

Rehs Galleries

New York City

In the interest of offering our readers insights and perspective into galleries, we plan to feature discussions with a successful gallery owner in each issue. These interviews are edited to fit the available space; the full text of the in-depth interview (well worth reading) can be found at www.artistadvocate.com in the Gallery Interviews section. —The Editor

Artist Advocate: Can you share the story of how your grandfather and father got into the art gallery business?

Howard L. Rehs: Our story starts back in the mid-20th century. My grandfather, M. Edwin Schillay, an accountant, had an antique dealer as a client. This dealer suggested, some time in the 1940s, that he consider entering the antique or art business and was very helpful getting him started. The dealer recommended that he travel to Europe, buy a group of paintings, and have them crated and shipped to the U.S. Once here, the containers were brought to a space he rented at the Manhattan Storage Warehouse and sold in bulk. He never opened the crates, each of which held 400-500 works.

This “business” continued until the mid-1950s, when his wife decided she wanted to work. They rented a space at 303 Park Avenue South and started to bring the crates in on a more regular basis and open them up.

In 1960, the business moved to a larger space at 386 Park Avenue South. By this time, they were bringing in 12 shipments per year, each containing 500-600 works of art. When my grandfather became ill, his son-in-law, my father, Joseph B. Rehs, also an accountant, went to work in his accounting firm — but it did not take him very long to see that the art business looked like a better opportunity.

By 1961, my father was working in the art business full time. He remembers the good old days: buying paintings by the British Victorian artist Oliver Clare, framing them, and selling them for \$10. He even went out on a limb and bought a major work by Frederick Morgan for \$225 (75 pounds sterling) and sold it for \$450 — a huge profit. Of course, that same painting came back on the market not too long ago and sold for about \$1 million!



Howard Rehs is director of Rehs Galleries and president of the Fine Art Dealers Association.

My grandfather passed away in January 1963, and that same year the firm’s name was changed to Schillay & Rehs, Inc. It wasn’t until 1991, when the last of the Schillay family left the business, that the name was changed to Rehs Galleries, Inc.

Artist Advocate: When did you enter the scene?

Howard L. Rehs: I think I was brainwashed at an early age — art, art, art! And I have tried that with my kids, but with little success. I spent many a summer working in the gallery. During the really early days, that consisted of me playing in the packing material. As they say, you have to start at the bottom and work your way up.

I majored in art history at New York University, which has one of the finest art history programs, and I had the added benefit of studying with many of the top professors: Rosenblum, Sandler, Janson, Sullivan, etc. For me, this education was priceless.

Artist Advocate: What are your keys to success in the gallery business?

Howard L. Rehs: Be as knowledgeable as possible in the period of art you deal in and realize that even an expert cannot know it all. Be open and honest, treat every customer as a friend, and do your best to make your customers happy.



Dealers who really care about the art they sell, and only offer works of the highest quality, build a loyal client base. Those who help educate their clients will have an easier job building their business. We always say that the paintings we deal in sell themselves — we just need, at times, to fill in some of the art historical blanks.

Artist Advocate: You are known for historical European paintings, but you also carry some living artists. Can you explain why you mix the two?

Howard L. Rehs: Anyone who deals in the historical art that we do, knows there is a limited supply of high-quality paintings that are not only good examples of their respective artist's work, but are in great condition and from the right period. As this supply begins to dry up, prices are pushed up, and certain people are forced out of the market. In order to cater to some of those individuals, and people who want a nice painting but do not want to spend a great deal of money, we have looked to include contemporary artists whose work is in the same vein as the 19th-century art we show — high-quality art by artists who we believe will stand the test of time.

Artist Advocate: What strategies do you employ to keep your business healthy?

Howard L. Rehs: Work, work, work, 24/7/365. I answer every e-mail that comes in. You also need to be out there, advertising, both in print and on the web, as well as participating in those exhibitions that relate to your business.

Artist Advocate: Tell me about the Fine Art Dealers Association. What is its purpose?

Howard L. Rehs: The Fine Art Dealers Association was formed in 1990 by a small group of California dealers and over the years has grown to be an important internationally respected art association.

The need to instill confidence in potential buyers is extremely important, especially in the unregulated art world. The more confidence people have in the dealers they intend to work with, the more rewarding the experience will be for all involved.

I was elected president 12 years ago; there were 16 or 17 members then, and now we are 55 strong — and still growing.

Artist Advocate: Will the art gallery as we know it be the same in five or 10 years, or will everything go online?

Howard L. Rehs: I cannot imagine the art gallery going the way of the typewriter. The Internet is a great tool for information, but artists need space to display their new works and buyers want to see and, at times, touch works. There are also many wise people who want to know that the galleries they are dealing with actually exist, have stood the test of time, and will be there in both the good and bad times. It is easy to make yourself look good on the Internet — images and information can be picked up anywhere — but it is another thing



to make your physical gallery look good. Here, the proof is hanging on your walls.

Artist Advocate: How important has the Internet become to your business and to FADA?

Howard L. Rehs: Today it is very easy for a person in some remote corner of the world to find you and hopefully purchase or even sell you something. Art professionals also need to realize that the Internet will not, on its own, change their business. You still need to work your website, constantly updating it with new information and giving people a reason to come back. You also need to understand that many people will land on your site looking for little more than information. All of this is very time consuming, but the rewards can be great — you just never know when being a nice guy will pay off.

Artist Advocate: What advice do you have for gallery owners who want to grow?

Howard L. Rehs: You need to spend a great deal of time building your reputation and expertise in your chosen field. There is nothing better than knowing that people are coming to you because of your reputation. It is also important to remember that while it takes years or decades to build that reputation, it only takes one stupid move to destroy it. In the end, it is your eye and your reputation that will either make or break you.

Artist Advocate: Who are your personal favorite artists?

Howard L. Rehs: When I was young, I used to tell my family that one day I would have a room with a swivel chair in the middle and on one wall there would be a Vermeer and on the opposite wall would be a Van Gogh. So far I have not accomplished that goal, but I am working on it!

Read the full text of the Rehs Galleries interview at www.artistadvocate.com.