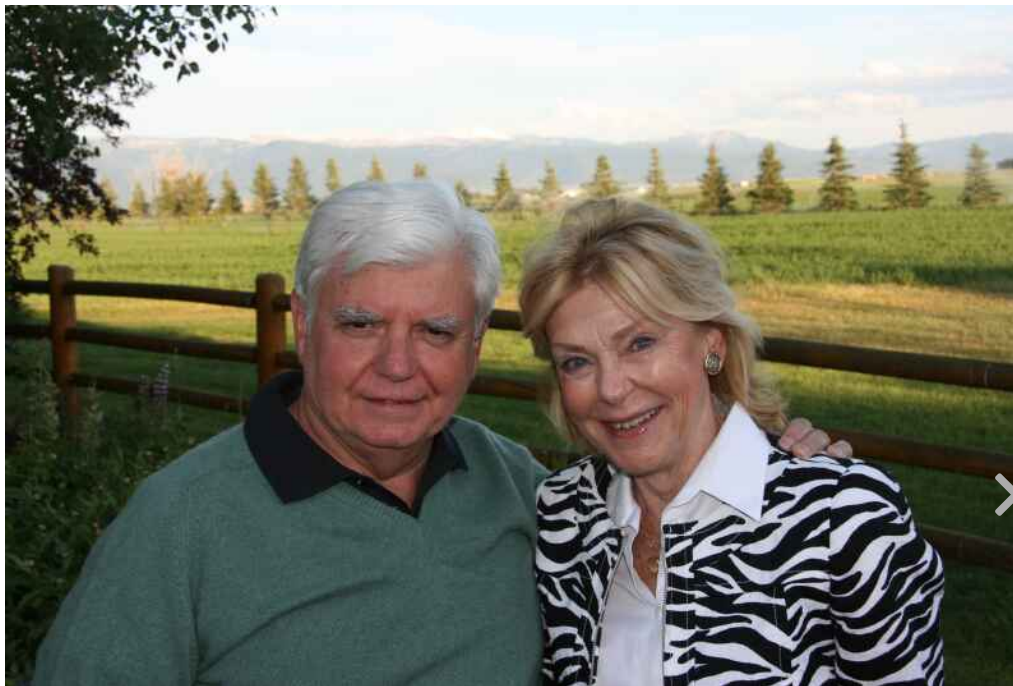


The Day

Exhibits

Friday, January 26, 2024

Westerly couple to open American Impressionism museum in town



Thomas P. and Cynthia D. Sculco (Contributed)



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By **Kristina Dorsey**
Features Editor

k.dorsey@theday.com

Westerly — A Westerly couple is creating a museum in town to focus on American Impressionist art, led by their own 250-plus-piece collection.

Thomas P. and Cynthia D. Sculco — longtime art supporters and philanthropists — both grew up in Westerly. While they now live primarily in New York City, they also have a home in Westerly.

He is an orthopedic surgeon, and she teaches nursing.

Their museum, dubbed the Westerly Museum of American Impressionism, will be on the 2-1/2 acres of the former Apple Rehab Watch Hill on Watch Hill Road. The site is next door to the Sculcos'; both properties are on a little point of land that extends into the Pawcatuck River.

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The museum is expected to open in fall 2024.

For the last 40 years, the Sculcos have collected American Impressionist art, primarily pieces created between 1880 and 1920. Most of the painters whose work is in their collection are from New England, and many painted in artist colonies up and down the East Coast.

Cynthia says of the Westerly Museum of American Impressionism, “We think it’s going to be a great addition to the community. ... You know, (Westerly has) Shakespeare in the Park, the United Theatre has wonderful activities going on, the Chorus of Westerly, the library — we just think this is another addition to that cultural community that’s evolving, and we couldn’t be happier to be part of that and introduce people to this beautiful art form.”

How the idea developed

After COVID hit, the Apple Rehab Watch Hill nursing home wasn’t able to survive and closed.

Thomas says, “What we did not want was condos (on that property), because it’s a beautiful area. ... So we bought it. Once we bought it, then we said, ‘Well, what are we going to do with it now?’ We had this vacant building which was not in very good repair.”

He says they went back and forth on what to do with it, including razing the building and “letting the grass grow, so to speak.”

In the end, he recalls, “We just said, ‘Why don’t we build a museum?’”

In fact, the couple had already had serious discussions about creating a museum in another place in Westerly: in the 1830s High Street house where Cynthia grew up. The Sculcos brought in an architect for that location, but the property had issues, including the fact that it lacks significant parking, exists on a narrow lot and has stairs.

The Watch Hill Road space proved to be a much better option.

Thomas declines to specify the price for the project.

“It’s costly, but I think it will be a great legacy and a great addition to the town,” he says.

They have already established a nonprofit foundation, called the Westerly Museum of American Impressionism, that will own the museum. The Sculcos will underwrite the foundation for the construction work and to maintain the facility.

Probably 12,000-13,000 square feet of the 20,000-square-foot building will be used to display the art.

Making plans

The Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, of course, also focuses on American Impressionism. The Sculcos spoke with Flo Gris director Becky Beaulieu before she left for a new job last year, and Thomas says she has been “unbelievably helpful” as the Sculcos developed their plans.

The Sculcos got in touch with the same architectural firm that had designed the Kriebel Gallery at the Flo Gris: Centerbrook Architects. Architect Justin Hedde has been working on the Westerly museum; he “came up with some outstanding architectural sketches,” Thomas says.

Thomas adds that all the permits are set, and the existing zoning allows for something like a museum on the property.

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“Where we are now is early in the construction phase,” he says. “The demolition work has been done. Now they’re doing the interior and reframing it.”

About the art

The museum will showcase art beyond the Sculcos’ collection as well. Thomas says some works will be on loan, some will be given to the museum, and some will be purchased by the museum foundation.

“I’m hopeful that a lot of collectors with the same genre will be interested in showing their paintings. There’s a lot of interest in that now. I’m getting all kinds of calls,” Tom says.

Separate theme for each gallery

Every one of the 14 galleries in the museum will have a separate theme. The Sculcos have eight or nine paintings by one artist, for instance, so a gallery might track a single artist’s evolution. The couple has many paintings of Gloucester Harbor, so that might serve as a theme.

They also have multiple paintings by the women in the Philadelphia Ten, which consisted of female artists who exhibited together in the early 20th century, at a time when women were discouraged from being artists, Thomas notes.

They have works by a few artists from the Lyme Art Colony as well, including Wilson Irvine and Walter Griffin.

Reinvigorating American Impressionism

Discussing American Impressionism, Thomas says, “A lot of American artists in that period went to France, went to England and learned Impressionism from the Europeans. Some of them stayed there, but many of them came back, and you can see an American influence in what they did.”

Many of the paintings the Sculcos have admired are seascapes, or water plays a prominent role in the images.

Talking about what drew him to American Impressionism, Thomas says he thinks some of it relates to his “growing up in Westerly and in New England, living on the water. When I was a kid, I dug clams for a living; I was in the water, like, eight hours a day. We’ve always been on the water. The house we have in Westerly is on the water. We’re just attracted to that.”

Thomas says that some people think American Impressionism is uncool, as trends have moved toward contemporary art. But, he says, “This wonderful school of artistry and the quality of the work, tonalism, some of the very different kinds of art forms that were used in that period are very spectacular. This is an opportunity to sort of reinvigorate American Impressionism as well.”

Building a collection

About 40 years ago, the Sculcos met Philip Wharton, who had worked at the renowned Vose Galleries in Boston but had retired to Charlestown, R.I.

“He got us so excited because he was so knowledgeable. We’d have a conversation, and it was like going to a class,” Thomas says.

Wharton found some of the first paintings for the Sculcos’ collection. He would call them from somewhere on the road and say he found a painting they might like to buy. (Wharton died in 2005.)

Thomas says now they have so many artworks that his wife tells him, “You’ve got to stop getting these paintings — we have no wall space.”

On the second floor of their home in New York City, they have about 70 paintings in three rooms.

Looking at artwork can be inspiring

Neither of the Sculcos are painters themselves, but Cynthia says, “We’re great appreciators of art and also music. ... To hear beautiful music is inspiring, and to look at beautiful artwork, I think, is also inspiring.”

As for their Westerly museum, she says, “I think it’ll be really lovely and people will enjoy it. It will be sort of understated but will bring a wonderful dimension of appreciation for art to the community.”

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Bravo! Just love it! Cannot wait!

Robert Bareiss May 15, 2023 at 09:24

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This will be a truly wonderful local landmark when it opens.

RICHARD SELDEN May 15, 2023 at 08:52

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