ART DOCTOR

Massoud Shiraz may look like a painter as he sits in his airy, sunlit Charlotte studio — and he is, on occasion — but his main goal in life is to save from degradation the work of other painters.

The concrete beneath the room where Massoud Shiraz operates goes down twice as far as most foundations. Vibrations from trucks rumbling through the street might otherwise make him disfigure the elegant woman whose beauty lies in his hands.

A slip of his scalpel means disaster. Disasters can be repaired, of course - that is his job - but never to the absolute perfection of the original. And his patient is old, so old, perhaps 300 years. The varnish caked on her face, yellow as the tusks of a dying bull elephant, must be removed delicately. The art restorer shares the doctor's motto: First, do no harm. Harm is done by his customers; they bring him paintings that are ripped, clotted with grime, faded from bright sun, blistered by intense heat. One recent piece looked as if it had bled to death: Inept house painters had spilled crimson latex down its surface in gaudy rivulets.

Not all of Shiraz's patients respond completely to treatment, no matter how deftly he wields his knives or how many glues and solvents emerge from his apothecary shop. But unlike the physician, he always holds out hope.

``I don't believe there's a painting in the world that can't be saved,'' he says, in a voice tinted by the lilt of an Iranian accent after 14 years in the United States.

``Maybe I can't save it. Maybe it can't be revived 100 percent. But some of it can be saved. Workers have been at The Last Supper' for 30 years; there are parts they can't fix, but they'll keep what they can.''

GUARDIAN OF SMALL TREASURES

Though some of the art that passes through his workshop is older than the United States, Shiraz doesn't restore Da Vincis. That task falls to museum conservators, who have an army of chemists and historians (not to mention huge bank accounts) at their beck.

He's likelier to preserve family heirlooms, finds uncovered in attics, maybe works painted by artists whose names are lost to time.

``You educate the customer,'' says Shiraz. ``If somebody bought a painting from a flea market, I have to say, Let's patch it or sew it, instead of relining it completely.' If you have a painting worth $2,000, you shouldn't spend $10,000 to restore it - unless it has sentimental value. My father's watch cost $5, but I spent $480 to fix it up.''

The setting of fees is a delicate matter. Shiraz prefers to visit clients in their homes, since he has to insure works that reach his studio.

The painstaking work of scraping away varnish, just a part of the art restorer's job, makes a huge difference in this before-and-after comparison of a painting tarnished by time.

He'll provide a range of estimates, from the cost of a basic fix to a complete restoration. He might charge $350 to remove the crimson spilled by house painters. To strip varnish, take out stains, retouch that painting and make sure new varnish matches might cost $1,300.

``In Europe, if the owner feels comfortable with you, he says, Go ahead, do whatever is necessary.' In Charlotte, you have to explain how long it will take, how much everything costs. Sometimes I'll quote a price to clean a painting. I'll clean it in my studio and find that it really needs all kinds of retouching. If I've quoted a price, I have to do that extra work anyway.''

You're paying for the studio he planned and built, with help from subcontractors. You're reimbursing him for supplies: A small plastic canister of varnish sports a $180 price tag, while tubes of paint may go for $50 apiece.

You're supporting his library, which begins with a 16-volume ``Encyclopedia of Fine Art'' and runs all the way down to three-ring binders explaining the chemical construction of solvents.

Mostly, though, you're buying two decades of expertise.

``I might have to use four or five different solvents on one painting,'' says Shiraz, who tests each in an area that won't be seen after the work is back in its frame. ``I have to analyze the paint to determine which color matches it exactly. It's much more difficult to touch up paint that has oxidized than to repaint completely.''

He points to a 1643 depiction of two lovers. ``That paint had come halfway off the canvas, so I had to preserve it with sturgeon glue from Russia and a thin piece of Japanese paper. I put all of the surface back to the way it had been, removed the relining (done to strengthen the canvas) and relined it myself.''

Though he'll restore paintings from any era, the Renaissance seems to be his love:

``Art in the Renaissance is complete. You can tell all the other artists, Go find other jobs. You

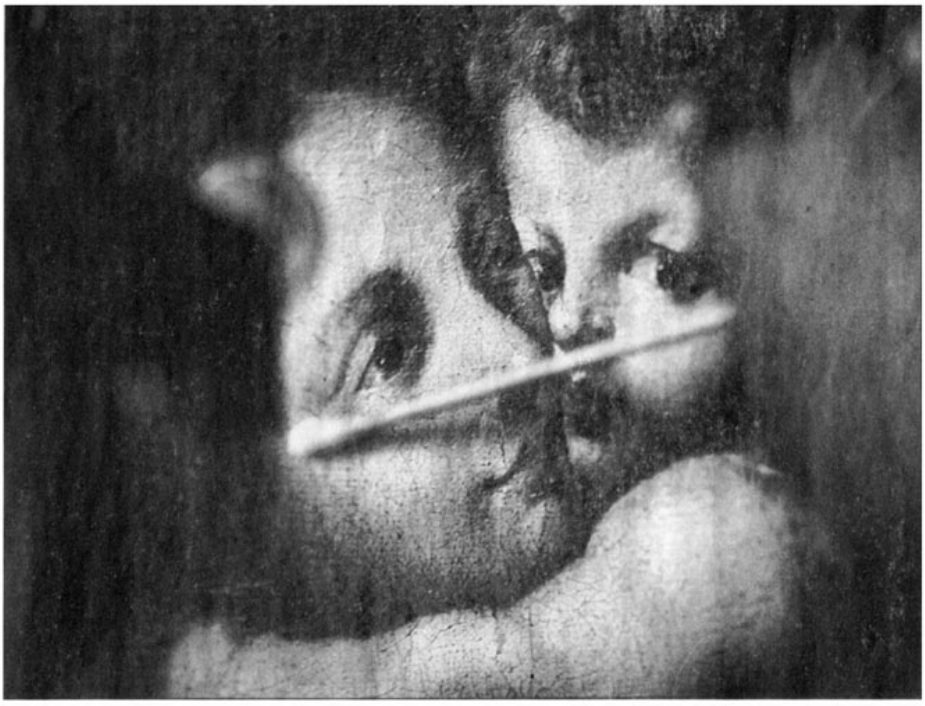
can't paint better than this.' Da Vinci, Raphael, Giorgione - you study art, it's the Renaissance, and it's Italy."

A NEW LEAF, A NEW LIFE

Italy snatched Shiraz out of one world and hurled him into another.

He was born 42 years ago in Iran, under the Shah. His father met and married Shiraz's mother in the U.S.S.R. after World War II. They moved to Mashad, a town on the border between the two nations. Young Massoud had one sister and nine brothers, all but one older than he; when he grew up, his father handled real estate and did government work.

Shiraz recalls primary school without affection: ``The only class I never cheated in was painting. Chemistry, literature, I couldn't put my heart into them; I always tried to pass with a C.' By eighth grade, my grades were very bad."



L. MUELLER/Staff

Among his other projects, Shiraz works on an Italian painting of the Madonna and child that dates to the Renaissance.

An art teacher suggested the boy attend art school. So he did, at a government-sponsored facility and then at the University of Tehran, graduating in 1978 with specialties in oil painting, miniatures and restoration.

``In 1979, the government changed, and I felt I had to leave," he says, sipping hot tea and nibbling white chocolate in his studio. ``The Muslims were against many things, including European art - especially nude painting. I thought, If God created us naked, he didn't have a problem. Why should I?' ``

He went to Istanbul, Turkey. The next few years are a blur as he recounts them: painting miniatures in a bazaar, living in a cold-water flat, eating bread and yogurt, copying paintings for an antique dealer. (His pay was $40 a day and all the tea he wanted.)

After a stay in Yugoslavia, where a brother acted as translator, he moved to Rome, where he traded paintings for rent. (He still paints for enjoyment.) He looked through the phone book and called a man with a Persian last name. The Persian ran a restaurant and introduced Shiraz to one of his customers, an art conservator.

``That man gave me a brush and paint and said, You have five minutes to show what you can do.' He came back half an hour later and said, You can stay here to work.' My first job was to sweep his floor. Later, when he trusted me, he let me do some retouching."

Shiraz says he worked on paintings for the Museum of the Vatican and churches, but fate didn't intend him for la bella Roma. When his father died, Shiraz was deputized to inform a brother in Charlotte; he soon returned to North Carolina to live, though he barely spoke English.

``That first year (1984), I stayed home and watched TV to learn the language. The second year, I started to sketch designs for an Italian fabric company at $165 a week. After four or five years, I was painting again and starting to restore." In 1991, he married his wife, Sherrill.

ACQUIRING A FOLLOWING

As you'd guess, he lives by word of mouth, collecting letters of recommendation from clients. Those include Francis Robicsek, the art collector who runs the Department of Thoracic and Vascu-

lar Surgery at Carolinas Medical Center. He says in a latter that Shiraz ``displays great artistic expertise in restoring old, neglected, deteriorating paintings as close to their original state as possible by bringing back their color, texture and vibrancy."

The Rev. Oscar Burnett, abbot of Belmont Abbey, writes of Shiraz's ``tempered, cautious and conservative strategy" in restoring six tattered oil portraits ``to their earlier freshness, sharpness and beauty."

CONSERVATIVE IS THE KEY WORD

``Everything I do must be reversible," insists Shiraz, a professional associate of the American Institute for Conservation. ``And I must document every step, so a future conservator knows what I've done.

``A painting may look untouched (to the naked eye). If you use an ultraviolet light, you see the work there." Sure enough, a woman's portrait shows an unblemished right profile under UV; the left profile seems to have been pitted by smallpox. That's retouching.

Shiraz attributes success to knowing what he doesn't know: ``Too much pride comes from ignorant people. If I have a doubt, I get a second or third opinion. Someone always knows more than I do.

``Maybe if I lived 300 years, working 20 hours a day, I could call myself a great conservator - for oil paintings only."

He's aware of time passing: Studio clocks reflect the hour in Iran, western Europe and Charlotte. And though he paints for his own pleasure, he realizes he won't make a lasting impact that way. His role in life is to save the art of others.

``That's how we know Raphael and Michelangelo today; without restorers, the great old paintings would be gone," he declares. ``But it doesn't matter if the paintings I work on are good or not.

``I have to respect the artist and resist the temptation to make the work better.' I even want to know if the artist painted right- or left-handed, because that affects my brush strokes. If I do my job right, no one will see I've been there."

PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE

So you hope never to meet Massoud Shiraz professionally? Then take his advice now.

``Half of the paintings I get, clients could have avoided coming to me," he says. Here are his tips:

- Try not to expose paintings to humidity of more than 55 percent.
- Never hang a painting over a fireplace. Paintings expand and contract as the temperature changes; this causes cracking.
- Cover the back of the painting so dirt doesn't adhere to it. Don't let dirt accumulate in places where it can make the canvas deteriorate.
- Keep the painting away from direct sunlight, which will bleach it. The more a painting stays in the dark, the darker pigment remains. (That's why paintings in churches often look so dark, says Shiraz.)
- Almost needless to add, don't leave the painting where the surface can be exposed to anything that would scar or stain it. If somebody's cleaning or painting your house, make sure art works are fully covered with clean cloths.

``Art doesn't belong to you and me," says the restorer almost devoutly. ``It belongs to our children and their children. We owe it to the next generations to preserve it."