

The Vareika's Art of Philanthropy

By Lisa Utman Randall
March 2009



With its verdant green walls, plush carpeting underfoot and softly-illuminated paintings hanging neatly in rows, walking into William Vareika Fine Arts, Ltd. on Bellevue Avenue in Newport feels like wandering off the path and into the forest. In contrast with the bustle of Bellevue outside, the gallery exudes a calm atmosphere perfect for viewing the impressive collection of 18th, 19th and early 20th century paintings, watercolors, drawings and prints.

The gallery, which was opened by Bill and Alison Vareika in 1987, had its more humble beginnings in the Newport carriage house that was also the couple's home for a time. From the beginning, the Vareika's defined the mission of their business as twofold: it would serve to provide a public viewing space for important historic American art and would be the vehicle through which they could support charitable causes.

Both Bill and Alison grew up in households where they witnessed their parents' ongoing involvement in philanthropy and public service.

"My father was always very philanthropic," Alison Vareika explained. "He was the Chairman of the Building Committee at the National Cathedral in Washington, and together my parents have raised millions over the years in support of Fragile X [an inherited form of mental impairment]."

"My dad was involved in politics and always on boards," Bill Vareika noted. "I learned by example." He added, "It was part of our particular generation. It was the time of the Peace Corps. I was also inspired by the motto of my Jesuit teachers: 'Go, and set the world on fire.' I had originally wanted to become a public interest lawyer and change the world and now I sell valuable art to the affluent class and use the gallery as a tool to raise funds for charitable causes I support. I think it's a good vocational compromise and a good reason to be successful in business."

Bill Vareika first came to Newport in the spring of 1974, a Boston College senior inspired by his one and only art history course and intent on completing a term paper about the artist John La Farge, who had lived and studied here in Newport in the mid to late 1800s.

"While I was here that spring I got involved in a community attempt to save a church building that had been decorated by La Farge," Vareika said. "I committed to come back for the summer to volunteer for the effort. My plan was that I'd graduate from B.C., spend the summer saving the building, and then go on to law school in the fall."

Complications ensued within the project and Vareika ended up staying in Newport. Six years later he had abandoned his plans for law school, worked a variety of odd jobs – including a stint as part time janitor at the Newport Art Association (now the Newport Art Museum) where he has since been both a trustee and a donor - and discovered an aptitude for spotting art treasures in antique shops, yard sales, and country auctions.

"And we did eventually save the church and the historic art works," he assured me.

Alison Vareika, on the other hand, arrived in Newport by sea. "I was working on a charter yacht and the owner wanted to see the America's Cup races," she said. "I loved Newport and decided to move here."

The two met by chance when an artist friend of Bill's introduced him to studio mate and local artist, Julie Smith, who was at the time painting a portrait of Alison. Once they formed a partnership the business grew alongside their family - starting with Alison's son Timothy and soon followed by the couple's two children Christian and Hope.

From the start, entrepreneurship and philanthropy went hand and hand – their first large-scale La Farge exhibit was a benefit to raise money for the church project followed soon thereafter by a similar show to support the then 20 year-old Save The Bay organization in 1990.

“I have been a supporter of Save The Bay from the beginning,” said Bill Vareika, whose first apartments in Newport were situated along the Narragansett Bay. “It was amazing to be able to stage another benefit exhibit for them in 2007 as part of our 20th anniversary celebration, and the benefit raised almost a quarter of a million dollars.”

Over the past two decades the Vareika’s have sat on the boards and advisory committees, sponsored numerous non-profit fundraisers and held benefit exhibits for some of their favorite causes including Save The Bay, The Newport Art Museum, Hasbro Children’s Hospital, Aquidneck Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, The International Yacht Restoration School & Museum of Yachting, The Redwood Library, The Robert Potter League for Animals, the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center, the Newport Music Festival and Historic New England – among others.

It’s an impressively long list and both agree that at this point they have narrowed their focus to a handful of organizations where they feel they can be most effective.

“My involvement with the Newport Art Museum started over 30 years ago,” Bill Vareika said. “I was on the board for twenty years, and I have donated artworks by John F. Kensett, John La Farge, William Trost Richards and others. I’m also currently involved with [the Boston-based] Historic New England. They have a great collection of 36 restored historic properties, including 4 in Rhode Island, which of course interests me.”

And Bill Vareika is also still involved with the artist who brought him here in the first place. “We were recently able to save 13 La Farge stained glass windows that were found in a chapel in Fall River about to be demolished. The windows were originally designed for a private home chapel in Newport that was demolished during the Depression, and we’re bringing them back to be installed in a new chapel at Salve [Regina University] where they can be enjoyed by students and the community as ecclesiastical symbols and great works of art.” The Vareika’s are planning an exhibition of John La Farge’s work to benefit this project in August.

Alison Vareika, for her part, is now primarily focused on her work with the Opera House Theatre restoration project. She is the current Chairman of the Newport Performing Arts Center, which owns the theatre and has completed work on the building’s façade. Working with other local and like-minded individuals, Vareika hopes to restore the interior as well, and create a permanent center for the performing arts in the current Opera House Cinema on Washington Square in Newport.

“I ran into Dominique [Alfandre, Executive Director of Island Moving Co.] one day a few years ago and that was that,” said Alison Vareika. “Dominique was involved from the beginning, and I had been watching the project from afar and was very interested. I think it’s so important for Newport to have a real performing arts center, although I see this as much an economic development project as an art project. Tourism is what is going to save this state economically.”

“A lot of the board responsibility is fundraising. You help craft policy and provide leadership,” Bill Vareika explained. “Over twenty years ago I joined the Newport Art Museum board to help define the mission to specialize in Newport’s rich artistic heritage and thriving living arts community, so we could become a truly unique institution, unlike every other small museum in America.”

“Bill in particular is the conscience of any board he’s on,” added Alison Vareika. “My role is more the fearless leader. When I was Chair of the Land Trust and we conducted a strategic plan to determine how much money we needed to raise, and the number turned out to be \$20 million. I had to convince everyone that it’s not that big of a number. The Opera House is the same situation. If you let the number stop you, then nothing would ever happen.”

In regards to the current financial crisis facing our country, Bill Vareika admitted that “it’s going to be an interesting year.” “The need,” he continued, “is not going to go away. The charitable public and corporate world need to prioritize and continue to support worthy causes. We make our contributions based on how well we do as a business. The year we face now is like no other, but we will continue to work very hard to meet our charitable commitments.”

To learn more about William Vareika Fine Arts, Ltd., visit <http://www.vareikafinearts.com/>.

For more information about the restoration of the Newport Opera House and how you can help, visit <http://www.operahousenewport.org/>.