Barrowing time

BY AMY BLEIER LONG

From sparkling waters to vibrant fall foliage, we Central New Yorkers take great pride in the natural beauty of our surroundings. It has been a source of inspiration for untold artists, including John Dodgson Barrow (1824-1906). Barrow’s exquisite work depicts the allure of still recognizable lakes, fields and forests. Through the Borrow-a-Barrow program, landscape enthusiasts living within approximately 25 miles of Skaneateles can enjoy his art in their own homes.

Barrow moved to the village of Skaneateles with his family as a teen. He studied painting in England and in his 30s, moved to New York City to open a studio where he specialized in portraiture. As his interest in landscapes grew, Barrow visited Central New York each summer and during the winters painted hundreds of oil-on-canvas works from his sketches and memories. He returned to Skaneateles full time in the 1880s, remaining there until his death. Very involved in the community, he frequently advocated for the preservation of the lake and land. He felt citizens should be guardians of the area for future generations.

The John D. Barrow Art Gallery in Skaneateles — designed and financed by Barrow himself and accessed through the Skaneateles Library — is dedicated exclusively to Barrow’s more than 300 landscapes and portraits. Regina Lewis-Middleton, the gallery’s director says, “It’s an unusual thing for such a huge representation of work by one artist to be on permanent display in one place.” Another unique detail about the gallery: Barrow painted numerous works on panels which are inset into molding on the lower part of the gallery’s walls. The gallery opened to the public on October 8, 1900 and was given in trust to the Skaneateles Library Association.
Concerned citizens formed a committee in the late 1970s to save the gallery and collection after it had gone through decades of deterioration. When Barrow built the gallery, he left his railroad stock in trust to care of the collection in perpetuity. As railroad fortunes declined, so did the trust, so the committee needed to develop a capital fund that could generate money for future operating expenses.

Gwen Birchenough, committee member and later a director of the gallery, devised the Borrow-a-Barrow program with Susan Blakney, Chief Conservator and founder of Westlake Conservators. Since Westlake Conservators was already responsible for the restoration and stabilization of many of the paintings, the women identified a core group deemed safe enough to travel that became available for the community to rent. "Outside of donations, it's one of our few revenue streams," says Lewis-Middleton.

A selection of landscapes and portraiture is available for two-year periods and rental fees range from $300 to $1,200, based on the size and appraised value of each painting. There are around 75 paintings currently out on loan, most in private homes though several can be found in banks and law offices.

Lewis-Middleton tries to balance what is allowed out for private enjoyment with what remains in the gallery for a well-rounded mix of work displayed for public viewing. She helps interested parties identify a suitable spot in their home, regarding space for hanging, light, temperature and humidity concerns, and provides additional guidelines for safekeeping.

"The best part is the program is not just a fundraiser, it's a friend-raiser. Because once you have one in your home, you want to go back and get another one; a loyalty to Barrow develops. It's easy to get accustomed to a beautiful piece of artwork in a killer frame," says Lewis-Middleton.

To learn more about the gallery or inquire about renting a painting, contact the gallery at 315-679-1764 or barrowgallery.org.