

## Escapes



GRUNLEY CONSTRUCTION/FROM THE NATIONAL SPORTING LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

The museum at the National Sporting Library is housed in an 1805 manor house on the edge of Middleburg.

## An artful take on the sporting life

BY LYDIA STROHL

In Middleburg, it's normal to see people in riding britches shopping in the grocery store. Foxhunters trot through town before the Christmas parade. Weekend parties often include shooting at sporting clays, deer or birds.

So it's no surprise that the nation's leading repository of literature about field sports, more than 17,000 volumes, resides here in the National Sporting Library, built in 1954 by a group of wealthy residents.

But the museum at the National Sporting Library, which opened this fall, is a surprise: It's a first-class gem. I walk through the door to find that same satisfying hush you encounter in the art institutions on the Mall. Artists sit in corners and sketch. Strategically placed seats allow contemplation.

The museum's inaugural exhibit is "Afield in America: 400 Years of Animal and Sporting Art," 150 works chronicling field sports and our national connection to animals, on display until Jan. 14. What hits me first is the sheer beauty of the art — magnificent landscapes and animals in action. It's the story of America — a county fair here, a wagon train there, a buffalo hunt. A cougar chases deer seemingly right out of the frame.

But look deeper.

"There's allegory and metaphor in all these," says Turner Reuter, a longtime library board member. A former foxhunter and steeplechase jockey, he first saw sporting art in fine homes at hunt breakfasts and race parties, and began collecting at age 19. He has a gallery at Middleburg's Red Fox Inn, which he runs with his family.

The exhibit springs from Reuter's book, "Animal and Sporting Artists in America," a 30-year endeavor. "These artists developed a unique national style reflecting the diversity of people, the wildlife and breadth of the landscape," he says. "I've devoted my life to this art."

The exhibit winds through the museum, an

1805 manor house on the edge of Middleburg, expanded with additional gallery space. Galleries in the original brick house — very like many of the homes these works were commissioned for — are intimate, with original floors and thick windowsills. The adjoining galleries have soaring ceilings and wide expanses of wall. The entire museum, which is privately funded, incorporates state-of-the-art technologies.

Each gallery has a theme. We start in the old building, in a downstairs gallery of early work by Europeans in America. A 1619 engraving by Johann Theodor de Bry shows a sportsman's paradise, fish and game aplenty. It's essentially an ad for Virginia (and democracy: no need to own land, just get here and carve out your piece). Also here is the striking "Long Haired Squirrel," a hard-to-find original John James Audubon.

The next gallery is Reuter's favorite, showcasing early examples of art by Americans. "Portrait of the Racehorse American Eclipse, 1822," painted by Alvan Fisher in the wooden style of English equestrian paintings, hangs just below Edward Troye's realistic "Mary Randolph, 1833." Just 10 years later, Troye is already developing characteristics of American art: You can see the horse's withers, and the landscape is uniquely American. In another of his paintings, "Turkey Shooting," a diverse hunting party points up the democratic nature of field sports in America. In Europe, they were generally reserved for the elite.

"The artists were sportsmen themselves," Reuter says in front of Thomas Hewes Hinckley's "The Days Bag: Gun Dogs and Game." Painted just before the Civil War, it foreshadows impending strife while accurately detailing the sport. "You can't fake a painting like that," Reuter says.

There are history lessons, as in the juxtaposition of Alfred Jacob Miller's "A Surround of Buffalo by Indians, 1848-58," depicting the Indian method of taking only the buffalo needed, with Louis Maurer's violent "Great Royal Buffalo Hunt, 1894," a massacre led by Buffalo Bill Cody. Local history is represented in Franklin Voss's

1919 paintings, commissioned by Joseph Thomas, of the Piedmont Hunt riding in nearby Upperville, where they still foxhunt today. And in a portrait of local philanthropist Paul Mellon, an avid collector and benefactor of this museum, by Jamie Wyeth.

There are social lessons: African Americans are both slaves ("Asteroid With Old Ansel and Brown Dick With the Alexander Colors, c. 1864") and freed men (spectators in "Great Royal Buffalo Hunt"). The entryway holds a model of the Vanderbilt family carriage, one of six cast in sterling silver for a dinner party, owned by the museum.

There are political messages, as in Rockwell Kent's "Sportsman's Delight, 1941," with its anti-hunting sentiment, or conservation overtones in Winslow Homer's "Boy Fishing, 1892" (on exhibit through Jan. 8), which depicts a simpler time in the Adirondacks.

And serendipitous moments, which come from the gathering of so many masterworks from disparate places. The deep blues of "In a Tight Place" by Roy Martell Mason are amplified by the tempestuous seas of "Marlin on the Rise" by William Goadby Lawrence. Or Elie Nadelman's bronze "Resting Stag" reflecting the lush golden overtones of William Herbert Dutton's art deco masterpiece "Tapestry of Autumn."

I see something different each time I visit, but what I take away is always the same: delight.

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"On the Wing" by [unclear] be seen in "Afield in America: 400 Years of Animal and Sporting Art."