

The Nero Wolfe Art Collection

Mr. Kevin Gordon
22 Dearborn Street
New Rochelle, New York 10801

Dear Mr. Gordon:

Thank you for your recent letter inquiring into my brief association with Mr. Nero Wolfe, the private detective. I can't imagine how you managed to track me down, since the small appraisal assignment I handled for him happened almost thirty years ago. Nevertheless, I'll try my best to answer the questions you posed in your letter, but you must forgive me if my memory is a little uncertain after all these years.

I've gone through the Kennington Gallery's files and have managed to find photostatic copies of the objects I appraised. I'm sending along the enclosed Xerox copies. I apologize that their quality leaves something to be desired, but I trust they'll suit your purposes.

You asked me to describe Mr. Wolfe's study, or office as you called it. I have a good recollection of that room, because of the many fine pieces on display there. I remember it as being a rather large room. I believe the dominant color scheme was yellow, although that would not have been my first choice against which to display such a collection. A muted grey-green would have been preferable, which would have set off the gold frames better, and would have complemented a large handsome deep-red leather chair at the corner of Mr. Wolfe's desk.

There were several floor-to-ceiling bookcases, which held volumes on a wide variety of subjects, some of which were bound in hand-tooled Moroccan leather. There was a very fine carpet which covered most of the floor. I am not an expert on rugs, but it appeared to have been a Shrivens or Keraghan, again predominantly yellow.

There was very little bare wall showing, almost every inch was covered. The bookshelves took up over half the wall area. The rest was used to display Mr. Wolfe's collection, such as it was.

I'll try to describe how each of the works was displayed. I did take several photos of the office to show the collection (in situ), but for some reason those photos don't seem to be included with the file. There are only photos of the individual works.

You asked that I add personal comments regarding my appraisal and other aspects of my visit to Mr. Wolfe's home on West 35th Street. Since they are for your own private information, and will not go any further, I will oblige.

After entering the office, at the far end of the room on the left, next to a door to the front parlor, one would see a sofa upholstered in yellow fabric. Over this sofa hung three very well-executed copies of paintings by Hans Holbein the Younger. Mr. Wolfe informed me that he personally commissioned the copies from a young British artist named Ian Patrick, and that they were painted from the originals.

Holbein was a 16th century portrait painter, born in Augsburg, but who made his reputation in London as the court painter of Henry VIII.

The paintings hung in this order:

FIGURE 1. This portrait of Henry VIII was painted in 1536 and the gold on the chain, jewelry and embroidery were all painted in real gold, in the copy as in the original. I suspect that Mr. Wolfe found much to identify with in this particular portrait. Indeed, I found that it echoed his own regal nature and stature.



Figure 1. Henry VIII



Figure 2. Sir Thomas More

FIGURE 2. Holbein painted this portrait of Sir Thomas More in 1527. Holbein was introduced to More by the scholar Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. More was appointed Lord Chancellor in 1529, but as he could not agree to Henry VIII's divorce, he resigned three years later and was executed in the Tower of London. Perhaps Mr. Wolfe admired More's dedication to his personal code of ethics.

FIGURE 3. Hermann Wedigh of Cologne was painted by Holbein in 1532. The artist portrayed several members of the wealthy Wedigh family, who owned the German steelyard in London. Mr. Wolfe told me that he admired the straightforward simplicity of this portrait.

I recall there was a large window behind and a little to the left of Mr. Wolfe's desk. Heavy yellow drapes hung to the floor and it was to the right of this window that the following three works were displayed.

FIGURE 4. This bust of Shakespeare was painted by John Taylor in 1610 and is thought to have been the only portrait of the bard which has a real claim to have been painted from life. It had been known as the *Chandos portrait* after the Duke of Chandos who owned it in the 18th century.



Figure 3. Hermann Wedigh

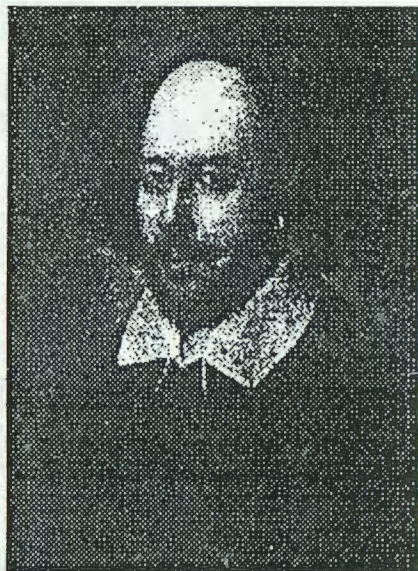


Figure 4. William Shakespeare



Figure 5. Socrates



Figure 6. Coal Miner

FIGURE 5. This profile of the philosopher Socrates was rendered in India ink by the noted portrait artist Stanley Gordon. Gordon, of Rochester, New York, is known mostly for his oil portraits, but he drew this head of

FIGURE 6. This small oil of a coal miner was painted in about 1890 by the Russian artist Vladimir Sepeshy. Born in 1856, Sepeshy studied painting at the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. The miner is actually the artist's father, who posed for his son during Sepeshy's student days.

The above grouping of completely unrelated subjects and artists may seem a bit odd. I asked Mr. Wolfe why he had chosen to display them together. I hope I recount his answer correctly. He said they served as an inspiration to him as Socrates represented the intellect, Shakespeare imagination, and the coal miner muscle. All qualities, I suppose, necessary in his profession as a private detective.

FIGURE 7. Though competent enough, this painting I hesitate to even include, and I do so merely as a novelty. It's a copy of Joseph Mallord William Turner's *The Great Falls of the Reichenbach* of 1804. The copy was painted

on the reverse side of a piece of glass and the frame was actually screwed to the wall. I can't imagine why a man of Mr. Wolfe's taste would display such a souvenir-like object. Did it have some sentimental value, perhaps?

On the wall perpendicular to Mr. Wolfe's desk stood two large book-cases. Between them was a space large enough for the following work to be displayed.

FIGURE 8. This engraving of the French magistrate Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin was done in 1800 by Carl Vernet, one of the lesser-known portraitists of the period. Brillat-Savarin was also a gastronome, having written a treatise on the culinary arts, and I imagine it was for this reason that Mr. Wolfe displayed his portrait. If I recall my French history, Brillat-Savarin was banished during the *Reign of Terror* and moved to Switzerland and later to America.

On the same side of the room, but on the other side of the door to the hallway hung a painting which at first glance I took to be an original Van Gogh.



Figure 7.
*The Great Falls of
the Reichenbach*

Figure 8.
Jean Anthelme
Brillat-Savarin



FIGURE 9. Although reminiscent of Van Gogh's Auvers period of 1890, it's obvious that this was painted by a different artist in Van Gogh's style. It is by an unknown American painter, Angus McIntyre, and was a gift to Mr. Wolfe. It was painted especially for Mr. Wolfe and depicts a village in the Montenegrin region of the former Yugoslavia. It was done as a sign of gratitude after Mr. Wolfe helped clear McIntyre of accusations that he had stolen two dozen paintings from a midtown art gallery.

I don't usually include photography in my appraisals, but Mr. Wolfe insisted inasmuch as this is a real rarity. It hung over Mr. Wolfe's assistant's desk, next to a large beveled glass mirror.

FIGURE 10. This is the only known photograph of the British detective Sherlock Holmes. According to Mr. Wolfe, it was taken in 1895, but he couldn't supply the name of the photographer. It seems Mr. Wolfe felt a kinship to the 19th century detective and kept the photo there as a sign of respect and admiration, because he spoke in very reverent tones in regard to this photograph.



Figure 9.
Montenegrin village



Figure 10. Sherlock Holmes

I'd like to add a few more comments about Mr. Wolfe's study. Although cartography is a bit out of my field, there were several fine examples of the mapmaker's art. Two of the maps were made by the Cary family of cartographers in London. The Carys were very successful from 1800 to about 1830.

There was also a very fine globe, one of the largest I had ever seen, which I thought had also been made by Cary. It was approximately three feet in diameter, and rested on an ornately carved base. Mr. Wolfe told me, however, that it was made for him by Gouchard of Paris.

I must say that all of Mr. Wolfe's paintings and prints were beautifully framed in the best of taste. He told me that his framer was Henry Heydenryk. Of course, I was familiar with the name, since the House of Heydenryk has provided frames for the world's finest art collections. Although Mr. Heydenryk has passed on, his business is still thriving on East 74th Street between First and York Avenues.

You asked if I had seen any other rooms in Mr. Wolfe's home. As a matter of fact, since the appraisal began around noon and took over an hour, I was invited to stay for lunch. I must admit that the conversation with Mr. Wolfe was so interesting, and the aroma coming from the rear of the house was so enticing, that I accepted. And I'm glad I did. We continued our conversation in the dining room, which was across the wide hall from Mr. Wolfe's study. It was simply but elegantly furnished, with yellow again the main color scheme. On the walls were framed lithographs of orchids, which I learned during lunch was a particular hobby of Mr. Wolfe's. I regret that I did not have time to see Mr. Wolfe's collection of orchids, which he seemed especially proud of.

Toward the end of lunch, Mr. Wolfe's assistant joined us. I believe his name was Goodwin. He seemed like a very personable young man. I recall he ate rather quickly and left before dessert was served. This seemed to upset Mr. Wolfe, who made a rather sharp comment, which was returned by the young man, who then apologized to me for his brusque demeanor. The lunch, by the way, was delicious, and served with great solemnity by a slim man with a mustache named Fred or Fritz...

I'm afraid that's all the information I can give you about my visit to Mr. Wolfe's home. I hope it has been of help in your research.

If you happen to speak to Mr. Wolfe or Mr. Goodwin, please give them my regards.

If I can be of further assistance, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely yours,

Morse Hudson
Art Appraiser

