

Sheldon Museum silhouettes of 19th century same-sex couple travel to D.C.

Sun, 06/03/2018 - 8:00pm admin

By: Addison Independent

Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant lived a respectable, relatively quiet life together as essentially married partners out of the spotlight in Weybridge, Vt., in the first half of the 19th century. This month a picture of the two women was placed in a spotlight — literally — in one of the most high-profile venues in the world: the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. A silhouette of the two women that has been safeguarded in the Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History in Middlebury was hung in a new exhibit called “Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now,” at the Smithsonian Museum’s National Portrait Gallery in celebration of its 50th anniversary.

On May 10, William F. Brooks Jr., executive director of the Sheldon Museum, and Eva Garcelon-Hart, archivist at the museum’s research center, attended the opening reception of the exhibition. The gallery borrowed from the Sheldon the unique double silhouette of Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant, the first documented same-sex couple in the United States. The striking piece of art not only shows the two women in profile, but also includes strands of hair from the two women braided together into the shape of a heart. It is displayed prominently in the National Portrait Gallery’s exhibition space and in the catalogue for the show.

Sheldon Archivist Eva Garcelon-Hart and Executive Director Bill Brooks stand with a Sheldon silhouette on display in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Some time ago Garcelon-Hart contacted the Harvard Art Museum conservator and silhouette specialist Penley Knipe in search of further information regarding the silhouettes. Knipe, in turn, conveyed her knowledge about this unique piece to Asma Naeem, the curator of the NPG exhibition. The “Sylvia & Charity” silhouette complements a number of the silhouettes on display in the “Black Out “ exhibit of individuals who have been rendered voiceless historically, including women, the enslaved, and free people of color, as well as constitutes an important link to the works of current-day silhouette artists on display, including that of Kara Walker, Kristi Malakoff and Kumi Yamashita.

Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant became the subject of the book, "Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America" by Rachel Hope Cleves available for purchase through the Sheldon Museum.

The local silhouette will be on exhibit until March 10, 2019, and shortly thereafter it will return to the Sheldon unless the gallery is successful in arranging "Black Out" to travel to other venues.