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Rejuvenated painting recalls the era of the Grand Tour

'The Fisherman' landscape was donated by West Palm Beach condo owner.

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Claude-Joseph Vernet, French, 1714-1789. 'The Fishermen,' 1746, oil on canvas, 30 x 39 in. Gift of Eleonore and Ronald Bacher, 2013

By [Jan Sjoström](#)

Daily News Arts Editor

These days, travelers visiting an exotic locale are likely to snap photos on their smart phones and post them immediately on Facebook for their friends to see. Sharing wasn't that easy in the 18th century, when aristocrats from England and northern Europe took the Grand Tour to Italy to acquire the necessary cultural polish for their stations in life.

Many purchased works of art as souvenirs. A lucrative trade developed in hubs such as Rome where artists congregated to meet the demand. One of the most successful was Claude-Joseph Vernet, a Frenchman who lived in Rome from 1734 to 1753, painting topographical views of the city, imaginary Italian landscapes and marine scenes.

One of his idyllic Roman landscapes recently was donated to the Norton Museum. The painting is the centerpiece of a small show highlighting its conservation and placing it in context with other works from the collection produced for travelers on the Grand Tour.

About a year ago, the Norton received a call from Edward Kampf, who was clearing out a condominium in West Palm Beach for friend Ronald Bacher, who had moved to Germany. Bacher wanted to donate a painting, which he thought might be a Vernet, to the museum.

Jerry Dobrick, curatorial associate for European art, went to look at the painting and suspected Bacher was right. The museum sent the untitled, unsigned, undated work to an expert, who determined that it was "The Fisherman," a 1746 work that was part of a set of eight the artist created for Pierre Charles Marquis de Villette, one of Louis XV's ministers. Only four survive. The others are in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow and the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

In the painting, which was inspired by a tourist destination outside of Rome called Tivoli, fishermen, travelers and other figures relax along a river that tumbles through a gorge overlooked by an antique ruin. Peach-colored light illumines the scene.

"This is a perfect moment for Vernet," Dobrick said. That same year Vernet was elected to the French Academy, opening the door to exhibiting in the annual Salon in Paris and critical acclaim.

The painting wasn't in such perfect condition when the Norton acquired it. It was dirty, and most of the paint had cracked as the canvas had dried out over time. A jagged tear that had been inexpertly mended with tape on the back streaked across the lower right section. Fortunately, most of the original paint was intact. Also, the painting was mounted on its original stretcher, which carried four red wax seals, possibly documenting its passage through customs in the 18th century.

Conservators today "do as little as possible" to artworks, said Jeronimo Perez Roca of South Florida Art Conservation in West Palm Beach.

"Your chances of changing a painting are less. Even with all the studies that have been done, nobody knows how what you've done will evolve during the next 200 years." Past conservation practices sometimes have been disastrous, he said.

Roca began the project by documenting the work with standard, raking and ultraviolet light, and infrared photography. Then he flattened the painting and consolidated the paint, using an animal adhesive glue applied through the back of the canvas.

Once that was done, he repaired the tears — there were two small rips in addition to the one big one — by aligning the threads under a microscope, and applying adhesive and thin fabric to fill in the gaps. The painting was cleaned, missing passages were filled in, and touched up and varnish was applied. To leave as much of the original work visible as possible only the edges of the back were re-lined.

Before and after pictures chronicle the process on a monitor in the gallery. Nearby, the refreshed painting invites modern viewers to experience a measure of the allure that drew 18th century travelers to Rome.

If You Go

What: A Masterpiece Rediscovered: Claude-Joseph Vernet's 'The Fisherman'

When: Through Dec. 8

Where: Norton Museum, 1451 S. Olive Ave., West Palm Beach

For information: Call 832-5196 or visit [norton.org](#)

Jerry Dobrick, curatorial associate for European art, will talk about 'The Fisherman' in the gallery at 6:30 p.m. Nov. 14 during Art After Dark. At 1 p.m. Nov. 20, he will give an illustrated talk about the painting and the Grand Tour as part of the A Closer Look series.

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