

WILLIAM VAREIKA FINE ARTS

# Two Decades of Art, and Philanthropy

Newport, Rhode Island



For most people, Newport, Rhode Island, conjures visions of Gilded Age mansions by the sea, crowded with heirlooms and tourists who admire life's finer things. Although these grand "cottages" are veritable museums, the town is remarkably underserved by quality art galleries, partly because most summer residents brought their treasures in long ago, and partly because the population shrinks from 44,000 to 26,000 off-season.

A prominent exception is William Vareika Fine Arts, housed in an 1893 building near the historic Newport Casino, where the International Tennis Hall of Fame tends grass courts upon which Vanderbilts once volleyed. Bill and Alison Vareika opened their gallery here exactly 20 years ago, and have since developed an international reputation for American paintings, watercolors, drawings, and prints of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Happily, their timing was perfectly in sync with the soaring market in American art.

Although the Vareikas obtain such pictures from around the world, and sell them to clients primarily from out of town, the linkage

between their inventory and this region is strong. Indeed, the beaches, cliffs, and salt marshes of Newport and the Narragansett Bay have long attracted American artists, among them Bellows, Bierstadt, Bricher, Haseltine, Hassam, Heade, Homer, Kensett, La Farge, Richards, Twachtman, and Whittredge.

Raised in blue-collar South Boston and Brockton, Massachusetts, Bill admits that "nothing in my childhood really prepared me for what I'm doing now." As a pre-law undergraduate at Boston College in the early 1970s, he stumbled upon John La Farge (1835-1910), the gifted painter-muralist whose stained glass windows were valued as highly as Tiffany's until his death. "Then everybody just sort of forgot about him," Bill marvels. He took a leave of absence from graduate studies at Brown University to help in the six-year-long legal battle to save

WILLIAM TROST RICHARDS (1833-1905)

*ON THE SHORE, CONANICUT ISLAND*

1895, OIL ON CANVAS, 18 X 30 IN.





JOHN LA FARGE (1835-1910)  
*WATERLILIES IN A WHITE BOWL, WITH RED TABLE-COVER*  
 1859, OIL ON BOARD, 9 1/2 X 11 1/2 IN.



ELIHU VEDDER (1836-1923)  
*VENUS (FRIDAY) WITH FIGURES OF SPIRITUAL LOVE AND WORLDLY LOVE*  
 c. 1893, GOUACHE ON PAPER, 8 1/2 X 8 1/2 IN.

Newport Congregational Church, which is graced by superb La Farge glass, but he never returned to the classroom.

Instead Bill discovered that he could prosper trolling for under-priced artworks and then selling them, so he and his wife Alison taught themselves art history and began displaying inventory in their Newport carriage house in the mid 1980s. They opened the gallery's current home in 1987, and in 2003 they expanded into the building next door in order to add foreign and contemporary artworks. Two years ago, Rhode Island declared their neighborhood an arts district, which means that sales of original artworks are exempt from state tax — a boon for an area that earns most of its annual revenues serving culturally minded tourists from April through October.

Bill is best known among connoisseurs for his expertise in La Farge, who has regained his rightful place in the canon due in part to Bill's scholarship and advocacy. Another Newport artist with whom he is closely identified is William Trost Richards (1833-1905). Once dismissed as a minor member of the Hudson River School, Richards is now considered one of the 19th century's great chroniclers of land and sea. "The more I look at his work, the more I think that we may still be underestimating him," Bill confides. "Nobody gets the kind of color effects in painting the sea that he does."

"I love to see local people come in and look at what we have," Bill notes. "We function as both a gallery and a museum seven days a week." Ironically, he himself has worked in the gallery almost every day for 20 years, and the pace is especially frenetic during high season. This has been the gallery's most successful year ever, partly because of the strong market, and also because the Vareikas mounted not one but two benefit exhibition-sales. These shows raise both funds and public consciousness for local causes the Vareikas support, including the arts, education, the environment, health care, historic preservation, and social services.

"I'd say that in 20 years, we've raised more than \$1 million for charity," Bill says. "Believe me, coming from my background, I never thought I'd be in a position to do this." One of this summer's shows raised \$200,000 for Save the Bay, and to underscore the Naragansett's continuing significance to artists, Bill commissioned three of his friends — David Dewey (b. 1946), Robert Manice (b. 1953), and Paul Rickert (b. 1947) — to paint works inspired by its fragile beauty. Fortunately, they sold well.

"Basically, I'm still a frustrated public-interest lawyer at heart," Vareika says. "But I love art, and I would be involved in it even if I didn't do this for a living." ■

**Information:** *William Vareika Fine Arts, 212-214 Bellevue Avenue, Newport, RI 02480; 401.849.6149; vareikafinearts.com*