

Through the Years

William Trost Richards: Masterpieces of the Land and Sea, at Home and Abroad on exhibit at William Vareika Fine Arts, Ltd.

Through September 30
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by John O'Hern

William Trost Richards was born in Philadelphia, summered in Newport, and traveled the world. His drawings, oils and watercolors ranged from the romanticism of the Hudson River School to the meticulous accuracy espoused by the British aesthetician

John Ruskin. In his book, *Modern Painters*, Ruskin wrote, "Paint the leaves as they grow! If you can paint one leaf, you can paint the world."

Richards observed, "Ruskin says truly that he only is great who had reached the heart of a thing, and this in the inner and most holy place."



William Trost Richards (1833-1905), "Gray Cliff," the Artist's Home, Conanicut Island, RI, 1894. Oil on canvas, 12¹/₈ x 15³/₈ in., signed and dated, lower left.



William Trost Richards (1833–1905), *Lulworth Cove, Dorset*, 1879. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 3 x 5 in., inscribed on verso: “Lulworth Cove, /Dorset/No 23/Recd July 28th 1879/G.W.



William Trost Richards (1833–1905), “*Harbor Entrance*” on Bull Point, Conanicut Island, Rhode Island, 1898. Oil on canvas, 32 x 56 in., signed and dated, lower left.



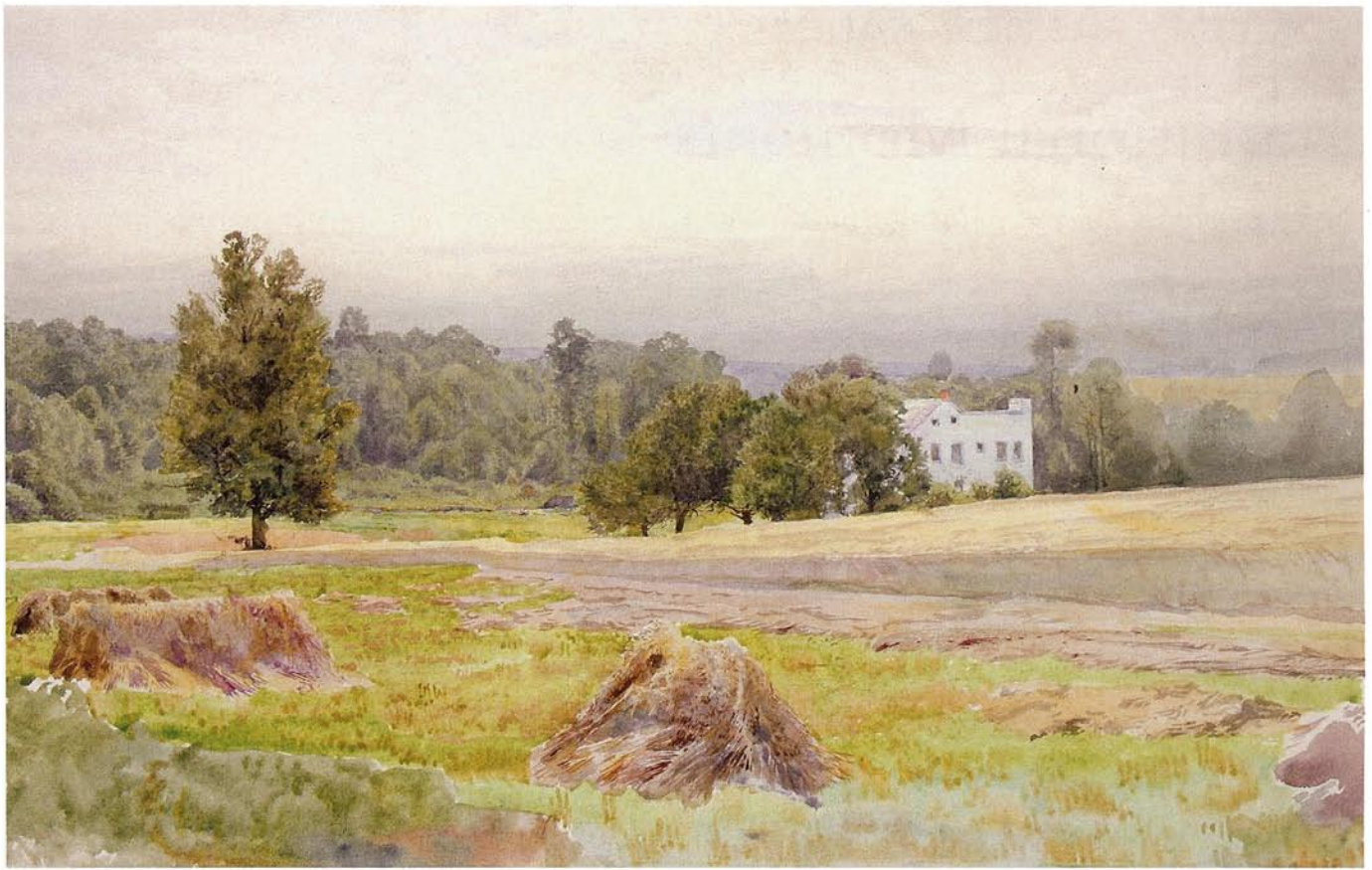
William Trost Richards (1833-1905), *Lighthouse, Annisquam*. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 7¼ x 14 in.

William Trost Richards (1833-1905): Masterpieces of the Land and Sea, at Home and Abroad is an exhibition of the artist's masterful paintings and drawings of subjects from Florence to the Tacoma Territory, now the state of Washington. On display at William Vareika Fine Arts, Ltd. in Newport, Rhode Island, through September 30, "the exhibition includes approximately 175 oils, watercolors and drawings that span the artist's entire career from early works from the early 1850s to the last years of the artist's life in the first years of the 20th century," the gallery explains. "Many artworks originate from the collections of Richards' family descendants and have never before been publicly exhibited. Also on display are rare vintage photographs, books, letters, memorabilia and gold award medals that relate to Richards' career."

Among the works exhibited are



William Trost Richards (1833-1905), *Rocks and Waterfall: Catskill Mountains*, Aug. 19, 1853. Pencil on beige paper, 9 x 10¼ in.



William Trost Richards (1833–1905), *A Farmhouse and Grainfields* (the artist's farm "Old Mixon" in Chester County, Pennsylvania), ca. 1887. Watercolor on paper 12 x 19¹/₈ in.

examples of the "coupons" Richards painted on his travels. He sent the tiny (3-by-5-inch) watercolor and gouache studies with his weekly letters to his patron George Whitney in Philadelphia. The coupons often served better than words to let his patron know his thoughts and were sometimes used as studies for larger paintings. One of them, *Lulworth Cove, Dorset*, inspired a larger watercolor that has descended through the family of the artist and also is in the exhibition.

Other personal associations can be seen in the dramatic oil "*Gray Cliff*," *the Artist's Home, Conanicut Island, RI*, and the bucolic watercolor *A Farmhouse and Grainfields* depicting the artist's farm "Old Mixon" in Chester County, Pennsylvania.

In her book *Never at Fault: The Drawings of William Trost Richards*, Linda S. Ferber quotes the chronicler

of American art George W. Sheldon writing about Richards: "His drawing is never at fault and the crispness of his touch is charming." Drawing was always an integral part of Richards' life. Ferber notes, "Richards' sketching forays began at an early age. A boyhood companion recalled their ramblings along Frankford Creek: 'I to fish and he with sketching material.' In the 1880s, Ferber writes, "...Richards still filled sketchbooks with drawings of landscape and marine subjects under all conceivable effects of light, rendering each in subtle tonal modulations of pencil and, sometimes, pen. These tiny compositions, drawn from a memory stocked with half a century's experience of recording nature, are the product of an investigation that started in the early 1850s when the artist began to train himself to record American landscape with the simplest

of means: pencil, paper and a touch 'never at fault.'"

Ferber quotes Richards writing in 1883 to one of his daughters who was learning to draw: "When a tree grows in an open space in perfect freedom from the first—we may say it is a fine tree but we can never think of it as picturesque or having had any experience... These are never selected as best for pictures... only those which are twisted and curved and give evidence of a fight for their lives— (There is the possibility of giving too much fight and there the result is distortion and ugliness)." There are a number of Richards' drawings of picturesque trees at the Vareika gallery, attesting to the artist's skill.

Richards truly "reached the heart of a thing." ■