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Portraits: Handyman of art

If you saw it at the Crocker, Patrick Minor likely put it there

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For much of his life, Patrick Minor has been a loyal attendant in beauty's tossed dressing room. He has unpacked and held up to the light priceless objects. Though not an artist per se, there is a gorgeous logistic, an unbreakable exactitude to what he does.

Minor, until recently, was an exhibition coordinator at the Crocker Art Museum. He's the guy who hangs the shows. No, he did more than that. He painted the galleries. He often made the pedestals. He arranged the work on the walls. Then, an art itself, he precisely lighted the gallery. Then he retreated to the dim recesses, only to return and remove the exhibition and put it safely back into its shipping crates.

Oftentimes, since the Crocker Museum has no loading dock, scant storage space, Minor would transport the work up the steep front steps, into the museum's tight, Victorian corridors. A gilded masterwork on his back, he was the Crocker's stalwart Atlas.

Minor had been at the Crocker for 27 years, the longest tenure of any museum employee. He saw a succession of directors, a parade of curators. He has installed thousands of shows; has witnessed the glare of so many dazzling canvases, he should be blind by now.

He once held a Rembrandt in his hands.

And didn't collapse on the spot.

Now he's gone. Now the spell that has captivated him for so long is broken. Now his hands are empty.

Now, on a hot, remorseless afternoon, far from the cool confines of the museum, Minor is sitting at a sidewalk table outside Crepeville on 24th Street. A glass of black iced tea weeps diluted in seconds.

Patrick Minor is 56 years old. Standing 6-foot-3, as gangly as a ladder, he has the perfect stature to reach up and adjust a light bulb. He has crinkly blue eyes, a jaw the size of a mallet. He is poised, unexcitable, with hands that are large, but glove-soft.

Two months ago, Minor and his colleague, Steve Wilson, himself an old master at hanging shows, were let go, victims of city cutbacks. Wilson will retire in December. Minor, needing to work, reluctantly took a transfer to another city department.

Today, Minor works as a Convention Center attendant. He sets up, then tears down, a sea of tables and chairs. He has been warmly welcomed by convention staff membes and applauds their hustle,

their efficiency. There's an undeniable beauty to a concise banquet floor.

But it's not art. "I think it's the same experience as anyone who visits a museum," says Minor, of what he will miss most about the Crocker. "You hear about this piece (of art). And, then, there it is in person. You feel this proximity to greatness."

Minor was born and raised in Auburn. Both his parents were schoolteachers. Artist types were part of the family's household ambience.

"I was just a boy," says Minor, "but I distinctly remember liking the smell of oil paint." A smell he has savored ever since.

He moved to Sacramento in the late 1970s to play his beloved guitar. He got a job at Richardson Fine Arts Handlers, crating and transporting art to museums all over the country. In 1981, he joined the Crocker. It was like rummaging in a magical closet.

The job, always physical, always precarious, came with beguiling occupational hazards.

"The drawings are so beautiful," says Minor of the museum's vaunted collection. "You have to watch yourself. So you don't look at them too long. You can get lost."

One early show that Minor unboxed and assembled was elaborate art glass by upstart Dale Chihuly. The glass, stuffed in cardboard boxes, arrived at the Crocker in a fish truck. Another challenging installation was an 800-pound "canvas" by Julian Schnabel.

More sublime, a Persian antiquity, a flawless vessel. "It was so light," says Minor, still amazed. "It felt like a thought. The bottle was so beautiful. There weren't any chips on it. It was more than 3,000 years old. And you have it in your hands."

Thinking more, he tenderly clasps this sigh of regret, "You always have to have reverence in your hands for everything."

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