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Treasure trove of American masters sits off the Thruway in Canajoharie

Karen Bjornland

(October 28, 2007) — High above the Mohawk River, just off Exit 29 of the New York state Thruway, the iconic Beech-Nut sign crowns Canajoharie, home of Beech-Nut baby food. But most drivers zooming by have no idea that the little village has a magnificent collection of American art.

Last month, the Arkell Museum opened across the street from the Beech-Nut plant after a \$10 million expansion and renovation of the Canajoharie Library and Art Gallery. Like the Beech-Nut sign, the rooftop "Arkell" sign is visible from the Thruway when you're headed east.

In the early 20th century, Bartlett Arkell, a founder of Beech-Nut, donated to Canajoharie more than 300 artworks by America's leading artists of the 19th and early 20th centuries, including Thomas Eakins, Maurice Prendergast, Childe Hassam and Charles Demuth. The crown jewels of the collection are 21 paintings by Winslow Homer.

Although well known to art historians around the world, Arkell's paintings have been one of upstate New York's best kept secrets for more than 80 years.

Several Homer paintings hang in the restored small gallery built by Arkell in 1926. In spring 2008, all the Homer works, watercolor and oil, will be put on display in a special exhibit. Other current exhibits:

- "Fragile Masterpieces: Pastels and Watercolors from the Permanent Collection," with works on paper by Prendergast, Hopper, Wyeth, O'Keefe, Davies, Demuth and more; through mid-December.
- "Mohawk Valley View," with artwork inspired by the Mohawk Valley landscape and the Erie Canal; through February 2008.

Like many Mohawk Valley towns, Canajoharie, Montgomery County, is a diamond in the rough, with 19th-century architectural gems next door to vacant



enlarge JONATHAN HILLYER Arkell Museum
The sign for the Arkell Museum beckons drivers on the Thruway.

Day in Photos

If you go

The Arkell Museum, 2 Erie Blvd., Canajoharie, Montgomery County. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, 12:30 to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Admission: \$7; \$5 for students and seniors; free for children age 11 and under. (518) 673-2314 or www.arkellmuseum.org.

Canajoharie is just off the New York state Thruway at Exit 29, about a 3-hour drive from Rochester. For information on lodging and attractions, call the Canajoharie-Palatine Chamber of Commerce at (518) 673-4434 or go to www.canpal.org. The Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce has information on early American and native American history and Amish crafts in the region. Call (800) 743-7337 or go to www.montgomerycountyny.com.

Where to stay

The Window Box Guest House, a bed-and-breakfast with rooms in two handsome circa-1870 houses, is four blocks from the museum, on quiet and historic Front Street. Rates: \$85-\$150. (518) 673-3131 or www.eriecanalgreenway.com.

Inn by the Mill, located 11 miles away in St. Johnsville, offers accommodations in a

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buildings and overlooked natural wonders close to town.

With the new museum attracting attention, there are glimmers of the tourist town that Canajoharie hopes to become. The brightest new light is Church & Main, an upscale restaurant applauded in the September issue of *Bon Appetit* magazine.

Chef Michael Lapi creates a weekly menu from meats, eggs, vegetables and cheeses hand-selected from local farmers and food hobbyists. Church & Main is in an old storefront at 49 Church St., around the corner from the museum. Dinner is served from Thursday to Sunday; reservations are suggested. Call (518) 673-2433 or go to www.churchmain.com.

For breakfast or lunch Tuesday through Friday, the best place is Melissa's, a gourmet café and bakery at 40 W. Main St., a block from the museum. Operated by a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Melissa's serves up freshly baked cinnamon rolls, muffins, quiche, frittatas and Belgian waffles, plus savory soups such as carrot-ginger; (518) 673-2100.

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19th-century cottage, the big white mill house with purple trim and two more modern cottages. The property, which includes an 1835 grist mill, was part of the Underground Railroad and is on the National Register of Historic Places. Outdoor hot tubs with waterfall views are open year-round. Rates: \$150-\$300. (518) 568-2388 or www.innbythemill.com.



enlarge ↗

JONATHAN HILLYER Arkell Museum

Once off the highway and inside, visitors will find Winslow Homer paintings among the collection of American art.

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