Traveling Through Time

ART CONSERVATOR LOOKS TO HISTORY FOR ANSWERS IN CANVAS.

Massoud Shiraz is a modern-day Renaissance man, an art conservator by trade who also paints his own canvases, collects centuries-old handmade frames and runs a fine art consulting firm with Charlotte's best-known businessman-turned-arts benefactor.

Shiraz—who prefers to be called simply by his surname—even built his sunny backyard studio complete with marble floors, 18-foot ceilings, two walls of windows and a darkroom.

But when it comes to his day job of painstakingly restoring oil paintings, Shiraz is one-part detective, one-part scientist and one-part artist.

In cases where customers want to know if a painting is a genuine original or a forged copy, Shiraz begins with extensive research.

"I have to look at the name of the artist, when the piece was painted, what age in life the artist began painting and the period the artist painted this particular piece," he explains. "For instance, if he painted the piece as an older artist, his hands and eyesight would have been getting worse."

To make matters more complicated, many young artists had older masters they admired and often copied in style.

"Raphael loved Perugino," says Shiraz. "He tried to be close in style to his work."

Some of the paintings that make their way to Shiraz are hundreds of years old, but masterpieces they aren't. Restoration of the paintings is typically done by big-budget museum conservators who employ teams of chemists, historians and art restoration experts.

In Charlotte, Shiraz is more likely to work on loved, but long-neglected family treasures, paintings put up in the attic for years and yard-sale throwaways art-lovers have rescued.

That's where the science comes in.

At work in his bright backyard studio, Shiraz places a Thomas Sully portrait on an easel and shines intense spotlights on the canvas. Sully, who lived from 1783 to 1872, was an American artist of the 19th century.

This portrait shows a young girl with a dog at her feet; she holds a basket of flowers, wears jewels on her wrists and has kicked off her shoes.

Using a special turpentine on a cotton ball, Shiraz lightly dabs at the background of the portrait. He also shoots photos of the painting, and then examines the photo under an ultraviolet light in the darkroom to show discrepancies on the painting.

"The UV light shows recent retouching, and by studying the photos under that light, you can see exactly where the old painting stops and the new painting begins," says Shiraz. "On this piece, the whole background does not belong to the artist."

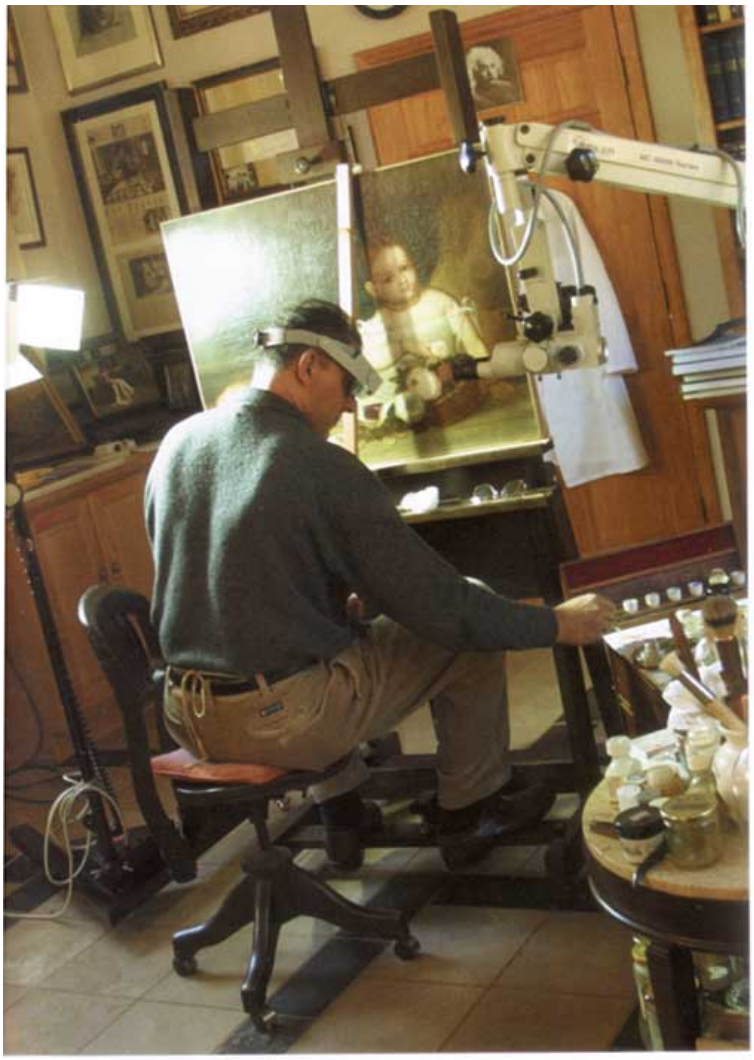
So why would someone paint over an existing portrait only to have Shiraz come back years later and restore it?

"At that time, this painting wasn't valuable," explains Shiraz. "Even Van Gogh never sold paintings during his lifetime. At the time, no one recognized its worth. And if it's not valued, it's exposed to moisture or sunlight or just laying it around. Then it gets tossed in a flea market or yard sale, someone with no experience buys it and starts trying to clean it, and pretty soon poor Thomas Sully isn't Thomas Sully anymore. You can feel sad about it, but really people didn't know better."

In the Sully portrait, Shiraz's examination shows another painter added to the background around 1920.

"You can see where an amateur's painting was painted on the top of the original background," says Shiraz, a professional associate of the American Institute for Conservation. "Also, one of the girl's hands is not

text by leigh pressley photography by michael lobiondo



OPPOSITE: Charlotte art conservator Massoud Shiraz, framed by a piece in his collection of 16th-19th century handmade frames. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: In his back-yard studio, Shiraz uses spotlights and photographs held under UV light to determine a painting's previous touch-ups. With a steady hand, Shiraz repairs a Thomas Sully portrait in which an amateur previously painted over portions of the 19th-century American artist's work. An art conservator's tools include brushes of all sizes, solvents, glues, sponges, putty, pigments and paint.

original to Sully."

After determining what's original and what's added, Shiraz will clean the painting to find its original color. To completely restore artwork, he may also have to delicately scrape away caked-up varnish, repair ripped portions of canvas, take off years of grime and repair misguided work done by earlier restorers.

Then Shiraz puts on his artist hat and begins the final step—restore the original color faded from years in the sun or altered by other elements.

Cabinets lining his studio hold expensive brushes, sponges, putty, beeswax, clay, solvents, glues, pigments and paints. Wearing slacks and a tweed jacket covered by a waist apron, Shiraz explains the difficulty in restoring old paintings with today's products.

"There were only seven colors used during the Renaissance," he says. "That's often how you ID the fakes, when the artist used media they didn't even have at that time. But when I restore a painting, I have to carefully analyze the paint to determine an exact color match. Touching up an old painting is much more difficult than repainting completely."

While he'd love to restore every painting to museum quality, Shiraz must also consider the client's budget. A basic fix may cost several hundred dollars, but a complete restoration and paint retouching can easily run into the thousands. Customers have to think about what the painting is worth.

"Unless it has great sentimental value, I sometimes tell people it's not worth it to spend the kind of money necessary to fix it," says Shiraz. "One lady brought a painting in here to be fixed, but couldn't afford to pay me. So we waited five years until she could afford to do it right. Another lady brought in a piece where the varnish had turned the painting yellow. I had to tell her it wasn't really a good idea to mess with it. I probably lose work that way, but I feel I've got to be honest as a professional. I have to be responsible."

Because of that attitude, Shiraz has developed a reputation as a restorer with a conservative, only-if-necessary approach.

Roddy Dowd Jr. has used Shiraz many times to restore oil paintings from his personal and corporate collection at Charlotte Pipe Company.

"He doesn't monkey with things unnecessarily, he takes a conservative approach and he will share his feelings about what is worth doing in the restoration of a painting," says Dowd. "He's a wonderful guy, not only a quality person of the first order, but a very skilled painter as well."

In addition to refusing to sell a client something he doesn't need, Shiraz also won't add his own mark to the painting. Like the Hippocratic Oath, he pledges first to do no harm.

"You cannot put your work onto his work, you must put his work back onto his work," he says of the original artist. "When we restore, we restore the way it was originally. You must respect the way the piece has been executed, respect the original art and accept the art in the way it was meant."

As in art, Shiraz also accepted his life in the way it was meant to be. Now 47, he grew up with 10 siblings in Mashad, a town on the border of Russia and Iran. Painting was the only class he ever loved, and around eighth grade, an art teacher suggested he attend art school.

"I wasn't interested in anything else," he says. "I grew up in a big family where everyone picked up a hobby. Mine was art. My art teacher saw my work and saw my potential to do more serious work, to continue with art into a career."

Some 3,000 people took a two-day test trying to gain entrance to the government-funded art school. At age 14, Shiraz was one of 19 accepted.

In his senior year, representatives from Europe's most famous museums visited the school as visiting professors. Shiraz got a job mixing paints, cleaning brushes and mopping the floor for one visiting teacher who introduced him to restoration work and inspired him to study further at the University of Tehran.

"Restoration work fascinated me," says Shiraz. "When you look at a painting, you have to understand art from hundreds of years ago—the paint used, the media used, if the artist was left-handed or right-handed. You drag yourself back through history to find the answers."

A year after graduation, changes in the government and the strict attitude Muslims had for European art led Shiraz to move to Istanbul, Turkey. He spent the next few years in a series of jobs, from painting in a bazaar to copying works for an antique dealer for $40 a day and all the tea he could drink.

After living with a brother briefly in Yugoslavia, Shiraz found himself in Rome, the capital of Renaissance art. He paid his rent in paintings and scanned a phone book for Persian last names for potential contacts. One, a man who ran a restaurant, introduced Shiraz to a customer who worked as an art conservator.

Shiraz worked his way up from sweeping floors to retouching paintings for churches and the Museum of the Vatican.

But when his father died, Shiraz was sent to Charlotte to inform a brother living here. In 1984, he moved to the Queen City permanently and started over again. He taught himself to speak English after months of watching television, and soon he was working sketching designs for an Italian fabric company, then painting and finally, restoration.

In 1991, Shiraz married his wife, Sherrill, a Gaston County native. Their daughter, Arianna, is nearly 3; the couple expects a second daughter, Mitra, this spring.

"Restoration work fascinated me," says Shiraz. "When you look at a painting, you have to understand art from hundreds of years ago—the paint used, the media used, if the artist was left-handed or right-handed. You drag yourself back through history to find the answers."

"Everyone said, why here, why Charlotte, this is the wrong city for restoration work," says Shiraz. "But my brother lives here. I came here to visit and fell in love with Charlotte and its wonderful people."

Behind his home near SouthPark, Shiraz spent about five years tearing down a small garage and building a 1,000-square-foot art studio himself. The concrete foundation is three feet thick so trucks barreling down the road never cause vibrations in his delicate work. Taupe and black marble floors help keep

Over the years, McColl entrusted Shiraz to restore a portrait of his great-grandfather and half a dozen other pieces.

"The portrait was dirty and had coal smoke from coal fireplaces and carbon film on it," says McColl. "He cleaned it beautifully. I find him to be outstanding and meticulous in what he does. He works very hard not to do any damage to a painting, and if he doesn't think a painting is worth restoring, he'll tell you not to do it."

The McColl-Shiraz venture focuses on art first and profit second, said the man known for building the nation's second-largest bank.

"The worst thing that can happen is that we end up with some very fine paintings we can't sell," says McColl. "Making money is secondary. We'd like to introduce really fine paintings to the city, and maybe some of them will find a permanent home here with people, corporations and eventually the Mint Museum. But it's for the community first. Then we'll see where it goes from there."

Shiraz, whose collection of handmade frames from the 16th to 19th century hangs on his studio walls, compares his business relationship with McColl to a fine painting and the hand-carved wood surrounding it.

"The frame is part of the art, it's equally as important as the painting," he says. "Together, the two make a very important marriage. Mr. McColl is very busy, but he really loves art and he's willing to spend what's necessary to get fine works to Charlotte. He's doing this for his love of art and his love of the community."

Shiraz hopes his venture with McColl brings an entire museum full of fine art to Charlotte; he believes art—whether it's painting, classical music, great food or other forms of art—help society move past violence, learn and experience something new that enriches their lives.

"When I get old, the most important thing to me as I'm sitting in my rocking chair will be a lifetime of good experiences I've had," he says. "I want to do lots of things in this world that I can look back on; I want to have lived life to the fullest. No one can take away what you've learned and what you've lived." ❖