

AS SEEN IN ARTIST
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 CONNECTING ARTISTS WITH GALLERIES

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 operator in each issue. These interviews are also available online at www.artistadvocatemagazine.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



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

work by Frederick Morgan for \$225 (75 pounds sterling) and sold it for a \$450 — a huge profit. Of course, that same painting came back on the market not too long ago and sold for about \$1 million!

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: Where 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 guess some of us are more susceptible to the powers of persuasion. I will add that I did spend many a summer, during my younger days, working in the gallery. During the real 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, graduating in 1981. NYU 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 with people, treat every customer as a friend, and do your best to make your customers happy.

Artist Advocate: What are the keys to building and maintaining a reputation and brand as a gallery and developing and maintaining a solid following of collectors?

Howard L. Rehs: This question relates to the previous one. 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 to see the differences between the good and bad works 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. Some of the more established contemporary realist artists include Allan & Holly Banks, Gregory Frank Harris, John Kuhn, and Sally Swatland. We have also just started representing the work of Katie Swatland, an amazing new talent; and as a slight departure, we have begun showing the abstract works of Chris Pousette-Dart, the grandson of American abstract expressionist Richard Pousette-Dart.

Artist Advocate: What are the keys to excellent relationships with collectors?

Howard L. Rehs: Keeping your clients well informed, offering the best works possible, and catering to their needs. If you have a large client base, this can be difficult when a number of clients all want the same thing, but we manage to make it work.



Artist Advocate: Can you share the strategies you employ to keep your business healthy?

Howard L. Rehs: Work, work, work, 24/7/365. 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. This year alone we have participated in the Los Angeles Art Show (January), The Palm Beach Jewelry, Art & Antiques Show (February), The D.C. Spring Antiques Show (March), and the International Fine Art Fair, New York City (May). While the economic climate is a challenging one, we have been doing relatively well. I am not going to tell you that business is like it was 16 months ago, but we still have many people buying, and considering, works of art. In the past few months we have sold important works by William Bouguereau, Daniel Ridgway Knight, Louis Aston Knight, three by Julien Dupré, Paul Trouillebert, Louis Valtat, Edouard Cortes, and numerous paintings by our contemporary artists — Sally Swatland, Katie Swatland, Gregory Harris, Holly Banks, etc.

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.

Like any similar association, we were created to help further the growth and notoriety of our members, and I know we still hold true to our mission statement: ... our members are dedicated to promoting and maintaining the highest degree of professionalism, scholarship, and integrity in all business conducted with colleagues, institutions, and the art buying public. 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.

In addition, we are able to secure group advertising rates; created a fabulous website (www.fada.com), and 14 years ago started the Los Angeles Art Show, which has become one of the preeminent art shows in the world.

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: How does one judge quality? Is it a know-it-when-you-see-it kind of thing?

Howard L. Rehs: That is a very interesting question. To begin with, membership is by invitation only and we require three current members to sponsor any potential new member. So before any gallery is proposed, there is some level of vetting. From that point, additional information about the gallery is requested, and then the membership committee starts its due diligence. Once a potential member has cleared these hurdles, the general membership is asked for their comments/opinions, and finally all the information is brought to the board for a final vote.

For the most part, quality is quality regardless of its style, so even a dealer who specializes in 19th-century Academic works, and has been in the art world for many years, will have a handle on what makes one abstract work better than another. I do think that an eye for quality is something you develop over a period of time, and being able to pick the good from that bad is what separates the best dealers from the rest.

Artist Advocate: What trends are you seeing in the art business?

Howard L. Rehs: Since we specialize in 19th-century Academic, Barbizon, and Impressionist works, the buyers who work with us are still looking for the same things: high-quality art that is in excellent condition and fairly priced. This is the way it has always been. While there are instances when someone is looking to fill a specific spot, for the most part, our clients buy what they love and then find a place for it.

Even with our contemporary artists, people are looking for works that speak to them, and that is really the main reason to buy a work of art.

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. There will always be a need for the traditional gallery, but that goes hand-in-hand with the on-

line experience. If you are not using the power of the web, you are still in the Dark Ages.

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.

As for the Fine Art Dealers Association's website, that is always evolving. During the years, we have changed it from a very simple group site to one that is now somewhat interactive, allowing people to sign up for e-mail alerts whenever a work by a specific artist is added to the site. And keep an eye out for our next version. In this instance, change is always good!

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: What are the most important lessons you've learned in the art business?

Howard L. Rehs: Work hard; be nice; be accommodating, and work for the benefit of the whole, not just yourself. I have been president of the Fine Art Dealers Association for more than 12 years now, and it is not just because I am a nice guy. Over that time, I have always worked for the benefit of all our members; if the group benefits, then I benefit.

Artist Advocate: If you were starting to collect today, what would you buy?

Howard L. Rehs: That is a tough question, because my tastes run the gamut. I own 19th-century paintings and both contemporary traditional and abstract pieces. I have always told people that you need to buy what you like, what you want to live with, what you love — and nothing will change that. What is the point of owning something if you do not like it?

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!