Art professor connects with Weir’s work

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WILLIMANTIC — Eastern Connecticut State University art professor Anne Dawson was first introduced to artist J. Alden Weir’s work in 2009.

At the time, she was looking for a research project with a connection to the community.

Dawson’s fascination with the American impressionist painter’s work and his connection to Windham led her to edit and coauthor “Rare Light: J. Alden Weir 1882-1919.”

“The reason I did the research is that few people know about his life in eastern Connecticut,” said Dawson, who is chairman of the art and art history department at ECSU.

Weir was born in 1852 and lived in Windham from 1882 until his death in 1919.

In addition to living on a farm in Windham, Weir also had a home on a farm in Wilton, as well as one in New York City.

According to Dawson’s blog, Weir’s home and studio in Wilton were preserved as the only National Historic Site in the state and the only historic site commemorating a painter. There is also a plaque about Weir at Windham Mills Heritage Park in Willimantic.

Elizabeth Peterson, who was director of Eastern’s former Akus Gallery, introduced Dawson to Weir’s work in 2009.

Dawson said Peterson wanted to her to work on an exhibit about Weir for the gallery.

“The more I looked into it, the more I realized it was really a bigger topic and deserved more than a local show,” she said.

An exhibit of Weir’s work was held at the new Fine Arts Instructional Center at Eastern from Jan. 14 to Feb. 25.

“It was very well-received,” Dawson said. “We got many, many compliments on the show. People really liked it.”

There are four essays in the book, which Dawson edited and wrote an essay for.

The book, which is the second Dawson has contributed to, uses photos, paintings and letters to show the influence the town of Windham had on Weir’s art.

“The Red Bridge,” a painting of a bridge near Weir’s Windham home, was published in 1895 and is displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The painting depicts a bridge that joined Windham Center, which is rural, with Willimantic, which was industrial at the time.
Town historian and Windham Textile & History Museum Executive Director Jamie Eves, an adjunct faculty member who teaches history at Eastern, also wrote an essay in the book.

Other essays were written by Weir’s only surviving grandchild, Charles Burlingham Jr., and Rachel Carley, an architectural historian.

Over seven years, Dawson did extensive research about Weir, even interviewing Burlingham and Bill Carlin, another grandson of Weir’s.

Dawson said Carlin and Burlingham provided a lot of valuable information for the book.

“They had a lot of stories,” she said.

She also interviewed the grandchild of one of Weir’s farmhands and conducted research at various locations, including Weir Farms National Historic Site, Brigham Young University in Utah and the Connecticut State Library.

“It was a very interesting process,” Dawson said. “I love doing research.”

Dawson has also curated another exhibit about Weir, “A Good Summer’s Work: J. Alden Weir, Connecticut Impressionist” that will run the Lyman Allyn Art Museum at 625 Williams St., New London, from May 7 to Sept. 11.

Dawson said she has not yet decided what her next research project will be, though she has been very inspired by her research about Weir.

“I became very fascinated with the history of Windham Center, so there’s a lot of research to be done there,” she said.

Dawson does not, however, plan to write another book about Weir.

For more information about Weir and Dawson’s research, visit Dawson’s blog at www.weirinwindham.org.

The book can be ordered online through Amazon at www.amazon.com.
Eastern Connecticut State University art professor Anne Dawson speaks during the ribboncutting for ECSU’s Fine Arts Instructional Center recently. Dawson edited and co-authored a book about artist J. Alden Weir, who lived in Windham from 1882 until his death in 1919.

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