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Rebecca Pavitt: A million Little Pieces

By Jessica Werb | J A N 1 , 2 0 0 8



IMAGE BY: SANDRA LEUNG

When Rebecca Pavitt was eight years old, she took an egg, made a couple of little holes in it and blew out its contents. Then she smashed it. Why? you ask.

"There was an anecdote that the nuns at my Catholic school told us about this bad little boy who broke a Fabergé egg, and as punishment he had to put it back together again. I thought what a lot of fun that sounded like," she recalls, laughing.

Not knowing what a Fabergé egg was, the New York City-raised Pavitt used the next best thing. She didn't quite manage to glue the shell back together, but the episode was a clear indication of where her life would lead.

Today, Pavitt is a Sechelt-based art conservator specializing in paper and textiles, with clients ranging from the Vancouver Art Gallery to commercial galleries and private collectors. She's been called on to repair everything from flood-damaged Emily Carr sketches to poorly stored Matisse prints. She's also cleaned up plenty of mishaps – such as the Picasso linocut that suffered scratches when its owner fell off a ladder while changing a light bulb, or the drawing that became the unfortunate casualty of a lovers' quarrel.

"A lot of the job is hand holding and calming people down," acknowledges Pavitt, who has been at it for 20 years. Armed with chelating agents, hydrogen peroxide and various bleaches, she will work her magic and attempt to turn back the clock. Not every piece of art, Pavitt admits, can be perfectly restored. In those cases, she says, "you make it so the area of damage doesn't jump out and help people come to the understanding that it's part of the history of the piece now."

And, she insists, that's not just a line she uses to stop a client hyperventilating over a torn Rembrandt sketch.

"I really believe that," she says. "We get wrinkles and get old, and art has things happen too."

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