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Newport area inspired La Farge, Friday, August 28, 2009



By Sean Flynn, Daily News staff

'Water Lilies in a White Bowl' is one of John La Farge's most famous paintings.

NEWPORT — John La Farge bought a house in Newport in 1859 and went on to create some of his most important art here, sometimes incorporating the landscapes of the city and Middletown into his works.

Born in New York City, he maintained a studio there throughout his career. But on the advice of his friend, architect Richard Morris Hunt, La Farge traveled to Newport to study painting in the studio of Hunt's older brother, William Morris Hunt.

Inspired by Newport's beautiful environment, he left Hunt's studio to become among the first American artists to paint landscapes in the open air, said William Vareika, an art dealer who is hosting a new exhibit of La Farge works opening tonight at his Bellevue Avenue gallery.

"It was in Newport during the 1860s and early 1870s that La Farge produced the first impressionist experiments in America and created some of the most beautiful floral still-lives ever painted," he said. "Some people call him the first American impressionist."

La Farge's famous painting, "Water Lilies in a White Bowl," will be recognized by many of viewers even if they did not know La Farge created it.

Visitors to the exhibit also will see La Farge's painting of Hanging Rock in Middletown, painted from the hill where St. George's School is now located. The Purgatory Rocks at Sachuest Beach in Middletown are featured in a few of the paintings, even in paintings with a different motif. One of the paintings depicts a Biblical scene, but the rocks can be seen in the background.

Another painting was done at Brenton Point in Newport.

"Newport, a place quite separate and removed from all artistic influences, good or bad, made an ideal retreat for individual study," La Farge wrote.

In 1861, La Farge and his wife, Margaret Mason Perry, a Newport native and granddaughter of Commodore Matthew Perry, who opened trade between Japan and the West, purchased a home at Bull Street and Mount Vernon Court, which later was moved to 24 Kay St. They moved to 10 Sunnyside Place in Newport in 1873. The family also lived in several rented homes in the Paradise section of Middletown.

Visitors to the exhibit will see the only existing oil portrait of Margaret painted by her husband.

La Farge is even more famous for his stained-glass work. A highlight of the exhibit is three stained-glass windows, all next to each other, depicting Madonna and Child, St. Elizabeth of Hungary and St. John the Baptist.

Visitors also will be able to see one of the life-sized paintings La Farge did of a stainedglass window before it was created. Such paintings are rare because they were cut into pieces for the creation of the glass pieces, Vareika said.

Working sketches for windows also are included in the exhibit.

La Farge traveled to Japan in 1886 and to the South Pacific in 1890-91, both times accompanied by Henry Adams, the grandson of President John Quincy Adams, Vareika said.

Some of the paintings La Farge created during these trips can be seen in the exhibit.