

# Home Again: A Dealer Repatriates Two American Icons

BY KELLY COMPTON



Last November, most collectors visiting the *Boston International Fine Art Show* stopped in their tracks to marvel at a pair of monumental paintings on the stand of William Vareika Fine Arts (Newport, Rhode Island). Though *The Virgin and St. John the Evangelist at the Foot of the Cross* did not sell at the fair, even casual passers-by could tell there was something special about these mahogany panels, each almost eight feet high and enhanced by elaborate frames adorned with gilded cherubs.

Those who asked learned that these are among the largest paintings created by John La Farge (1835-1910), the groundbreaking painter, engraver, muralist, illustrator, writer, and stained-glass artist best remembered for decorating Trinity Church in Boston's Copley Square during the 1870s. Made in the early 1860s, when he was still in his 20s, these are La Farge's earliest extant decorative creations, and have not been seen publicly since 1936.

Why are scholars and connoisseurs so excited about this discovery? First, La Farge was an early advocate of Italian art in the United States. James L. Yarnall, a professor at Salve Regina University in Newport, explains that "the poses and attenuated silhouettes of [Mary and John] are especially reminiscent of work from the Byzantine and Siense schools of the late 14th and early 15th centuries." In the 1860s, if they were looking at Italian art at all, most Americans were thinking of Raphael, who lived well after the period La Farge most admired.

Second, this young rule-breaker infused "a modern feeling through the introduction of an atmospheric landscape and breathtaking perspective." Indeed, La Farge was one of the first Americans to paint landscapes *en plein air*. Here we find ourselves looking across a coastal landscape near Newport, where La Farge was living when he painted the panels. Finally, Yarnall believes the features of St. John are those of the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James, and the Virgin Mary closely resembles the artist's wife, Margaret.

## THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

So how did these paintings find their way to Boston last fall? We know they were part of a crucifixion triptych commissioned in 1862 for St. Peter's, one of the historic churches in lower Manhattan that offered supplies and solace to thousands following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Alas, La Farge completed only these two side panels, which he exhibited in 1863 at New York's National Academy of Design, then

John La Farge (1835-1910)  
*The Virgin and St. John the Evangelist  
 at the Foot of the Cross*  
 1862-63, Oil on mahogany panel,  
 each 95 1/2 x 29 1/2 in.  
 William Vareika Fine Arts, Newport, Rhode Island







Bill Vareika standing alongside the La Farge panels



the most important art venue in America. In a country still skeptical of Roman Catholic imagery and Italian styles, La Farge was essentially stuck with his enormous pictures until 1884, when they were finally sold to the millionaire William Collins Whitney for his residence in Old Westbury, Long Island. Whitney was urged to buy them by no less than Stanford White, the most socially connected partner in America's leading architecture firm, McKim, Mead & White.

The panels remained in the Whitney family until Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney donated them to her own Whitney Museum of American Art when it opened in 1931. The story of Gertrude Whitney's fearless advocacy of American artists — in an era when most of her compatriots admired European art — has been told often, though no mention has been made of the surprising aesthetic impact of seeing La Farge's über-Catholic, über-Italianate panels among her more characteristic Hoppers and Bentons.

In 1950 — after Gertrude's death — the museum decided to focus its collection on 20th-century work, and thus sold the La Farge panels to Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney. It is revealing that he decided not to hang them in America, but at his palatial home in Trujillo, Spain, where they remained until 1983, when they were almost certainly acquired by Whitney's decorator, Duarte Pinto Coelho, for his own home nearby. Coelho died in 2010, and his estate was dispersed in London at a Christie's "country house" sale last July. Overlooked by most fine art dealers, the pictures were bought there by Bill Vareika, who brought them back to the U.S. and had them carefully conserved.

Vareika became acquainted with La Farge in 1971 while practicing transcendental meditation in Trinity Church, the very day he was searching for a term-paper topic in the one art history course he took while a pre-law major at Boston College. He soon abandoned his law school plans to volunteer to direct a legal effort to save a La Farge-decorated church threatened with demolition. While working as a part-time janitor at the Newport Art Museum, Vareika became an art dealer primarily to support himself during that six-year preservation fight. In 1987, when he finally opened a walk-in gallery, Vareika's specialty was, inevitably, La Farge and other artists who had worked in and around Newport. To date, he has probably owned more artworks by La Farge than any other dealer, and he recently helped arrange the gift of 13 endangered La Farge windows to Salve Regina University.

For almost 30 years, Vareika wondered what happened to *The Virgin and St. John the Evangelist at the Foot of the Cross*. (They were long listed as "location unknown.") One can only imagine his joy when they turned up in London last year. Now he rightly hopes to place them in a collection whose owners will grasp their thrilling significance and will also relish their unusual, ethereal beauty. ■

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*Kelly Compton is a contributing writer to Fine Art Connoisseur.*

Information: 212 Bellevue Avenue, Newport, RI 02840, 401.849.6149, vareikafinearts.com