

First Responder

by William Bole

Art dealer William Vareika '74



Vareika, in his gallery. Photograph: Gary Wayne Gilbert

Showing a visitor around his spacious art gallery in Newport, Rhode Island, William Vareika came to a highly impressionistic rendering of trees in a forest. “This one is very important to me,” he said. With its quick, spontaneous brushstrokes, the 1864 oil painting by eclectic American artist John La Farge (1835–1910) prefigured French Impressionism. More to the point, Vareika explained, as a Boston College sophomore on a budget, he purchased a black-and-white print of this La Farge piece, *Wood Interior*, and glued it onto a page in a paper he wrote for an art history class. Now he owns the original.

Raised in Brockton, Massachusetts, Vareika had every intention of becoming a public interest lawyer. In fall 1971, the political science major took the class in 19th-century art mainly to fulfill a distribution requirement. One day, he slipped into Boston’s Trinity Church to reflect on a topic for his paper. Inside, Vareika saw the elaborate murals around the sanctuary, works by La Farge. He had his subject.

During his senior year, as part of an independent study on La Farge, Vareika visited Newport, where the artist had been tutored by William Morris Hunt. There, the student was drawn into a struggle to save Newport Congregational Church—with its La Farge stained-glass windows—from bulldozing. He decided to devote his summer before law school to the campaign, which turned into six years of unpaid community organizing and negotiating among church members and developers. Meanwhile, Vareika worked as a part-time janitor at a local art museum and as an art “picker,” trolling yard sales and thrift shops for items that “looked better than their price” and reselling them to galleries.

The church battle was won, but Vareika never entered law school. Instead, he became an art dealer, specializing in 18th- and 19th-century American art. In 1987, he and his wife, Alison, opened William Vareika Fine Arts Ltd., in two adjoining red brick buildings on historic Bellevue Avenue. Often cited in New England guidebooks, the gallery functions in part as a museum, open to the public without charge seven days a week.

Vareika works with clients, including museums and private collectors, helping them locate and acquire artwork on their “wish lists.” And he remains an activist: He recently spearheaded the rescue, restoration, and relocation of 13 La Farge stained-glass windows in a Massachusetts convent slated for demolition.