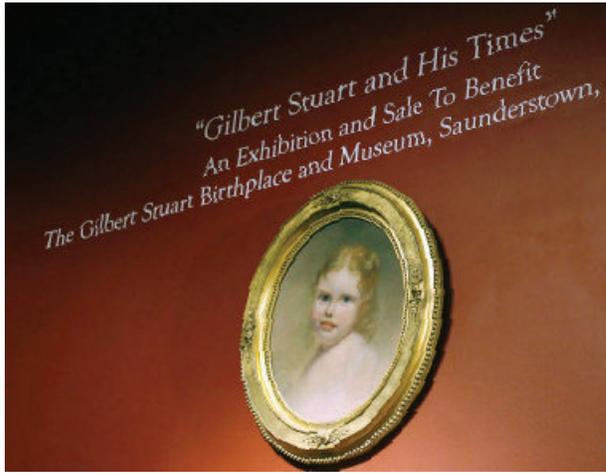


Providence Journal

Newport show highlights Gilbert Stuart, and friends

01:17 PM EST on Friday, December 10, 2010



A portrait by William Allen Wall (1801-1885) entitled, "Portrait of a Rotch Family Child," greets visitors to the show. The Rotch family of New Bedford were leaders in the whaling industry there.

By Bill Van Sicen, Journal Arts Writer

NEWPORT, R.I. — Somewhere, Gilbert Stuart must be smiling.

Not only did the man who gave us iconic portraits of George Washington and other Colonial-era luminaries recently celebrate another birthday (his 255th, on Dec. 3), but his work is the focus of "Gilbert Stuart and His Times," a sparkling new exhibit at William Vareika Fine Arts. Indeed, the show, which has been handsomely installed on the gallery's second floor, amounts to a kind of mini-survey of early American art: In addition to Stuart, visitors will find paintings by his daughter, Jane Stuart, his onetime mentor, Benjamin West, and the man whose success may have inspired Stuart to pursue a painting career in the first place: John Singleton Copley.

Other highlights include works by Thomas Sully, a British-born artist who also painted several portraits of Washington; John Smibert, a Scottish painter who was active in Newport during the Colonial pe-

riod; and Charles Willson Peale, a Philadelphia painter and the founder (along with his sons Rembrandt, Rubens and Raphaelle Peale) of one of the great family dynasties in American art.

The result is an exhibit that many museums might envy. Yet as gallery owner Bill Vareika explained during a recent visit, the show began as something far more modest.

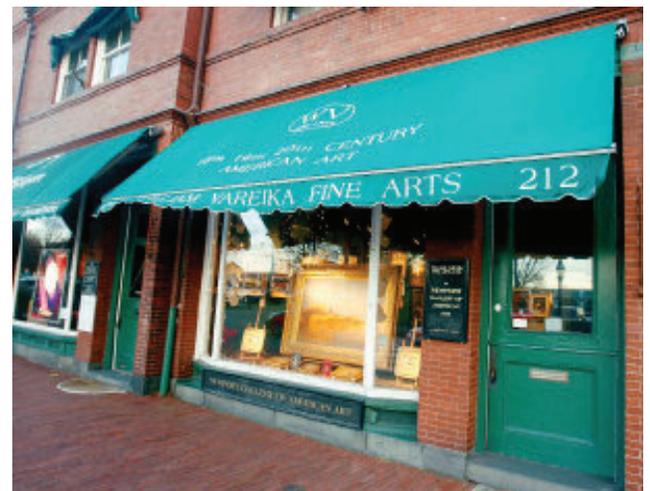
"Basically, it just sort of snowballed," Vareika said. "At first, the idea was to do a small show focusing mainly on Gilbert but with a few supporting works from some of his close contemporaries. But as sometimes happens in this business, once we started it was hard to stop."

Vareika, of course, has done this sort of thing before. In fact, over the past few years, his Bellevue Avenue gallery has hosted a number of museum-worthy exhibits, including shows devoted to the 19th-century artist-designer John LaFarge and Newport painter William Trost Richards.

Those efforts, in turn, have made it easier for Vareika to borrow artworks that might otherwise remain locked away in private collections or inside museum storerooms. In the Stuart show, the loans include a handsome portrait of Abraham Touro, on loan from Newport's Touro Synagogue, and a rare portrait bust of Stuart himself owned by the Newport Historical Society.

The Society also lent what is thought to be Stuart's earliest known artwork — a pencil sketch of a young boy, presumably one of Stuart's friends, made on a wood shingle.

In all, the show boasts about 75 artworks, ranging from small sketch-book drawings to large-scale landscapes and historical scenes. According to Vareika, roughly half the works are for sale, with the remainder on loan from a variety of public and private collections. (By the way, a percentage of each sale will go to a worthy cause: the Gilbert Stuart Birthplace and Museum in Saunderstown.)



The gallery is down the street from the Tennis Hall of Fame.



This Gilbert Stuart oil painting is of Rebecca White Pickering, the wife of Col. Timothy Pickering, who served in President Washington's Cabinet.

At the same time, Vareika concedes that his gallery is no match for the New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which organized a major Stuart exhibition in 2005, or Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, which affords Stuart a prominent place in its new Art of the Americas Wing.

Instead, "Gilbert Stuart and His Times" offers something else — a quick but satisfying glimpse of Stuart the man and the artist, together with cameo appearances by some of his contemporaries, both famous and forgotten. Indeed, while many of Stuart's most famous paintings are already in major museum collections, his skills as a portraitist are apparent even in relatively minor works.

A gifted raconteur, Stuart had a knack for putting his sitters at ease — a trait that's evident in a circa-1816 portrait of Rebecca White Pickering, wife of Revolutionary War hero Col. Timothy Pickering. Sporting a white-lace cap and matching collar, the British-born Pickering manages to look both dignified and down-to-earth — the kind of woman you might meet in a Jane Austen novel.

Other works, including portraits of Harvard University president the Rev. John Thornton Kirkland and Newport businessman George Gibbs, show off the paint-handling skills Stuart learned in London, where he apprenticed with the expatriate American painter Benjamin West.

No Stuart show, of course, would be complete without a portrait of another George — George Washington. After all, Stuart painted the definitive portraits of the first president, including the so-called "Athenaeum Portrait" which appears on the U.S. one-dollar bill.

Don't bother looking for any of those paintings here. However, you will find one of the few portraits of Washington painted directly from life; it's by James Sharples, an English portraitist who was famous for using a special device, known as a "physiognotrace," to create an exact outline of a sitter's face. The result: Sharples' Washington has broader (though presumably accurate) features than most of us are used to seeing.

After Stuart's death in 1828, his daughter, Jane, carried on the family's painting tradition. For the most part, that meant cranking out copies of her father's Washington portraits. But on the rare occasions when she ventured out on her own, Jane Stuart proved to be a better-than-average painter in her own right.

A case in point: a charming painting of a cherub, his face as rosy as a bowl of Christmas punch, that hangs on the gallery's back wall.

"Gilbert Stuart and His Times" runs through March 6 at William Vareika Fine Arts, 212 Bellevue Ave. in Newport. For information, call (401) 849-6149 or visit www.vareikafinearts.com.



Opposite is Stuart's portrait of Abraham Touro, a Newport merchant, shipbuilder and philanthropist who was the son of the first rabbi of Touro Synagogue.