

Dirty pictures: Collector profits from cleaning old art

By Suzanne McBride
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INDIANAPOLIS — Alfred Bader knows Christie's and the other auction houses as well as any other multi-million-dollar art collector.

But the garage sale down the street and the mom-and-pop shop on the corner are the Milwaukee man's favorite places to plunder.

"I like to go to junk stores, antique shops, flea markets and auctions and buy dirty, old pictures," said

Bader, who buys about 200 "dirty pictures" here and abroad every year.

Many of the works are worth the few hundred dollars he pays for them. But others, once the varnish is removed and the surface cleaned, can fetch thousands of dollars.

Earlier this month, Bader shared his cleaning tips and detective skills with dozens of chemistry teachers attending an international education conference at Butler University.

The 69-year-old art collector keeps three or four of

the 200 paintings he buys each year. He donates some to his alma mater, Queen's University in Ontario, Canada, and sells the rest. Often, he makes a healthy profit.

Although the retired chemist has never studied art history, he's developed quite a knack for finding treasures. Sometimes the artist is unknown. Other times, layers of grime or another portrait covers a valuable painting.

For starters, he advised his Butler audience to let specially trained professionals restore their paintings.

However, if they choose to do it themselves, they should use only mild solvents, not dish soap or other detergents.

Many paintings are in such bad shape because the wrong chemicals are used to clean them, Bader said. But don't expect every rummage sale treasure to be a genuine Old Master.

"I often discover after buying an old, dirty painting that it's still an old, dirty painting," he said.

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