

The Newport Daily News

If these walls could talk

Sean Flynn | The Newport Daily News



100 years at Newport Art Museum

Art students work with casts in 1917 on the second floor of the Griswold House.

NEWPORT, R.I. - William Vareika has had a personal connection to the Newport Art Museum for more than a third of its history. As the museum celebrates its 100th birthday this year with scores of events to engage the public in the celebrations, Vareika will be a part of many of them.

His first job after graduating from Boston College was as picture hanger and janitor at the museum's campus on Bellevue Avenue. Early in the job, he was sent to the Swanhurst mansion, then owned by the museum, to pick up some materials.

"I went to the attic and saw a pile of newspapers in the corner," he said. "I picked them up to check the dates and out dropped a drawing from Winslow Homer, unframed and unprotected. It is now one of the most valuable items in the museum's collection."

Through more than three centuries, from the 18th century through today's living community of artists, most major American artists have come to Newport to live and work for a period of time, Vareika said.

"Newport proudly boasts one of the greatest centers and settings in the history of the arts in America," he said. "The Newport Art Museum and Art Association has as its mission the collection, exhibition and interpretation of that rich artistic heritage. We are the only museum in the world that has that mission and it's our great legacy."

The museum is collecting reminiscences and reflections from people like Vareika and the wider community for its "Memories & Messages Project," which will include written submissions, oral history recordings, video, photos and all types of birthday greetings collected throughout the year. Contributions will be posted all year in the museum, on Facebook and YouTube, on the museum's website, and in the museum's print publications and archival albums.

Many of the birthday greetings are creative.

Molly White, part of the museum's guest services staff, used a cutout technique to create a portrait of Maud Howe Elliott, the driving force behind the creation of the Art Association of Newport in 1912. The artwork is based on the large portrait of the founder painted by Benjamin Curtis Porter in 1877, which is on display on the first floor of the museum.

For details on how to participate in the memories project, go to www.newportartmuseum.org.

Vareika is the proprietor of William Vareika Fine Arts, 212 Bellevue Ave., but remains actively involved in museum activities. He has been a member of the museum's collections and exhibits committee for 38 years and a member of the board for 20 years. Just a week ago, he was the featured guest of the Winter Lecture Series, where he focused on the "enduring art of William Trost Richards," an American landscape artist associated with both the Hudson River School and the American Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Richards, who lived 1833-1905, produced 110 small watercolors on Newport and other settings during his travels in the later half of the 19th century for his patron, George Whitney. Vareika recently arranged the sale of that collection to a client who donated it to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, with preferential lending rights to the Newport Art Museum. The collection will be part of an exhibit here entitled "From Pennsylvania to Paradise," June 2-Sept. 9.

Keeping current



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After the Art Association of Newport bought Griswold House, the library became known as The Member's Room. This photo was taken by John T. Hopf, in April 1956.

Museum visitors who want to see the rich talent that exists today in Newport and the region should visit the Newport Annual Members Juried Exhibition now on display at the museum through May 13, featuring 328 artworks.

"The Newport Annual is the region's largest and most comprehensive showcase of Rhode Island artists," said Gayle Hargreaves, the museum's director of marketing. "There is amazing creative talent on exhibit here."

Besides the winners chosen by the jurors, there will be “People’s Choice” award winners. Each visitor to the exhibit can cast a ballot for their favorite artwork, with the voting results updated regularly during the exhibit. The people’s winners will be announced May 14.

There are so many events going on at the Newport Art Museum that people will have to go to the museum’s website to keep track of all of them.

“We have over 350 events, classes and workshops every year,” Hargreaves said.



Jacqueline Marque | The Newport Daily News

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A portrait of Maud Howe Elliott, a founder of the Art Association of Newport, painted in 1877 hangs on the first floor of what is now the Newport Art Museum.

The museum will be having “birthday celebrations” all year at different intervals, but if one has to be chosen as the big “Happy Birthday Party” for the museum, it’s likely to be the Centennial Gala scheduled for July 7. The evening includes cocktails, dinner and dancing to the Mac Chrupcala Orchestra.

People not willing to wait until then can attend the “Artists’ Ball” scheduled for May 12. The first of these balls was held in 1920, when guests were urged “to come in costume to add to the brilliancy of the fete.” The ball was an annual tradition at the museum for decades, but has not been held for several years.

Just three years after its founding, in 1915, the organization purchased the John N.A. Griswold House. To honor artist Howard Gardiner Cushing, an early member, the association built the Cushing Gallery in 1920. The association became the Newport Art Museum and Art Association in 1984. A third building was added to the campus in 1998, when the Gilbert S. Kahn Building was acquired to house the museum’s education center, now known as the Coleman Center for Creative Arts.

Education and entertainment

Besides being a museum, the organization provides art education for people around the state, with up to 2,000 students enrolling in courses each year. Every quarter, up to 50 courses and workshops are offered by a staff that includes experienced artists. The daily art lessons began one year after

the founding, with John Elliot, Maud’s husband, and noted Newport artist Helena Sturtevant among the first instructors.

Sturtevant, whose paintings of Newport street scenes and buildings hang in City Hall, became the school’s first and longest-serving director, and developed a first-rate art school.

Finally, the organization is a cultural setting for many events. The “Fourth Friday” event every month offers live music in a coffeehouse setting. On Friday this week, the local band Castle offered its version of “artrock.” There’s a cash bar at these events, modest snacks and socializing. While it attracts people of all ages, the majority are in their 20s or 30s, Hargreaves said.

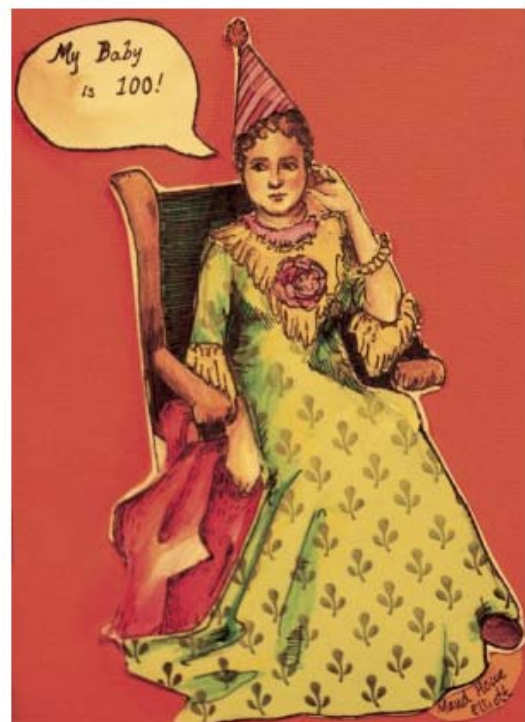
“People love it,” she said. “It’s more like a party, not a concert.”

Among the other cultural events are the murder mysteries presented by the Marley Bridges Theatre Company in the Griswold House. The audience helps search for clues, question suspects and uncover “whodunit” in a 90-minute interactive experience. Tonight’s performance takes place from 5:30-7 p.m. and is called “The Butler Did It!” The following performance is on March 4, at the same time.

The Winter Lecture Series is also a popular draw. Today, beginning at 2 p.m., Steven Feinberg, director of the state Film & TV Office, talks about “the romance of making films in the culturally and visually rich Ocean State.” Hayat Alvi, a professor at the Naval War College, will discuss latest developments and long-term trends in the Middle East on March 10, beginning at 2 p.m.

The Newport Art Museum is recognized for the quality of these offerings, and more, nationally. It is among only 5 percent of American museums to have achieved full

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