

RHODE MAP

You have to get down to Newport to check out this art gallery this fall

By [Dan McGowan](#) Globe Columnist, Updated October 13, 2023, 8:30 a.m.



Art dealer William Vareika in front of a John La Farge stained glass triptych, which he and his wife Alison donated to the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College. WILLIAM VAREIKA FINE ARTS

Who says you should visit Newport only in the summer?

If you're looking for something fun and educational to do this fall, you should take a trip to the city by the sea to William Vareika Fine Arts on Bellevue Avenue.

William Vareika and his wife, Alison, are celebrating their 36th year running the gallery, and it has a stunning new exhibit focusing on three centuries of American art that runs through Nov. 30.

I asked William Vareika to tell us more about his passion for art (and share a few fun stories).

Q: You're now celebrating 36 years of running a public art gallery in Newport, but you have a fascinating story about how you fell in love with art. Tell us about that.

Vareika: I was a pre-law student at Boston College taking a single art history course and struggling to come up with a term paper topic. I had a part-time job at the Boston Public Library, and during breaks I used to practice transcendental meditation at Trinity Church across Copley Square. I would often look up at the stained glass windows and wall and ceiling murals by the Newport-connected artist John La Farge, which I decided to research for my paper topic.



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That led me to Newport and to a six-year preservation fight to save an endangered La Farge-decorated church. It also led me to a life-long obsession with La Farge and American art, particularly artists working in the Narragansett Bay region, and to a community I've called home for nearly 50 years.

Q: Your latest exhibition focuses on three centuries of American art between the 18th and 20th centuries. What should visitors know about the exhibit?

Vareika: For 35 years, our gallery has been exhibiting historical American artworks that rival those shown in the finest American museums. In our current anniversary exhibition, we feature artworks from the colonial portrait period, the 19th century Hudson River School landscape tradition, tonalism, impressionism, ashcan, early modern, and expressionism, ending with pop art.

There may be few galleries anywhere where visitors can view so many major works spanning 200 years of American art history in a relaxed setting, with a friendly and knowledgeable staff ready to answer questions and to educate. Serious collectors and museum curators from throughout the country seek out the gallery, but the staff also welcomes novice collectors and tourists on a daily basis.

The anniversary exhibition includes artworks by such American masters as Benjamin West, Kensett, Sanford Gifford, Heade, Richards, Homer, La Farge, Sargent, Chase, Theodore Robinson, Hans Hofmann, Andy Warhol, and many more.

Q: The art dealing world is filled with fascinating characters. Has anyone ever tried to pull one over on you and sell you a forgery?

Vareika: Yes, more than once. But you will have to wait until I write my book to learn the details.

In one case long ago, the leading art experts and museum conservators blessed a work as fully authentic and it was purchased for a seven-figure price by a major museum. Turned

out it was a total forgery and after a long process of verification, I refunded the purchase price.

On the other hand, as a young dealer I once had a distinguished museum curator tell me that an artwork I was offering by a major artist was clearly not authentic. I was embarrassed, but before I totally discarded the artwork as worthless, I reached out to the world's leading expert on that artist for a second opinion. She promptly asked the price and bought it for her personal collection as an outstanding example of the artist's work.

Q: It's no secret that your family has long been involved in Rhode Island politics. Be honest: Which politician has the best taste in art and who has the worst?

Vareika: Senators Claiborne Pell and John Chafee frequented the gallery in our early years and were very knowledgeable about historical American art. Governor Lincoln Chafee inherited that art interest. Governor Bruce Sundlun was an early client of our gallery and bought some wonderful artworks. He wanted Rhode Island to be known as "the state of the arts."

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse is very knowledgeable about art and once remarked at a public event that, since he was an art history major and I was pre-law, in another life our paths might have been reversed. Former congressman David Cicilline has a good "eye" for art, but collects more contemporary works than my specialization.

As for the worst, I respect those who are dedicated to public service, so I'll leave that answer to the voters.

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