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20 years of bringing 'art by old dead guys' to life

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William Vareika's namesake gallery may be the most successful commercial art gallery in Rhode Island.
The Providence Journal / Frieda Squires Frieda Squires

NEWPORT Twenty years is a long time to do anything, let alone something as economically and emotionally risky as running an art gallery. Yet Bill Vareika, whose William Vareika Fine Arts is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, has not only survived but prospered. In fact, Vareika, who happily describes himself as a "former hippie counterculture type" who once dreamed of becoming a public-interest lawyer, runs what may be the most successful commercial art gallery in Rhode Island.

True, Vareika isn't the first local art dealer to reach the two-decade mark. Tiverton gallery owner Virginia Lynch managed to keep her namesake gallery going for 23 years before closing up shop last year. Other galleries, including Providence's Lenore Gray Gallery (founded in 1970) and Westerly's Sun-Up Gallery (currently celebrating its 30 anniversary), have had even longer runs.

Still, Vareika stands out for several reasons. For one thing, he specializes in 19th-century American art — or, as he cheekily but accurately puts it, "art by old dead guys." That sets him apart from the majority of Rhode Island galleries, which tend to showcase the work of living artists. He's also been hugely successful — so much so that when the two-story commercial

space on Bellevue Avenue that houses William Vareika Fine Arts came on the market a few years ago, he was able to buy it outright.

"Looking back, I think the odds of failing were a lot better than the odds of success," Vareika says. "In fact, I'm as surprised as anyone that we're still here."

At the same time, Vareika's countercultural roots still run deep. Most years, for example, he and his wife, Alison, mount at least one exhibit designed to raise money for a local cause or charity. This year, in honor of the gallery's 20th anniversary, there are two such exhibits: the first, featuring a selection of historic and contemporary views of Narragansett Bay, opens today and runs through Sept. 9. Titled "Precious Muse: Art of the Narragansett Bay Then and Now," the show will raise money for Save the Bay.

The second exhibit, which will focus on paintings of animals, opens in late September and will benefit the nonprofit Robert Potter League for Animals. In the past, the Vareikas have helped raise money for the Newport Art Museum, the Aquidneck Land Trust and the Preservation Society of Newport County.

"Basically, I'm still a frustrated public-interest lawyer at heart," Vareika says with a laugh. "On the other hand, as someone who lives in Newport and sees the beauty of the Rhode Island coast every day, I feel I have an obligation to give something back to the city and the area."

A NATIVE OF BROCKTON, Mass., Vareika, 55, got into the gallery business almost by chance. While pursuing a prelaw degree at Boston College, he decided to take an elective course — "something artsy," he says. On a whim, he signed up for a course in art history.

"It really was just a shot in the dark," he says. "I was never one of those people who spend a lot of time going to galleries and museums. At the time, I don't think I could have told you the difference between the Hudson River School and Impressionism. I was pretty ignorant."

In order to complete the course, Vareika had a choice: He could take an exam designed to test his general knowledge of art history or he could write a term paper on a topic of his own choosing. Since his study habits were, as he puts it, "rather lax," he chose the paper.

But that left him with another problem: What to write about? Though he didn't know it at the time, the answer to that question would change his life.

"Completely by chance, I wound up writing about a guy named John La Farge," Vareika says. "At the time, I was working part-time at the Boston Public Library, and I used to spend my lunch breaks — and this is really going to date me — doing transcendental meditation in Trinity Church, which is right across the street and which was the only quiet place I could find to meditate.

"To make a long story short, the more I visited the church, the more I began to admire the decorative murals on the church's

walls. One day, I asked someone who'd made them. The name — John La Farge — didn't mean anything to me, so I decided to use my paper to find out."

WHAT VAREIKA LEARNED about La Farge only whetted his appetite for more. Born in New York City in 1835, La Farge had been acclaimed during his lifetime as a painter, watercolorist, muralist and glassmaker. His stained glass windows were considered the equal of those designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany. Yet after his death in 1910, La Farge had slipped into obscurity. By the time Vareika discovered him in the late 1960s, his name was largely unknown outside specialist and academic circles.

"It was great stuff," Vareika says. "Here's a guy who was as famous as Tiffany during his own lifetime, but then everybody just sort of forgot about him."

In a roundabout way, La Farge is also responsible for Vareika's presence in Newport. After graduating from Boston College in 1974, Vareika enrolled in the American Civilization program at Brown University. He also began working as a "picker" — basically, someone who trolls for undiscovered (or at least under-priced) artworks that can be resold to galleries and museums at a profit.

Eventually, one of Vareika's picking safaris led him to Newport.

"In retrospect, it seems almost inevitable that I would wind up in Newport," he says. "After all, most of the great 19th-century artists, including people like Winslow Homer, John Frederick Kensett and Martin Johnson Heade, passed through Newport at one time or another. And La Farge, who was married to a Newporter — Margaret Mason Perry — had a house here for many years."

In 1985, convinced that there was an untapped market for La Farge and other 19th-century artists, Vareika began selling artworks out of his Newport apartment. Two years later, he opened William Vareika Fine Arts at 212 Bellevue Ave. Fittingly, the two-story space, which is located just down the street from the historic Newport Casino, had once housed an art-framing business.

"Like so many other things that we've done, Alison and I found this space completely out of the blue," Vareika says. "We'd all but given up trying to find a place on Bellevue Avenue when Alison happened to see an ad in the paper. It's been our home ever since."

SINCE THEN, VAREIKA'S fortunes have soared, along with those of many of his artists. La Farge, for example, is no longer a marginal figure; instead, he's regained his rightful place as one of the giants of 19th-century American art, a worthy rival to Tiffany in glassmaking and design, to James MacNeill Whistler in his experiments with color and Asian art, and to Homer and Sargent in watercolor.

Another Vareika favorite, Newport marine painter William Trost Richards, has made a similar comeback. Once dismissed as a minor member of the Hudson River School, Richards is now considered one of the greatest watercolorists of the 19th century

— a position that was cemented in 2001 when New York's Metropolitan Museum accorded Richards a rare one-man exhibition.

Vareika, who currently has a number of Richards' paintings and watercolors in his upstairs gallery, says that Richards' talents may still be undervalued.

"The more I look at his work, the more I think that we may still be underestimating him," he says. "Nobody gets the kind of color effects that he does. Granted, he's not a flashy painter. He doesn't have the flair of a John Singer Sargent. But in his own way, he's just as good."

Other artists, such as Heade and Kensett, were famous long before Vareika arrived on the scene. Yet prices for their works have continued to grow as dealers and collectors have moved beyond Monet, Renoir, Sargent and the rest of the "usual suspects" of 19th-century art.

WORKS BY MANY OF THESE B-list-turned-A-list artists are included in the gallery's Save the Bay benefit show. A large Heade, *Coast of Newport*, dominates the gallery's back wall. Painted in 1874, it depicts a group of small boats outlined against a smoldering sunset.

The price tag? "Let's just say it's over \$1 million," Vareika says.

Other works include a large Richards' painting, *Breakers*, priced at around \$500,000 and a Gilbert Stuart portrait pegged at \$75,000. For budget-minded collectors, there's a small Currier & Ives print (\$2,500), a group of small Richards' drawings (\$2,000 and under) and a selection of 19th-century lithographs (\$500 and under).

Though he's best known as a 19th-century dealer, Vareika also handles work by contemporary artists. The Save the Bay show features three such artists: Massachusetts painter Robert Manice, New Jersey artist David Dewey and Pennsylvania painter Paul Rickert.

All three specialize in coastal scenes — several paintings, for example, feature views of Newport-area landmarks — and are worthy heirs to 19th-century artists such as Richards, Kensett and Heade. Prices for their paintings and watercolors start at \$2,400 and go up to \$24,000.

"Precious Muse: The Art of Narragansett Bay Then and Now" runs through Sept. 9 at William Vareika Fine Arts, 212 Bellevue Ave. in Newport. Hours: Monday-Friday 10-6 and Sunday 1-6. For more information, call (401) 849-6149 or visit www.vareikafinearts.com