

There's an art gallery hiding in plain sight on North Tryon

Big cat, sparkling glass amid North Tryon's hidden treasures

And that's among the works anyone can walk in and see

Unless you've spent time in the Foundation for the Carolinas' lobby at 220 N. Tryon St., you've likely never encountered Charlotte's largest feline – a tabby cat immortalized on a 7-foot-tall painting, so realistic you expect a tail twitch.

The painting is named “Emily,” after the cat that served as model. It's one of 107 works – Chuck Close paintings, Italian art glass – that populate this lobby that's also a hidden gem of a public art gallery. But there's even more: some 350 pieces beyond the gallery, scattered throughout the building.

When the foundation moved into this building in 2011, it put art everywhere – not just in the lobby, but in the staff offices, where glass pieces gleam on tables and shelves, and also in 17 meeting rooms, each showcasing artwork. A glass mobile spirals from a ceiling. Living art – a wall of green plants – graces an outdoor sculpture garden.

At first, it seems curious – a foundation that gives away money and exhibits art – but it was actually carefully planned. Most works are from Charlotte's Isaac and Sonia Luski, renowned collectors who specialize in art glass. Their gifts already enhance public buildings and museums in Charlotte and around the country. But they had hundreds more pieces they wanted seen and enjoyed. So when the foundation moved in 2011 to its current location, it renovated specifically to showcase their works.

Though there's no official curator, Michael Marsicano, the foundation's executive director, sounds like one when he talks about this art. He obviously loves it. Recently, he gave me and photographer Diedra Laird a tour, pointing out favorites, even unboxing a few pieces in a basement storage room that once held furs, back when 220 N. Tryon was home to Montaldo's, an upscale women's clothing store.

Here are highlights, including several works you won't see unless you attend a meeting or event at the foundation. There's lots more in the foundation's lobby gallery, open 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. weekdays.

1. “EMILY”: W. Louis Jones' 7-foot-tall portrait of a tabby on a pedestal is the most photographed and Instagrammed in the gallery, foundation officials say. It's flanked by two smaller cat portraits, “**Emily Sleeping**” on the left, and “**Clem**,” the orange cat on the right. Says Marsicano: “What I love about the cat is it's kind of Mona Lisa-esque in that the eyes really follow you.”

Story behind the art: This feline portraiture began as a Charleston Gray watermelon. Jones, who lives in Asheboro, was roughing in the background when he noticed his cat, Emily, watching from a windowsill. He realized she was the subject he really wanted to paint. The work, exhibited in Jones' first solo show in New York in 1977, was dubbed "beguiling" by a New York Times critic.

But Jones' favorite reaction to Emily's portrait came from another feline – a cat that once wandered through his open apartment door, saw the image, startled, and jumped straight into the air, fur bristling. "It looked like one of those cartoon frightened-cat things," Jones says. "I consider that to be the biggest compliment I've ever gotten on a painting."



2. "BAG BAGS" (above): These blown-glass pieces, by North Carolina's John Littleton and Kate Vogel, are outside the main board room, where many local nonprofits often meet to discuss many things, including grant-making. Marsicano likes the symbolism: Imagine these fanciful bags filled with money.

Story behind the art: John Littleton is the son of the late Harvey Littleton, founder of the studio glass movement. (The gallery includes Harvey Littleton pieces, too. The Luskis were early collectors of his work.) Interestingly, Harvey Littleton's father worked for New York's Corning Glass Works, where he helped develop Pyrex glass. Son and grandson stayed in the glass business, but as artists, not scientists.

Husband and wife John Littleton and Kate Vogel have been an artistic team since 1979. To make these pieces, they fired the small bags, heating them to 1,000 degrees, then fused them inside heated glass cylinders that they shaped into the larger bags, complete with glass ties.



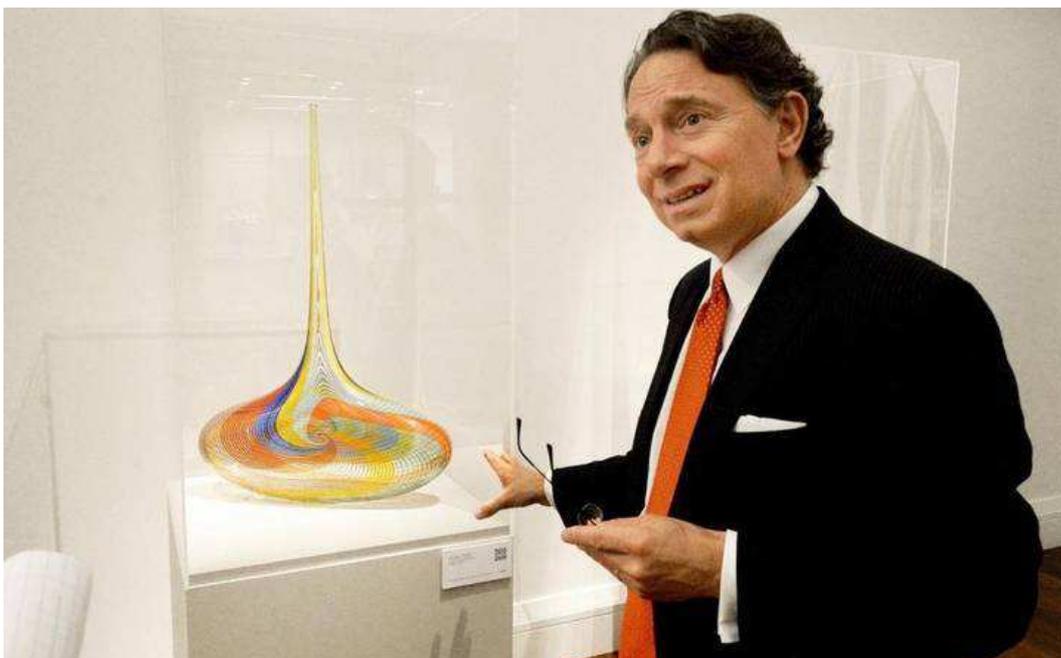
3. “VERTICAL GARDEN” (above): Perhaps the most unexpected sight in this surprising building, this wall of plants enhances a fourth-floor outdoor sculpture garden. It was designed by French botanist Patrick Blanc, who’s been called the father of vertical gardening. The plants live on liquid nutrients. “When it’s lit at night, it’s stunning,” Marsicano says. The foundation rents the space for events.

Story behind the art: Sonia Luski suggested this installation, which provides a dramatic backdrop for five marble pieces by Hanna Jubran, a sculptor and professor at East Carolina University. The sculptures were a gift from Irwin “Ike” Belk.



4. **“BLUE MANIFEST”** (above): Glass artists often work with molten or blown glass, but this piece, by Winston-Salem artist Jon Kuhn, is constructed from cold glass that he cuts, fuses and polishes.

Story behind the art: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Vatican Museums are among the collectors of Kuhn’s work. But you can find numerous Kuhn pieces in the foundation’s lobby. Several of these sparkly works rotate if you give them a gentle push. The Luskis, who believe this art should be touched, would encourage you to do that.



5. **“ANGEL TEAR”** (above): Marsicano counts this blown-glass piece by Venetian artist Lino Tagliapietra as a favorite. “I just think it’s stunning,” he says.

Story behind the art: While most of the foundation's art is exhibited so that visitors can get up close, this one's so fragile it's protected in an acrylic case.



6. “CUARTRO MUJERES EN AZUL FONDO NARANJA,” “TRIO” AND “QUARTETO HABANERO” (above, left to right): This trio of paintings is by the late Cundo Bermúdez, a Cuban modernist.

Story behind the art: The Luskis emigrated from Cuba to Charlotte in 1961, and their collection includes the work of several Cuban and Hispanic artists that reflect their heritage.



7. “ENDEAVOR”: The mobile, a series of gondola-shaped glass pieces, also by Lino Tagliapietra, hangs in a spiral from a second-floor atrium. “They look like boats taking you somewhere in the sky,” Marsicano says.

Story behind the art: Marsicano calls this work one of the foundation’s “best-kept secrets.” Its board of directors commissioned the piece to honor Marsicano following his successful fundraising efforts to renovate the building. The work’s name – Endeavor – reflects the foundation’s mission – to endeavor to do great things.

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