

# MCCOLL, SHIRAZ TURN THEIR PASSION INTO A BUSINESS

NEW GALLERY EMPHASIZES TRADITIONAL 'FINE ART' WITH ACCENT ON SERVICE

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Hugh McColl Jr. (left) and Massoud Shiraz have recently opened McColl-Shiraz. The art gallery features not only European paintings from the 17th to 20th centuries, but more than 200 European frames of the same period.

Hugh McColl Jr. fears he and Massoud Shiraz may have given the wrong impression when they opened their new gallery, McColl-Shiraz, in March - that the paintings were too expensive, and that the partners weren't looking to turn a profit.

On view at the opening and, as it turns out, on loan, was a painting worth more than a million dollars by Adolphe William Bouguereau. And McColl joked that he didn't have a price list. In a recent interview, the two partners emphasized they have affordable paintings and are in business to sell them. They hope visitors will flow through the glass doors into their clean, well-lit space where East and South boulevards meet. Yet McColl-Shiraz is more about love than money.

"He has a passion for art," Shiraz, an art restorer and artist, said of the retired banking executive.

McColl said, "I like to buy paintings because I like the beauty of them. They talk to me."

About 60 landscapes, nudes, still-lives, portraits and genre scenes hang on the white walls of the first floor. Many are by 19th-century Dutch, German, Italian and American painters.

About 200 historic and ornate picture frames hang on the upper floor, visible from below through a glass and aluminum railing. "I believe, immodestly," McColl said, "we have the finest frame collection south of New York." Charlotte's newest gallery fills the niche that generally might be called "fine art" - realistic and figurative,

untouched by contemporary art's shock of the new. The partners point out, however, that their business is about more than selling paintings.

## A journey in art

Art brought them together about 15 years ago. McColl had a painting restored by Shiraz, an Iranian who's been in the United States for almost 20 years and has spent a lifetime in art.

McColl spent a life in business, retiring in 2001 as CEO after leading Bank of America to the top ranks. He credits several sources for his interest in art, including the bank's collection, which grew richer as the bank took over other institutions.

Before that, there was his mother, a painter; and friends such as the late Anne McKenna, a longtime Charlotte gallery owner, and artist Ben Long, best-known for his frescoes.

(By happenstance, the gallery's holdings include a large nude by F. Luis Mora, who taught Long's grandfather, painter and preacher McKendree Long, at the Art Students League in New York at the beginning of the last century.)

The collecting bug bit McColl hard. At the end of a trip, he and his wife Jane would buy a painting as a remembrance. When he bought a bank, he would give himself art as a present. McColl also likes to support local artists by buying their work.

During his tenure, Bank of America redid old buildings on North Tryon Street uptown into the Mint Museum of Craft & Design and what is now the McColl Center for Visual Art, and purchased the Hewitt Collection of African American art for the Afro-American Cultural Center, at a total cost of about \$20 million.

McColl's personal collection overflows into closets, various offices and onto the walls of institutions he's connected with - Queens University and the Foundation for the Carolinas.

He estimates that he owns about 200 works, but he can't keep track of it all. "I have no idea," he said. "I really don't know." A gallery - as much a chance to buy art as to sell it - seemed like a natural step. He and Shiraz talked about it for years but didn't get down to serious planning until McColl retired.

## Service as well as selling

For the past two years, the partners spent weekends driving around the city looking for a site. Jane McColl spied the building, which had housed the Dilworth Post Office, a fancy dress shop and a rug store.

"We knew we wanted a museum-quality space," McColl said. The partners worked with architect David Wagner on a gallery with movable walls (McColl's idea) and a tongue-and-groove white oak floor.

The gallery and art consulting business is McColl's third endeavor since retirement and the one he's put the most money into. The others are McColl Partners, a merger and acquisitions firm, and McColl Garella, which specializes in advising businesses owned and run by women. Shiraz will continue his restoration business. They also bought art that expresses their taste. A favorite of McColl's: "Sisters Playing Music on the Dunes," a sunny scene by 19th-century German artist Herman Seeger. Just before the opening, Shiraz put a darker wooden frame on a marine painting, "The Exploration Sets Sail," by 19th-century Dutch artist Frans Jacobus Blyk. Now, the ships straining against the wind and the whitecaps stand out.

Works sell for \$1,200 to \$200,000, with many in the \$25,000 to \$35,000 range. The artists are not well-known. "We don't collect names," Shiraz said. "We collect the artwork."

But paintings are only part of the gallery's mission. The partners say the emphasis will be on service as much as on selling.

If you have a painting in mind from a particular place, time or price range, the staff will find it for you. Ditto if you have one you like and want one like it.

They'll work to authenticate works, make sure they have the right frame, and clean them and restore them if necessary.

Several years ago, McColl bought a painting on his own that turned out to be a fake. He wants to spare others that experience.

If a client wants a Picasso or a contemporary work, the partners say they'll step outside their comfort zones. "We don't rule out anything," McColl said. "We won't try to impose our taste on other people."