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'Faces of Our Ancestors' exhibit benefits art restoration project

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Art conservator Peter Williams sprays a layer of varnish on a Henry Mosler painting of former Rhode Island Gov. Augustus O. Bourn on Tuesday at William Vareika Fine Arts in Newport. Williams restored the painting in his Boston studio. The gallery's 'Faces of Our Ancestors' exhibit will end Nov. 30. (Jacqueline Marque/Daily News staff)

NEWPORT — The Bourn Amendment is not the latest book in Robert Ludlum's best-selling series on super-spy Jason Bourne — note the different spelling.

No, it refers to a 19th-century amendment to the Rhode Island constitution proposed by then-Gov. Augustus O. Bourn, approved by voters in 1888 that allowed naturalized citizens that did not own property to vote in statewide, but not municipal, elections. Rhode Islanders interested in seeing Bourn up close and personal can do so until Nov. 30 at William Vareika Fine Arts' "Faces of Our Ancestors" exhibit.

The exhibit, which opened Sept. 20, will benefit efforts to restore the 71 historic portraits of Rhode Island governors that hang in Statehouse corridors. Three of those portraits, including Bourn's, are included in the Vareika exhibit.

The Bourn portrait is the first to be restored by art conservator Peter Williams. Photos of the un-restored Bourn portrait, painted by Henry Mosler, make it look like the former governor has varicose veins in his forehead. Under Williams' deft hands, Bourn's complexion is much improved.

The exhibit includes portraits by American artists from Gilbert Stuart to Andy Warhol and covers more than 260 years, from 1730 to 1996.

"This really brings American history to life," Vareika said.

“The only place you can see exhibits of this quality are the Boston Museum of Fine Arts or the Metropolitan Museum (in New York City),” Williams said. “This show is at that level.”

The lineup includes a historic portrait of George Washington by James Sharples, painted near the end of his second term in office. Wearing his Continental Army uniform, Washington is portrayed somewhat less regally, but probably more accurately, than he is in most portraits.

There also are two works from Newport artist William Morris Hunt, brother of noted Newport architect Richard Morris Hunt. The first African-American artist to gain national recognition, Edward Mitchell Bannister, also is represented with a portrait of his wife.

Anna Richards Brewster’s painting of her father, noted Newport artist William Trost Richards, includes an interesting twist. The portrait has William sitting in his Newport studio painting an ocean landscape. The twist is that, while Brewster painted her father, she allowed him to paint the landscape in the painting, right down to his signature in the lower left corner of the landscape.

Vareika had another find when he located a long-lost Benjamin West portrait of “The Drummond Boys,” two sons of the Archbishop of York. Vareika heard that the portrait, painted in 1767, was available in a collection sale in Georgia and bought it “sight unseen.”

Vareika, who serves on the subcommittee overseeing restoration of the gubernatorial portraits, will donate all proceeds from the exhibit’s opening night gala to the restoration fund. The gallery also will donate a percentage of the proceeds from exhibit sales to the fund. He estimated it would take \$200,000 to restore all 71 portraits.

“I’m hoping this show will generate one-quarter of that amount,” Vareika said.

Williams has started his restoration of Gov. William Sprague’s portrait. One patch where Williams has cleaned away years of soot and cigarette smoke shows that Sprague’s hair, blond in the portrait now, was, in the original painting, gray.

Hailing from Cranston, Sprague is more noted for being the brother of Amasa Sprague, who was murdered on Dec. 31, 1843. John Gordon, an Irish immigrant, was convicted of the murder and executed in 1845. But doubt about Gordon’s involvement grew after his death and directly led to the abolishment of capital punishment in Rhode Island.

“Through the eyes of those sitting (for the portraits) you get to see the history of America,” Vareika said.

The gallery is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Sunday from 1-6 p.m. There is no admission to see the exhibit.