

RESTORING THE MASTERS

The incredible rise of Massoud Shiraz, one of Charlotte's most premier art conservators

Massoud Shiraz is often called the "Art Doctor."

Private collectors and museum curators consider him the go-to guy to not only assess a painting's authenticity, condition and value, but restore the piece to its original condition and find the perfect centuries-old, hand-carved frame to display it.

In recent months, Shiraz has restored and framed artwork by French Impressionist Edgar Degas, Surrealists Alberto Giacometti and Max Ernst, and French Cubist Fernand Leger for Bechtler Museum of Modern Art under construction in uptown Charlotte. Other clients have included former Bank of America chairman Hugh McColl Jr. and well-known Queen City surgeons, writers and business owners.

Several times a year, the SouthPark

resident also jets to Milan, Frankfurt and other European cities to examine a painting and report back to international clients.

But it's not just his expertise curators and collectors seek. It's also his honest, tell-it-like-it-is approach.

"This business is all about trust," says Shiraz. "Some people want to hear what they want to hear, but would you want your doctor to lie to you about the condition of your health? You have to have integrity and tell the truth, in your professional opinion. At the end of the day, I want to be able to look in the mirror and like what I see."

Art, science and history

Shiraz's work requires him to be a historian, scientist and artist rolled into one.

Each job begins with extensive research.

"I study as much as I can about the artist, looking at his whole body of work,"



he explains. "Then I dig up information about the particular piece and look at its size, composition and condition."

When the artist painted the piece is an important element. Younger artists often copied the style of older masters. Conversely, a painting completed when an artist was older may be worth less as his hands and eyesight deteriorated.

Supply and demand also factor into the value equation. Pieces by an artist who died young or who didn't complete many paintings of a particular period, for

instance, are worth more.

Shiraz uses a blend of modern technology and old-school techniques to restore a painting. Infrared cameras and X-rays, for instance, allow a conservator to see different images under the top layer of paint.

"Rembrandt is well-documented for changing his mind in the middle of a work," says Shiraz. "If he didn't like the way it was going, he might change the way a hand was positioned, for instance. But on a copy, those changes aren't going

to be there."

On a typical restoration, Shiraz shines intense spotlights on the painting and lightly dabs the background with a cotton ball soaked in distilled turpentine. Next he takes photos and examines them under ultraviolet light to find places where one painting may cover another one.

Many famous artists never sold paintings during their lifetimes, Shiraz says. If the piece wasn't valued, it was most likely neglected and exposed to moisture, sunlight and other damaging elements. Sometimes artists painted over canvases or attempted to repair damaged elements of an original. Folks who find these pieces at estate sales, flea markets or in an attic bring them to Shiraz to learn more about what they have.

"I had one customer who purchased a painting at a flea market for \$2,000," he says. "He later sold it for \$110,000."

After determining what's original and what's added, Shiraz cleans the painting. Working with a delicate hand, he scrapes away caked-up varnish, repairs ripped portions of canvas, cleans layers of grime and repairs misguided work done by earlier restorers.

Then Shiraz picks up his artist's palette to restore the painting's original color. Touching up an old painting, he says, is much more difficult than repainting completely.

"If you aren't sure, it's always better not to touch it," he says. "First and foremost, you have to keep the integrity of the piece intact and leave it the way the artist intended."

Shiraz's final step is framing the piece, one of the most important elements in presenting original art. From Michelangelo to Picasso, he says, famous artists often selected frames for each piece.

"A painting is not complete without the appropriate frame," he says. "A beautiful woman needs a beautiful dress as well. It's a marriage between the two, a blending."

Over time, Shiraz has developed a niche business with antique frames for museum-quality paintings. High-end private collectors, the North Carolina Museum of Art and the new Bechtler Museum have called on Shiraz to find frames for their pieces.

Shiraz's oldest frame – which he says



he'll never sell – is a signed Italian piece carved in 1472. "I don't look at it as a piece of wood," he says. "I see it as a 600-year-old piece of art. It was a simple thing, but it was made with passion. To me, you're touching history."

From hobby to profession

Each painting Shiraz examines has a unique story, but his own story may be the most interesting yet.

Shiraz grew up with 10 siblings in Mashad, a town on the border of Iran and Russia. In his large family, everyone picked up a hobby. His was art, and as a teenager he was one of the 19 students, out of 3,000 applicants, accepted into a government-funded art school.

At 14, Shiraz began learning his craft, working his way up from mopping the floor to mixing paints for visiting professors from Europe's most famous museums. One such professor introduced him to restoration work, and his fascination began.

"I realized I was a much better conservator than I was an artist," he says. "Plus I enjoy understanding many famous artists from throughout history. If you're restoring a Degas, for example, that leads you to learn about colleagues such as Renoir and Monet, too. You become a scholar of all of them."

Increasingly strict Muslim beliefs about European art led Shiraz to leave Iran for Istanbul shortly after graduation from the

University of Tehran. To make a living, he painted in a bazaar and copied works for an antique dealer for \$40 a day and all the tea he could drink.

Shiraz eventually landed in Rome, the capital of Renaissance art, where he paid his rent in paintings. Eventually, he earned a job retouching paintings for the Museum of the Vatican.

When his father died, Shiraz traveled to Charlotte to inform a brother who was living here.

"I fell in love with Charlotte and its wonderful people," he says. "I've lived here longer than anywhere else in my life, even my fatherland. This is my home. I am happy here."

But at first, starting over in a new country and foreign culture wasn't easy. Shiraz taught himself to speak English by watching television for months. Professionally, he started by sketching designs for a fabric company.

Over more than two decades, his business in painting, restoration, framing and consulting evolved.

Through the years, Shiraz got to know former Bank of America chairman Hugh McColl Jr. at art shows. Shiraz chatted with McColl, one of the city's best-known arts supporters, about art and its place in Charlotte. McColl also hired Shiraz to restore a portrait of McColl's great-grandfather and a half-dozen other pieces.

In 2001, Shiraz co-founded a fine arts consulting business with McColl. Located in South End, McColl-Shiraz Fine Art brought 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century European oil paintings to public and private collections in the Queen City.

After a few years in business together, McColl shifted the business to a more retail-based gallery and Shiraz bowed out to concentrate on consulting work. McColl Fine Art remains in South End.

Today, Shiraz works out of a sunny yellow tri-level home on Sharon Road. Centuries-old hand-carved frames share wall space with a small museum of paintings ranging from nudes to Christian scenes.

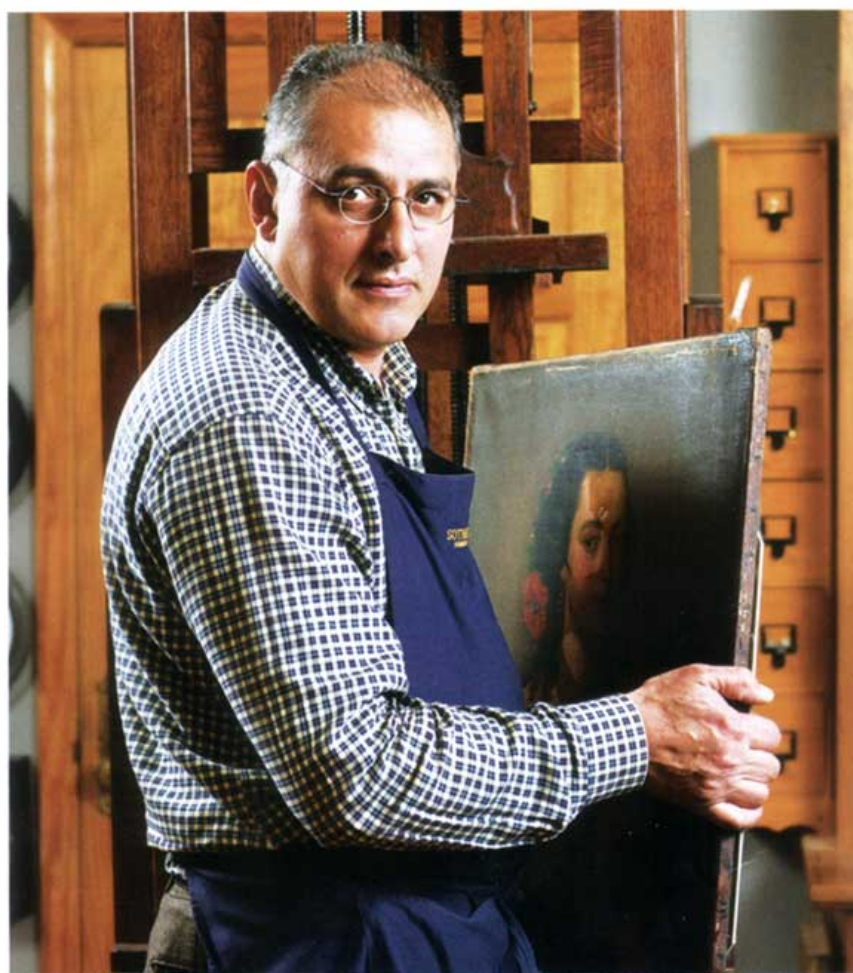
Behind the house, Shiraz built a 1,000-square-foot studio with 18-foot ceilings and gleaming hardwood floors. North and south windows provide natural light, and a concrete foundation that's three-feet thick prevents vibrations that might affect his delicate work.

Bookcases hold an extensive reference collection, and the walls are covered with original art, 17th-century Spanish swords, intricately carved frames and clocks set in different time zones. Expensive brushes, sponges, solvents, glues, pigments and paints line cabinets filled with the tools of his trade.

While some may question his choice to live in Charlotte, Shiraz says he can't imagine living anywhere else. He and his wife,



Shiraz restores an oil painting dating from around 1800.



Sherrill, a Gaston County native, have two daughters, Arianna, 9, and Mitra, 6.

"Life is not all about making money," he says. "I'll never get rich, but when I deal with art, I deal with people who have passion. Each one teaches me something about life. Everyone has something to offer. It's part of the circle of life, to change everyday, to get better everyday. People who love art teach me how to be a better, more interesting person." 📧