









Special Section: Great Ideas for Holiday Entertaining

San Francisco Focus

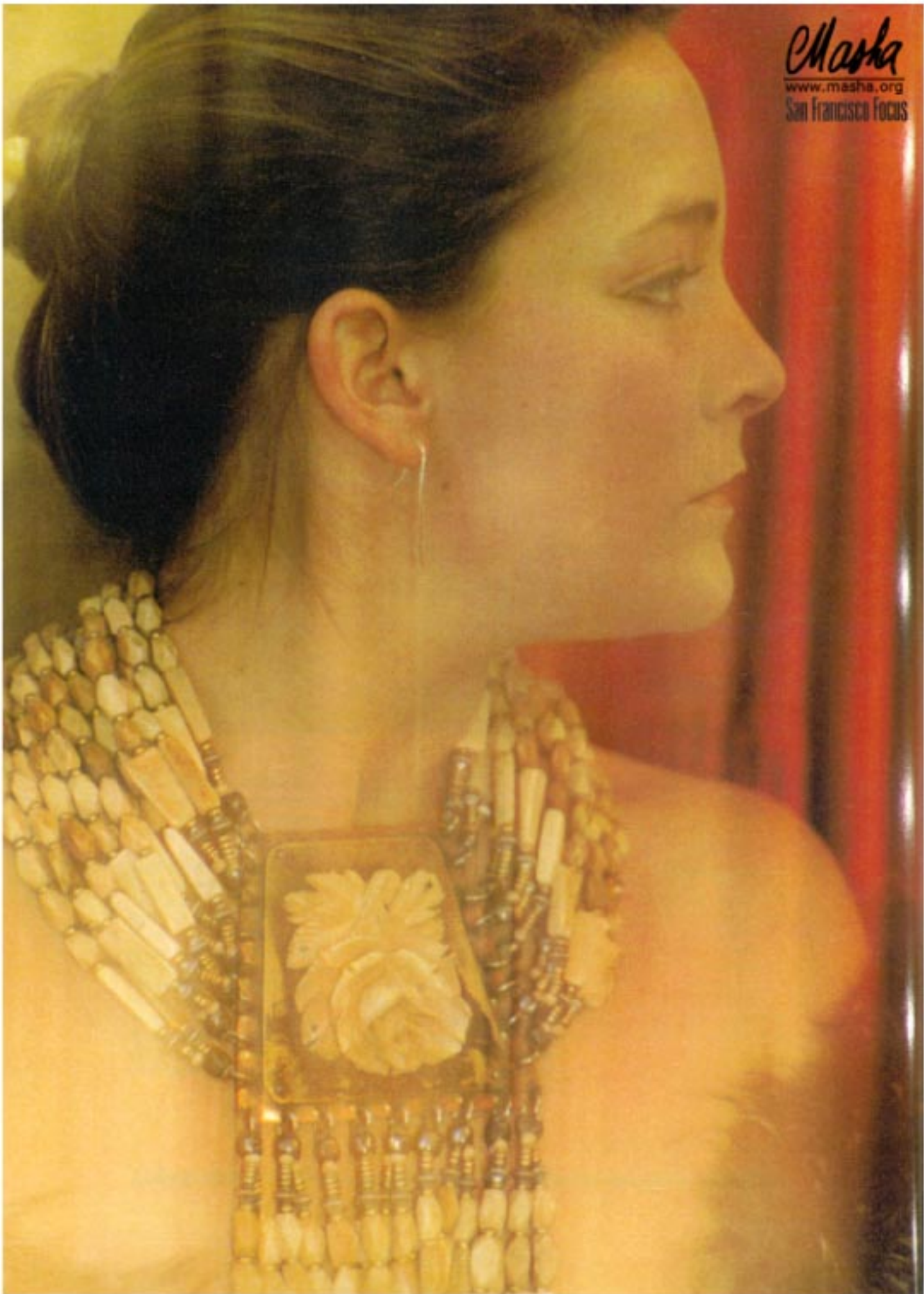
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	<p>We run the most sophisticated private intelligence operation in the world. Friends of mine are active in every country of the world. A million of them.</p>		<p>Both the Republican and the Democratic parties, especially the Democratic Party, are controlled by drug pushers.</p>	
	<h2>LAROUCHE</h2> <p>He's the father of Proposition 64, the "PANIC Initiative." He's running candidates for office across America. He has connections around the globe. His enemies include "homosexual" Henry Kissinger, "mobster" Mario Cuomo, "drug pusher" Queen Elizabeth II and the "communist" Reader's Digest. His goal: to become president of the United States.</p> <p>--An Exclusive Interview by Ken Kelley</p>			
	<p>The whole royal household is a nest of drug users. And the servants are dropping dead of AIDS left and right. You've got that Rosemary's baby--Prince Charles.</p>		<p>The Soviet government thinks I will be elected in 1988 or 1992. ... There was a Tass news bulletin about me today, attacking me again. ... The Soviets want to kill me.</p>	



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LOST ART

The Story of a Personal Tragedy

Nightmares, sometimes, begin in the morning.

In the empty second-floor flat of an outwardly drab Victorian surrounded by sweatshops, a four-year-old child hid in a closet while his parents painted rooms in preparation for occupancy.

He struck a match.

Within minutes—or tens of minutes (no one is sure)—omnivorous tongues of flame licked up the walls and through the ceiling to the floor above.

Before the windows of her third-floor bedroom/gallery imploded from the intense heat, Masha Archer smelled the smoke. She raced to the front of the flat to rouse her eldest daughter from sleep, pushed her into clothes and, shoeless, fled the building.

It was 10:15 a.m. on the last day of April 1986. In the subsequent hour, priceless art of every imaginable description (*Continued on page 77*)



“Craft
becomes art when it
receives the heat of an
artist’s attention—
such work as that of
Tiffany, Lalique,
Gaudi and Bakst.”
—Masha Archer

By Michael Munzell
Photography by Charles Archer



"Color compositions can totally engage and satisfy my eye. I try to present the viewer with this experience in a way that is at once familiar and completely new to us both."

—Masha Archer





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vanished in fire, smoke and torrents of water.

All the residents of the building escaped without injury. Nevertheless, portions of lives—and part of history—were lost.

The top floor of 653 Minna Street in San Francisco was more than a cramped six-room residence for a family of four. It was, in the words of a woman who had dined there just two weeks before, "like walking into a museum, into another era."

Masha and Charles Archer—both celebrated artists in their own right—had lived and worked on the premises for twenty years. During those decades, they packed their six rooms as well as the entire basement with countless collections of fine, rare, exotic and even whimsical art.

The Minna Street flat was, in startling ways, light-years removed from the polished marble floors and discreet ashes-of-rose display counters of the Saks Fifth Avenue store on Union Square, some twelve blocks away. Yet in the very first glass case that greets shoppers at the store's Powell-Post Street entrance are the fabulous necklaces crafted by Masha Archer, most of which retail for \$800 to \$2,500. And it is but a short cab ride from there to Vesuvio's Restaurant in North Beach, where some of the dreamy, exquisite photographs of Charles Archer will be on display through November 15th—or to the Community Blend Café on Fillmore near Haight, where other examples of his work hang until the end of November. Original prints of his work, according to Masha, sell for \$300 to \$400 each.

"I expected the Archers to be living in a mansion in Pacific Heights," confides Pearl Malkin, a Costa Mesa housewife who met and befriended Masha at an exhibit of her artwork. "When my husband and I went to dine with them, I realized they are, truly, the last of the starving artists."

Not exactly starving, perhaps, but certainly ill-prepared for adversity. Whatever money the Archers earned over the years through their art, they plowed back into materials for work and material things.

"We are both rapacious collectors," Masha says.

Charles adds, "We bought whatever was beautiful, whenever we could—and at bargain prices."

"Money, in a bank, just sits there," Masha continues. "This way we could do something wonderful with it, something that's interesting to people."

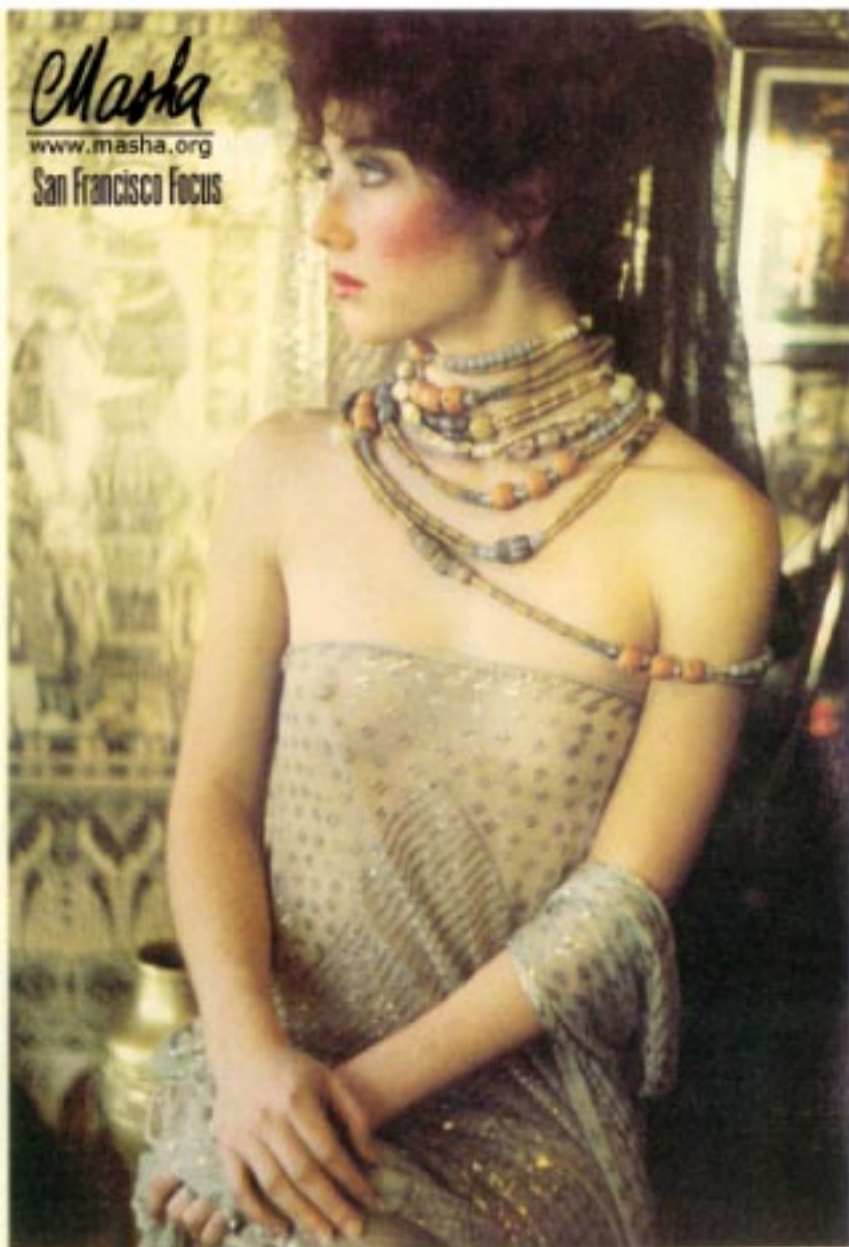
Constantly they haunted antique shops and dusty galleries—across the nation and around the world. "We were fixtures at flea markets," Masha recalls. "We would go with the intention of making money by selling some of our stuff, but while one of us was sitting in a booth ostensibly selling, the

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"Simplicity
for me is not a prize, unless
it is won through the articulation
of divergent ideas."

—Masha Archer



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other was out buying—more than we ever sold.”

Their collections grew and grew. They bought paintings, sculptures, classic cars, classic clothes, furs, ceramics, jewelry, glassware, pitchers, musical instruments, porcelain, photographs, daguerreotypes, tinnypes, Mexican *retablos*, dolls, stuffed animals, fabrics, anything art deco or art nouveau, Russian amber, ancient coins, entire libraries—and much, much more.

On the bannister of their Minna Street flat were close to two hundred Oriental carpets. “It looked like there was a hippopotamus when you came up the stairs,” Masha remembers. “You had to move like this [she sways her torso] to get around them.”

When the firemen were able to brave the stairs, they threw the carpets out a window onto the barren back lot in order to douse the flames. Within hours, mold set in, ruining many of the rugs.

Coins (some dating back to Alexander the Great) fused with glass in the intense heat of the fire. Cameras melted. Strings of bone and horn and ivory Masha had gathered to incorporate into a new line of



“My

dream is to have the great opera stars give these to each other—to have my visual music rest on the bosoms from which have poured the great arias.”

—Masha Archer

necklaces evaporated in flames.

Most devastating of all, Masha says, was the loss of Charles' life work. Charles' particular expertise is in calotype photography—the precursor of modern photography—in which negatives are made on paper with giant century-old box cameras. Between the fire and water that charred and drowned the flat that April morning, paper negatives never had a chance.

On one wall of the couple's bedroom-



workroom were three paintings by Russian artist Vladimir Shatalov. “Today even his lesser works go for \$25,000 each,” Charles says. But, he adds, “There is absolutely no way of gauging our loss. We never really catalogued the things we bought. You buy things because you love them, because they are beautiful and you want them around you.”

Not only was the art irreplaceable, it was uninsured. “No one would insure us,” Masha explains. “Not in this neighborhood.” Minna is the first SoMa—South of Market—street. Paralleling Market, it would be an alley were it not for the venerable Victorian houses located here and there along its eleven-block stretch. It's the sort of neighborhood cautious citizens avoid at night.

Despite the bleak warehouse walls and loading platforms across the narrow way, the light in the northern rooms was ideal for Charles Archer's extraordinary photography. The back porch, leading to rear stairs, served well as a darkroom (with windows obscured by Oriental carpets). And the ambience of art in every nook and cranny

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LOST ART

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my inspired Masha in her delicate and painstaking work of making jewelry into art (or vice versa, depending on your view).

FOR MORE THAN A MONTH AFTER the fire, the Archers spent their mornings looking for housing and their afternoons sifting through rubble to recover whatever they could. They camped out in a downtown hotel room provided by the Red Cross. Their daughters Maya, twenty-one, and Larissa, six, bunked in with friends.

And as if the initial material loss and familial upset were not tragic enough, the Archers' half-charred home was burglarized—again and again.

With the help of friends, they were continually boxing clothes and whatever remaining goods that were intact or only partially damaged and storing them in the basement of the building. At least twice, thieves broke in at night and carted off boxes. Then, three weeks into the recovery efforts, looters broke down the boarded-up back door to the third-floor flat to scavenge what the Archers had been unable to crate and store elsewhere.

The relentless pillaging took a heavy psychological toll. On a chilly afternoon early in June, Masha stood in the devastated flat still crammed with remnants of their life. Near tears, she said, "We were broken into again last night. There's no way to tell what they took. Everything is turned over. We can't find a place to go that we can afford. We're homeless. We have no place to put things. And we haven't any money."

The pricey necklaces by Masha Archer move at "one a week—at least," according to a salesperson at Saks in San Francisco, one of dozens of outlets nationwide where her artistry is for sale (mostly in Saks stores, museum shops and fine art galleries).

"But it's not like that elsewhere," Masha says. "I wish it were. Some money comes in, but it's not enough to do something sudden, to do what we need to do."

Twenty years ago the Archers rented the Minna Street flat for \$145, and that, she explains, included "two thousand square feet of space upstairs and another two thousand square feet of storage in the basement." The Archers were paying \$329 a month for the digs when the fire destroyed them. "We'll never find another place for that kind of money," she says, "and we know it."

"I was staggered by what the [rental] prices are nowadays," Charles adds, "with deposits and such. And we need space—space to work and live in."

When the allotted time for emergency housing ran out in late June, the Archers became gypsies, accepting shelter from

various friends. Finally, in August, they moved into the middle flat of an architecturally raped Victorian on Grove Street—on the wrong side of the freeway that separates chic from shabby.

Still, they were grateful for quarters to call their own and for the generosity of landlord Roger Kleid, who took pains to make the unit as suitable as possible "and even gave us a break on the rent," Masha says. Kleid cleared the basement so the family could store some of their hundreds of boxes of salvaged goods, and he put in new wiring so Masha could light a dank subterranean corner for a workshop. "We're going to make it as pleasant as possible," Charles says.

The task is formidable. A major drawback is that the only sunlit room in the Grove Street flat faces south, and the light is harsh. "I haven't figured out what to do about it yet," Charles says. "Suddenly my camera is seeing warts... and hairs on noses. I don't see those things and I don't want my camera to." He shrugs, then chuckles. "It'll ruin my reputation for romantic glamour."

It's been months since the flames were extinguished, but the Archers remain trapped by the fire—physically and mentally. "I still wake up at night," Charles says, shaking his head in bewilderment. "But you have to go on. You can't dwell on it because, well, because."

Fire was always the demon of their dreams, Masha adds. "The first thing we did when we moved in [on Minna Street] was sell our collection of candle holders. In those days hippies were using lots of candles and burning down those lovely Victorians in the Haight. We didn't want that here. We never lit anything. We appreciated it when people didn't smoke. We made our daughter sit at the bottom of the stairs to do her studies when we weren't here. She wasn't allowed to cook in the apartment when she was alone until she was in her late teens. We thought about fire, talked about it all the time."

But when the conflagration arrived, they were totally at its mercy. Charles was away that morning, supervising the mounting of a photo exhibit. Larissa was at school. Masha and Maya, in their haste to escape the flames, carried nothing with them when they fled.

Adversity is no stranger to the Archers, but it hadn't paid a house call in more than twenty years. Before the couple settled in San Francisco in the mid-1960s, pursuit of their art (and, in Masha's case, flight from oppression) carried both of them across continents. The daughter of renowned artists, Masha was born (in "the very early '90s") in Kiev, Russia. Her family was cast adrift during the upheavals of World War II.

Masha remembers part of it. She recalls

playing among the marble chips in her father's studio in a displaced persons camp as he sculpted heroic monuments for Eastern bloc countries immediately after the war—monuments that still stand in the German city of Hanover and elsewhere. As her father worked, Masha recalls, "There were always a couple of Russian soldiers with their rifles trained on him." The Soviets planned to repatriate the family when the monuments were finished.

The mother was allowed out of the camp only during the day while the father was working and Masha, the inquisitive daughter, was with him. The mother, during these sojourns, explored avenues of emigration to freedom.

At last she found a way. The family escaped to a DP camp jointly operated by the British and the Americans, "with the Russians literally breathing down our necks," Masha recalls.

"At that time, all the Russians who were discovered and were ordered to repatriate found ways to not arrive at home alive. But the Americans learned that they could save us through a technicality."

Masha's father changed his name from Mykola Muchin to Bohdan Dursat. Since the new name was on no Russian roster, the family, for all practical purposes, had vanished. "Danai," Masha explains, "is the name of a river that the Cossacks always used to get across to freedom. It was symbolic of escaping oppression."

During the five years the family spent in that DP camp, Masha's father did some of his most important work. Eventually the Dursats were located by American sponsors who had been searching for them for years. With the sponsors' aid, they landed in Philadelphia.

Masha was a schoolgirl then—unschooled, perhaps, in sciences, but savvy in the ways of the world, and in art. Her parents taught her what they could, while establishing careers in the States.

After studying painting in New York and Philadelphia, Masha traveled to Mexico. In Mexico City, she met her husband-to-be, Charles Archer, a chap from Mark Twain country who was visiting Mexico in order to view firsthand the work of world-renowned muralists.

Charles, eleven years older than Masha had already been married once when they met. He had served in the Army in World War II and spent five years in veterans hospitals afterwards, suffering from tuberculosis. When he was cured he enrolled in North Carolina's prestigious Black Mountain College.

Although his interest since childhood was in photography, he was schooled in art

up a studio, where he painted and photographed.

Whenever he accumulated a grubstake, Charles would cross the border to capture Mexico's Mayan ruins on film. It was almost inevitable, with their parallel interests in art and collecting, that Masha and Charles would meet. When they did, in 1963, it didn't take them long to recognize their compatibility.

They married, had their first child, Maya, in the Yucatán and migrated to San Francisco in 1966. Charles took a job handling office matters for a women's center on Page Street. As soon as they got on their feet financially, the Archers moved to the Minna Street flat.

DESPITE THE RECENT CATASTROPHE, Charles says, the Archers "won't do anything differently" in the future. Their entire lives have been dedicated to the creation and collection of art. They can't change that, and they don't want to. "Hopefully, we won't live in another house that will burn down," Charles says. "Once in a lifetime is sufficient."

"Art is for the ages," he adds. "That's the real loss. Yes, we had it for a time, but we always intended for it to go somewhere else—to museums."

"Museums borrowed from us," Masha adds. Once, for instance, she loaned the San Jose Museum enough antique jewelry to fill ten display cases.

Such a cooperative venture would be impossible for the Archers today. Chaos still bedevils them. "Hundreds of boxes of things are elsewhere," Masha says—stacked in warehouses, garages, basements and hallways of friends' businesses and homes. All were packed in haste and confusion. Reorganization is a colossal undertaking, and precious few hours per day can be devoted to it.

"We've got to concentrate on working," Masha says. Already, she estimates, the four-month break in creative endeavors will mean a scarcity of her jewelry in the stores sometime after the holidays.

And, eventually, the Archers must locate housing that will accommodate their collections. "This time," Masha says, "we want a place all our own, a house with a big garage or an old commercial building—something, anything. That way we'll know what happens. We'll be able to talk about what other tenants are doing. We're praying someone will help us."

It may be years before the Archers can tally the toll of the cataclysm on Minna Street. But some things did survive. Their lives were spared. Their talents are intact.

Masha
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