

## American treasures reborn



RICHARD W. DIONNE JR.

William Vareika points out the genius of John La Farge in his Bellevue Avenue gallery. "Madonna and Child" is behind him.

*Restoration on La Farge masterpieces is nearly complete; accompanying exhibit runs through November*

BY TED HAYES

thayes@eastbaynewspapers.com

NEWPORT — Years ago, long before William Vareika became a prominent art historian, collector and dealer, a college professor who recognized his passion and eye implored him to give up his study of law in favor of a career in the arts. His response? "I declined," he said, speaking of his idealism. "I hoped to devote my life to public service in order to 'change the world.'"

But in a busy glass studio outside of Boston, and within the walls of a new \$7 million chapel rising on the grounds of Salve Regina University, that idealism is coming to roost.

Workers at Serpentino Stained and Leaded Glass in Needham, Mass. are nearly ready to receive the last of 13 stained glass panels they're restoring for Salve's new chapel, which should be complete by next spring and will be dedicated next fall.

The windows, created by American master John La Farge in 1890, originally graced a private Newport home before being moved in the early 1930s to a convent in Fall River. There they remained for 70 years, all but forgotten, until Mr. Vareika heard about them nearly a decade ago and helped mount a campaign to save, restore and house them. That campaign, which is being benefited in part by a La Farge

exhibition running through the end of the month at Mr. Vareika's Bellevue Avenue gallery, is also bearing fruit on Salve grounds. There, the university's first-ever dedicated chapel — previously, a room within Ochre Point had to suffice — is rising steadily, and workers are nearly done building a special wing that will house several of the largest La Farge masterpieces. The remaining panels will be incorporated into different parts of the building.

For Mr. Vareika, who credits La Farge as his first and greatest inspiration in art, the windows' imminent return to Newport is a dream come true, and gives him no small measure of satisfaction.

"It all makes perfect sense," he said. "Because of all the ties to Newport ... from La Farge, who painted and had a home here, to the pieces themselves, to the university. For future generations these things will be here to be enjoyed."

### The pieces

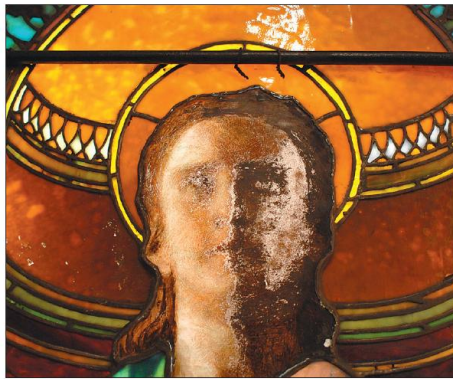
La Farge, who died 99 years ago this month at age 75, is considered one of the masters of American painting, muralism and stained glass. He pioneered many stained glass techniques, including the invention of opalescent glass and the use of layered glass to add depth and



TOP: Master craftsman Matthew Fallon works on a Salve La Farge window at the Serpentino studios. ABOVE: Workers at Salve's new chapel hope to finish their work by next spring.

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Some of the figural paintings still need to be restored, including Saint John the Evangelist, which shows evidence of paint loss on the face.

## LA FARGE: Exhibit runs through November

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color to his pieces. Throughout his long career, he was commissioned by universities, churches, public institutions and private clients, and such was the case with the 13 panels now being restored.

They were originally built for a music room and chapel in the Newport home of the Caldwell sisters — Mary and Gwendolyn Byrd and Mary Eliza Breckenridge — the co-founders of The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. In 1931, when the Caldwells' home was razed following their deaths, the windows were saved by Fall River Bishop James Cassidy and transferred to the Sisters of Mercy convent in Fall River.

When Mr. Vareika learned in 2001 that the convent would be razed to make way for a parking lot, he consulted with Salve officials, who were ultimately able to purchase the entire collection in 2004 for \$350,000. The possibility that the windows would be sold piecemeal was originally very real, he said, and there was little doubt in his mind that they should come back, en masse, to Newport.

The windows "had survived the demolition of the Great Depression," he wrote in an introduction to his current La Farge exhibition. "For (them) to be broken up forever and disbursed piecemeal throughout the art market to the highest bidders, possibly ending up in secular venues like a restaur-

ant or residence in a far-away land, would amount to the loss of a national and sacred treasure, a tragic calamity with implications far beyond Fall River and Newport."

### Restoration

For nearly two years now, all but a few of the windows — there are three figural pieces representing St. John the Evangelist, St. Elizabeth of Hungary and the Madonna and child, as well as secular ornamental windows — have been undergoing restoration at Serpentino.

Roberto Rosa, the son-in-law of the firm's founder, said his craftsmen have spent hundreds of hours working on the ornate pieces, which burst with color and

light despite their age and formerly poor condition.

"Some were in pretty rough shape," he said. "They showed some signs of deflection (sagging areas), a lot of cracks and a lot of glass breakage."

Common household paint had also apparently been used some time in the past to touch up painted areas, he noted.

Early on, Mr. Rosa and his craftsmen decided to do as little work as possible on the pieces.

"Our whole goal from the beginning, because of the importance of these windows and the importance of John La Farge, was to retain as much of the original material as possible."

To this point, workers have been able to save as much as 90 percent of the original lead, and have cleaned the pieces and repaired broken glass with conservation-grade epoxy.

"The reason why we felt so strongly (about conservation) is that they are important windows," he said. "No matter how good of a craftsman you are, and how patient you are, it's really difficult to recreate what was done originally."

Though he's seen many La Farge pieces in the past, the Salve works speak to him, he said.

"The figural ones, I would rank them at the very top," he said. "Some of the ornamental windows also are some of my favorites."

"It's really a love affair. They're so beautiful and so colorful, that you never know what you're going to find and you never know what to expect. We found emerald, alabaster. Just beautiful pieces.

## LA FARGE: Chapel cost is \$7M

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There's always a sense of pride when you're working on them."

### The chapel

The pieces' beauty has not been lost on Salve and on the thousands of visitors who have come to see the benefit exhibit, which brings together 160 La Farge pieces from collections across the country. Though many are not for sale, percentages of proceeds from those that sell are being donated toward the chapel campaign. The exhibit itself, which has kept two large figurals in unrestored condition — they'll go to Serpentino following the exhibit's conclusion at the end of the

month — are among the biggest selling points.

"When we walk into the Vareika gallery to show potential supporters and friends the La Farge windows, they literally stop suddenly in place — amazed at the beauty of the exhibit," said Michael Semenza, the university's vice president for university relations.

"The impact is, in a sense, spiritual as they experience the light, the warmth and the brilliant colors. Bill and Allison Vareika have helped generate awareness of and enthusiasm for Salve Regina University's chapel far beyond our expectations. The exhibit has brought new and unexpected support to our chapel campaign."

### La Farge exhibition

**WHAT:** "John La Farge: American Artistic Genius and Renaissance man (1835-1910)"

**WHERE:** William Vareika Fine Arts, Ltd. 212 Bellevue Ave.

**HOURS:** The exhibition runs through Monday, Nov. 30. Gallery hours are Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Sundays 1 p.m. to 6 p.m.

**ABOUT:** The exhibition and sale of more than 100 John La Farge paintings, watercolors, drawings, prints, photographs, letters, books and opalescent leaded glass windows benefits the acquisition and conservation of 13 La Farge opalescent glass windows to be installed in the new chapel and spiritual life center at Salve Regina University.

**MORE INFO:** See [www.vareikafinearts.com](http://www.vareikafinearts.com) or call 849-6149.



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A special wing of the new chapel was designed to house the three figural La Farge pieces. The rest will be installed elsewhere in the building.