

HELPING OLD PAINTINGS COME TO LIFE AGAIN

by Stephanie E. Suggs

Photography by Robert Bailey

Massoud A. Shiraz's studio is laden with the smell of new paints, turpentine, and acetate — the sensory badge of an artist. The marble floor is spotless. Several paintings lean tiredly on counters and easels awaiting the touch that will rejuvenate them. Cabinets bear rows upon rows of paints, solvents, and chemicals from all over the world. The back wall is lined with books—heavy, glossy art books from the Louvre, The National Gallery London, The National Gallery Washington DC, The Guggenheim, The Tate, The Metropolitan...

Shiraz is a conservator — a type of artist few people hear much about. Most conservators work in the private rooms of museums or in their own studios carefully studying, copying, and restoring the masterpieces we wait in line to see. They are the anonymous artists who keep art that is hundreds of years old looking vivid and untouched by age and elements.



Conservator Massoud Shiraz at work in his studio. The painting above the doorway is a copy he did of a Ruben; the paintings on the worktable and easel are current restoration projects.

Restoration is all about knowing paint — from all periods of art. To restore a painting the artist must know what kind of paint the artist may have used and what chemicals will dissolve which pigments. Restoration is also about knowing the artist's technique and style. For this reason, Shiraz does some copy work when preparing to restore a painting. This enables him to imitate the brush strokes used by the original artist. He is very meticulous about his work, documenting everything he does and taking

before-and-after photographs so the next time the painting needs restoring, a conservator will know exactly what areas were worked on, what the problem was (water damage, smoke damage, torn canvas...), and what kind of paints and chemicals were used.

A member of the American Institute of Conservation since 1991, Shiraz received his training in the art of restoration in a compelling and applaudable way. Shiraz

ARTIST AT WORK

was born in Iran where he was schooled in painting and restoration at one of two government-funded art schools in the country, then continued on at the University. At the age of 19, Shiraz left Iran to make his way alone in Istanbul.

While there, he painted postcards for children and took on some commission work to pay for rent and food. He later moved on to Yugoslavia, but because there was no work available he went to Vienna and then on to Rome. In Rome, Shiraz worked

as an understudy for a conservator at the Vatican. It was there that he got hands-on education in restoration. Shiraz still remembers the time he had trouble with a small area on a painting and his instructor laughed at him, saying, “You never learn until you know for yourself. I did the same thing about 24 years ago.”

At the Vatican, Shiraz worked mostly with Italian Renaissance pieces, but in Charlotte 75% of his work is 19th Century. He says the most common problem he gets is paintings that have moved from dealer to dealer and a coat of shellac has been applied with each move to make it look older. Shellac can damage a painting and often takes away much of the beauty.



Adam and Eve (tempra) is an excellent example of Shiraz's ability as an artist

Although Shiraz makes his living by restoring paintings, he also finds time to do some paintings of his own. He works mostly with tempera and creates pieces in a miniaturist style which has precise curving lines and bold colors, but appears flat and has no background perspective. His work has a magical, dream-like quality, best summed up in a piece called “Dream”. This perfectly two-dimensional piece portrays a person sitting among clouds—almost fighting to be seen—and the lines that should

separate the fingers on the hand are missing. It depicts how we remember dreams—things are cloudy and details, such as a person's hands, are never noticed.

After working half-way around the globe, Shiraz made Charlotte his home in the early '80s. He had spent four months in the U.S. and when he returned to Rome, his instructor told him, “I came out of retirement to teach you because I knew you wanted to learn. I've taught you all I know – now go back to America.” Shiraz is content in Charlotte. He feels he is needed here – to help the community realize the value of art and the value of caring for it properly. “My job,” he feels, “is to educate the people.”