called Victor.

The boy's mother died in childbirth, although Victor remembers (imagines?) the woman slamming the door of his father's workshop and leaving the house with a stoic face, resolute as stone. His father could not bring himself to speak of her.

And so, Victor was left in the liver-spotted hands of this myopic restorer of paintings. His father arranged a bassinet beside his easel. He rocked the baby on the knob of his knee as his right hand busied itself with the eradication of black mold plaguing a canvas's fibers, or ironing a queen's cloak wrinkled by delinquent moisture.

The baby cooing in the corner enlivened his grim hermit's workshop. And Victor was brought up in the society of masterpieces, among his father's distinguished, ailing guests.

Victor's first feat was performed at the age of four when he copied every eloquent hair of Dürer's hare. The rabbit's twitching musculature was so fine the creature appeared poised to scatter off the page and hide beneath a table in the workshop. Although his father's exacting squint could detect small but grievous errors in the translation of Dürer's brushwork by the child, he knew an untrained eye would blink over these, and so he sent a photograph of the painting to the newspaper. Requests for an original of the child's Dürer imitation arrived by the hundreds. The boy's father bought a small stool and desk where Victor could reproduce the rabbit. A small fortune was made. More importantly, Victor was made an apprentice.

Victor worked at his father's elbow in the dim cellar scattered with constellations of hot moons, the brilliant lamps that illuminated their work. He mastered the secrets of the trade of restoration. The most difficult was determining the original ingredients of an artist's paint, and then gathering the strange (sometimes extinct) elements to mix an exact match. The older the masterpiece, the more sorcery required to replicate the paint: animal blood for reds (but this they substituted with cinnabar) and blacks of burnt organic matter. Ocher in arsenic compounds, green and blue from malachite and azurite, respectively. Expensive gold leaf had to be ordered.

Although the old man's eyes began to retract into mole blindness behind his glasses, the commissions from curators and collectors never dwindled, and so Victor compensated for his father's decline by assuming the responsibilities of restoration. The clients were unable to spy the difference. In this small way, Victor's work was (anonymously) housed in the finest museums in the world when he was only an adolescent apprentice. A second feat.

At night, when the old man shriveled like a spider into the corner of his bed, Victor pressed on in the workroom, unencumbered by his father's increasingly desperate stories about the irrelevance of vision. His father praised the Persian miniaturists who strove for sightlessness in order to attain godliness by painting soaring minarets smaller than a speck of salt. The court portraitists who could depict an authentic likeness of their subject while blindfolded.

At night, Victor reproduced masterpieces. He imagined the ghosts of the old masters agonizing to identify their work from his own reproductions, pulling out their cobwebbed beards in despair. From the restoration workshop all the elements were available to concoct the paints that had stained the fingernails of the masters. Skill and style were earned tediously or intuitively, sometimes at the crawl of an inchworm, sometimes faster than thought. Victor's reproductions were not uncanny copies; they were the same paintings that had been painted by another man's hand. By the time he was twenty-four years old, he had achieved (a third feat) the perfect reproduction of one hundred masterpieces.

One morning, a contract for the restoration of a da Vinci came by telephone. Victor hurried to wake his father. The old man was dead in his bed, creased and mottled beyond the skill of restoration. A closed casket then. Some undertaker's amateur brush dabbing cosmetics to refurbish the face would make a mockery of the old man's lifework.

Victor admitted to the client that his father would be unable to restore the da Vinci (the pinnacle of a career). Instead, Victor reproduced "The Lady with an Ermine" in a single month with the dutiful sorrow of a pallbearer.

Victor found in his father's address book of professional contacts a wealthy woman, an art collector. My god-mother, Gertrude. She had the handsome face and broad shoulders of a bull. He surrendered his one hundred and one reproductions to her savvy. Within the year, Gertrude arranged a show in a Parisian museum, where Victor's reproductions hung beside each of the originals. (This was Gertrude's first feat of collection, an assembly of this magnitude should be estimated as masterful in its own right). Even one living artist, who attended the opening, was reduced to tears when he failed the guessing game: he identified Victor's reproduction as his own work.

The Master of all the masters—no longer an apprentice, or even Victor. Shortly after his father's death, he was renamed.

But, he always concluded this bedtimestory: it all meant very little until (what he considered his final feat) the creation of the girl. I was always, even then, uncertain if he meant me his daughter.