



Deborah Greel, left, and Elizabeth Clement take a painting by Mary Bradish Titcomb out of the storage closet at the Marblehead Arts Association, as Jane Weiss looks on.

Marblehead Arts Association cleans out its closet, and finds some treasures inside

Deborah Greel, clutching a key in her hand, climbed the stairs at the **King Hooper Mansion**, turned left at a landing and came to a stop.

‘This is the **red bedroom**,’ she said before entering a room bathed in a color that seemed more crimson and filled with an antique bed, a sitting chair and a portrait on the wall of a woman known as ‘Biscuit.’ ▶

By TOM DALTON
Photos by KEN YUSZKUS

Secrets in ...

Greel, the executive director of the Marblehead Arts Association, which makes its home in the mansion, walked to a back corner of the room and paused again before putting the key into a lock.

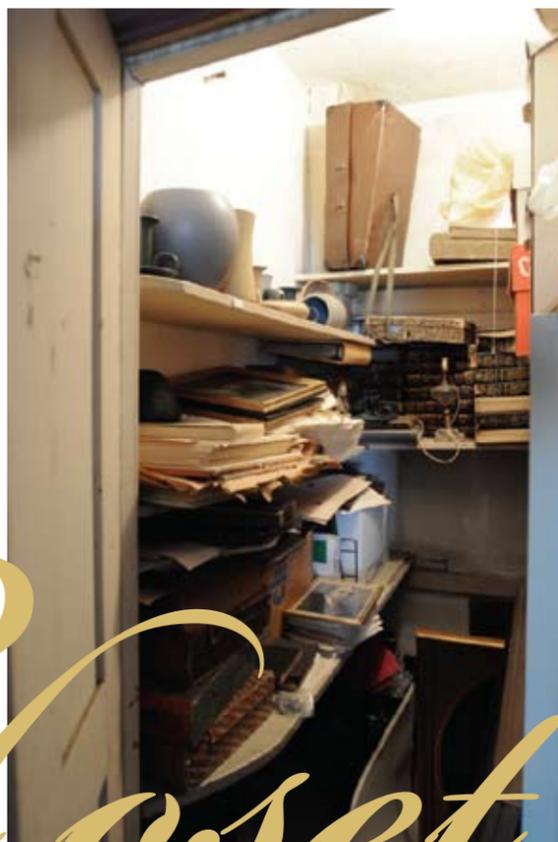
"This is the infamous closet," she said.

The tiny closet, illuminated by a bare light bulb on the ceiling, looked as if it hadn't been opened in years. Worn cardboard boxes rested on shelves next to dust-covered pottery. On the floor, several framed and tattered paintings leaned against a wall.

Greel had unlocked the closet in the red room to shed light on works of art donated to the association over the years and either forgotten or neglected. She invited Elizabeth Clement, a fine-art appraiser from Danvers, who has appeared on "Antiques Roadshow," to offer expert opinion on all the little secrets inside.

There were no Winslow Homers, they knew, but there were potentially valuable paintings by prominent American artists, works that the art association hopes someday to restore and display.

"This is a beautiful painting," Clement gushed, as Greel lugged a large oil-on-canvas into the center of the room.



the Closet



Deborah Greel, executive director of the Arts Association, and Elizabeth Clement, an appraiser, display a painting by H. Tompkins, which they found in the closet. They don't know the identity of the man in the portrait.

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Deborah Greel carries a painting by William Stanley Haseltine while Jane Weiss, assistant to the appraiser, watches. The value of the painting? An estimated \$30,000 to \$50,000.

The painting, titled “A City Set On A Hill,” shows Abbot Hall with rows of houses stacked below. It is by Mary Bradish Titcomb (1858-1927), a once-noted American artist who lived – and died – in Marblehead almost a century ago.

Titcomb studied under two prominent American Impressionists, Edmund Tarbell and Salem’s Frank Benson, and gained notoriety when President Woodrow Wilson bought one of her paintings for the White House.

The painting in the closet is not one of Titcomb’s masterpieces, Clement said, but it is a fine painting.

“This clearly was in a show,” she said, pointing out exhibition labels still visible on the back of the frame.

“It’s a great example of what she’s known for – New England landscapes,” said Jane Weiss, an assistant to the appraiser.

Clement estimated that, when restored, the Marblehead landscape could sell for close to \$40,000. The top price a Titcomb painting has drawn at auction is \$85,000, according to the Web site AskART.



Art appraiser Elizabeth Clement examines the back of a painting by Mary Bradish Titcomb, noting that an exhibition label is still on the back. She estimates it could sell for close to \$40,000 if restored.

Rocks by a master

She was equally intrigued by the next old painting – a study of rocks at the ocean’s edge.

“This piece we know has value,” Greel said.

Although unsigned, the painting arrived years ago with important documentation that links it to William Stanley Haseltine (1835-1900), a big-time American artist, associated with Hudson River School, whose paintings have sold for more than \$700,000.

In addition to the painting, the Arts Association was given a book on Haseltine’s life, with a note from the artist’s daughter certifying that the painting is by her father.

“This is as good as you can get without having a signed piece,” Clement said.

Although the painting of sea rocks may appear ordinary, the subject matter is Haseltine’s artistic signature, Clement said. He studied geology and was noted for his depictions of rocky shorelines.

“This is really an iconic painting,” she said. “This is what people who collect him, or go to see him in museums, are expecting to see – the rock formations.”

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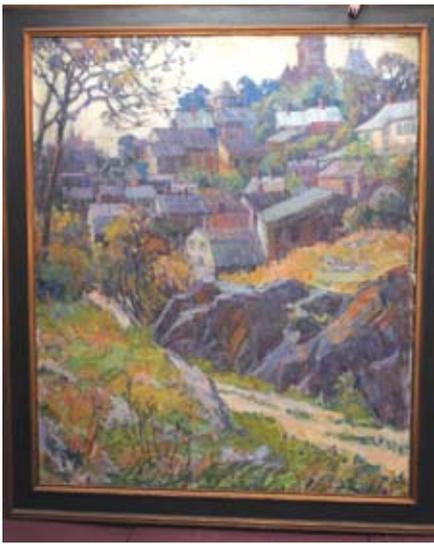
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"A City Set on a Hill," by Mary Bradish Titcomb, shows Abbot Hall with rows of houses stacked below. Titcomb died in Marblehead in 1927.

CLOSET, from Page 55

She estimated it would sell in the \$30,000 to \$50,000 range.

"It might even be more, which is exciting," she said.

There was much more in the closet, including paintings by Orlando Rouland, a prominent New York society artist who spent summers in Marblehead, had a studio around the corner from the King Hooper Mansion, and was a driving force behind the founding of the Marblehead Arts Association in 1922.

One painting in the closet is noteworthy, Clement said, because it is a portrait, which was Rouland's speciality. He also painted Teddy Roosevelt and Thomas Alva Edison.

But the portrait in the closet had everyone scratching their heads. It is of a man with white hair, a blue suit and red tie – a man nobody knows.

"It was someone important enough to have his portrait painted," Clement said. "The mystery is ... who is the sitter?"

Greel kept pulling one thing after another out of the red closet, with the excitement of a child opening presents at a birthday party. There were letters signed by prominent local residents, legal documents and a duck print by Benson, an artist so important he was the subject of a major exhibit at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem a few years ago.

As she watched the little closet turned inside out, Clement laughed at the seemingly endless stream of art and archival documents, many of them long-hidden works that are still largely unknown.

"This is a treasure trove," she said. **M**

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