

DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University
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The Bader Gift (1982)

Agnes Etherington Art Centre in cooperation with Queen's Television

SPEAKERS

Alfred Bader and an unnamed narrator

KEYWORDS

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TRANSCRIPT

Alfred Bader: It's the best university I've ever known. People here just care so much for other people. Now, I'm on the Board of Trustees, and of course, what I'm trying to do is to help the university really to build up the finest university collection in Canada of Old Master paintings.

Narrator: There were no art history courses offered at Queen's in the 1940s. And Alfred Bader began his studies in art by reading on his own. But the work of collecting art began for him at a very early age.

Alfred Bader: My parents collected paintings, but they collected paintings that were modern at the time, artists like Klimt and Schiele. And when I was a kid at home, the house was just full of paintings, but not paintings I really liked. When I looked at paintings and I went to museums when I was a small boy, I always liked Dutch 17th-century paintings by far the best, and we had almost none at home. Now, as a boy of 10, I had an uncle who gave me 10 Austrian shillings in Vienna, and asked me to buy a camera. They had a camera sale of Voigtlander cameras, where for 10 shillings, you could get a box camera. But I didn't want to buy a camera. I didn't know how to use it. I had no great interest in photography. And I had been looking at the auction sales at the Dorotheum in Vienna. And I bought a drawing for 10 shillings to start with. Bidding started at five shillings, and I got it for 10 shillings. And when my uncle came on his next visit, he was rather aghast. And he talked to my mother, and said, "That boy needs help there's something the matter with him, that instead of buying a camera, he would buy a drawing." The first painting I bought was the painting of a man with an open mouth that we used on one of our chemical catalogues. It's a delightful painting, Flemish, about 1630. And I bought it from a dealer in New York, who had known my father and he had known of my grandfather. When I introduced myself, he said, "Well, what painting do you like here?" And he showed me a number of paintings, marvellous painting. And I asked him what it cost, and he asked me what my income was. I was a teaching fellow at the time, and my income was \$100 a month. And he said, "Could I spare \$50 a month to buy that painting?" And I said, "For that painting, I could." So that's the only painting I ever bought in instalments, and I'm sure glad I bought it. It took many months to pay for.

Narrator: Since his early ventures into art collecting, Dr. Bader has made it a major part of his life.

Alfred Bader: It's a disease, I don't know how to get away from it. I'd say, now, I probably buy between 100 and 200 paintings a year. Wherever I go, I look for paintings. The last painting I bought was last Tuesday evening in New York, a beautiful Tobias saying goodbye to his blind father. We got into New York on -- at 9 o'clock in the evening, and 11 o'clock in the evening, I bought the painting. My grandfather, my mother's father, had a very fine collection of Renaissance paintings. In fact, he'd been the owner at one time many years back of the very first gift I gave to Queen's. The Salvator Mundi, the Venetian painting of about 1520. But my main interest is in Baroque paintings, mainly Dutch, but obviously, I bought a good many Italian pictures, and mainly School of Rembrandt. And there again, mainly biblical pictures. I'm very interested in the Bible. And so if I have any specialty at all, it's biblical paintings of the School of Rembrandt.

Narrator: Despite this rigorous involvement with the current art markets, Alfred Bader is professionally active as the director of the Aldrich Chemical Company in Milwaukee, and he has found a unique way to incorporate both art and chemistry to their mutual advantage.

Alfred Bader: At the beginning, when some of our directors suggested that we use paintings on the covers of our catalogues and of our house organ, the Aldrichimica Acta, I was against it. I said, "Well, won't chemists look askance at a chemical catalogue having an Old Master painting on the cover?" But I was overruled on the board of directors. At a board of directors meeting, the vote was three to two. And this was some 15 years ago. We put an Old Master painting, a School of Rembrandt painting on a cover. Customers liked it. And ever since, we have advertised almost exclusively with Old Master paintings. Every publication of ours has a painting on the cover. And it has gotten so now that when people see the chemical catalogue with an Old Master painting on the cover, they know it's an Aldrich catalogue. We don't even put the name "Aldrich" on the front cover anymore. They know if it's an Old Master painting, it's an Aldrich catalogue.

Narrator: This lifetime interest in art has resulted in a fine private collection. But as he collects, Dr. Bader balances the growth of his personal collection with gifts to public galleries, such as the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's.

Alfred Bader: If a painting is Dutch, 17th century, biblical and relatively small, it stays in my own collection. If it is really first class and large, as, for instance, the Govert Flinck. I mean, that's a marvellous biblical sacrifice of Manoah, one of Rembrandt's ablest students. It's very important work signed and dated. But it's so large. I -- we're out of wall space at home. And so that obviously has a place at Queen's. But I've given to many other museums, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Oberlin, of course. But primarily, I'm trying to build the collection at Queen's in the hope that eventually it will only be a first-class collection. I don't, you know, I don't go to galleries and spend 30, 40, \$50,000 on some name picture. I try to buy essentially unknown pictures, often puzzle pictures. You have lots of puzzles here, which, where you have obviously good paintings, but we don't know who painted them. But eventually, a good name will come to them. What one always hopes to do, of course, is to make discoveries not just of the painting, but of a personality. For instance, the painting of the Massacre of the Innocents by Jan van Noordt, which you see in the entrance hall here, I feel that Jan van Noordt is a very great artist, who as yet is not appreciated. I think you'll find within the next 20 or 30 years, somebody will write a book on Van Noordt, and pull together his major works. This is one of them. There's another beautiful work, similar quality, at the Wallace collection, for instance. I

have a third one at home of Joseph selling grain to the Egyptians. The man was a very, very great artist, not fully appreciated. This painting was in the collection of one of the great English collectors. He had one of the finest Baroque collections, Dr. Efim Schapiro, who passed away some years ago. And this had been one of my favourite paintings in his collection. Then I was very happy that I was able to acquire it for Queen's. It's certainly is by Van Noordt. It's one of his masterpieces. And I hope that some years from now, people will appreciate how good Van Noordt really is. One of my favourites is the Jacob Pynas of The Raising of Lazarus. On a number of -- for a number of reasons, one is the very good quality, the other is a historic importance of the painting. It's a totally unknown painting. It's never been published. The signature, indeed, came out on cleaning. It's signed and dated 1624. And of course, Jacob Pynas was Rembrandt's teacher. And 1624 was just about the year that Rembrandt worked with Jacob Pynas. He was a student in Amsterdam. And it's a challenge to the mind to wonder whether Rembrandt might have seen it, he probably did. And it certainly influenced a number of his early paintings. And so here, you have a very fine artist, a totally unknown painting, signed and dated with this connection with Rembrandt. And it's a natural for Queen's. Another is a large Moeyaert of Joseph selling grain to the Egyptians. I like that because it's such a wonderful storytelling picture, and it's one of the few pictures I know where I sense that the artist -- the artist realized what kind of a person Joseph is likely to have been. To me, Joseph is one of the least likable characters in the Bible. I really dislike the man. The man was a great statesman, he saved Egypt, he saved the entire Middle East, but as a human being, he was a manipulator. You wouldn't want to be his brother. You wouldn't want to be -- you couldn't be his friend. He was a brilliant man who played cat and mouse with people. He saved Egypt, and yet, he enslaved the entire population of Egypt. And here, you have these poor starving people coming to Joseph, the viceroy, selling their children into slavery so that they could buy grain from the Seven Years of Plenty. Another favourite of mine is the old woman with a skull. I'm not sure, not absolutely certain of the meaning by Jan Lievens. It shows so clearly the influence that Lievens and Rembrandt had on each other. It's a beautiful work.

[Music]