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A great show of formal faces

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James Sharples 1790s portrait of George Washington is part of “Faces of Our Ancestors: Three Centuries of American Portraits: Joseph Blackburn to Andy Warhol” at William Vareika Fine Arts in Newport.

When was the last time you took a close look at a portrait? And no, I’m not talking about the family photo gallery in the den (or wherever you keep those adorable shots of Granny, Gramps and the kids). Charming as they are, they’re not the kind of portraits I mean.

Instead, I’m talking about the kind of formal, painted portraits that famous people used to commission from talented artists, usually for a hefty fee. You know the ones — dark backgrounds, heavy furniture, men in power suits and women in fancy gowns, gold frames. For most of us, encountering such works in a gallery or museum has, sadly, become a reason to keep on walking.

And that’s a shame, since portraits have a lot to tell us — about how people lived, what they wore (or at least what they wore to have their portraits painted) and what they thought was important. In that sense, a good portrait is a

kind of visual time capsule, a record of the past waiting to be reopened and rediscovered in the present. It’s history written in paint rather than in print.

All of which brings us to “Faces of Our Ancestors: Three Centuries of American Portraits,” a terrific exhibit at William Vareika Fine Arts in Newport. Though the gallery is best known as a showcase for American landscapes and marine paintings, owner Bill Vareika is also fan of portraits, which he thinks are often undervalued relative to their artistic quality and interest.

And to prove his point, he’s amassed a remarkable collection of (mostly) paintings, ranging from Colonial-era portraits by Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley and Gilbert Stuart to more recent works by the likes of Al Hirschfeld and Andy Warhol. Other highlights include a rare pastel study of George Washington by the 18th-century artist James Sharples (it was reputedly Washington’s personal favorite) and a great British portrait: Thomas Sully’s 1844 Portrait of a Man.

The show, which runs through the end of November, also serves a worthy cause. A percentage of each sale goes to the Rhode Island State House Restoration Society, a non-profit group that is overseeing efforts to clean and restore all the governors’ portraits in the State House.

The project, which ultimately aims to research and restore more than 70 paintings, is expected to continue through 2010 and cost between \$250,000 and \$300,000. According to Vareika, the society hopes to raise the entire amount through private donations and fundraising.

As an added bonus, “Faces of Our Ancestors” features three State House portraits, including one — a half-length view of William Sprague, a Cranston textile magnate (and future U.S. Senator) who was governor from 1838 to 1839 — that has already undergone some partial cleaning. The other two portraits depict Augustus O. Brown (1883-1885) and George Utter (1905-1907).

While history buffs will be interested in all three paintings, art lovers will want to seek out the Sprague portrait. Not only is it more intimate than the other two — the nattily dressed Sprague looks as if he’s going to ask us to pull up a chair — but it’s painted by James Sullivan Lincoln, a prolific artist whose clients included a Who’s Who of prominent 19th-century Rhode Islanders.

In all, “Faces of Our Ancestors” features about 100 artworks, including prints, paintings, drawings and sculptures. Not surprisingly, the show is strongest in many of the same areas — mainly portrait paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries — that are among the gallery’s specialties.

In fact, you could mount a pretty good survey of early American portraiture using only works from the exhibit. The show’s earliest entry, for example, was painted by John Smibert, a British artist who accompanied the philosopher George Berkeley on what turned out to be an ill-starred attempt to found a university in Bermuda in 1728. (Instead, Smibert wound up settling in Boston.)

Like Berkeley, Smibert also spent considerable time in Newport, where he painted many of the city’s social and political leaders. Among them was Nathaniel Byfield, a local magistrate who appears in a circa-1730 portrait wearing a tight-fitting frock coat and powdered wig. Though hardly a great work of art — Smibert’s painting style is every bit as stiff as Byfield’s pose — it’s still a good example of what our Colonial forebears expected when they commissioned a portrait.

From roughly the same period comes Robert Feke’s portrait of Jeremiah Greene. Feke, who was born on Long Island, was one of the first homegrown artists to achieve fame as a portrait painter. Though still a bit stiff by contemporary standards, his style, at least in this painting, is noticeably livelier than Smibert’s. His handling of Greene’s clothing is especially good.

As good as Feke and Smibert were, the generation of American portrait painters that followed them was even better. Boston artist John Singleton Copley, for example, combined a keen eye for physical details with an interest in the inner lives of his sitters. The result, evident in the two Copley portraits in the Vareika show, was a new (and distinctly American) brand of realism.

Pennsylvania painter Benjamin West, meanwhile, was one of the first New World artists to achieve success in Europe. Mixing Old Master technique with a dash of theatrical flair, West eventually rose to become president of Britain’s Royal Academy — a rare honor for a non-Briton. His style is nicely illustrated in *The Drummond Brothers* (circa 1767), a portrait of two young men (actually, the teenaged sons of West’s patron, Robert Drummond) outlined against a classical background.

Another artist who studied abroad was Gilbert Stuart. Yet unlike West, the Rhode Island-born Stuart returned to America, where his portraits (notably of George Washington) earned him a reputation as America’s foremost portraitist. The two works in the Vareika gallery

show Stuart at his best, particularly a wonderful 1815 portrait of his longtime friend, Allen Crocker.

Another highlight: a marvelous pastel portrait of Washington by James Sharples. Though heavier and somewhat fuller of face than the Washington who appears in Stuart’s iconic portraits, Sharples’ Washington has the advantage of feeling livelier and truer to life. Maybe that’s why this circa-1796 portrait is reputed to have been one of Washington’s personal favorites.

In addition to Stuart, the show features a number of works by artists with Rhode Island ties. Among them: a charming portrait of the pioneering African-American businesswoman Christiana Carteaux Bannister by her husband, Edward M. Bannister; an Old Master-ish portrait, *The Tragedian*, by the painter (and sometime-Newporter) William Morris Hunt; and a portrait of the great marine painter William Trost Richards by his daughter, Anna Richards Brewster.

Though not as star-studded, the show’s collection of 20th-century portraits also features some interesting works. Among them: an Edward Hopper-ish self-portrait by Leon Knoll and Lazar Raditz’s dreamy *Man at Piano*, a kind of semi-abstract tone-portrait of the Russian-born conductor Leopold Stowkowski.

Also of note: Andy Warhol’s 1980 portrait of Ted Kennedy. Though Warhol is often criticized for turning celebrities into ciphers, this ghostly image of a young Ted Kennedy takes on a special poignancy, especially in light of Kennedy’s recent (and ongoing) battle with cancer.

“Faces of Our Ancestors: Three Centuries of American Portraits” runs through Nov. 30 at William Vareika Fine Arts, 212 Bellevue Ave., Newport. Hours: Mon.-Sat. 10-6 and Sun. 1-6, or by appt. Contact: (401) 849-6149 or www.vareikafinearts.com

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