



Still Life, by Robert Spears Dunning

The Fall River Public Library offers a rare view of the treasured works of the group of artists known as the Fall River school.
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ART of the FALL RIVER SCHOOL

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FALL RIVER — It's not often that the Fall River Public Library takes some of its most valuable artworks out of storage, carefully unwraps them and puts them on display, but marking the 100th anniversary of the library calls for things that are out of the ordinary.

The public will be treated to a one-day show next Thursday of 11 of the oil paintings in the library's collection and a lecture about some of the most notable artwork that was ever produced in the city. Among them are opulent still life oil paintings by Robert Spear Dunning, an artist who gained national recognition. He painted in Fall River from 1852 to his death in the summer of 1905 at Westport Harbor.

The exhibition of about one-third of the library's collection of 35 paintings will take place from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. in the gallery around the colonnade on the second floor of the Main Library at 104 N. Main St. Special security arrangements have been made for the day, according to library administrators.

A lecture at 7 p.m., entitled "A Regional Heritage: The Fall River School of Painting," by William H. Gerdts, a professor emeritus of art history at the graduate school of the City University of New York, will focus on the paintings and the artists who are known collectively as the "Fall River school."

It was more than 30 years ago that Gerdts first saw a still life painting by Dunning in Williamsport, Pa.

"I realized this was an artist of more than common or ordinary ability or imagination," Gerdts said from his home in New York this week.

A "top notch" Dunning will sell for a couple of hundred thousand dollars, said Gerdts.

Gerdts first came to this city in 1969 to find out more about Dunning and many of the other artists of the Fall River school.

He later wrote a book, "American Still-Life Painting," which included a chapter on the Fall River painters between 1865 and 1925. It is one of 24 books he has authored.

Gerdts calls the library's collection of artwork "impressive."

Many of the paintings in the collection were given to the library when it first opened, said David Mello, supervisor of children's services for the library. Many once hung in the gallery on the second floor, and Mello remembers looking at them when he would visit the library as a boy.

"The paintings were given by prominent, wealthy people of the city," said Mello. And they were on public display for decades.

"Fifteen to 20 years ago, we had to take them down because of security reasons," said Mello. The upcoming display "will be a real treat for people who are familiar with the Fall River school," he said. Mello's favorite is "Memory Comforting Sorrow," a painting by Mary Lizzie Macomber, who was the daughter of a jeweler and a student of Dunning's.

In celebration of its centennial, the library will offer a rare view of works by the group of artists known as the Fall River school.



Memory Comforting Sorrow, by Mary Lizzie Macomber

Art of the Fall River School

Because the library does not have museum-quality climate control for the works, there has been some deterioration over the years, said Keith Stavely, library administrator, but he said it is evident only to someone with a trained eye. He said the library has had the works appraised and received estimates for restoring the paintings and the ornate frames. It hopes to one

day have them restored and put them on permanent display.

Skip Darmody, a member of the Centennial Committee for the library, said the estimated cost of restoration is \$50,000.

Riverside Art in Somerset has assisted the library in the show and will help hang the paintings, some of which are quite large and heavy.

Groups of area school students will visit the library that day to learn about the men and women and the style of painting that made a Dunning painting a much sought-after commodity back then and today.

Dunning also painted landscapes and portraits, many of which are in the Historical Society's large collection.

Michael Martins, curator of the Historical Society, said two more Dunning works were donated to the society last year.

Dunning did quite well in a city that was enjoying economic prosperity at the time. The movers and the shakers of the city had the money to commission portraits and buy his still lifes and landscapes, many of which are in the possession of the Historical Society.

Dunning worked out of a studio downtown and had students who also concentrated on still life painting at a time when it was considered no longer fashionable.

"His pieces are almost photographic," Martins said of Dunning's works.

In his book, Gerdtz says a typical Dunning still life "contains a large piece of crystal, silver or the like with the emphasis on ornate, Victorian design. The fruit is lusciously rendered, with a very convincing suggestion of textures. It often rests on a strikingly patterned cloth or napkin — in order to add to the design and for the sake of luxuriousness — and the tabletop support is always highly polished to reflect the multitude of objects upon it. The edge of the tabletop is ... almost always elaborately carved One item that is very characteristic of Dunning and his school is the honeycomb.... It was undoubtedly introduced to add a touch of the unusual and the exotic."

Gerdtz is the owner of small Dunning that contains a glass of water, peaches and grapes on a highly polished tabletop.

A painting of the six Valentine children, who were the grandchildren of wealthy Fall Riverite William Valentine, was done by Dunning in the early 1860s. They are wearing opulent silk taffeta dresses and their sleeves are pinned up with their mother's precious jewels, said Martins. One of the children is holding a bunch of grapes. It is in the Historical Society's collection.

Dunning also incorporated himself into several of his paintings, said Martins. In one still life, the table edge is decorated with a carved gargoyle and in it he painted his face. In another, the silver bowl that holds cherries has a reflection of the artist working in his studio.

"Dunning is the most valued of all the Fall River artists," said Martins. "The still lifes are the most desirable."

Two of the 11 paintings in the display are Dunning still lifes. Other paintings in the show are by Herbert Cash, Bryant Chapin, Mary Lizzie Macomber, Franklin Harrison Miller, Adam Emory Albright, Albert Fitch Bellows, John Joseph Enneking, Louis Charles Moeller and Albert F. Munroe.

The show and lecture are open to the public free of charge.