

ART SCENE

A Gallery with a Museum Quality Collection

By John Pantalone

One of Newport's most prestigious galleries is museum-like, but technically not a museum. The William Vareika Fine Arts, owned by Bill and Alison Vareika is celebrating its 36th anniversary this year. Its prestige is drawn from the 19th century paintings on the walls by such historic artists as Winslow Homer, William Trost Richards, John LaFarge, John Frederick Kensett and many others.

"Some of the biggest collectors in the country fly in to look at work we have in the gallery," Bill said. "But we seldom see local people just stopping in. We really want locals to see this amazing artwork."

For that reason, Vareika Fine Arts has mounted an impressive 36th anniversary show, featuring Trost Richards, LaFarge, Kensett, William Merrit Chase, Martin Johnson Heade, Alfred Thompson Bricher and others of international note in their time. They were all lured to Newport to paint the natural beauty of the island, particularly its coastal scenes and its rural nature. The show will be up through Nov. 30.

"The truth is we'd really enjoy seeing local people," Bill said. "We're happy to have people come in and browse and sketch the work if they'd like, the way folks do in museums. We have work in the gallery that you aren't likely to see outside of an art museum. People might be afraid to come in because they think we only want to see wealthy collectors, but we want to share these treasures, especially with people who live in the area."

Alison Vareika studied art history at the University of Rhode Island, so she had background in the field when she and Bill met. Bill, on the other hand, practically tripped over the art world. Born outside of Boston, he was an undergrad at Boston College studying pre-law when he took an art history class. As he tells it, he had to do a major class paper on an American artist, and that slowly began his journey to becoming embedded in art.

"It was the 1960s, and I was thinking I'd be a lawyer involved in big political issues," he said. "I was doing transcendental meditation at the time and was working part time at the Boston Public Library. So, I'd go to Trinity Church right across from the library to do my meditation. It was there that I saw some of LaFarge's opalescent



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stained-glass windows and mural decoration. So, I figured I would write the paper on him."

That project took him to Newport, where LaFarge had settled, married and made brilliant art for many years. While Bill was in town, he stopped at an antique shop not far from where his gallery is now on Bellevue Avenue, and encountered one of Newport's great characters, Edith Bozyan, who, as she always did, struck up a conversation and discovered that he was working on a LaFarge paper for a college class.

"She said to me, 'Have I got a project for you,'" he recalled. "She invited me to dinner and told me all about the Newport Congregational Church and how it was in danger of being lost to development."

When Vareika turned in his paper, the art professor recommended that he change his major to art history. He didn't change it, but Bozyan luring him into the Congregational Church fight meant he volunteered for six years of fighting the case in court until the portion by the church congregation won. They were able to buy the church, and that sent Vareika and others on a long journey to protect the LaFarge windows and distinctive decorative murals that make the church unique.

From there, he took a parallel journey into the collection and sale of art with an emphasis on 19th century American painters. He and Alison have since branched out to include figures from the Ashcan School and other early 20th century movements. The current show includes an Andy Warhol and a

Hans Hoffman.

But the gallery's emphasis remains on the core Hudson River School painters and other American landscape artists that they started out with, and their efforts in that realm have resulted in them becoming key figures in Newport's art community.

While helping with the Congregational Church in the 1970s, Bill worked as a custodian and picture installer at the Newport Art Association, now the Art Museum, which has also collected the work of artists with Newport connections.

"When I first came to Newport, I was just amazed at its beauty and history," he said. "I had never been here before, so the fact that my career has happened here is almost a fluke."

For years, he served as a trustee at the Art Museum, as well as serving on the board of the committee that has worked to save and re-



"Playing with Dogs," by Benjamin West.

store the LaFarge murals and windows at what is now warmly referred to as the LaFarge Church.

The adjacent church offices have fittingly become artist studios, and the fundraising continues for some infrastructure issues. The Vareikas also held two exhibitions to benefit the church restoration project, and in 1997 the church achieved National Historic Landmark status because of the LaFarge windows and murals.

Those activities are only part of how they have helped Newport. Over the years, they have installed benefit exhibitions at the gallery to raise funds for Save The Bay, The Potter League Animal Shelter, the Museum of Yachting, Historic New England, the Gilbert Stuart Museum and others. The exhibitions shared with area residents the museum quality work on display, and the Vareikas are hoping to generate that kind of interest with the anniversary show.



"Persian Phantasy," by Hans Hofmann.

"We always have books on display about the art we are showing," he said. "We welcome people to look through them. They'll see images in the books of the work we have hung in the gallery. Coming into the gallery is an educational experience, and we want people to come in and enjoy that."

You don't need to coax Bill into telling stories about the work on display or about the early days of his marriage to Alison, when they were trying to sell paintings from their small apartment. Eventually, they happened upon the space on Bellevue near the Newport Casino and across from the Bellevue Gardens Shopping Center.

Ask Bill to tell you the story about the large painting in the gallery window by New Bedford artist

William Bradford and how the painting had hung in a long-gone house on the shopping center site, and he's happy to give you the details about the home's owner, the wily James Gordon Bennett.

Or he'll tell you about a drive in a snowstorm to reach Alison and their children for dinner when he stopped for no known reason at a roadside antique shop and saw from across the room a small painting hanging above a wood stove that the owner sold for \$150.

"I was a picker working out of my car at the time," he said. "But I had already developed an eye. It turned out that the painting was a LaFarge."

That leads to a question always asked of art dealers who sell and/or consign historic works: "Can you easily spot a fake?" Simple answer: "Yes."

Years of experience make it difficult to fool people with the expertise that Bill and Alison have devel-

oped. In fact, it even rubs off on employees like the gallery's receptionist, Molly Richard, who interned there when she was a student at Salve Regina University studying art history.

"I can look at a signature now and tell that it isn't right," she said. "Just being here and learning, you can pick up details like that."

After retiring this year from 22 years of teaching journalism at the University of Rhode Island, John Pantalone, the founding editor of



Newport This Week, is happy to be writing for the paper again.