

# NORWALK CITIZEN~NEWS

## Art Center Breathes New Life Into Local Landmark

BY WENDY LOGAN

St. Philip's Roman Catholic Church on France Street will open the doors of its historic 104-year-old mansion tonight for the unveiling of St. Philip Artists Guild (SPAG), a new public art center and gallery. Paintings by resident and other local artists will vary in style, depicting landscapes, colorful abstractions, portraiture, religious icons and social issues.

The evening artists' reception, slated for 6 to 9 p.m., will be followed by a weekend-long open studio and gallery

**ST. PHILIP ARTISTS  
GUILD OPENING**  
Tonight, 6-9 p.m.  
St. Philip's Roman  
Catholic Church,  
France Street

tour of the recently renovated space.

Thereafter, the gallery will be open by appointment only.

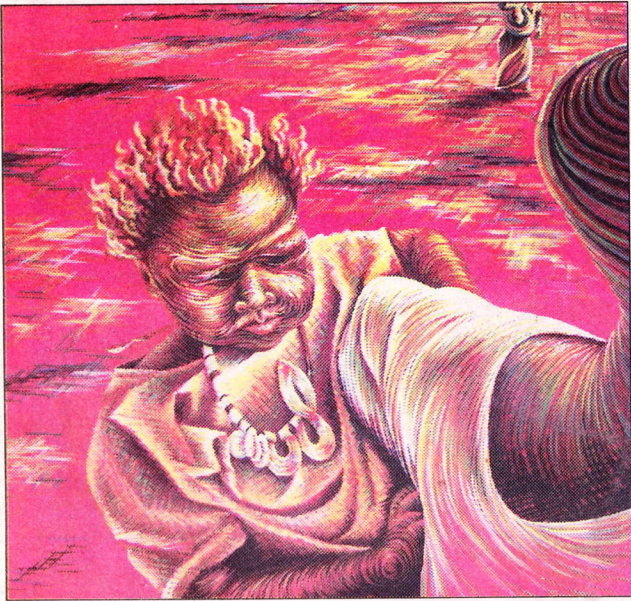
With the exception of one wing,

occupied for the past five years by church Deacon Frank Ciappetta and his wife, the mansion has sat vacant for more than seven years.

"It seemed a crime against architecture and culture for this beautiful space to be empty; to sit uninhabited," Father Michael Boccaccio, St. Philip's resident pastor for the last 20 years, told the *Norwalk Citizen-News*.

"I kept wondering what should be done with it and how we would be able

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Contributed photo

*Duvian Montoya's "Lost on the Border of Sudan," will be on display at SPAG. Montoya was one of the catalysts behind the creation of the new art center.*

# Arts Center

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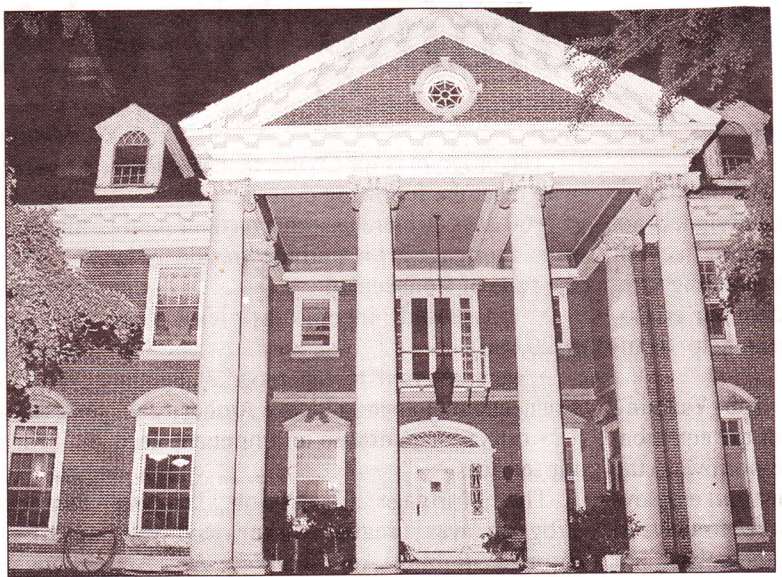
to restore it to its old state.”

Then one day, in an e-mail exchange with one of his young parishioners, Duvian Montoya, 32, a painter, it came to him.

“Duvian had been living in New Mexico and was looking to come home, but was unsure about how to re-establish himself and concerned about how he would afford a studio space. Around the same time, artist and parishioner David Morico, who had been keeping his paintings in the back of a station wagon, asked Father B – as he is fondly known to the community – if he might store some of them in the mansion.

“And I thought, look at that....David and now Duvian....there’s something to consider.”

A great lover of art himself, which he credits in part to his Italian heritage, to his annual visits to Italy and to his informal but ongoing



Contributed photo / James Campbell

*The restoration of the mansion, depicted here, began in March.*

study of art and how it traces church history, Father B said, “What interests me most is the depth, the background, the history and detail in a piece of art. One painting is worth a 1,000 encyclopedias,” he said.

And the passion for art extends even further at St. Philips. Deacon

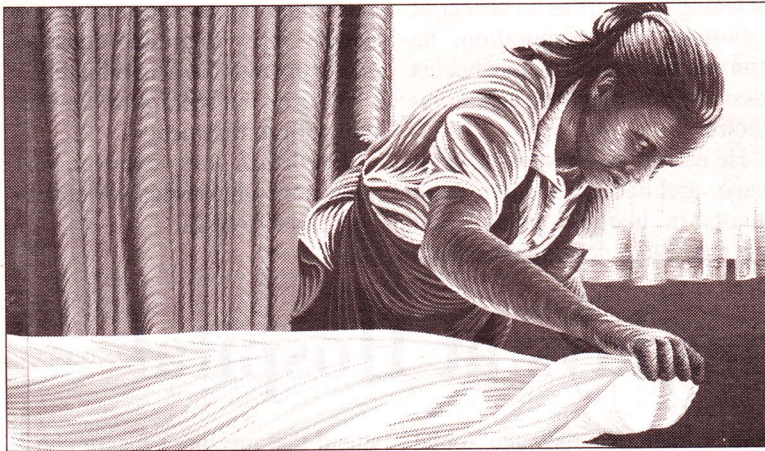
Frank Ciappetta is also a painter, as is the deacon’s nine-year old grandson. So, the idea to reinvent the historic mansion came to fruition as Father B brought the idea to church administrator Steve Bagnell and discussed the possibility of offering the space as studios to these and other artists in exchange for their commitment to help restore and rehabilitate the building.

## A Rich History

While the current house was built between 1914 and 1916 by the 19th century cousin of LeGrand Lockwood of the Lockwood Mathews Mansion Museum, the whole of the St. Philip property, which for centuries was owned by the prominent Lockwood family, holds a long and storied history.

In the 18th century the land, which extended to Camp Street, was a farm. The original farmhouse, which sat where the church sits today, was burned to the ground by the British in 1779, though some of the home’s contents were rescued and items like a 1760s wedding dress, some silver and pieces of furniture are now on display at the Norwalk Museum.

In 1784, a new farmhouse was built in the same spot by Captain E. Lockwood, an American army captain whose job as assistant commissary of issue was to distribute food



*Duvian Montoya’s “Our House Keepers,” on view at SPAG.*

to American troops. The Lockwood Farm continued to operate through the 18th and 19th centuries and was eventually inherited in 1858 by Manice deForest Lockwood, Sr. who decided to build a grander house than the original, just behind it. Once the mansion was completed in 1916, the original farmhouse was broken up to make way for a large front yard, but the foundation of the current St. Philip church was actually built in 1969 atop the same 18th century foundation.

In 1946, after his father's death, Manice deForest Lockwood, Jr. inherited his father's estate but decided the mansion and property were simply too large for him and his wife and in 1947, he sold it to St. Mary's church. St. Mary's was seeking housing for the nuns who taught at the Catholic schools it operated and thus the mansion was converted to a convent.

Just five years later, as the school expanded, the low brick buildings were constructed to house the main school and in 1964, St. Philip's parish was established, taking over the entire property. Soon after, construction began on what still stands today as St. Philip Church.

While once all Catholic schools were run entirely by priests and nuns, by the 1970s, this practice began to change and lay people were brought in to teach. As such, some of the nuns housed at the convent left for other work; others stayed but eventually passed away. When just four remained in residence at an added wing of the convent, the church was left to consider the best use of the mansion.

In the mid-1970s, the building was rented to the now defunct Vitam Center, a facility for troubled teens, and through the nearly three decades that it served as Vitam student housing, the building fell into extreme disrepair. The mansion was sectioned off with firewalls that closed off the main stairway and chopped up the space throughout. Woodwork and walls were damaged; windows sealed shut. Vestiges of the original mansion in all its grandiosity were barely visible. By

2000, Vitam Center closed, leaving the building in total disarray.

Meanwhile, by 1990, the then three Catholic schools of Norwalk were amalgamated into what is currently All Saints School on West Rocks Road, leaving additional space empty on St. Philip's church grounds. Today, what was once a cow pasture and eventually the main school is used for religious education and additional programs as well as meeting rooms and church offices. The former lower school building is rented by the Carousel Daycare Center.

### Coming Back to Life

The restoration project was launched in March of this year, as artists Montoya, David Morico, and Ralph Dimarco began work with the assistance of Bagnell, who arranged for specialty contractors. Each artist is personally and financially responsible for the rehabilitation of his own room and its conversion into private studio space, as well as for pitching in on renovations for the larger, common areas of the mansion whose costs are being underwritten by the church.

"They've done a magnificent job," exclaims Father B with pride. "They've been very industrious and enthusiastic. The broken up rooms have been restored to the original design and seeing this beautiful building coming back to life has been a joy."

For his part, Montoya couldn't be happier with both the space and the incredible support of Father B.



Gary Recchia's "Our lady of Coyocan" is on display at SPAG.

"His knowledge and love of art are inspiring to me," he said. "I look for his critique and his voice (regarding) my work. It's always truthful, honest, to-the-core..."

"And correct!" added Father B with a boisterous laugh.

Later, Montoya, whose family has been attending services at St. Philip's for 25 years said privately, "Father B is really special. He has a way about him and a way of portraying the church that made it feel really good to come back here. He's always encouraged my love of art, using my drawings in church bulletins and even using a rendering I did at age 17, of plans to remodel the church, as an actual rough guide. He's my biggest fan. It feels great to be able to give something back."

In addition to this evening's artists' reception, the space will be open Saturday from noon to 7 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
*Editor's note: Special thanks to Norwalk historian Ralph Bloom, former curator of the Norwalk Museum, for his expertise on the Lockwood family history.*