

St. Johnsbury Athenaeum - Public Library & Art Gallery

The Athenaeum at a Glance

The St. Johnsbury Athenaeum was built as a public library and presented to the townspeople of St. Johnsbury by Horace Fairbanks in 1871. A nephew of the man who invented the platform scale, Horace was a partner and later president of the E. and T. Fairbanks Company, the scale manufacturing company whose development so much influenced the history and growth of St. Johnsbury. Mr. Fairbanks also served as Governor of the State of Vermont. This elegant French Second Empire style building was designed by John Davis I-Latch of New York. The building is characterized by a mansard roof, tall windows which brighten the interior, elaborate woodwork, floors with alternating strips of ash and walnut and spiral staircases.

In 1873, an Art Gallery was added to the main building. Horace Fairbanks acquired a number of topics of classical paintings during his trip to Europe and was also collecting works by contemporary American painters, primarily members of the Hudson River School of painting. The design of the gallery itself was determined by his purchase of an enormous ten by fifteen foot painting by Albert Bierstadt, "The Domes of Yosemite." This landscape, prominently situated opposite the narrow entrance to the gallery, overwhelms the viewer with a panorama of nature. The natural light provided by an arched skylight enhances the effect of looking down into the valley, from the artist's vantage point.

Time magazine (August 20, 1965) described the gallery as "the United States' oldest unaltered art gallery still standing" and indeed there has been a conscious effort to retain its original style and atmosphere. Paintings in the heavy gilded frames of that era hang one above another. White marble statues and busts sit atop pedestals. Oak bookcases contain gold tooled leather bound books. This gallery is truly an authentic period piece.

Donations of paintings by Horace and other members of the Fairbanks family over the years enlarged the collection from two and a half dozen to what is now a permanent collection of one hundred works. The Hudson River School is well represented by such artists as Asher B. Durand (the father of American Landscape painting), Joseph Cropsey (known for autumn landscapes), Sanford Gifford (a Luminist Painter), James and William Hart (pastoral landscapes with cattle), Samuel Colman and Worthington Whittredge (Western views).

The fact that a large number of nineteenth century American paintings were painted to order or purchased directly from the artist has been pointed out by S. Morton Vose III, formerly of the Vose Galleries of Boston, as a unique aspect of this particular collection. An article in the April 1980 Antiques Magazine describes in detail some of the significant American paintings in the Art Gallery.

The library's book collection, originally consisting of 8,000 finely bound volumes selected with the advice of the noted bibliographer W. F. Poole, has been augmented and now includes approximately 45,000 Volumes. In addition to books, the library has magazines, newspapers, records, video and audio tapes, a complete set of the local newspaper on microfilm, pamphlets and paperbacks. Although in actuality an independent private corporation governed by a Board of Trustees, the Athenaeum does receive an annual appropriation from the town and in effect serves as the public library for St. Johnsbury. Library cards are available to residents of other towns.

Because of its remarkable architecture, well-preserved gallery of American paintings, and Poole's original book collection, the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum was designated a National Historic Landmark by the United States Department of the Interior in 1996. The Athenaeum is one among only ten libraries in the nation with this prestigious status.

The St. Johnsbury Athenaeum stands as a permanent reminder of the generosity of the Fairbanks family and an invitation to temporarily reenter the gracious world of the nineteenth century. The public is cordially invited to visit the Library and Art Gallery.