

KALNOKY, Maria Francesca Countess

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Countess in the Capitol

Washington's Capitol guides were just beginning their chants one day last week when a tiny, blue-eyed woman with curly grey hair strode into the rotunda. While sightseers gawked, she hopped spryly on to a roped-off platform, sat down on John Trumbull's huge (13 by 18 ft.) *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*, which was lying flat there, and started touching up Trumbull's paint. Marie Francisca Kalnoky, a full-fledged, two-castle Hungarian countess who fled Europe in 1949, was busy at her latest job: giving some of the Capitol's historic paintings their first restoration in 80 years.

Marie Kalnoky is well prepared for the job. At 56, with 30 years of experience in her steady hands, she is one of the top experts in her field. Her father, a colonel of Austro-Hungarian dragoons, started his children off early in art. Often, after dinner, she remembers, "he would put a pot of flowers or something on the table and we children would all copy it." But Marie Francisca never particularly tried to be a painter. "There were enough finished paintings," she says crisply. "People preferred to have their old paintings restored."

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Cranach Was Hidden. Going from "castle to castle" between world wars, she restored some 500 works for fellow blue-bloods. She learned how to smooth over chipped spots ("like filling a tooth"), repaint damaged hands and noses, replace frayed lining, spruce up dull paint with a coat of bright varnish. As she became more skilled, she repaired masterpieces by Rubens, Tiepolo and Velásquez. Once, working on a dark, somber painting by the 16th century Italian Jacopo Palma, she found a whole covey of saints and angels hiding under the grime. Another time, she was called in to restore an unusual Lucas Cranach; instead of one of the 16th century master's sly, dreamy-looking women, the canvas showed a mysterious black-cloaked, black-hooded figure. The countess got to work, and sure enough, under the black was a typical Cranach painting of a handsome girl garbed in a low-cut gown.

Restoring work thinned out in Austria and Hungary during World War II. The countess spent most of the war in Budapest, then in 1944 went to a family castle



Walter Bennett

RESTORER KALNOKY

Sometimes, strange bumps.

in Czechoslovakia. When the Russians arrived, they let the family keep three of the castle's 80 rooms. The rest they appropriated, including the "spoons and forks and everything in the bank." Countess Kalnoky fled to Switzerland, thence to Mexico and the U.S.

Cornwallis Went Boom. In Washington, a gallery hired her, gave her the job of restoring three of the rotunda's old Trumbulls: *The Surrender of General Burgoyne*, *The Resignation of General Washington* and the *Cornwallis*. The countess says it wasn't a hard job. The linings were rotted and the paint flaked in spots, but there were no hands or feet to be repainted.

After five months of careful work, *Burgoyne* and *Washington* are back in their frames, and *Cornwallis* is almost finished. Tightening the picture on a stretcher last week, the countess gave it a light tap with her finger. *Cornwallis* uttered a soft boom. "You see," she said proudly, "like a drum."

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