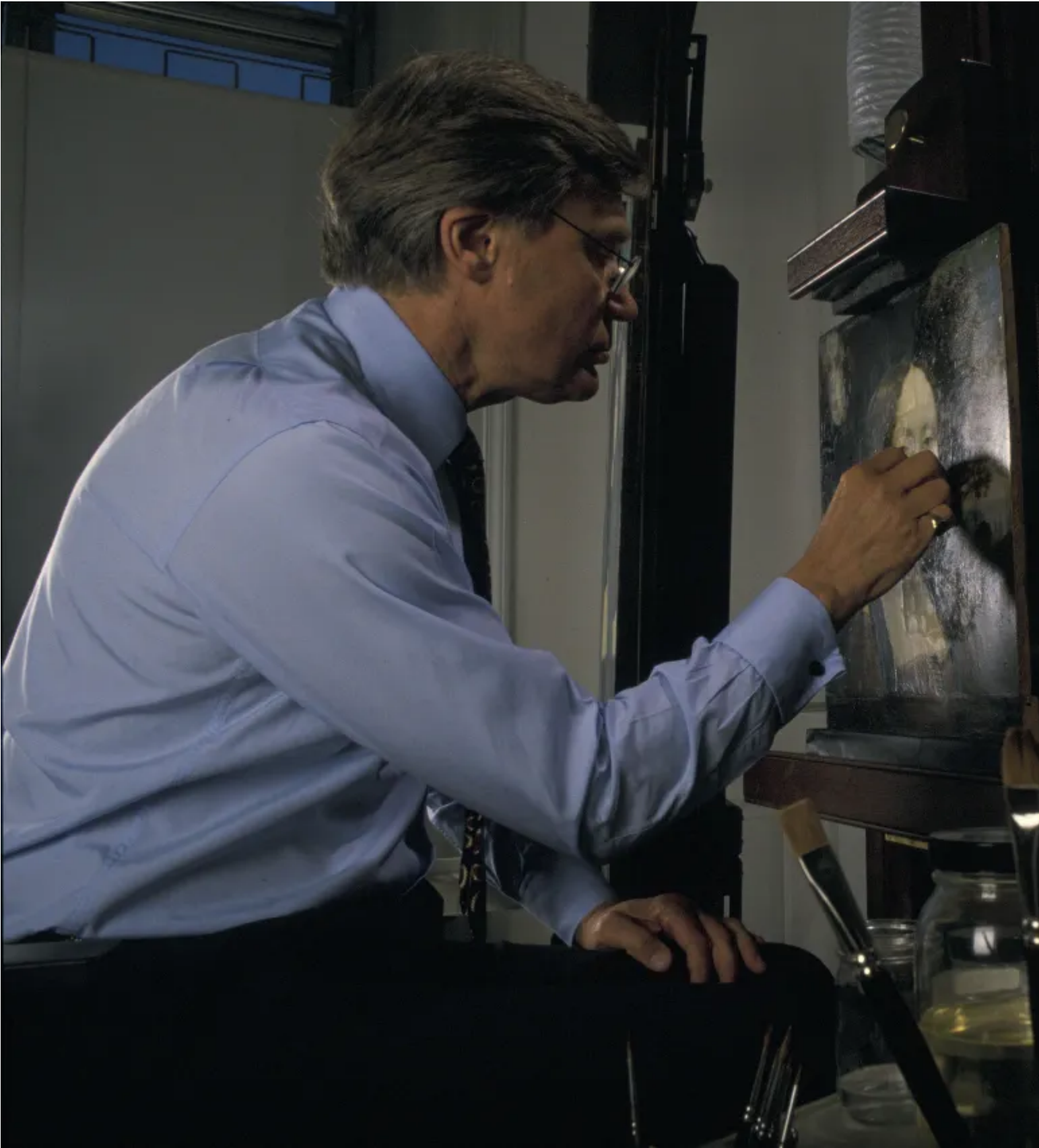


Obituary: David Bull

Submitted by sharragrow on 14 Apr 2025

Image



In memoriam: David Bull (March 5, 1934 - Dec. 28, 2024)

David Bull, who passed away on December 28, 2024, was not only one of the world's finest restorers of Old Master paintings but also admired and respected for his basic humanity, connoisseurship, good judgment, and leadership qualities. Born in Bristol, England, where he received his conservation training, David soon became conservator of Old Master paintings at the National Gallery, London, and subsequently started his own conservation firm. Because of his outstanding reputation, David was invited to come to the United States to head the conservation department at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California. He later served as director of two important museums in California — the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena and the Timken Museum in San Diego.

In 1984, soon after David had established his firm, Fine Art Conservation & Restoration Inc., he moved to Washington, D.C. to become head of conservation at the National Gallery of Art, where I served as Curator of Dutch and Flemish Painting. We often collaborated on restoration projects, which led to long discussions in front of paintings, often studying them under the microscope so that we could assess condition issues and/or determine types and layers of paints. The most intensive discussions occurred in the early 1990s when we began a program of cleaning the four Vermeer paintings at the National Gallery of Art in anticipation of the Vermeer exhibition, scheduled for 1995. We not only examined our own paintings, but we also travelled together to study other works by Vermeer in European and American collections.

It was an exciting time. The restoration of each of these paintings offered new and different challenges, but the results, in each instance, were amazing. With the removal of discoloured varnish and old overpainting, Vermeer's masterpieces took on new life in ways that were often unexpected. With David's sage guidance, the Gallery also acquired appropriate seventeenth-century Dutch frames for each of these works. This past year, when we decided that *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, the precious Vermeer painting in The Leiden Collection, would greatly benefit from conservation, there was only one choice: David Bull. Fortunately, David, and his wife Teresa Jarvis Longyear, who is also a conservator, were excited about undertaking this project. As with the Vermeer paintings in the National Gallery of Art, David carefully spent time assessing the structure and stability of the support, the visual effects Vermeer sought to achieve, the nature of the discoloured varnish, and the extent of the overpainting, before beginning his treatment. It was a joy to watch David sitting quietly before the painting, while the subtle touches of his brush brought forth slowly and surely the inner light and radiance of Vermeer's small masterpiece, which he described as "a magical little painting".

David was a dear friend, who was so gentle, sensitive, and fun to be with—yet forever steely in his commitment to excellence. We shared many incredible moments of wonder in our work together, and I, as well as the rest of the broad community of conservators and art historians worldwide, will miss him enormously.

Arthur Wheelock

Senior Advisor

The Leiden Collection

Originally published on the [Leiden Collection website](#)