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'Inner Light' shines brightly on Bradford collection

Exhibit pays tribute to both renowned artist and former museum curator

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The staff of the Whaling Museum install "Sealers Crushed by Icebergs." a painting by William Bradford that will be shown in an exhibit at the Whaling Museum in downtown New Bedford. PETER PEREIRA/THE STANDARD-TIMES/SCMG

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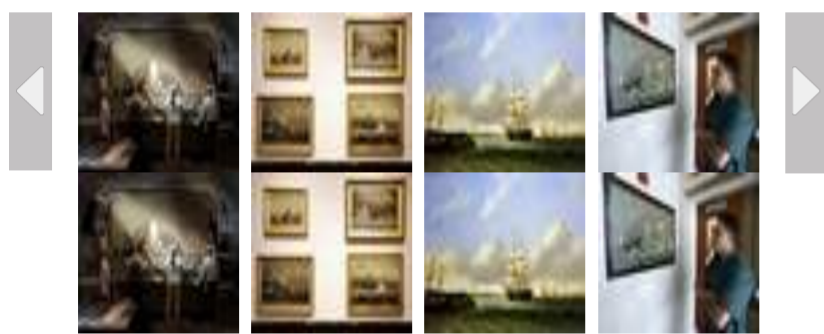
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By Keith Powers Contributing Writer

Posted Jun. 30, 2016 at 2:01 AM

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frontiers on canvas.

And it also remembers another man, who built the Whaling Museum into a vibrant, modern institution — Richard C. Kugler.

Kugler, the museum's director from 1967 to 1988, passed away this spring. During his tenure, he transformed what was the Old Dartmouth Historical Society into a place for international scholarship about the whaling industry.

In addition, he added substantially to the museum's collection of Bradford's paintings. He also curated a 2003 exhibition, "William Bradford: Sailing Ships and Arctic Seas," which celebrated the centennial of the society, and helped further Bradford's reputation in the art world.

"Inner Light" has been organized by the New Bedford Whaling Museum curator, Dr. Christina Connett, with support from trustees Barbara Moss and Keith Kauppila.

"The exhibition and the catalog are both dedicated to Richard's memory," Connett said. "The exhibition is entirely taken from our own collection, which he was instrumental in building up when he was here.

"His family also donated all his research binders, which have been very helpful," she said. "I've been going through them, and it gives me quite an insight into what he was thinking. We are still actively collecting Bradfords — one of the big drivers of the exhibition was a new work that was recently donated. But when Richard was here there was a big bump in our collection."

Museums remember. Collecting works of art and history, museums serve as repositories for what we should not forget — the best of what we are, in a way.

So "Inner Light: The World of William Bradford," a far-ranging exhibition opening July 1 at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, is fitting for multiple reasons.

It shows to the public the Whaling Museum's prolific holdings of a prolific painter who sailed to the Arctic to capture one of the earth's final

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The highlights of Bradford's work are the oversized Arctic views, famous for their grandeur and exoticism, and the gorgeous, almost otherworldly light that Bradford captured.

"Sealers Crushed in Ice," which has been in the museum's collection for more than a century, is part of the exhibition, and well as the newest acquisition, "Schooner Ellenor, Boston," a donation from Herbert and Patricia Pratt.

An important series of cloud sketches and paintings will also be displayed. "Painters like Bierstadt and Cole were also doing works like this," Connett said. "Very beautiful studies of atmosphere and color."

Bradford made six trips to the Arctic to sketch and to photograph, during a time (1861-69) when such trips were dangerous and costly. Those voyages, along with painting excursions later in life to Yosemite Valley, established him as one of the era's great artist-explorers.

"It was the age of Arctic travel," Connett says. "The Arctic was the last frontier. Just making it there was the goal, like going to the moon was in the last century. It was a craze.

"Bradford funded those trips by bringing passengers," she says. "They would pay for passage, but then they would end up frustrated by him because he wanted to stay in one place and sketch or capture the light when everyone else wanted to go."

The 2015 sale at a Christie's auction of Bradford's "Midnight Sun, The Arctic" for \$1.4 million serves as a benchmark for the artist's current popularity and market value.

"It's a very beautiful painting," Connett said, "Really a gorgeous work. But it's fairly small, especially compared to something like 'Sealers Crushed in Ice.' It gives us an idea of how valuable our own collection really is. I believe it is the most comprehensive collection of Bradfords works anywhere."

The exhibition displays more than 50 paintings — as well as works on paper, photographs and sketchbooks — spread out over multiple galleries and in the reading room. "It's meant to show his work through a lifetime," Connett says. "Not only his Arctic period, but the time he traveled out west with Albert Bierstadt, and after.

"We want this show to explore his connections and his influence," she says. "We've even discovered some wonderful things from our own archives. The awareness of Bradford has shifted upward in the last few years—the Luminist paintings are more desirable, but also painters that are intrinsically American as well."

"Inner Light: The World of William Bradford" runs through May 2017 at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. The opening reception is Friday, July 1 at 6 p.m. For complete information, and a listing of ongoing lectures and special events accompanying the exhibition, visit www.whalingmuseum.org or call 508-997-0046.

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