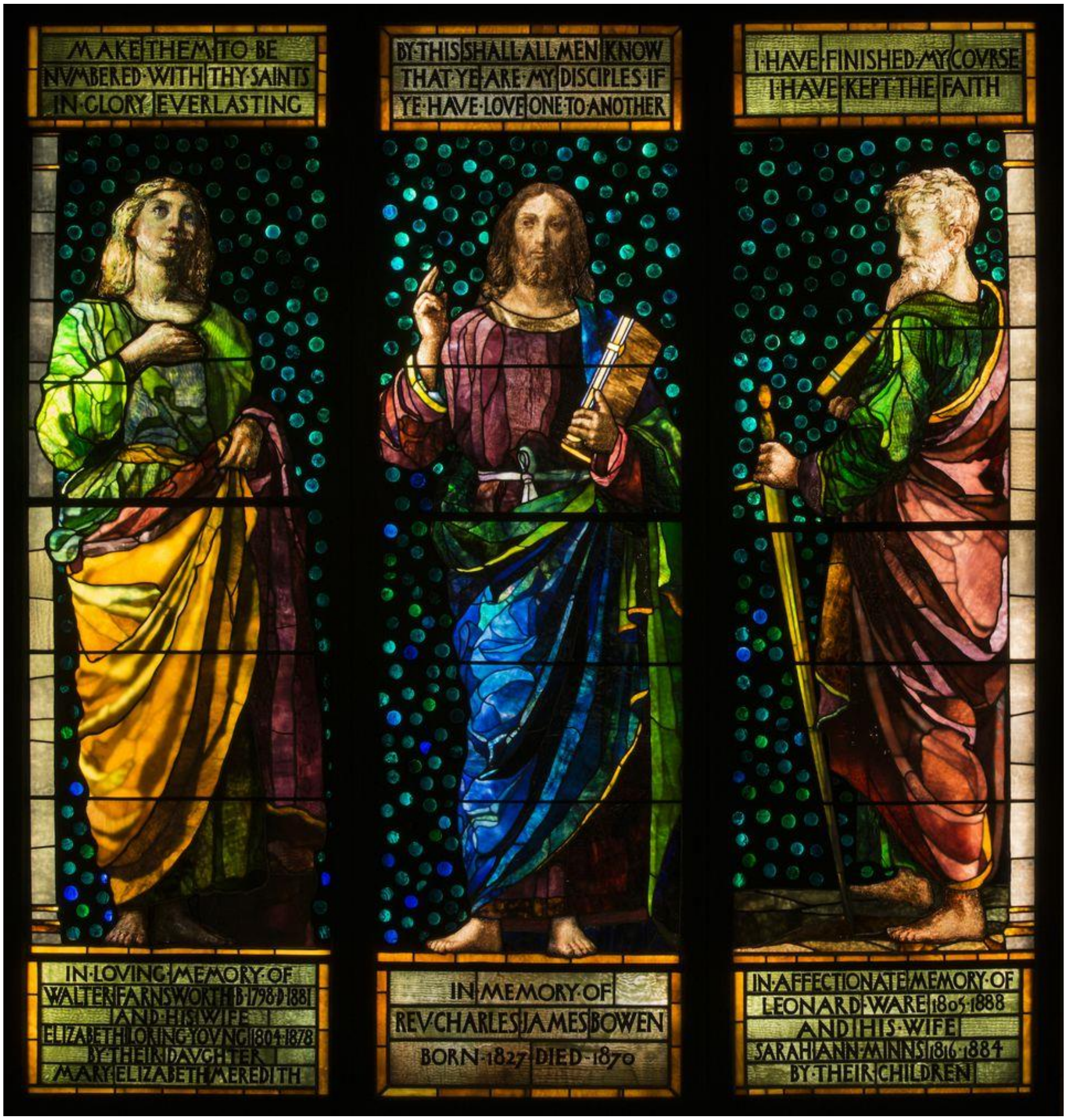
ART REVIEW

Making the case for the importance of John La Farge

By Sebastian Smee Globe Staff,September 3, 2015, 3:52 p.m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John La Farge’s triptych “St. John the Evangelist, Christ Preaching, St. Paul.”

MCMULLEN MUSEUM OF ART, BOSTON COLLEGE

CHESTNUT HILL — No pithy statement can adequately explain why John La Farge died in 1910 as one of America's best known artists, only to endure a long century of obscurity. But if you have even a vague sense of why, at the beginning of the 20th century, Cubism eclipsed Post-Impressionism, the machine gun eclipsed the rifle, and New York eclipsed Boston, you can probably grope your way to an answer.

It was a question of energy. It was a question, moreover, of spiritual energy — which feels strange to say, given the explicitly spiritual focus of "John La Farge and the Recovery of the Sacred," a show at Boston College that makes the strongest case in decades for La Farge's importance.

The show, occasioned by the most recent of a number of major gifts to the college's McMullen Museum of Art by La Farge devotee and dealer William Vareika and his wife, Alison, includes more than 90 works. It was organized by BC's Jeffrey Howe, with assistance from Vareika, who knows as much about La Farge as anyone.

The gift, a restored triptych in opalescent stained glass, is complemented by murals, more stained glass, illustrations, paintings, and watercolors from every stage of La Farge's career.

Energy, on the face of it, wasn't a problem for La Farge. He was constantly innovating. He busied himself with travel and ambitious commissions to decorate churches and the homes of wealthy clients, including Vanderbilts, Morgans, and Whitneys.

He exerted, as well, a profound influence on many of the greatest minds of his day. The young William James, who studied art with La Farge under William Morris Hunt in Newport, R.I., was astonished by his intellect: "He knows everything. He has read everything. He has seen everything — paints everything. He's a marvel!"

Nor was a sense of the spiritual something La Farge lacked. Quite the contrary, as this show beautifully demonstrates, he was an artist with a questing, susceptible soul, richly informed by the Christian past but open to the mystical and visual aspects of alternative religious traditions, including Buddhism and Islam.

He was truly an original — a figure unlike any in American art.

But the fact is that by the time La Farge died, at age 75, American art had outgrown swooning aestheticism, symbolism, and backward-harking religiosity. It all seemed suddenly sluggish, complacent.

The generation coming to the fore no longer felt it necessary to defend fine, aristocratic feelings against the coarsening effects of the Industrial Revolution. That fight was over. The winner wasn't in doubt.

And so, ambitious artists wanted to snuff out the kinds of sensibility that gazed soulfully off into the distance, favoring mists and dreamy evocation over substance, democratic plainspokenness, and heft.

The path that leads from La Farge's friend Winslow Homer through Marsden Hartley and Edward Hopper to Jackson Pollock is a wide one, but La Farge was never on it. He was off exploring his own gorgeous and meandering path in the 19th-century gloaming. Questing, experimenting, deepening his press at every point of tenderness, he forged an intimate idiom that looked conventional on the surface, but was full of subtle suggestion and adhesive idiosyncrasy.

It is remarkable, mind you, to see how many other paths — and roads and highways — La Farge's private path crossed. His impact on the intellectual history of New England in the 19th century can be felt everywhere: in the teachings of William James and the writings of his brother Henry; in the Japan craze La Farge helped to inspire (he was the first major artist on either side of the Atlantic to collect Japanese prints); in the sculpture of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the collecting of Isabella Stewart Gardner, the writings of Henry Adams, and the architecture of Henry Hobson Richardson — the interior of whose Trinity Church in Boston was enhanced by La Farge's stunning decorative scheme.

That scheme was his first major commission, and it made his reputation — incidentally crystallizing the movement known as the American Renaissance. Drawing on medieval and (Italian) Renaissance precedents, it involved the extensive use of murals, wall colors, and stained glass. Most of that glass was European, but several windows are by La Farge, and they make use of the breakthrough for which he is best-known: opalescent stained glass.

Suspending opaque colored particles within the glass, opalescent stained glass has a milky, shifting quality. (It was quickly adopted and advanced by La Farge's onetime friend and more business-savvy rival, Louis Comfort Tiffany.) La Farge combined its use with a technique called plating — layering glass in different hues to create affects akin to colored glazes used by painters — and later with pressed jewels and confetti glass.

His first stained glass commission for Trinity Church, “Christ in Majesty,” was installed on the west façade in 1883. It became the model for the triptych at the center of this show, a commission for All Souls Unitarian Church in Roxbury, which La Farge completed in 1889.

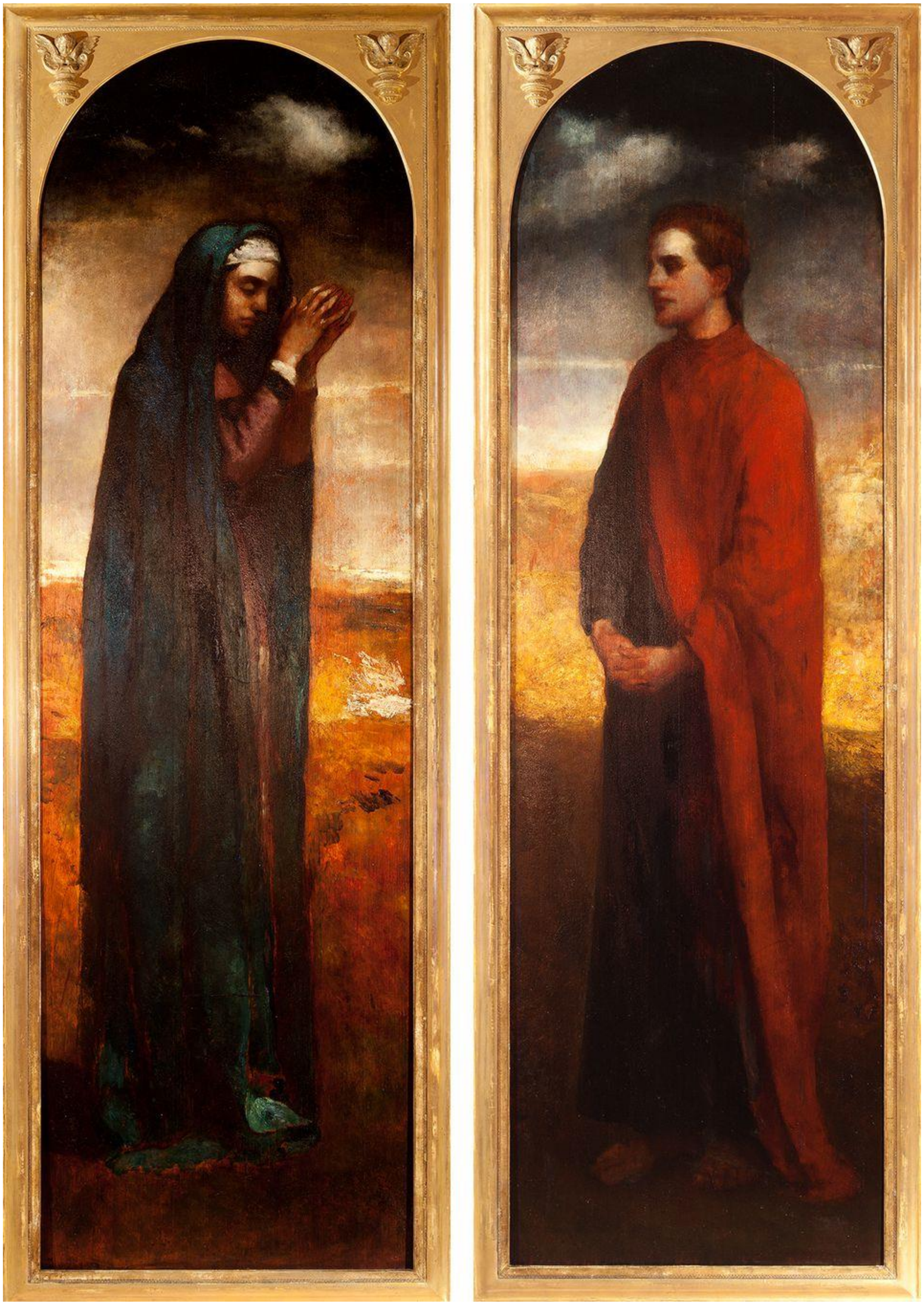
The triptych, which shows St. John the Evangelist and St. Paul flanking the figure of Christ preaching, was later moved to the Unity Church in Amherst, where it was very nearly broken up and sold separately. Vareika persuaded the owners away from this course, bought it himself in one piece, and donated it to BC, his alma mater, in 2013.

It’s a magnificent work, made more so by a restoration performed by Needham’s Serpentino Stained Glass Studio. The entire work was disassembled, cleaned, repaired, and put back together piece by piece. La Farge’s use of blue glass cabochons (semi-spherical, unfaceted pieces of glass) in the background sets off the stunning palette of greens, rich yellows, and shifting pinks.

The central figure of Christ — stripped of the halo that appears in its Trinity Church prototype, in deference to the Unitarian ban on overt symbolism — is based on the celebrated figure of the “Beau Dieu” on the central portal of Amiens Cathedral. Following in the tradition of Leonardo’s “Last Supper,” the blonde and feminine figure of St. John was modeled on Mary Whitney, La Farge’s studio assistant and long-term mistress.

La Farge had married Margaret Mason Perry in 1860. Hearing of other suitors preparing to act, he had rushed down to Louisiana to propose to her. He won her assent, but he also contracted malaria, which plagued him for years and prevented him from taking part in the Civil War.

Watching the devastating conflict from the sidelines affected La Farge profoundly — although he was not the only man or woman of refined sensibility to find sanctuary from so much carnage in aestheticism.



La Farge's "The Virgin and St. John the Evangelist at the Foot of the Cross"

ALEXANDRIA AND MICHAEL ALTMAN AND ALISON AND WILLIAM VAREIKA; PROMISED GIFT TO THE MCMULLEN MUSEUM OF ART, BOSTON COLLEGE.

Perry’s great-great-grandfather was Benjamin Franklin, and her great uncle was Commodore Matthew Perry, whose gunboat diplomacy forced Japan to open her doors to the world in 1854. The connection may be a serendipity but, given La Farge’s pioneering role introducing Japanese aesthetics to American art, it feels astonishingly apt.

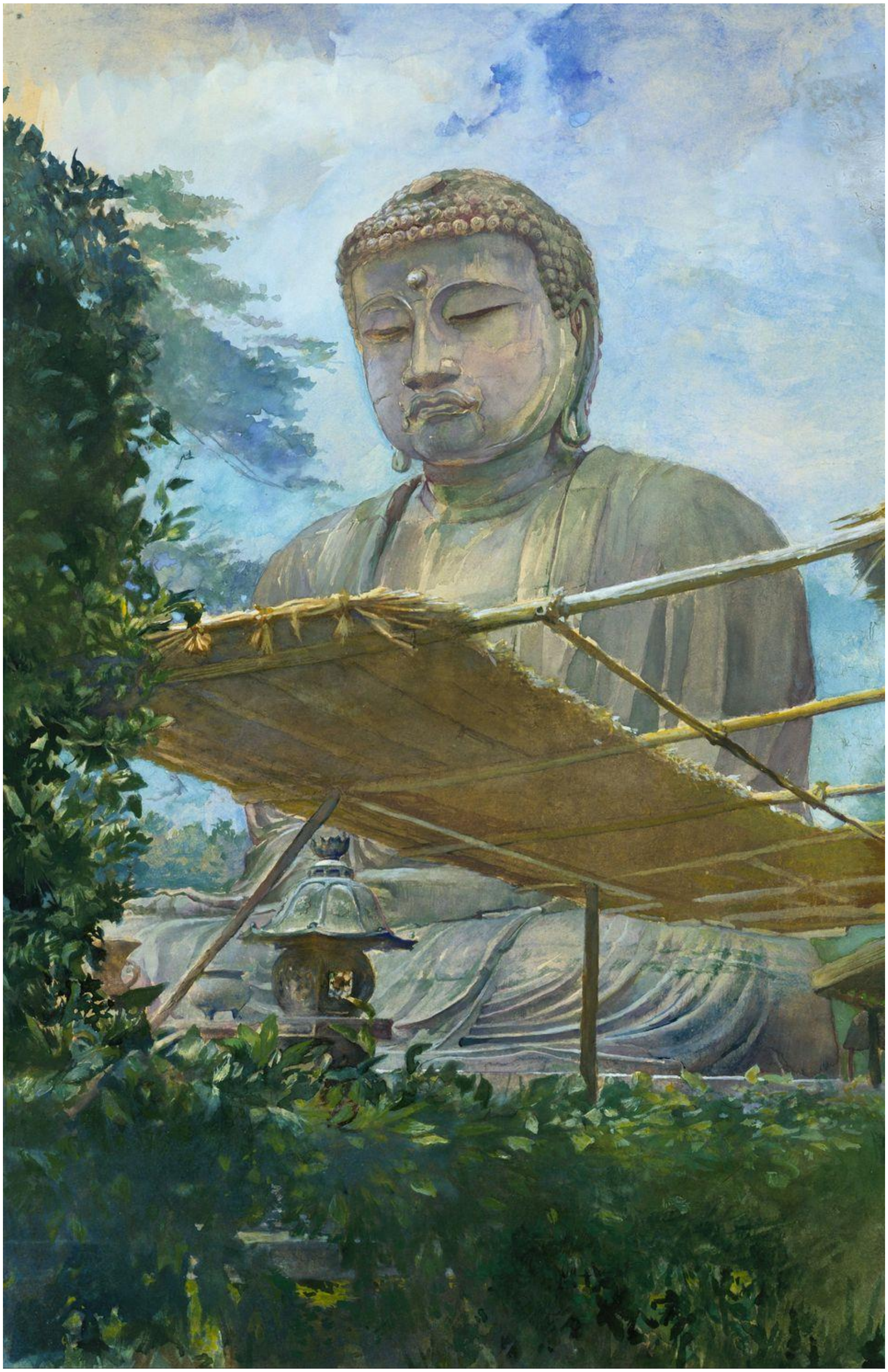
Margaret La Farge gave birth to eight children, one of whom died in infancy. (He is memorialized here by a cast of his small hands, made by Augustus Saint-Gaudens).

The marriage wound down as La Farge pursued his work (and his affair with Whitney) in New York and left care of the children to his wife in Newport. Margaret nevertheless features prominently in the show. She is the subject of a small portrait in profile from the year they married.

It hangs beside a large panel depicting the Virgin, whose features are based on Margaret. The panel, painted audaciously on wood that is allowed to show through in places, was part of a larger, unfinished triptych. The second part, a “St. John the Evangelist,” is based on William James, and hangs here beside a smaller portrait of James.

A possibly pregnant Margaret appears again, dressed in a kimono (an invitation to campus-wide protests against cultural appropriation? The mind reels . . .) in a gorgeous watercolor in the downstairs part of the show. Here, the focus is on La Farge’s travels in Asia and the South Seas, his book illustrations, and his landscapes.

Spiritual threads run through all this work, as they do, more obviously, through the explicitly religious commissions and the celebrated flower paintings, redolent with spiritual symbolism, upstairs.



“The Great Statue of Amida Buddha at Kamakura”
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

La Farge, a fastidious man with a melancholic side, was deeply swayed by Japanese Buddhism (his watercolor depicting the Great Statue of Amida Buddha in Kamakura is one of the exhibition's highlights). He saw no distinction between inner life and nature: "The moral life expressed in living beings," he wrote, "is nature for us just as truly as plant life or crystallization of minerals."

The landscapes La Farge painted in pale watercolor around Paradise, the section of coastline close to his home in Newport, are gorgeously fresh, and make a poignant end to this involving show. If La Farge's obvious brilliance suffered only from an excess of fine feelings, it is possible to wonder if "suffer," in that context, is really the *mot juste*.

Art Review

John La Farge and the Recovery of the Sacred

At McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College. Sunday through Dec. 13. 617-552-8100, www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/artmuseum

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