Walter Edward Rowe, who is wiry and spare, is Master Restorer in the Museum’s Conservation Department. But if he weren’t so busy with his normal work, he could lead tours that make you see the essential work of art fresh in space. “Ed Rowe goes beyond the object to its material and how it is made,” comments Dr. Oscar Muscarella, Associate Curator of Ancient Near Eastern Art. “When he holds a piece that needs fixing, he thinks, ‘If I were making this, how would I go about it? I’d think this and do this. . . .’”

And then he tries out his theory in the repair shop—that is, if he can get the curator to agree. “The talk sometimes takes four weeks while the work takes two,” is the way he clocks the average job. One dented bronze caldron sat around the shop for a year before he was finally allowed to take a hammer to it.

“Of course, you hammer with your heart in your throat,” he says. “If the thing cracks, you might as well put on your hat and coat and go home.”

Ed Rowe’s specialties are fine metalwork, jewelry, and clocks. There are few craftsmen in American museums who can touch his ability in these areas, according to Kate C. Lefferts, Conservator Administrator. In addition, he works on monumental stone sculptures and tries out new methods and machines useful for conservation work.

“Ed Rowe combines the skills of a watchmaker with the actual working knowledge of a gunsmith,” notes a great admirer, Dr. Dietrich von Bothmer, Curator of Greek and Roman Art, and adds, “He is a bit of a tinkerer.”

“A man trained to do one thing is of very little value around here,” says Rowe about the department. “The more he can do, the more useful he is. What you really need is an intense curiosity.”

The repair shop—“a misnomer, because it sounds as if we take care of radiators and fans”—is like a dream loft, spacious and winding. A humidifier gives it the sweet, moist atmosphere of a greenhouse, and here and there stands a large, immaculate machine—an ultrasonic transducer, for instance, and a vacuum bell for treating bronzes.

The whole place is marvelously shipshape. At one end stand tall cupboards with glass doors and tiny, broken things inside. There are tidy arrangements of small boxes and jars on worktables and desks.

Ed Rowe unlocks the middle drawer of his desk and takes out a box containing what looks like a piece of mud, but turns out to be a spoon from an archaeological dig. It’s a typical example of what he calls “an ancient object covered with an unsightly incrustation.”

In the museum world, it has long been traditional to leave objects, as Rowe puts it graphically, “covered with crud like an anchor pulled from the sea. You couldn’t see the shape or the decoration. One of my campaigns has been to present the object as the artist did it. Now most curators are interested in this idea.” But, he points out, there is a fine line between presenting an object as the artist intended and sprucing it up to the point of “making a fake.”

In the Masterpieces show, for example, Rowe can point to a rhyton shaped like a ram’s head on which one can clearly see the line of restoration by the change in the color of the silver—deliberately noticeable so scholars can see exactly what the original piece consists of.
Does he ever stumble across fakes? The question of fakes, like the subject of breakage, is an unpopular one around the Museum. “Having a piece turn out to be a fake is, of course, something we hope doesn’t happen,” Nora Scott, Curator of Egyptian Art, admits. “But every so often an object is questioned, and then we try to find out the truth.” When there is any doubt about the authenticity of a proposed acquisition, the Conservation Department is usually consulted. Do its materials fit the period? Was it made by techniques known at the time? are the kinds of questions asked.

“There was a ring I was in doubt about,” Miss Scott went on. “Ed weighed it in his hand the way you do chestnuts to see if they’re fresh. He said that in his opinion it was too low a carat for an ancient ring.” A characteristic judgment by the kind of person who has his learning in his bones. Rowe says he can tell if an object was repaired properly by whether it “looks right.”

Ed Rowe is a perfect example of a man who learns by doing. Certainly his whole life could be a model for what is considered today to be the ideal avant-garde education: learn all about whatever interests you and take it as far as it can go.

He started out in the textile industry, first in his native Canada and after 1927 in this country. By the time he joined the army in the Second World War he had decided he wanted to try something new. So when Handy and Harman, the largest American purveyors of silver and gold, offered a course in metalworking at the Walter Reed Hospital, he signed up. Through this program, and through meeting Handy and Harman’s designer, Margaret Craver, he became fascinated by the craft’s intricate technical demands and opportunity for creative design. At the end of the course he bought a set of tools and joined a jeweler in New York. A couple of years later he branched out into watchmaking via a course under the G.I. Bill, then apprenticed himself for four years to an exacting old Scottish clockmaker. In 1953 the Metropolitan, searching for a skilled restorer, asked Handy and Harman if they could recommend anyone: they suggested Ed Rowe.

Rowe is a craftsman in the total sense of the word. He is intensely involved and curious about whatever he is doing. Since he came to the Museum, that’s been art. He has no favorite period, though characteristically the Victorian leaves him cold (“too hodgepodge”). He does have a favorite exhibition, last year’s Before Cortés, which he considers the greatest show he’s ever been involved with (his crew is responsible for mounting all objects that must be doweled or propped up—anything that does not just sit in a case); a connoisseur of technique, Rowe comments admiringly, “The works in Cortés had the finest craftsmanship in the widest variety of materials.”

He has many plans for the time when he and his wife finally retire to an old farm they have in New England: travel, painting, a freelance job or two—and fixing things up. “The house needs a lot of work, and there are fields and an apple orchard that I want to put into shape.”

With his knowledge of antiques and his instinct against junk, it could easily be a farm filled with works of art. But it won’t be.

“I’d rather live simply,” he says decisively. “I’ve been surrounded by some of the world’s greatest art, here at the Museum.”

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