

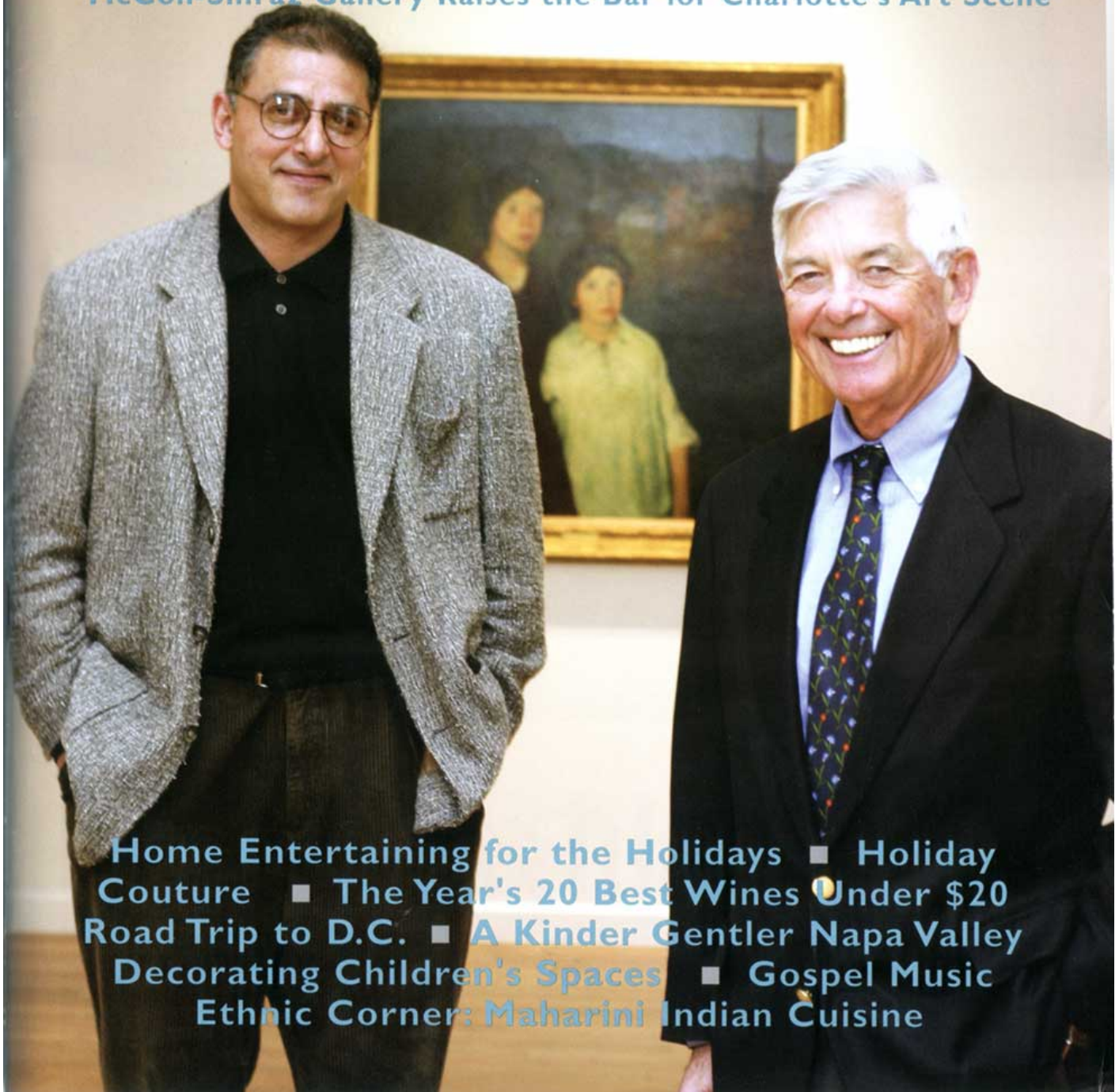
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State Of The Art

McColl-Shiraz Gallery Raises the Bar for Charlotte's Art Scene



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Foreground: Incoming Tide. Oil on canvas, artist Child Hassam. Background: Roman Ruins. Oil on canvas, artist Giovanni Nicolo Serviamonil.

S T A T E O F T H E A R T

McColl-Shiraz Gallery Banks On The Future Of Fine Art In Charlotte

- By Kim Wright Wiley, Photos by Brooke Thomas

Here's what they say about Charlotte. Plenty of money, but no style. How seriously can you take a city whose previous contributions to national culture include a karate-chopped airport queen falling off her post, and the bold pairing of teal and purple in an athletic uniform?

Of course, what they say doesn't bother Hugh McColl, Jr. He can remember when they said that Charlotte was a small town. He can remember when Bank of America was little old NCNB. His destiny is to be just a little bit ahead of the curve. Who are we kidding? Hugh McColl's destiny is to be decades ahead of the curve, to be Charlotte's cultural and financial scout, his ear perpetually pressed to the ground, able to hear what's coming long before the rest of us.

So perhaps it isn't surprising that in 2001 when McColl retired as Chairman and CEO of Bank of America, he wasn't content to merely take a retiree's pleasure in his own estimable collection. Instead he opened a fine art consulting firm with

the equally estimable conservator, Massoud Shiraz, whom he met twelve years ago when Shiraz was restoring a portrait of McColl's grandfather. What exactly makes art fine art? "It's realistic, it has a message to it, and it's often European and usually done in oil," says McColl. "These paintings have stood the test of time and are still highly regarded. In other words, our artists are dead."

McColl-Shiraz is appropriately located where East meets West in the former Dilworth Post Office. The bottom floor features museum-quality paintings ranging from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries; the top floor houses an impressive collection of European antique frames. Everything in the gallery is for sale, but the main function of the collection is to facilitate discussion with collectors and would-be collectors. Team member Mark Methner says, "People may have a sense of what they want and may not be able to articulate it, or they may feel that the fine art acquisition process is intimidating. Our job is to

eliminate the intimidation factor and help them acquire the art they desire."

Here's how it works: "Someone might fall in love with a certain painting," says associate Kathryn Howell. "They'll say 'I love this style, it speaks to me.' We use what's hanging downstairs to get them talking about what they like."

Howell recalls one client who was drawn to a painting called Study of Two Nudes, by Francis Luis Mora. Huge to the point of being overwhelming, the painting is framed in an equally imposing gold, Tiffany-style frame. "Obviously you have to have a big wall in a big house with a big budget to even consider such a piece," says Howell. "But if this is what we know you're drawn to, we'll start looking for similar paintings that are more in line with the size or dollar amount you need."

Of course, collecting fine art is not simply a matter of wandering through a gallery, pointing to the nudes of one's choice. *continued on page 58*

Serious collectors need information and this is where McColl-Shiraz shines. The original impulse may be emotional, but the second part of the decision is financial. As an investment over the last ten years, art has outperformed other collectibles, most financial markets, and even real estate.

Making a sound financial investment in buying a painting requires knowing that the work of art is, in fact, what it is represented to be, and knowing that it is fairly priced, considering its quality and significance in the artist's body of work. First of all, some pieces are fakes. Never a good idea. But even an original by a name artist isn't necessarily a solid investment. "There are art auctions all the time," says Massoud Shiraz, "and plenty of bad paintings come to market."

Amateurs get burned when they assume that any Van Gogh is a good Van Gogh. Determining whether a work of art was produced in an early academic period of an artist's career, or in a later, more mature period are key considerations in evaluating paintings. Whether it is a good example from a given period is equally important.

And once this emotionally appealing, authentic and fairly priced work of art is finally uncovered, there's one more hurdle. A great painting may not be in great shape.

Enter Massoud Shiraz. "Work that has been badly restored loses much of its value," he says, almost shuddering. "Sometimes poor restoration cannot be corrected." Shiraz began training in restoration during his junior year of high school in Iran, when he became an intern at a museum. Since then, he's studied all over Europe, and paintings he's worked on hang in many important collections. "You must know the components of the painting and the work of the particular artist," he says. "What century, what media, what brush, whether he used his right or left hand. And you must know your limits. It's about the artist, not about you."

The restoration of old paintings is a process that begins with a careful examination and evaluation of the painting's condition. A painting in good condition can usually be cleaned through the removal of surface dirt which may have accumulated through the years, and then the very careful removal of old discolored varnish, which often hides a painting's true beauty. If done correctly, a painting will often appear dramatically more vibrant and will more accurately reveal the artist's original intent. The conservator removes the varnish along with the smoke and general grime accumulated through the years, and then reapplies a new coat of varnish. If done correctly, the colors suddenly pop out, as vibrant as the day the artist first dipped his brush.

So a painting must be evaluated from many perspectives before the team at McColl-Shiraz will give the nod. "We could investigate a piece," Shiraz says, "and end up saying, 'Don't buy this painting. It's inferior in quality, it's overpriced.' The collector might be disappointed but we've saved them a lot of money."

The current exhibition (November 22-January 17) at McColl-Shiraz features approximately 60 pieces of marine art and is entitled *The Exploration Set Sail*, in honor of a key painting in the collection. "To be candid," McColl says, "we went with marine art because I like it."

"Our marine exhibit will bring something new to the Southeast," says Howell.

"Seascapes are fixtures in collections in New England, and growing in popularity with collectors in the South." The collection includes *View of Boston Harbor* by Robert Salmon and *Coastline with Rocky Cliffs* by Josef Willroder.

Some of the pieces are being reframed to show them to their best advantage, which leads us to another aspect of art consultation. Frames are an important part of the story at McColl-Shiraz. Artists working 300 years ago knew how a piece would be framed and took that into consideration as they painted. Some artists went so far as to design their own frames, and a Whistler painting in a Whistler frame is worth far more than just a lone Whistler.

Private collectors sometimes sell the picture with its original frame, but pictures bought at auction have often been reframed by savvy auctioneers looking to sell them separately and up their profit margin. "If you acquire such a piece, the odds are that it's not in the original frame," says Methner. "So the first step is to determine if it is in an appropriate frame."

What makes a frame appropriate? "First of all, there must be a marriage between painting and frame," says Howell. A frame shouldn't compete with the painting, but rather draw the eye to it. "Another part of the question is academic," says Methner. "Is the frame from the same country and period as the painting?" Needless to say, coming up with antique frames isn't a cheap process. The ever-practical Shiraz adds, "Consider framing part of the cost when you obtain any piece."

Sometimes the frame stands as art within itself. Framers were skilled craftsmen, and it was no less a personage than Martha Stewart who first mainstreamed the idea of grouping empty frames. "They really are stylish," says Howell.

Especially when the frames are as gorgeous as those upstairs at McColl-Shiraz. One side of the room holds French frames, which are heavy, ornate, and generally gold. On the other side are darker and more austere frames from Holland, Italy, and Germany. "I believe it's the largest collection of frames south of New York," says McColl. "If you're going to buy a great painting and pay a great deal of money for it, it only makes sense to get a first-class frame."

And now the final question – the money question. Is Charlotte ready for this? McColl predicts that this banking town will soon be banking on art. "You buy a \$100,000 car," he reasons, "and in five years it's worth half that. You buy a good \$100,000 painting and in five years it may be worth twice what you paid. Many financial portfolios need a place for fine art. And it's the most beautiful asset anyone can own." ■

● McColl-Shiraz. 208 East Boulevard. 704.333.5983. mccollshiraz.com ●



Artist Frans Jacobus Blyk, *The Exploration Sets Sail*, Oil on canvas



Artist Adolf Echter, *Little Girl Playing Dressup*, Oil on canvas



Artist Pierre-Marie Beyle, *Fleur des Grèves*, Oil on Canvas
Kathryn Howell from McColl-Shiraz