

Lyme Art Association Goes to Rehab

By Susan E. Cornell / Photos by A. Vincent Scarano

Do you recall the DeLorean time machine, the automobile-based time travel device that helped maverick scientist Doc Brown gain insights into history and the future in *Back to the Future*? With the DeLorean in reverse, in 1914 Old Lyme Doc would find the American Impressionist painters forming an association and dreaming of building their own gallery to exhibit their work. If he put the car in forward by a century or so, he'd likely find that same association and building, thanks to a present day complete and extreme makeover project.

Turn the clock back again to 1914. Some of the world's most famous artists were summering in Old Lyme, staying at Florence Griswold's house, inspiring one another, and exhibiting their paintings of bucolic southern Connecticut. These American Impressionists needed a gallery so they pooled their resources and built what is today the Lyme Art Association building. The land belonged to Miss Florence, who sold the site to the artists for the sum of one dollar.

One of the most famous architects of the time, Charles A. Platt, donated his services and designed the building. Platt also designed the Freer Art Gallery in Washington, DC and the Lyman Allyn Museum in New London, and was an artist and member of the Lyme Art Association.

The plans for the gallery called for perfect lighting and architectural compatibility with the other buildings in the New England village of Old Lyme. In its review of the opening exhibition, the *New York Times* praised the gallery as, "an embodiment of art in harmony with its natural surroundings."

Turn the clock forward and, after all these decades, the landmark gallery still had the same old shingles, the same old trim, the same millwork, and the same windows literally rotting and falling apart. It was time for This Old Gallery to get the love and attention it deserves.



Restoring this building is important for so many reasons. Today the Lyme Art Association continues its commitment to advance the cause of representational fine art, while maintaining and preserving its historic building and galleries. It is a vibrant art center and gallery where professional and developing artists mount major exhibitions year-round – open to the public and free of charge. The Association





also has a robust schedule of art classes, workshops and lectures. The landmark means a great deal to artists, those who appreciate art and, of course, the community. The Lyme Art Association is far more than a “fixer upper,” it is a valuable asset and centerpiece for Old Lyme’s historic district.

But makeovers take money, and so the Lyme Art Association’s Second Century Capital Campaign launched to bring the historic building back to life.

This multiphase campaign is also a multiyear campaign which started in 2013 with Phase I, the Condition Assessment Study. The Association commissioned Centerbrook Architects to conduct a top to bottom, inside and outside, comprehensive assessment of the building and property.

Their team of architects and engineers evaluated the property and identified critical areas to be addressed in order to halt further deterioration and to plot out a repair, restoration, and renovation plan. The short of it: replacement of the original cedar shingles; restoration of

rotting and deteriorating exterior trim; repair of cracked foundation elements; replacement of interior lay lights; upgrade or replacement of outdated HVAC, electrical, plumbing, secu-

Then came Phase II, the Master Plan, a clear and concise narrative explaining needs for the coming decades as well as the Association’s important role as a caretaker of a landmark work of architecture.

Explained the Association’s Development Director Gary Parrington, “Before we were comfortable starting the renovation and the restoration work, we felt it was imperative to step back, take a breath, and look at the long view for how do we use the space, how will we want to use the space, will we want to put in an additional gallery, more offices. We took the time to put together a Master Plan so we could completely understand how to anticipate what the Lyme Art Association might look like in five years, in 20 years, for the

next generation.”

Satisfied that the players understood (a) the condition of the building including all the things one can’t see, and (b) how they viewed the future, they were able to prioritize the steps.



LAA artists Circa 1925

rity, insulation and wall systems; installation of ADA safety code compliance entrances and points of egress; etc. The long of it: a 177-page report including a prioritized list of work projects, preliminary cost estimates, a timeline – the works.



Lyme Art Association 1921



Before



After

A committee of volunteers led by Carrie Walters, Capital Campaign Chair, Board Member, and the “go-to person” for the exterior restoration, set out to identify the most important projects to start. Those were the exterior skin – the shingles and the millwork and redoing the pathway that leads to the front door, to make it safer and more accessible. Those projects, all totaled, came to nearly \$400,000! Long gone are the days when anything cost “one dollar.”

Exterior repair and renovation, aka Phase III, kicked off in 2016 but not with \$400K in the piggy bank.

“It is somewhat daring for a nonprofit to begin the capital work without all the capital money in hand but this just couldn’t wait so we moved forward,” said Parrington.

Sapia Builders Corp. of Old Lyme is the contractor for the project.

Walters said the work required examining every detail of the building, down to the size of each shingle and how much each shingle is shown.

This is what’s called an in-kind project, meaning everything that is replaced is done exactly the way it had been originally, she explained.

“It is an iconic structure so it’s very important

we get this done right. The gallery is not only on the National Register of Historic Places but we are also in the Historic District in Old Lyme. We didn’t dare change the appearance,” Parrington said.

Kathy Simmons, Lyme Art Association President, said, “We’re going to recognize the donors who made it possible – members and non-members alike, these people are excited about the project and excited about the historic restoration of a property vital to the culture of Old Lyme.”

She added, “The Lyme Art Association building is an integral part of Old Lyme’s historic district and stands as a reminder of Old Lyme’s important place in the history of American art.

Every day I am inspired by the thought that as we repair and restore the exterior of this grand, historic building, we honor Old Lyme’s place in the history of American art.”

After the restoration is over, Simmons said, “We’re going to have a party!”

Still on the punch list for this spring and summer: a new walkway to the front door, leveling the property, rehabilitating and painting two sets of double doors, landscaping, and new lighting across the front of the building and along the new walkway.

The whole enchilada is expected to wrap up this summer. “If it doesn’t you may never see me again,” Walters quipped. “Really, it’s close and just a matter of finessing some aspects.”

“We’ve had very few major issues that were tough to deal with. Not everyone can say that about a restoration as



large as this one,” she said.

Like Simmons, Walters said, “We absolutely need a party. We need to celebrate the finish of this.” And maybe that DeLorean will pull up the driveway.

Visit them on the web at: <https://lymeartassociation.org>



Before



After