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Lifebeat

WEEKEND

ART SCENE by Bill Van Siclen

"Homage to the Sea" at the William Vareika Fine Arts gallery on Newport's Bellevue Avenue is a terrific summer show that features some of the biggest names in American marine painting

An exhibit of sailing ships even landlubbers will admire



James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894) *The Schooner Triton and The Sloop Christine Racing In Newport Harbor, c. 1884*

Though it's located on a busy stretch of Newport's Bellevue Avenue, the William Vareika Fine Arts gallery is the kind of place you could easily walk past without noticing. That's especially true at the height of the summer tourist season — in other words, now — when the streets and sidewalks along Bellevue Avenue are filled with throngs of sun-addled sightseers and day-trippers.

Yet the gallery, which mainly specializes in 19th- and early 20th-century American art, is worth seeking out. For one thing, owners Bill and Alison Vareika operate what may be the state's best commercial art gallery, with a roster of artists that includes American masters such as Winslow Homer, John LaFarge, Martin Johnson Heade, John Frederick Kensett.

In addition, the Vareikas mount regular exhibits — usually three to four a year — that often rival museum exhibitions in depth and quality. A case in point "Homage to the Sea," a terrific summer show that features some of the biggest names in American marine painting.

Granted, marine painting, which includes everything from serene coastal landscapes to dramatic views of storms and shipwrecks, isn't as popular as it once was. Homer, in fact, is probably the genre's last great practitioner, and he died in 1910. (Then again, calling Homer a "marine painter" is a bit like calling Claude Monet a "landscape painter." It may be technically correct, but it also ignores everything — vision, skill, depth of feeling, towering genius — that makes great artists great.)

Still, even hardcore landlubbers should try to see the show, which features about 150 prints, paintings, sketches and watercolors. (Visitors should also know that a percentage of each sale will go to the International Yacht Restoration School and the Museum of Yachting, two venerable Newport institutions which now operate under the same non-profit umbrella.)

Sailing fans, for example, will find some top-notch sailing scenes, including several works by the man many consider the greatest nautical artist of all time: Robert Salmon.

Born near Liverpool, England, in 1775, Salmon was one of the first artists to combine the no-nonsense descriptive traditions of British marine painting, in which artists were expected to fuss over every last spar and sail, with an array of lighting and atmospheric effects derived from Dutch landscape painting.

The results, which at times verge on a kind of brine-splashed Impressionism (and which are shown off to brilliant effect in an undated painting of the Liverpool waterfront in the Vareika show), would eventually influence several generations of marine painters on both sides of the Atlantic.

In addition to Salmon, the show features a number of other prominent painters of ships and sailing scenes — notably Salmon’s great countryman James Buttersworth (1817-1894) and the Danish-born marine artist Antonio Jacobsen (1850-1921).

Like Salmon, Buttersworth was born in England but wound up spending most of his professional life in the United States. In particular, he’s known for his paintings of sailing races and regattas, in which everything — wind, waves, clouds and boats — conveys a sense of headlong action.

Though the Vareika show features several good examples of Buttersworth’s work, local pride obliges me to mention one in particular: that’s a rare (for Buttersworth, at least) canvas depicting a race off Newport Harbor. Look closely and you can see Newport landmarks such as Trinity Church and Colony House in the distance.

Jacobsen, meanwhile, is represented by a pair of “ship portraits” — so-called because they give yachts, steamships and other boats that same up-close-and-personal treatment found in traditional portraits. Both are painted in a charming, matter-of-fact style that verges on folk art.

The show also boasts some fine examples of Luminism, the Hudson River School offshoot that dominated New England landscape painting during the middle decades of the 19th century. The striking moonrise depicted in Martin Johnson Heade’s *Sailing by Moonlight*, for example, easily could have been lifted from a Hudson River School painting. Yet the foreground setting — a rocky beach dotted with moonlit stones — clearly put us somewhere along the New England coast.

John Frederick Kensett’s *Spouting Rock, Newport, R.I.*, meanwhile, is typical of Luminism’s focus on quiet, contemplative scenes (in contrast to the dramatic effects favored by many Hudson River School artists). Indeed, the painting is almost a Hudson River School landscape in reverse: no blazing sunsets, no sweeping panoramas, just a few cows grazing quietly by the water’s edge. Even the landmark that gives the painting its name — Spouting Rock — is relegated to the background.



James Hamilton’s The U.S.S. “Advance” Trapped in the Ice Floe at Rensellaer Cove, 1856.

On the other hand, there’s plenty of visual drama in work of James Hamilton, an Irish artist who was active in the Philadelphia area. In fact, Hamilton seems to have enjoyed depicting ships in extreme situations, whether it’s a boat stranded on an ice floe (*The U.S.S. “Advance” Trapped in the Ice Floe at Rensellaer Cove*) or battered by an ocean storm (*Sunset After the Gale*).

Equally dramatic are the works of William Bradford and William Trost Richards. In *The Mary Jane of Eastport, Maine*, Bradford transforms an otherwise forgettable harbor scene into a brooding, Rembrandt-esque study of man against nature.

Richards, meanwhile, was so determined to understand every aspect of sea that he often spent hours studying the waves that washed up near his Jamestown (R.I.) home. Fittingly, “*Homage to the Sea*,” devotes an entire wall to his work, which ranges from sweeping coastal scenes worthy of the Hudson River School to smaller sketches and drawings that are closer to Luminism’s quieter, more intimate spirit.

“*Homage to the Sea*” runs through Sept. 14 at William Vareika Fine Arts, 212 Bellevue Ave., Newport. Hours: Mon.-Sat. 10-6 and Sun. 1-6. Contact: (401) 849-6149 or www.vareikafinearts.com.