

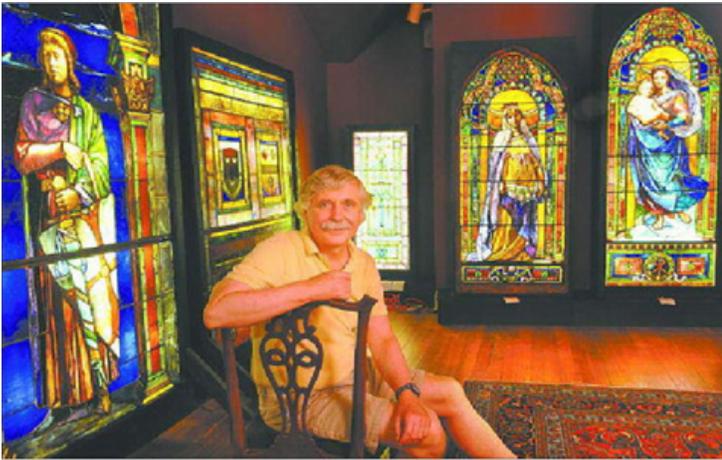
The Newport Daily News

Friday, August 28, 2009

Glass with Class

By Sean Flynn Daily News staff

Artwork by John La Farge, including stained glass windows destined for a chapel at Salve Regina University, will go on display tonight.



William Vareika, owner of William Vareika Fine Arts Ltd. in Newport, takes a break Thursday from preparing for today's opening of the exhibit 'John La Farge: American Artistic Genius and Renaissance Man.' Some of the stained glass windows on display will be installed in the Our Lady of Mercy Chapel on the Salve Regina University campus.

David Hansen Daily News staff

NEWPORT — William Vareika wandered into Trinity Church in Boston while he was a student at Boston College in the early 1970s and was enthralled by the John La Farge murals he saw there. He made La Farge the focus of a project in the art history class he took at BC, where he was in a prelaw course of study.

More than 30 years later, Vareika is leading a drive to return 13 La Farge stained-glass windows to Newport and have them installed in the new Our Lady of Mercy Chapel now under construction on the

Salve Regina University campus.

"The windows are breathtaking," said Katherine Horoschak, Salve's director of major gifts. "These are major art treasures. I just love them."

La Farge lived from 1835 until 1910 - much of that time in Newport — and is America's most famous stained-glass window maker. He experimented with varying thickness of glass pieces, invented opalescent glass and solved color problems to create windows that rival the beauty of classic medieval stained glass.

"He was a genius at glass," Vareika said.

Residents and visitors can view 160 works of art by La Farge in a new exhibit opening tonight, "John La Farge: American Artistic Genius and Renaissance Man," on the second floor of William Vareika Fine Arts Ltd., 212 Bellevue Ave.

Except for the grand opening tonight, which is a fundraiser, the exhibit will be open to the public free of charge through Nov. 30.

Eight of the stained-glass windows planned for the Salve chapel are on exhibit. Six of the windows have been restored. Vareika said he included two of the unrestored windows in the exhibit so visitors can contrast them with the restored windows. Other La Farge glasswork is on display, including a window shipped to the exhibit from Virginia on Thursday.

Oil paintings, watercolors, drawings and prints by La Farge also are on display, as well as books and letters written by La Farge and photographs of him. While some of the works are on loan from private collectors, art dealers and museums, many of the works are for sale. A percentage of those sales will be donated to the fundraising drive to preserve the windows. Vareika said it his goal to raise \$1 million for the acquisition, restoration and installation of the windows at the chapel, which was designed to include the windows. Horoschak said construction of the chapel, as well as the associated spiritual life center, interfaith prayer room and offices, is a \$7 million project.

Gallery owner William Vareika holds 'The Good Knight' a watercolor and gouache on paper by John La Farge, circa 1899, which was a study for the stained glass Albert Greenville Boyton memorial window at the First Unitarian Church in Detroit.

David Hansen Daily News staff





Salve Regina University employees Frank Gilchrest, left, and Marc Canulla on Thursday help move one of the restored John La Farge stained glass windows into the William Vareika Fine Arts Ltd. gallery for the opening of tonight's exhibit. **David Hansen** Daily News staff

La Farge designed the 13 windows for a private Catholic chapel and music room in the Kay Street home of sisters Mary Gwendolyn Byrd Caldwell and Mary Eliza Breckenridge Caldwell about 1890. Before the Caldwell home was demolished in 1931, Bishop James Cassidy acquired the windows and had them installed in a Sisters of Mercy convent in Fall River, Mass.

In 2001, one of the nuns informed Vareika and Sister M. Therese Antone, then president of Salve and now the university's first chancellor, that the convent would be demolished to make room for a parking lot.

"When I heard that, I wanted to preserve the windows and keep them intact," Vareika said. "If possible, I hoped to see them retained in an ecclesiastical center and available for viewing by the public."

Vareika said there was a danger that the windows would go to an auction house or art dealer and they would be sold individually for installation in private homes or other buildings around the world.

The Sisters of Mercy founded Salve Regina and Antone also was committed to the preservation and restoration project, Vareika said.

"We put together a small ad hoc committee and made a proposal to the Fall River diocese so the windows could come back to Newport," Vareika said. "Salve acquired them in 2004." Originally, the plan was to put the windows in light boxes and have them displayed around the campus, since building a chapel was not a priority for the university at the time, Vareika said. "The momentum of saving the windows helped lead to the creation of the chapel," he said. "Now they will be enjoyed by future visitors to Newport."

Salve Professor James Yarnell is a leading expert on the artwork of La Farge. Salve students will study the windows, Horoschak said.

Five of the windows still need to be restored. The windows are being restored at the Serpentino Glass Studio in Needham, Mass. Robert Rosa, who is the chief of the restoration effort at Serpentino, is expected to be at tonight's opening reception. This is Vareika's second major effort to save La Farge stained glass windows for Newport. In the 1970s, he successfully led an effort to save the historic Congregational Church at the corner of Spring and Pelham streets, with its La Farge murals and opalescent glass windows.

When he first became acquainted with the work of La Farge during his art history class at Boston College, Vareika said he had planned to go to law school. But the preservation effort to save the church changed his plans and he developed a career as an art dealer, never losing his passion for the life and art of La Farge.

"Thirty years later, I'm involved in another effort to save La Farge's work for the public," he said. "This exhibit will raise awareness of La Farge and his role in the history of art. People who come here, including potential donors, will recognize how important this project is."

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