

The Providence Journal

Editorial

Tuesday, November 25, 2008

PORTRAITS FROM HISTORY

We have long admired the Rhode Island State House Restoration Society, which has worked to bring the state's great Charles McKim-designed marble palace of democracy back to its original splendor. When the society was established by Gov. Bruce Sundlun, in 1992, the building was in a sad state, with dropped ceilings and office "quad" systems in some of its ornate rooms, original works of art obscured and many of the original furnishings and bronze and silver fittings for doors and windows missing. The restoration of spaces such as the State House Library and the Governor's State Room, with its twinned portraits of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry and Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene, is a triumph.

Recently, the society has turned to another project, the restoration of the 71 portraits going back to the earliest colonial times that hang in the building's Gallery of Governors. As part of that effort, William Vareika Fine Arts, at 212 Bellevue Ave. in Newport, is showing "Portraits of our Ancestors, Three Centuries of American Portraits: Joseph Blackburn to Andy Warhol" to benefit the project. A percentage of sales from the show will be donated to the society, of which gallery owner Bill Vareika is a long-time member. The society estimates that the cost to clean the portraits will be around \$250,000, which it hopes to raise privately.

Among the riches in the show are Andy Warhol's 1980 portrait of Edward Kennedy, whose son Patrick represents the Ocean State's First Congressional District; the 1750 Robert Feke portrait of Rhode Islander Jeremiah Greene, who fought in the French and Indian Wars; Joseph Blackburn's 1752 portrait of a young girl named Anne Jones; Gilbert Stuart's 1815 portrait of his friend Allen Crocker, and Edward Bannister's painting of his wife, Christiana Carteaux Bannister.

Included are three portraits of Rhode Island governors from the Gallery of Governors. The portrait of Gov. William Sprague (1838-39) is partially cleaned, giving a hint of what lies ahead for the images of his august colleagues.

"Portraits of our Ancestors" is on exhibit through next Sunday.