A CONSERVATION STRATEGY FOR A STATIC NON-FUNDED COLLECTION: THE JOHN D. BARROW ART GALLERY

by Susan S. Blakney*

Rural America stores a wealth of decaying treasures. These collections of our cultural heritage have often been bequeathed to institutions, acting as repositories, with little or no funds available for proper storage, general maintenance or conservation. Many of the custodians are overwhelmed with this responsibility and at a loss for a solution to their dilemma.

In 1977 the author became involved in a mission to save such a collection, the John D. Barrow Art Gallery, a near complete portfolio of one artist's life work left in trust to the people of Skaneateles, N.Y. John D. Barrow was a second generation member of the Hudson River School, best known for his portraits and landscapes. The general condition of the 354 paintings was appalling and their disfigurement obscured their merit.

A conservation program was developed over ten years with the author's professional guidance and a hard working group of volunteers. Increased public awareness and novel fund raising evolved into a major community effort and ever growing pride of ownership.

This paper relates the historical background of John D. Barrow, his gallery and the ongoing tactics employed to save the deteriorating collection.

Ten years ago I became involved in a mission of saving a nearly forgotten treasure, the John D. Barrow Art Gallery. This truly unique collection of 354 paintings, represents a near complete portfolio of one artist's life work, and a romantic's view of nature's beauty spread before him.

Biography

John Dodgson Barrow, best known for his landscapes and portraits, was one of central New York's more prolific painters during the second half of the nineteenth century (fig.1). Born in N.Y.C., Nov. 24, 1824 in an age of Romanticism, he was very much influenced by both the Hudson River School of painters and the romantic New England poets. At the age of fourteen he was sent to reside with relatives, in northeast England, to further his education. There he received his first lessons in painting.

Five years later he rejoined his family in Skaneateles, N.Y. and continued to paint. He joined the American Art Union in 1850, and exhibited his first painting at the National Academy of Design in 1852. At age 32 he opened a studio in N.Y.C. adjoining Charles Loring Elliott's which he maintained for 20 years. Barrow returned permanently to Skaneateles in 1877 and was appointed to the faculty.

* Susan Blakney, Chief Conservator
West Lake Conservators Ltd., P.O. Box 45, Skaneateles, N.Y. 13152
of Syracuse University as a professor of painting. He left the University in 1887 and involved himself with painting and town affairs.

His affluence enabled him to explore and paint nature his entire life, regardless of his success with the public. Exhibition records list 19 works at the National Academy of Design, 4 at the Pennsylvania Academy Annual Exhibit, and 2 at the Boston Athenaeum.3

He spent countless hours wandering and sketching the countryside around and upon Skaneateles Lake, alone and with the company of friends. His life long friend, the Reverend William Beauchamp, a clergymen, geologist and naturalist wrote, "In one way Mr. Barrow realizes Ruskin's idea of what a landscape painter should know. Geology, botany and a knowledge of physical laws are involved in such an artist's true training, and the geologist's hammer goes with Mr. Barrow along with canvas and brush. The oar and sail are handled as readily as the pencil." His paintings with meticulous presentation of flora, reflect this scientific study of nature.4 Capturing the nuances of light and the changing seasons were repetitive themes of his favorite subjects: the glen, the rocks, the meadow, the woods, the waterfall, the lake, and the mountains. Like others of the Hudson River school, his paintings record sojourns to the Adirondack and White Mountains, the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes.

Near the end of his life Barrow erected a gallery to house his collection, which he gave in trust, to the Library and the people of Skaneateles. (fig. 2) He included a railroad bond worth, at that time $2,000.00, to cover maintenance costs. Built as an annex to the main library, the gallery was a brick masonry structure with a clerestory skylight. When it opened in 1900, exhibition space consisted of the connecting 8'x12' hallway and one large room 20'x42'. The walls were literally papered with paintings, in the style of galleries of the 1800's. Soon after the opening he began work on a second gallery, 20'x14', named the Skaneateles Room. A unique feature of both rooms is the wainscoting, designed to house canvases and panels, which runs around the entire perimeter. It is three rows high in the Skaneateles Room. He died while working on the site in 1906 and the room was completed by his sisters. The 1908 catalog of the collection combines an interesting range of poetry by Bryant, Whittier, Cooper, Shakespeare, Rev. Beauchamp, Barrow, and his friends, which are all intended to illuminate and elucidate his paintings.5

Historical Background

After Barrow's death, income from the railroad bond, $40 a year, was not enough to maintain the gallery's upkeep, and the structure began to deteriorate. The roof began to leak and the wood floor sagged. Paintings of the 19th Century in the romantic academia style such as John D. Barrow's went completely out of vogue, and declined in market value. The Library Board was hard put to keep up with the sophisticated demands of the 20th Century and a growing population. The railroad went bankrupt and as the gallery fell into disuse, the heat was turned off. The resulting effects of this damp uncontrolled environment had disastrous effects on the paintings. Years of neglect resulted in grime, distorted surfaces, degraded canvases, with brittle paint-ground layers, curled and cleaving ominously. Some paintings were totally lost and the beautiful gilt frames were crumbling.6

The collection looked its worst. Its custodians, the Library Board, felt it was beyond repair and a burden to both their time and financial assets. It was rumored there was thought of selling the frames and using the gallery for library expansion.7 A decision was made to petition the county court to dissolve the trust, thereby releasing the library from further responsibility.8 In 1972, when the Historical Society learned of the Library petition, it filed an application to appear "friend of the court", to assist the court in documenting the significant historical value of the John D. Barrow Art Collection to the people of Skaneateles.9

26
Fig. 1 - "Portrait of the Artist", by John Dodgson Barrow, # 79 (23" x 19").

Fig. 2 - John D. Barrow painting in his gallery, c. 1900.
The collection was appraised at $300,000.00 and stated that "at least 1/3 of the paintings were seriously damaged." An official from the State Museum in Albany, N.Y. was brought in for advice in 1974. He estimated conservation costs at $75,000.00, and offered the library the opportunity to donate the Barrow trove to the State, if Directors felt they could not safely store and maintain the collection. His first recommendation was, however, that it remain in the village.\textsuperscript{10}

Soon after, the State Supreme Court Justice ordered the Library Association to remove the paintings from the gallery and begin a program to improve and maintain both the structure and paintings. He ordered the establishment of a separate interest-bearing account, the Barrow Art Gallery Trust Fund, with a deposit of almost $8,000.00 which the Library had earmarked toward resolution of the problem.\textsuperscript{11}

This marked the beginning of a major community effort to preserve the collection.\textsuperscript{12} Upgrading and renovating the gallery was planned, implemented and funded, primarily by the Library Association. The Skaneateles Bicentennial Commission also raised $10,000.00 toward the $40,000.00 project.\textsuperscript{13} Volunteers cleaned some of the paintings and the doors were reopened in June 1977, after three long years of renovation and fundraising by the Board members and interested townspeople.\textsuperscript{14}

**Initial Dilemma**

I personally became involved in the project soon after the gallery reopened. I had recently returned from a six year apprenticeship in England, to establish a conservation practice in Skaneateles, drawn by the same romantic lure of the lake as John D. Barrow.

I found the general condition of the paintings extremely poor and their aesthetic quality was obscured by their deteriorated state. The problem was monumental and there were no specific conservation funds available. It was apparent that the court case was an emotional issue. I was appointed as permanent advisor to the Barrow Management Committee, a group of dedicated volunteers with little previous museum background.\textsuperscript{15} We meet on a regular basis to plan operations and projected goals.

Realizing that conservation funds would require long term development, I decided my contribution to our community would be to implement a conservation strategy. Some of the tactics I employed deviated from standard museum policies out of necessity.

**Conservation Strategy**

**Stage (1) Increase Appreciation Of The Collection**

Although many of the paintings were in jeopardy of being lost the first task was to increase appreciation of this trove by cosmetic treatment of the paintings displayed in the gallery. Apart from the permanent installations in the wainscoting, the paintings chosen for the reopening were structurally, in the best condition. Since the doors were now open to the public, I decided first impressions of the collection were a priority. We set up an in-house work area, upstairs in a crowded storage room of the library, for the simple cleaning of paintings. My assistants and I worked one evening a week unframing, photographing, removing grime layers, brush varnishing and re-installing. The similarity of the painting’s conditions and artist’s techniques enabled treatments to proceed rapidly as familiarity increased. Working with a team of 3 to 4, at very reduced rates, we surface cleaned 95 paintings in 18 evenings and wrote brief treatment and condition notes on 4x5 index cards.
These sessions were underwritten by individuals and groups, including two banks, the Historical Society and Art Guild.\textsuperscript{16}

The visual improvement was a success. Visitors to the gallery couldn't help but notice the fresh look of the recently cleaned paintings. The depth of colors and improved perspectives brought renewed interest in the artist's talent and a kindling sense of pride of ownership.

Amazingly, after removing one small canvas from the wainscoting, we discovered there were two paintings, stretched one-atop-the-other, on one stretcher. Our excitement rose as we removed the top canvas, and uncovered a charming full length portrait of an unknown man, walking through the fall woods, staff and ferns in hand. (fig. 3) The local press covered the story and the treasure hunt was on.\textsuperscript{17} We uncovered three more paintings in the same fashion as our work progressed. That year three complete treatments were underwritten by individuals and two large landscapes were lent to our neighboring savings bank for public display after the bank financed their conservation.\textsuperscript{18}

The management committee kept every donation in the public eye through continued press coverage.

\textbf{Stage (2) Educate The Public}

That summer we had another opening featuring recently conserved paintings and a photographic exhibit of their documented treatments. I exchanged work with a friend completing a photography degree in exchange for enlarging treatment slides of five paintings into 11x14 colored photos which I mounted and labeled for display. This was the beginning of the second stage of the strategy to educate the public, the Management Committee and the Gallery Board regarding the capabilities of complete structural conservation treatments. To this end I chose a small wainscot painting, cupped beyond recognition, with sizable losses, and donated it's treatment to the cause. This was followed by a presentation of its treatment to the Gallery Board, where I made them aware that many of the paintings they had considered worthless could be given new life. The board members were suitably amazed but not necessarily art lovers. As businessmen their primary concern was the cost of these treatments. I accepted all invitations to speak publicly where I lectured on conservation and the Barrow Gallery project to groups including the Rotary Club, Lions Club, Chamber of Commerce, Merchants Association, Art Guild, Antiques Club, Historical Society, Docents of the Everson Museum, Syracuse University Museology students, etc.

\textbf{Stage (3) Collection Survey}

In 1982 we conducted a Condition Survey of the collection in storage, combined with emergency treatment, to freeze conditions of the flaking paintings. Every time the paintings were shuffled through in the storage racks, paint fell from the surfaces and gilt fell from the frames. Each painting was photographed, its condition documented, damage diagramed and emergency-treated. Because visibility of the paintings was important for future fund raising and treatment funds were meager, a fast stabilization of the flaking paint was carried out by dripping a warmed wax-resin mixture generously over cleaving areas with batik pipettes. The mixture was advantageous in relaxing the high paint shards and compatible with future Beva 371 consolidants and linings. All paintings were color coded - Red (In Danger), Yellow (Caution, monitor), and Blue (Sound).
Stage (4) Increase Individual Conservation Treatments

As a solution to the large number of seriously deteriorated paintings requiring funding for major treatment, and to aid a continuing storage problem, a "Borrow A Barrow" program was introduced. A representative selection of 19 red coded paintings "in danger" were hung on one wall in the gallery with very visible cleaning tests and estimates for conservation treatments. A contractual agreement was drawn up whereby a donor could borrow a painting for a one year period if they financed its conservation and insurance coverage for the period of the loan. This was renewable up to three years, depending upon the amount invested in the treatment. I prepared a general care handout sheet to accompany the loan.20

This program was launched during the Village Sesquicentennial in 1983, with an exhibit featuring 21 paintings documented, cleaned, varnished and corrective-framed in a two day period, on site with a team of three. The day of the opening was proclaimed John D. Barrow Day and the festivities were begun in Lakeview Cemetery in front of the Civil War Monument he designed. Scheduled boat tours ran throughout the day to locations he painted. His former residence was opened to the public.21 His famed portrait of President Abraham Lincoln was borrowed from the Chicago Historical Society22 and a photographic exhibit entitled "Then And Now" compared actual sites today with the paintings.23 The day was completed with oral presentations of the poetry Barrow wrote to accompany many of his paintings and David Prince, a Syracuse University student presented his master's thesis, "John D. Barrow, Gentleman Painter", which he had undertaken as a result of my lecturing to his class.24
Stage (5) Improve Fundraising & Exposure

The gallery operates on approximately $4,500.00 raised annually in November by a direct mailing to appeal for donations. The Merchants Association agreed to display Barrow paintings in shop windows concurrently with the appeal. Paintings were selected by size, condition and suitability of location. I cleaned half a painting for a conservation display and the gallery was opened throughout shopping hours. Once again we were surprised by the number of people previously unaware of its existence. The Chamber of Commerce financed the printing of a quality calendar, reproducing Barrow's composite of the months, marketed in village shops with profits to be donated to the Gallery. The design of a new brochure was donated by a local designer and we offer 3 postcard reproductions.

Stage (6) Improve Storage

Safe storage continued to be a major problem. I visited four nearby institutions to research sliding storage systems. Arrangements were made for the Director of the Management Committee to follow up with visits. This resulted in the purchase of six 8'x10' gates with tracks and sundries for a total of $3,100. Volunteers assembled and installed the system in the newly renovated upstairs "Silence Room". (fig. 4) A local architect donated his drawings and advice for installation. Another opening celebrated this achievement.

Stage (7) Memorial Restorations

Our best fundraiser has proven to be memorial restorations. The sentiment attached to seeing the name of a loved, cherished or respected individual or organization, etched into a brass plaque
and mounted on a frame, combined with the satisfaction of contributing to preserve our heritage has thus far resulted in 24 individual conservation treatments. One costly treatment of a large torn canvas was sponsored by the Rotary Club over a three year period with funds raised at a pancake breakfast. A fourth grade class from the Skaneateles Elementary School, after a gallery tour and lecture by my cohort Margaret Sutton and others, resulted in their raising funds for a small wainscot painting. It was first displayed in a corridor window at school, pre-treatment, and then returned to the window, post-treatment, with a presentation to the class about the work by Margaret. Each memorial is noted by recognition in the local press, a new brass plaque on the paintings frame and a notation in the gallery's donor records.

Stage (5) Frames

Stage eight, frames have tediously been cleaned and repaired under our supervision by volunteers at our laboratory. These forces have dwindled to my mother, who thankfully as yet has not tired of the project.

Treatment Aspects

Heat lamps were employed to coax large raised islands of paint/ground into initial alignment, in conjunction with a burnt finger technique, employing a wax/resin adhesive.

A semi-rigid epoxy plate was employed as a lining support material, in conjunction with a glass cloth interleaf. This combats the memory of the planer distortions, in the many double paintings heavy multi-layers. Barrow frequently painted paintings on top of another. It is also an added protection and barrier for all permanent wainscot installations, and most "Borrow a Barrow" paintings.

A heavy mylar was used as a backing board and barrier for the snugly fit wainscot installations.

An unusual crystal growth has been found on several paintings in the Skaneateles Room's wainscoat, and it has recurred on one small panel painting after cleaning. It may be a formate efflorescence caused by the urea-formaldehyde foam insulation, added to the exterior walls at the time of the gallery's renovation. Analysis of the growth is currently in progress.

Accomplishments

This summer we celebrated a decade of accomplishment with a special opening and new exhibition. New labels for the collection, and a handsome invitation were typeset in Monotype by the donation of the Michael Bixler Press and Letterfoundry. A thirty minute video by Don Stinson, a local historian, juxtaposing Barrow's paintings with real scenes from nature set to music, was an inspiration, and a portrait was a featured conservation display. Joyce Hill-Stoner, Director of the Winterthur/University of Delaware Art Conservation Program, donated it's treatment by her students, to show their support of the Gallery's accomplishments. Tours of the improved storage and ailing paintings resulted in 13 more individual conservation treatments. (fig. 5)

During the last ten years 88 paintings have been individually funded by donations of which 35 memorialize someone and 17 have been borrowed. Almost $25,000.00 has been spent on conservation. This conservation strategy is rapidly gathering momentum. The gallery is managed and manned purely by volunteers. The sense of community pride in this project is still growing. (fig. 6)
YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED
TO CELEBRATE

A
Decade
of
Accomplishment
1977-1987

The John D. Barrow Art Gallery
SUNDAY, JUNE 28TH, 2-5 P.M.

Including refreshments and Don Stinson's video:
"Skaneateles is Barrow Country"

49 East Genesee St., Skaneateles, New York 13152

Fig. 5

Fig. 6 - The main gallery interior today.
John D. Barrow would be pleased to see his appeal to preserve and increase the reputation of Skaneateles Lake has been heeded. Our village with a population of 2800 has retained its picturesque and colonial charm, and the sparkling pure waters of the lake have been preserved for the delight of all. May his gift to our village remind us of his dreams. (fig. 7)

"Is it not fair to hope under Providence that our village and lake will share in the accumulating wealth and power that we see coming, when we can also see them endowed with greater beauty and influence that few of us dream today? The beauty and healthfulness of our neighborhood are a capital, if used aright will bring us richest increase.

"There is no use in saying we cannot prophecy, but I will try and add my voice to cheer and help all my successors to the faith in this matter and add some little work each year, or at least an earnest word that will accumulate at last a power that cannot be thwarted. May Nature under Providence be able to thwart all vandal schemes and all ignorant officiousness." 37  - J. Dogson Barrow

Goals

Installation of a climate control for improved maintenance.

To expand the role of the John D. Barrow Gallery in our community making it a vital educational resource, through continued interpretation of the collection. To this end the assistance of a part time museum management consultant would aid in cataloging and development of museum services.

Appeal

We will be appreciative of any information pertaining to John D. Barrow and the location of his paintings, not in our collection.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my colleagues, Margaret and John Sutton who have equally dedicated themselves to this conservation project, also Gwen Birchenough, Director of the Barrow Gallery Management Committee, Fran Milford, President of the Barrow Gallery Board, and all of the Management Committee's and Gallery Board's past and present members, for aiding and supporting this project wholeheartedly.

Thousands of volunteer hours by the citizens of Skaneateles have brought renewed life to the John D. Barrow Art Gallery.

We hope you have the opportunity of visiting us in Skaneateles, N.Y.

Thank you.
Fig. 7 - "Skaneateles Village from the Lake", by John Dodgson Barow, # 197 (15" x 29").

Notes

1. Dr. Bruce Dearing, "John Barrow - The Painter as Poet," A paper read before the public at the John D. Barrow Art Gallery, July 17, 1983.


25. The sliding storage gates were purchased from Batty & Hoyt, 1444 Emerson St., Rochester, N.Y. 14606-4297.


33. After experimenting with making a semi-rigid epoxy support as outlined in Albert Albano's, "A Semi-Rigid Transparent Support for Paintings Which Have Both Inscriptions on Their Fabric Reverse and Acute Planer Distortions," Journal of the American Institute for Conservation, 20, Nos. 1 & 2, pp. 21-27 (Fall 1980-Spring 1981), we searched for a similar material available commercially. We found an electronic circuitry board made from a continuous filament woven fiberglass fabric, impregnated with a phenolic epoxy resin and available from some plastic companies. We purchase a natural colored G 10, .015-.025" thick, available in 36"x48" sheets, from Ain Plastics Inc., 249 E. Sanford Boulevard, P.O. Box 151, Mount Vernon, N.Y. 10550.


36. Michael Bixler Press and Letterfoundry, P.O. Box 820, Skaneateles, N.Y. 13152.
