

Central New York History on the Everson Museum Walls

By Bill Chaisson | Posted: Wednesday, June 13, 2012 12:00 am

“Anyone with any tie to the Syracuse area will really be drawn to this show,” said Sarah Gryzmala, an assistant curator at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse. The exhibition, a collaboration between the museum and the Onondaga Historical Association, is called “People, Place and Progress.” It opens June 2 and will be on view until September 2.

“The show originated as a conversation between [senior curator] Debora Ryan and Dennis Connors [curator of history at the historical association],” said Grzymala. “They were going through the OHA collection and [Ryan] noticed that there were a lot of images of Onondaga County that were readily identifiable and that could be paired with historical photographs.” That was over a year ago. The resulting show includes 25 paintings and over 30 historical photographs. Most of the paintings and all of the photographs are from the historical association’s collections.

This is the first time that the Everson and the OHA have collaborated in several years. “There’s a tiny clash between the ways that a historical association and an art museum present things,” said Gryzmala. “Historical museums tend to have more text-heavy presentations, but our curatorial practices are quite similar.” The Everson had the resources to make reproductions of historical photographs that were too delicate to display for three months.

One of the more intriguing elements of “People, Place and Progress” is a silent film produced by a local photographer in 1923. *A Clouded Name* stars film legend Norma Shearer, but it is included in the exhibition largely for its images of “laying out” on the salt flats near Liverpool. Grzymala said that these are the only known moving images of the long-discontinued process. Syracuse is called “the Salt City” because Silurian age salt deposits reach the surface there. The same deposits are mined hundreds of feet below ground in Lansing, Watkins Glen, and Retsof (near Geneseo).

According to Gryzmala, Ryan and Connors assembled the exhibition because they were intrigued by how artists had portrayed Syracuse and the area around the city. “These are only images we have,” she said, “so they affect how people think about the region.”

The assistant curator said that historical shows are popular. “People are inquisitive about the past; they want to know how the city we know today was shaped.” Gryzmala’s father grew up in Syracuse and his parents still live there. She just received her master degree in art history from Syracuse University last May.

Connors will be giving two lectures in association with the exhibition. On July 14 he will describe the influence of the Erie Canal on the development of the city. “People, Place and Progress” includes four images of the canal itself and two others that show it has part of the landscape of the city. Much of the original route of the waterway has been filled in through the city, so the historical paintings provide a

record of a vanished cityscape.

The oldest image in the exhibition dates from 1820, actually preceding the opening of the Erie Canal. The newest, a watercolor of the Durston Building by Adelaide Morris Gardner, was painted in 1952, but its subject was torn down many years ago. In contrast a painting from the Everson collection by Beatrice Wose-Smith records a winter evening in downtown Syracuse, "Fayette Park at Night." According to Gryzmala, anyone looking at the painting would recognize the setting immediately because so little has changed in the vicinity of the park.

Some of the paintings in the show – like Morris Gardner – have national reputations and are not closely associated with Syracuse per se. Levi Wells Prentice was born in the North Country and set up his first studio in Syracuse in 1875. His painting "Hoppers Gorge," depicts the landscape of the Onondaga Valley south of the city. He was influenced Hudson River School painters like Thomas Cole and Asher Durand, and eventually moved to New York and then to Philadelphia.

Because Everson is collaborating with the Onondaga Historical Association they qualified for a grant from the New York State Council on the Humanities, which helped to pay for the cost of mounting "People, Place and Progress."

Assistant curator Sarah Gryzmala will give a gallery talk on August 14 at 6 p.m., but museum docents will be conducting tours of the exhibition regularly through the summer. Admission to the Everson Museum is a voluntary donation.