

Collect what you love

WILLIAM VAREIKA, 60 | Art dealer

His Bellevue Avenue gallery celebrated its 25th anniversary last year and in that span of time, William Vareika has remained true to the mission of his youthful, long-haired, idealistic and Jesuit-trained self: To save the world. He quotes 19th century Harvard professor and psychologist William James (1842-1910): "The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it." Vareika Fine Arts has hosted exhibitions supporting Save The Bay, Aquidneck Land Trust, Potter League for Animals and other causes. When he was in his early 20s, Vareika set out to save the legacy of 19th century artist John La Farge. And he's done just that, helping rescue Newport Congregational Church and its La Farge opalescent glass windows and murals and other important initiatives. **BY MARY STUART**

What type of art do you specialize in?

I specialize in artists of historic note that were attracted to the Newport-Narragansett Bay region. Not necessarily artists that happened to be born here in Newport but those who came here because of the various interesting features, the natural landscape or the great light. We focus on American art of the 18th and 19th centuries, with some works from the early half of the 20th century.

Why is this time and place special?

An interesting climate thrived here from the beginning of the 18th century; churches were built, the Redwood Library and the Town and Country Club, which became the Newport Art Association, were founded. Poets and writers came from New York, Boston, and elsewhere because of a stimulating intellectual climate. Beginning in the 18th century, there was a patron class, because of the triangle [slave] trade. In the 19th century Newport became a great watering hole. The wealthy from around the country were building summer cottages and Newport, and they wanted to buy paintings of remembrance of their time to take back to their homes in Chicago, Philadelphia, or New York, or elsewhere.

Why do you like American art?

The field of American art history is young. When I went to school I don't think there was a single university in the country that offered an American art course. New artists are still being brought to light, just as I have contributed, in my small way, to the recognition of William Trost Richards and John La Farge.

How did you become interested in La Farge?

I was a pre-law, political science major at Boston College. I took a 19th century art course and

I needed to come up with a topic for an independent research paper fast. I used to practice transcendental meditation in Trinity Church, across the street from the Boston Public Library where I had a work study job, and when I awoke from my meditation, I noticed the most gorgeous murals and stained glass windows. The artist was John La Farge, and my professor thought it was a great topic. LaFarge was very well educated, well connected and an influential artist and by studying that one subject, I would end up learning just about everything I needed to know about the 19th century.

You love art, you are a great researcher. What else is required to be an art dealer?

I was born with what they call "an eye," the ability to spot a diamond in the rough. I started out with modest means, and bought some undervalued pieces, sold them relatively quickly, and built up from there.

What was one of your spectacular finds?

I was frequently in the doghouse because I worked so much to build my business. My family was up north skiing, and they had given me a deadline of getting there by dinnertime on a certain night. On my way to Maine, after I left the highway, I couldn't resist stopping at some antique stores along the way. It was 5:30. I was late for dinner, it was dark, and it was snowing. I saw an antique shop in an old converted church, and being sure that it was just about to close, I left the motor running and quickly went in. Across the room I spotted what I thought was a La Farge. It had a price tag of \$195. When I brought it over, the proprietor asked me if I was a dealer. I said yes, and she said, "Then you get a 10% discount!" It turned out to be a very fine John La Farge painting of flowers on a Japanese tray.

Have you ever had any surprising requests from clients?

I have been surprised by people. I had a request to hang some paintings on a boat and when I got there, their boat was bigger than my building!

How has the economy affected prices, buying trends or private collections coming up for sale?

American art has stayed fairly constant in terms of pricing throughout the recession. I haven't seen collections put on the market as much as I might have expected. Over the past four years, we have seen a negative impact on our business, although that seems to be turning around since the election.

What advice do you have for first-time collectors?

First, develop a relationship with someone dealing in art. Second, you should only buy something because you love it, not because it is a good deal or a good investment. The only way to discover what you love is by exposure. Come back to the gallery regularly. When you are on a business trip or vacation, go to the local art museums and galleries.

Is there an affordable way to get started?

I advise younger collectors to consider looking at drawings, which are traditionally less pricey than watercolors and oil paintings. By collecting fine drawings by first rate artists you get more bang for your buck.

Should people mix styles and periods of art?

I advise people to develop a specialty, not to buy a number of things that don't relate to each other, because it makes the search more interesting. You might collect a particular artist or a style. Some people adopt themes, like the works of women artists, Newport views, flower paintings, African-American artists, or whatever it might be. The



William Vareika, shown in his Bellevue Avenue gallery, recommends beginning art collectors start with drawings, which cost less than paintings. PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

possibilities are endless, but if you specialize, the collection that you develop over time often has a value as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

What appeals to you personally?

The theme at our home is primarily living artists, people we know. We often purchase art at charity auctions like Wet Paint, a fundraiser for the Newport Art Museum.

Your mission is to preserve the legacy of artists but at the same time you help individual collectors buy them and take them out of the public eye. How do you reconcile this conflict?

One of the important artists I am interested in is William Trost Richards, a Philadelphia artist who fell in love with Newport. Recently, I was asked to sell an important collection of 110 miniature watercolors Richards had painted for one client.

I agreed to do it on the condition that I be given the time to find just the right party to buy them, who would keep them intact and then gift them to a public institution so they would remain intact forever, and I was successful. Those watercolors are now a promised gift to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, with preferential lending rights to the Newport Art Museum.

So an art dealer can have influence.

We got a group together to save 13 La Farge stained glass windows from a convent chapel in Fall River that was slated for demolition. An angel appeared and committed a large sum of money to build a home for those windows at Salve Regina University. Now the university has a chapel that wouldn't exist if it weren't for those windows. Those are the kinds of things we try to do. That's why I came to Newport, and that's why I started my business.