



RESTORING GREATNESS

by Jane Shufer

In person, Simon Parkes is spare and seemingly quiet. These characteristics are shared by his paintings; his light-filled landscapes are executed with a clear and clean palette. Usually Parkes focuses on Long Island scenes, but he also records his travels—Morocco was the most recent location.

More than most painters, Parkes is in a position to learn directly from the masters, no matter how long ago they lived. The 44-year-old Englishman has dedicated 27 years to the restoration of oil paintings.

A slender, mid-sized man, Parkes sits still as he talks. His face registers little emotion, and his British accent lends a sheen of culture to what is no doubt going to be a polite discussion about art and how he became a restorer. And then he says, "My father, trying to divert me from a life of heroin addiction and petty crime ..."

It turns out that "the stuff" under Parkes' surface, similar to layers of paint beneath the visible stratum in a painting, is quite complicated. It's also very funny.

He was 17 years old when he became an apprentice restorer. "All scraping and carpentry—glue and big buckets of steaming muck. Filthy, disgusting—it was great."

At 24, he decided to try the United States and ended up working at the William Doyle Galleries. Eventually, Parkes opened his own restoration business, now located in a tiny two-story building on quiet East 74th Street in Manhattan. He deals only with oil paintings from the year 1400 to the present, employing 10 people in addition to himself.

About five years ago—inspired by the art that passed through his hands daily—he started to paint. His works are small, about 14 by 24 inches. They have to be, as he paints outdoors, on the spot, always landscapes, sometimes two in a day. Many depict small quiet beaches around the Hamptons.

So will he try other subjects, maybe portraits? Other media, maybe watercolor, as did the American expatriate John Singer Sargent, another of his favorites? "If I had more time, I'd do watercolor," Parkes says. He's serious now, "I don't know. I haven't got enough time. I just don't." ■