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FROM HER STUDIO IN WEST PALM BEACH,
FINE ART CONSERVATOR BARBARA STELLA
LOOKS TO HER EUROPEAN ROOTS WHEN
PRESERVING THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE.

WRITTEN BY JENNIFER QUAIL / PHOTOGRAPHY BY SONYA REVELL





With passion as the seed of purpose, Barbara Stella's work has blossomed into a vibrant canvas of historic significance, timeless beauty and future promise. In a career that began in Europe and crossed the sea to West Palm Beach, the fine art conservator has restored the works of Rembrandt, Veronese and Kiefer, to name just a few, and established a reputation for the unsavable save.

Stella speaks of her work not as a job but as a mission—one that literally has roots in a little girl's coloring book and what she calls an innate ability "to see art with a deep consciousness." As she grew up, Stella studied in Italian cities Ravenna and Florence, places that surrounded her with treasures everywhere she went. "I loved walking in the city with my sketchbook," she says. "The beautiful architecture, mosaics, sculptures and paintings—I started to feel the ancient, to recognize the precious message that an old masterpiece was bringing to us after all those years."

An ocean away from where she began, the thrill of discovery still feeds Stella's soul, from the art collections that have made their way to her laboratory to her exploration of nearby Floridian

towns with her husband and two boys. The drive to continue her journey comes not only from the discoveries within past preservations but in the possibilities hiding within each new piece that is brought to Stella's careful hands. Her restorations thus far have included a collection from the Bahamas that suffered severe damage in a fire, paintings distressed by aggressive cleaning or incorrect previous restorations, and a 7-by-12-foot painting wrecked by wartime bombing that was brought to Stella folded like a blanket. The stories, the characters, the artists and the circumstances of each piece play into her understanding of what might lie in wait beneath the surface and can reveal even more than expected. One of her favorite examples: an oil-on-wood painting, suspected by its owner to be from the late 19th century, whose cleaning and restoration actually uncovered a circa-1500s painting beneath its layers.

This ongoing mission is one Stella views as both duty and gift—a unique opportunity to at once serve as a guardian of history and beauty. "There is a feeling of honor that I'm being trusted with great artists' works," she says, "and a responsibility to generations ahead to learn from the masters who created them." ■



Under the auspices of Stella Art Conservation, Barbara Stella restores old artworks to their former glory. Before beginning, she examines each piece using ultraviolet reflective light, microscopes, and X-rays. Shown on the previous pages are projects awaiting her attention, including William King's elongated sculptures, 19th-century pastel cherubs, and an oversize Paul Jenkins abstract, circa 1969.

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