

Venerable Gallery In Modern Move

WSJ AUGUST 11, 2012

By JENNIFER MALONEY

New York's oldest art gallery is synonymous with the staid back rooms of Midtown art dealers, where the works of Old and New World masters trade hands in quiet, carpeted surroundings.

Now, Babcock Galleries is moving to Chelsea.



The space at 525 W. 25th St. for Driscoll Babcock Galleries.

The leap to the heart of the city's contemporary art scene—a neighborhood with a markedly different aesthetic than Midtown—marks a new era for Babcock. The gallery, which for 160 years has specialized in American artworks, is embracing a new look, a new name and a new expansion—into contemporary and international art. It is also expanding its stable of living artists.

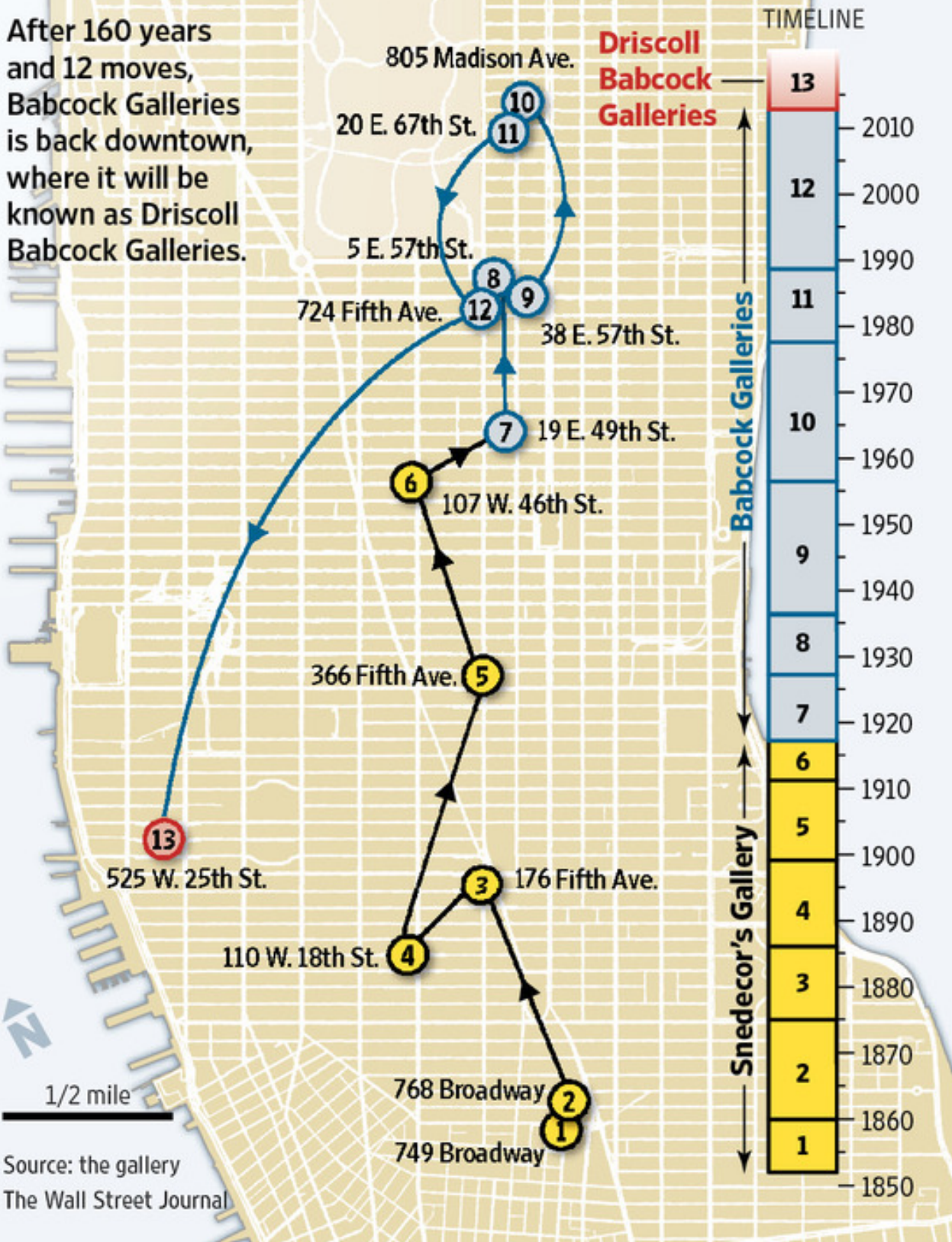
Driscoll Babcock Galleries—renamed for its owner, John Driscoll—will open on Sept. 8 at 525 W. 25th St., on a block stacked with such galleries as Pace, Marlborough Chelsea and Nancy Margolis.

The owner's idea: to hang the work of contemporary artists side by side with historic works that explore the same themes.

"You can't create this great art in a vacuum," said Mr. Driscoll, 62 years old. "Our interest is in artists who are cognizant of art of the past and recognize its pertinence in their own work today."

Moving Uptown and Back Down

After 160 years and 12 moves, Babcock Galleries is back downtown, where it will be known as Driscoll Babcock Galleries.



And so he will move from galleries on Fifth Avenue near East 57th Street—decorated with imported wool carpeting and paint in shades of gray inspired by Cézanne's Aix-en-Provence studio—to a space with concrete floors, white walls and exposed ducts.

It's quite a change for a place that has kept the same phone number since 1956, and occasionally receives calls from former clients' great-grandchildren.

"Someone once said going into Babcock was like going into a white-shoe law firm," Mr. Driscoll said, acknowledging that he will be adding to his collection of edgy eyeglasses.

Knoedler & Co., founded in 1846, held the title of New York's oldest gallery until it closed last year. Babcock Galleries was founded by John Snedecor in 1852—18 years before the founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art—on Broadway near East Eighth Street. From the beginning, it sought out the works of American masters—the likes of George Inness, John Frederick Kensett, Winslow Homer, Mary Cassatt and Childe Hassam.



Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal

Gallery owner John Driscoll in what will be his new showroom.

Snedecor's Gallery gradually zigzagged uptown, and was renamed Babcock Galleries in 1918.

Works that today hang in the Met, the Brooklyn Museum and the National Gallery of Art, among others were sourced by Babcock.

Mr. Driscoll bought the gallery in 1987. Although he followed its tradition of acquiring and sourcing American art, his personal interests are much broader. His own collection includes English, Japanese and Danish art, as well as 20th-century ceramics.

He had been mulling a move downtown for about seven years. He said he jumped at the chance to lease 4,700 square feet—with the possibility of 2,000 more—in a building owned by Related Co.

The gallery owns an unusually large inventory, numbering in the thousands of pieces. Although it has mounted shows and represents estates, it has had only a small stable of living artists. Mr. Driscoll recently signed the Brooklyn painters Jenny Morgan and Margaret Bowland, and said he is in discussions with other artists in the U.S., China and Europe. He will continue his back-office business sourcing works for private collections and museums.

Mr. Driscoll will be presenting a distinctly historic perspective in a neighborhood known for cutting-edge art.

David Maupin, of Lehmann Maupin Gallery in Chelsea, said the idea is compelling.

"I think juxtapositions of different periods in our history are always interesting, as long as they are done well," he said. "I look forward to seeing it."

Jenny Morgan, a figurative painter, said she left Like the Spice Gallery in Brooklyn to sign with Mr. Driscoll last month.

"There's a lot of knowledge and experience behind him," she said. "It's really exciting."

Ms. Morgan, who said she draws inspiration from the masters and as well as contemporary portrait painters, said of her decision to join the new venture: "Honestly, it was just instinct. It felt correct."

Walking through his new space, which is still under renovation, Mr. Driscoll described a glass wall that will enclose the gallery's archives, which go back 150 years.

The design for the main gallery includes LED lights and a metal mesh ceiling, only partially obscuring the "spaghetti" of pipes and ducts above, he said.

And he will keep the phone number from 1956. "Every time that number lights up, we know it's a phone call from another dimension," he said.

Write to Jennifer Maloney at jennifer.maloney@wsj.com

A version of this article appeared August 11, 2012, on page A19 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Venerable Gallery In Modern Move.