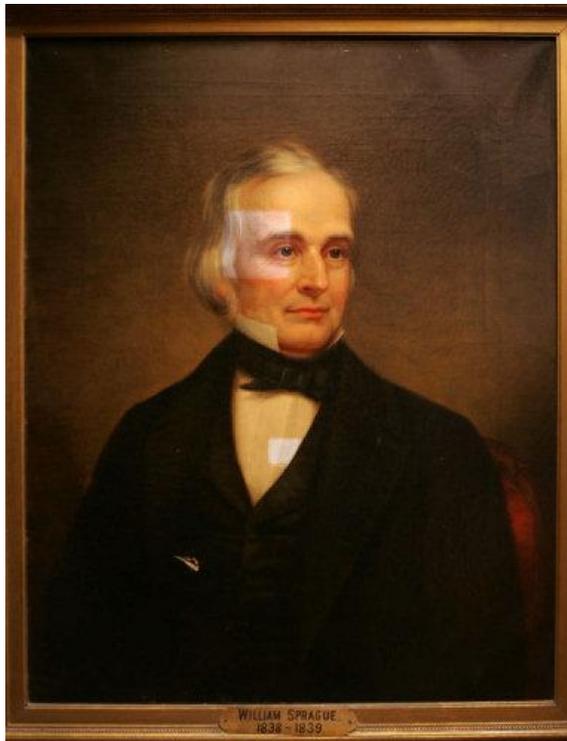


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Art: Old R.I. State House portraits being restored

By Bill Van Siclen, Journal Arts Writer



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In this painting undergoing restoration, there is a rectangular area on one side of the face, and also a part of his shirt, that has been cleaned of the old yellowed varnish. There is also a hole in the lower left area of the portrait of former Rhode Island Gov. William Sprague (1838-1839).

Photo by Sandor Bodo

NEWPORT Judging by his portrait, William C. Gibbs wasn't what you would call a touchy-feely kind of guy. Indeed, Gibbs, who served as governor of Rhode Island from 1821 to 1824 and whose official portrait is part of an unusual exhibit at the Newport Art Museum, looks positively fearsome — a scowling Old Testament prophet in a frock coat and bushy sideburns.

Gibbs' portrait was another matter.

After hanging in the Rhode Island State House for more than a century and a half, it definitely needed some pampering. Colors were fading, pigments were cracking and the varnish, typically applied as a protective topcoat to a finished canvas, was turning brown.

Fortunately, help arrived in the form of the Rhode Island State House Restoration Society, a nonprofit group that has spent the last two years restoring about a dozen of the state's 71 governors' portraits. Ten of those paintings, including portraits of Gibbs, John Wanton (1734-40) and Charles C. Van Zandt (1877-80), are currently on display at the Newport Art Museum.

Meanwhile, a companion exhibit with three more governors' portraits is at the William Vareika Fine Arts gallery on Bellevue Avenue, through the end of November.

The two shows are part of a concerted effort to call attention to the portrait-cleaning campaign, which is expected to continue through 2010 and cost between \$250,000 and \$300,000. Organizers hope to raise all that money through private donations and fundraising.

"It's very much a private effort," says State House Restoration Society chair Elizabeth "Betty" Capozzi. "Given the economic situation, you really couldn't expect the state to use taxpayers' money to clean these portraits. So that's where we come in."

At the same time, Capozzi and other society members hope that civic-minded Rhode Islanders will contribute to the portrait-cleaning effort, despite the rocky economy.

"It's really a chance to save a part of our history," she says.

In all, Capozzi estimates that about 65 portraits will require some degree of restoration. In most cases, the work will be relatively minor — usually a matter of removing layers of varnish that have yellowed over time, then applying a new coat of non-yellowing varnish.

But in a few cases, the restoration will be much more extensive. Several portraits, for example, were placed near radiators,

causing the wooden “stretchers” that support the canvas to warp. Others show signs of being bumped or scraped by passersby.

In some cases, restorers face even bigger hurdles. Peter Williams, a Boston-based painting conservator who is leading the portrait-cleaning effort, says that several older portraits were restored long ago, when the experts knew far less about the chemical properties of paints and varnishes. Williams says the previous restorers used a type of varnish that formed a brittle, yet rock-hard shell.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it,” says Williams, whose clients have included the Boston Public Library and the Massachusetts Historical Society. “We actually had to chip it off using surgical scalpels. It was more like woodcarving than painting restoration.”

Williams says that some problems appear only after the restoration process has begun. As an example, he points to a portrait of Augustus O. Bourn, governor from 1883 to 1885.

“When we first saw the painting, we thought it was in pretty good condition,” he says. “There was the usual yellowing, but it was no big deal. Then we started removing the varnish and, lo and behold, we found some pretty big cracks that a previous restorer had covered up.”

More recent portraits are also showing signs of wear and tear.

A portrait of William Henry Vanderbilt (1939 to 1941), for example, was badly warped, causing the painting to bulge in some places and sag in others. To save it, Williams first had to remount the painting on a new canvas, then use a vacuum machine to pull it taut.

“That’s a lot of work for a 20th-century painting,” Williams says.

Still, for Capozzi and other society members it’s work that needs to be done. For them, the governors’ portraits aren’t just tributes to political egos and ambitions. Instead, they’re a visual timeline, tracing the history of Rhode Island from its Colonial roots to the present day.

“When you think about it, it’s really a remarkable resource,” says Iona Dobbins, a former executive director of the State Council on the Arts. “When you visit the State House and see all these former governors, it’s like having the history of Rhode Island right in front of you.”

Well, maybe not the entire history. Dobbins, who’s spent time researching the history of the portraits, says that none exist for some of the state’s earliest governors..

“We’re missing portraits for some of the early Colonial-era governors,” she says. “Either they didn’t have official portraits or the portraits were lost at some point.”

Dobbins says the earliest surviving paintings date from the late 1600s, when Newport, not Providence, was the state’s largest

and wealthiest city. Not surprisingly, many of Rhode Island’s Colonial-era governors hailed from the City by the Sea.

The city’s prominence is also reflected in the Newport Art Museum exhibit, which focuses on portraits of governors from the Newport area. Of these, three depict Colonial-era governors: John Wanton, a Newport merchant who served from 1734 to 1740; William Coddington Sr., one of the original founders of Newport, who served as governor for several terms between 1638 and 1678; and Joseph Wanton, John’s nephew, who served from 1734 to 1740.

(Coddington, in particular, seems to have been a colorful character. As a young man, he defended Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson and other religious reformers against charges of heresy brought by the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Later in life, he petitioned authorities in England to grant him a lifetime appointment as governor of Newport and Portsmouth. After angering many of his friends and supporters, he was forced to flee Newport and seek refuge — in Boston.)

Other paintings depict Richard Ward, a Newport merchant who served from 1740 to 1743; Beekman R. Livingston, a successful stockbroker and financier who served from 1915 to 1921, and William C. Cozzens, a former Mayor of Newport who served only one year, 1863.

Dobbins’ research also extends to the artists who painted the portraits.

For example, more than half the portraits — 37 — were painted by members of the Providence Art Club. Of these, 14 were by a single artist — James Sullivan Lincoln, who reportedly painted more than 3,000 portraits during his lifetime.

Eventually, Dobbins says, each will include a small label identifying both the governor whose likeness it depicts and the artist who painted it.

“It’ll be just like a museum,” she says.

In the meantime, the Restoration Society is sponsoring a series of smaller exhibits featuring portraits of governors from specific parts of the state. Newport came first, organizers say, because it’s the home of Rhode Island’s original seat of government, the Old Colony House.

In January, a similar one will be held at the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket. That exhibit will feature portraits of governors from the northern part of the state, including Cumberland, Lincoln, Pawtucket and Woonsocket.

The society, which was formed in 1992 to help raise money for the restoration of the State House interior, also hopes to mount a portrait exhibit in Providence. Organizers say they would like to hold that exhibit at the end of the portrait-cleaning process.

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