

by Peter Williams  
with Tania Portis

# Restoration of a Marine Painting

## The Ship *ELLA NORTON* off Dover

This mid-nineteenth century portrait of the American ship *ELLA NORTON*, off the white cliffs of Dover, England, was attributed to the prolific maritime chronicler William Coulter (Irish-American, 1849–1936) when it appeared at auction in 1998.<sup>1</sup> Active in the San Francisco Bay region from 1869 until his death, Coulter was largely self-taught but studied briefly in Europe in the late 1870s.

Purchased by a couple from Maine, the painting was to be hung in the saloon of their one-hundred-foot steel yacht, being built in Australia for an intended three-year vacation at sea.

The work had not been well cared for in the past and required extensive restoration in order to both stabilize the canvas and make it suitable for display. Below are details of the painting's condition prior to its conservation and the steps that were taken to restore it.

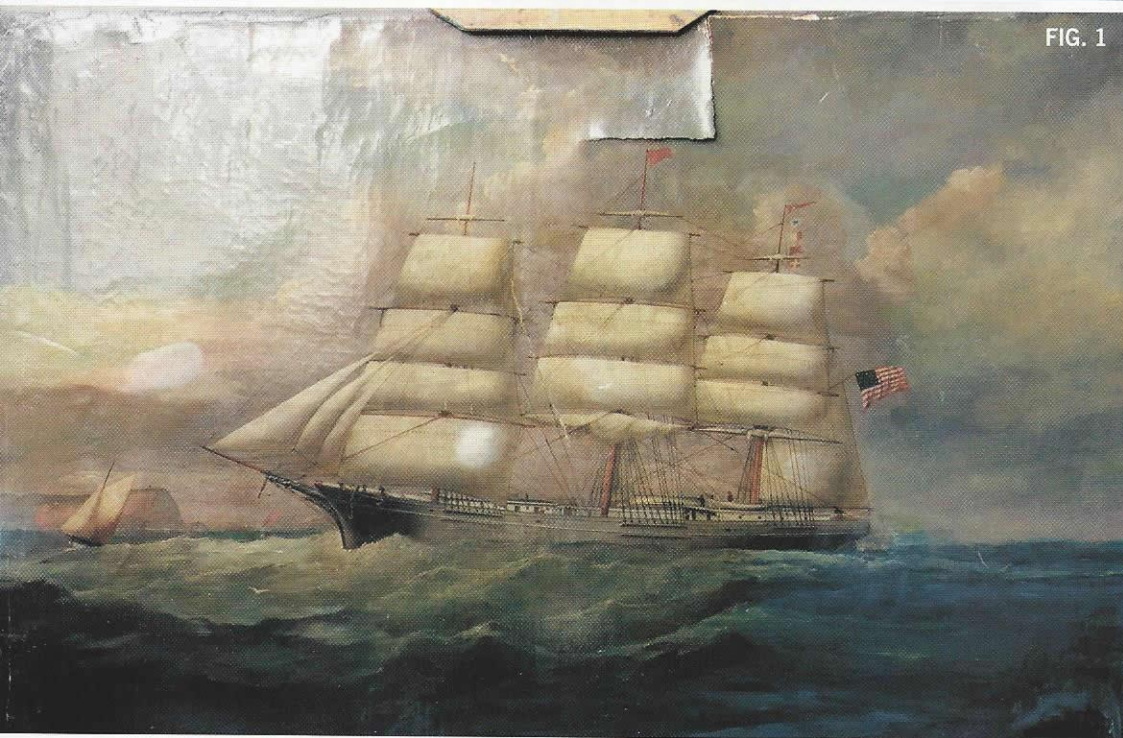


FIG. 1

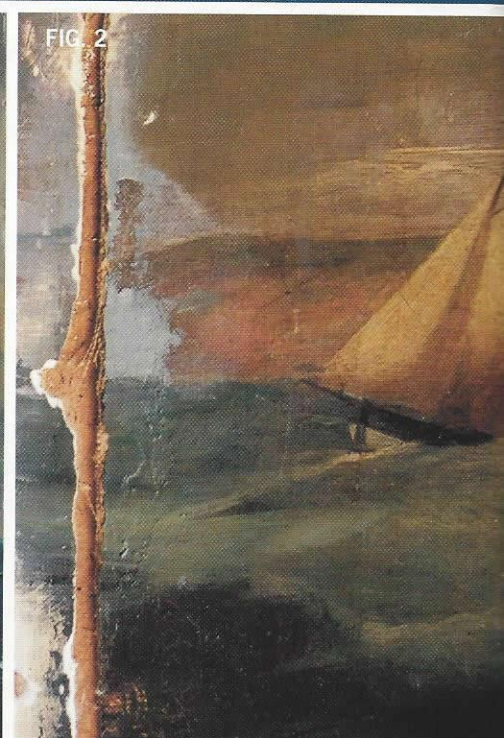


FIG. 2

**FIG. 1:** Before it appeared at auction, the canvas had lost a section of its upper right corner, suffered a significant rip in the upper middle area, and experienced substantial paint loss due to random folding.

**FIG. 2:** An earlier restoration job attempted to make the painting pre-

sentable and mechanically sound, but was not of professional quality. The previous restorer added an inch to the left border by mounting the painting on a masonite panel so that it would fit into a standard size frame, one inch longer than the canvas itself. A knife was used to spread gesso into the resultant gap on the left edge, and the area was

roughly touched-up with paint to make it look like part of the original oil.

**FIG. 3:** The same method was used to compensate for a lost section of canvas in the upper right-hand corner.

**FIG. 4:** When the current owners brought the painting in for conserva-



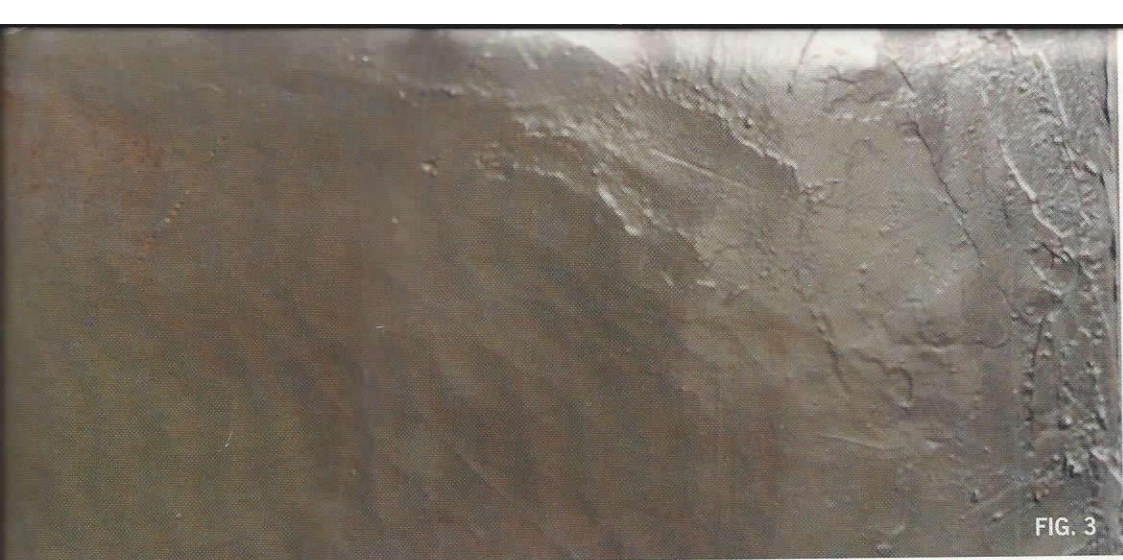


FIG. 3




FIG. 4



FIG. 5

tion, it was nearly detached from the masonite panel. The first step was to reveal the original surface by stripping off old varnish and previous restorations using a scalpel, cotton, and acetone. The masonite was discarded. To repair the tears, the painting was lined by placing it in a vacuum press to bond the canvas to a linen backing using a wax-resin adhesive.

**FIG. 5:** The lined painting was then re-stretched on wooden stretcher bars that reflected the original size of the painting. Paint losses were filled in with gesso which was sanded down to the same thickness as the surrounding paint layers. Then the color was matched with archival pigments. Finally, a varnish was applied to the surface and the painting installed in an appropriate period style frame. From start to finish nearly 200 hours were required to complete the job.

The owners of the painting were so pleased with the outcome that they decided to hang *The Ship ELLA NORTON off Dover* in their home instead of on their yacht. A fine S. F. M. Badger schooner portrait subsequently filled the empty space in the yacht's saloon. 

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<sup>1</sup> Sotheby's, *Important Americana*, October 11, 1998, lot 151.