Picturing the Page: A Legacy of Artist Illustrators

by **Nancy Whipple Grinnell**

From Winslow Homer and Augustus Hoppin to David Macaulay and Chris Van Allsburg, *Picturing the Page: A Legacy of Artist Illustrators* presents work by nearly fifty historic and contemporary illustrators, most of whom have an association with the Rhode Island region. Two local institutions are obvious sources for the work of great illustrators: the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence and the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport, both of which have loaned works to this show. But illustration has also been a component of the exhibitions and collections at the Art Association of Newport (now the Newport Art Museum and Art Association) since its earliest days, when it hosted "The Publishers' Art Exhibition of New York, comprising some 150 of the original drawings and paintings that have made the finest illustrations in the leading magazines of the country" in 1913. Illustration luminaries like Howard Pyle, Jesse Willcox Smith and Frank Schoonover were included. Furthermore, Philadelphia native Harrison S. Morris, director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts during the 1890s and of the Art Association from 1916 to 1947, drew on his connections with the Brandy-

Picturing the Page: A Legacy of Artist Illustrators is on view through February 26, 2006, at the Newport Art Museum and Art Association, 76 Bellevue Avenue, Newport, Rhode Island, 02840, 401-848-8200, www.newportmuseum.com.

BELOW: John Clymer, *Samuel Slater demonstrates the first successful textile machinery,* 1969, o/board, 30 x 40, illustration for the American Cyanamid corporate calendar, 1969, courtesy of American Illustrators Gallery, New York.

ABOVE: Philip Russell Goodwin, *An Unexpected Opportunity*, 1931, o/c, 30 x 22, illustration for Stats Motor Company Calendar, 1931, National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, Rhode Island.
ABOVE RIGHT: Elizabeth Shippen Green, *Paper Doll Books #6*, 1906, w/c and charcoal on paper, 23 x 14 1/4, illustration for "The Mind of a Child," by Edward S. Martin, *Harper's Monthly,* December 1906, National Museum of American Illustration.
RIGHT: Winslow Homer, *Farm Children Playing on a Fence,* 1874, graphite and gouache on paper, 10 x 14, Newport Art Museum and Art Association, bequest of Swanhurst Estate.

wine School of Art as well as his close friendship with legendary graphic illustrator Joseph Pennell to bring illustration exhibitions to Newport.

By the middle of the nineteenth century in the United States, the art of illustration was coming of age. Mass media as we know it today received its impetus with the illustrated magazine. For the first time great numbers of citizens, becoming increasingly literate, were able to read topical stories with pictures. Technological advances produced speedier printing presses and rapidly evolving methods of reproducing images. An ever increasing number of artists was required to illustrate these stories of war and politics, romance and intrigue—especially after amendments to the Copyright Act prohibited the reproduction of foreign drawings. The country's burgeoning railroad system carried these new

LEFT: Jon Foster, *Dragon and Thief*, 2000, o/c, 23 x 23, cover illustration for *Tor Science Fiction and Fantasy, Young Adult Line,* courtesy of the artist.

BELOW LEFT: Charles Dana Gibson, *Cherub Looking in a Store Window*, c. 1900-10, pen and ink on paper and board, 21 1/4 x 40, National Museum of American Illustration.

RIGHT: Howard Pyle, *Mary Dyer Being Led to the Scaffold, June 1, 1660, Boston Common,* c. 1902, o/c, 29 1/2 x 21 1/2, illustration for *McClures* magazine, 1902, later reproduced in *Howard Pyle's Book of the American Spirit*, The Newport Historical Society, gift of George Lewis Dyer.

FAR RIGHT: Charles A. Platt, *Central Fountain of the Villa Albani, Rome,* c. 1900, o/board, 32 x 25, illustration for *Century* Magazine, National Museum of American Illustration.

BELOW RIGHT: Mary Jane Begin, *U is for Underground Railroad,* w/c, pastel and pencil, 9 1/4 x 7 1/2, illustration from *R is for Rhode Island Red,* written by Mark Allio, (Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear Press, 2005), courtesy of the artist.

illustrated weeklies out from the cities to rural areas, where their arrival was met with excitement.

Those illustrators who embraced the industrial age were more apt to be successful. The most famous example was Winslow Homer, who easily adapted the new technologies, becoming an independent and sought-after illustrator in the late 1850s, after an apprenticeship at the lithographic firm of J.H. Bufford in Boston. Homer's illustrations were wood engravings, which replaced copper and steel plate engraving and lithography as the method of reproduction used in books and periodicals in the mid 1800s. He worked well with the wood engravers who carved his drawings on the blocks, and when photography was introduced into that process around 1860, allowing the artist's drawing to be photographed on the block, his outstanding abilities as an artist-reporter emerged.

The artistic career of Winslow Homer was largely directed by his work as an illustrator: his early style, characterized by crowding and cross-hatching, evolved into the simplification of forms and shallow perspective characteristic of his painting. Popular journals like *The Century* and *Harper's* perfected the wood engraving process, although it continued to rely on hatching and cross-hatching to achieve tonal values.

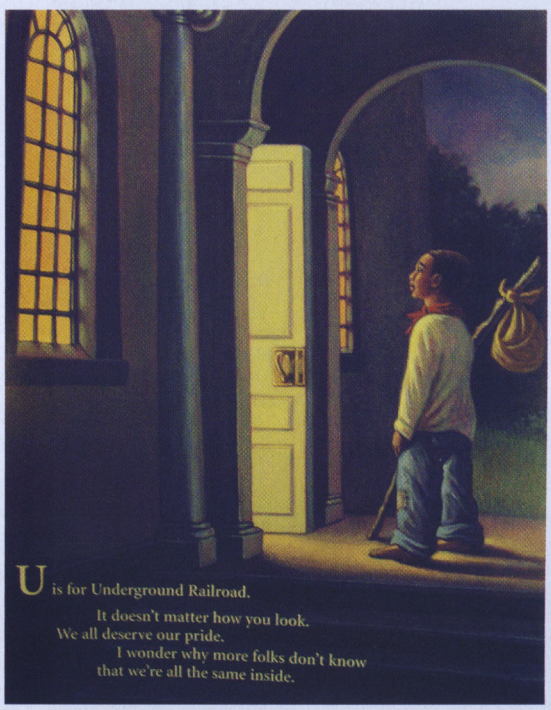
Thure de Thulstrup was the epitome of the artist-reporter. A Swedish immigrant who arrived in the United States in 1873 and attended the Art Students League, de Thurstrup was a regular contributor to *Harper's, The Century, Scribner's* and *Cosmopolitan*. His illustrations were often newsworthy: military occurrences, or in this case the polo tournament at Newport. He was particularly adept at portraying horses, and illustrated a lively scene of Newport society's coaching event.

In 1881 the halftone process was invented, paving the way for The Golden Age of Illustration, which took place roughly between 1890 and 1930. A picture could now be photographed through a screen, dissolving it into a grid-like series of dots, which blended together when seen by

the eye. By the 1890s the halftone and color halftone were prevalent, assuring artists that their artwork in any medium would be reproduced with accuracy. Illustration gained stature as a fine art, and some illustrators became celebrities. While photography was beginning to supplant illustrations in newspaper reporting, the illustrated magazine stories were eagerly anticipated by a public that never dreamed of television, DVDs and the Internet. Instead of *Entertainment Weekly,* they turned to *Life* magazine where Charles Dana Gibson entertained them with his bravura pen and ink satires of the upper classes and created a sensation with his depiction of the very modern, all-American Gibson Girl.

Gibson, whose family was originally from Bristol, Rhode Island, loved to poke gentle fun at the Newport society types. During World War I, Gibson's prowess for political commentary emerged in much of his work. In 1917 he headed up the Division of Pictorial Publicity, which assigned topics relative to the war effort to the nation's illustrators, resulting in some posters that have become national icons.

During the Golden Age, swashbuckling adventure and tender romance, motherhood and childhood were portrayed with aesthetic references to the arts and crafts



style, art nouveau, symbolism, tonalism, the Japanese print and more. Howard Pyle, called the "Father of American Illustration," also advanced the design of the whole book, both in his own work, which relied on authenticity and a flair for the drama, as well as in his teaching. Characteristic was his dramatic depiction of the execution of Mary Dyer, a Rhode Islander and a Quaker, who personified the state's reputation for religious tolerance.

Pyle's students, Elizabeth Shippen Greene, Jessie Willcox Smith, Frank Schoonover, and N.C. Wyeth among them, developed specialties that captivate audiences today. Greene was known for her exquisite compositions of color and pattern, as well as for being one of the Red Rose Girls, along with Jesse Willcox Smith and Violet Oakley. Greene moved to Rhode Island for a time in 1911, when she married Huger Elliott, director of the Rhode Island School of Design.

Schoonover, a close friend of Pyle and highly regarded for his carefully documented, bold and colorful illustrations, had an exhibition at the Art Association of Newport in 1922. An accolade in the *Herald* read, "To the man who, alone among present day illustrators, puts the medicine of the Red Gods into the mists which veil his valleys and into the timbered hills which guard them."[1]

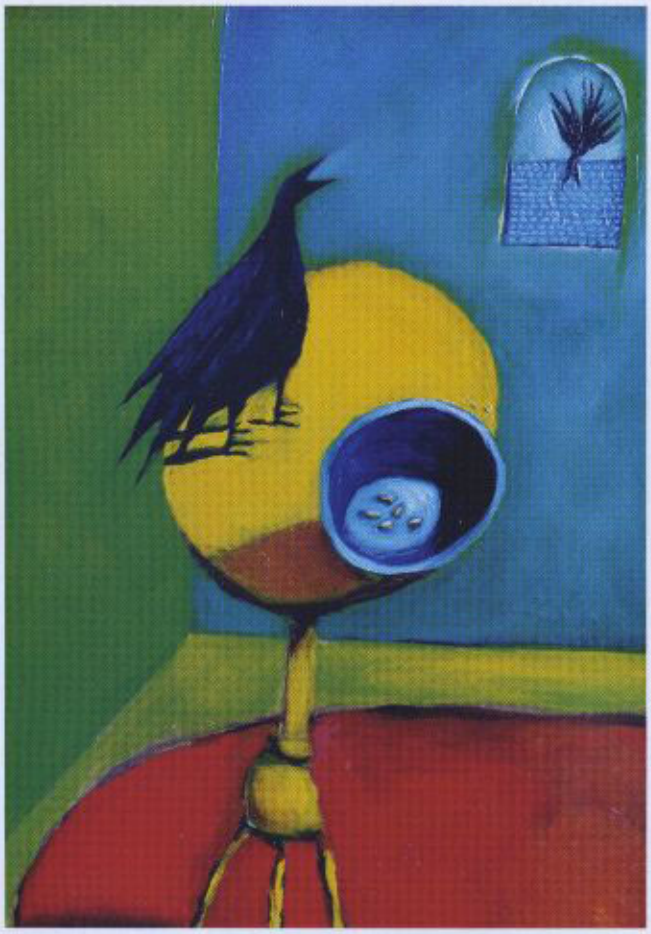
Another Pyle student, Maxfield Parrish, collaborated with Newport author Edith Wharton, in 1903. Parrish is generally associated with fanciful illustrations set against violet skies replete with classical columns, urns, balusters and archways. This love of classical architecture was evident early in his career when he received a commission from the editor of *The Century* magazine, Richard Watson Gilder, to make several paintings of Italian villas and gardens for a book by Edith Wharton. Parrish

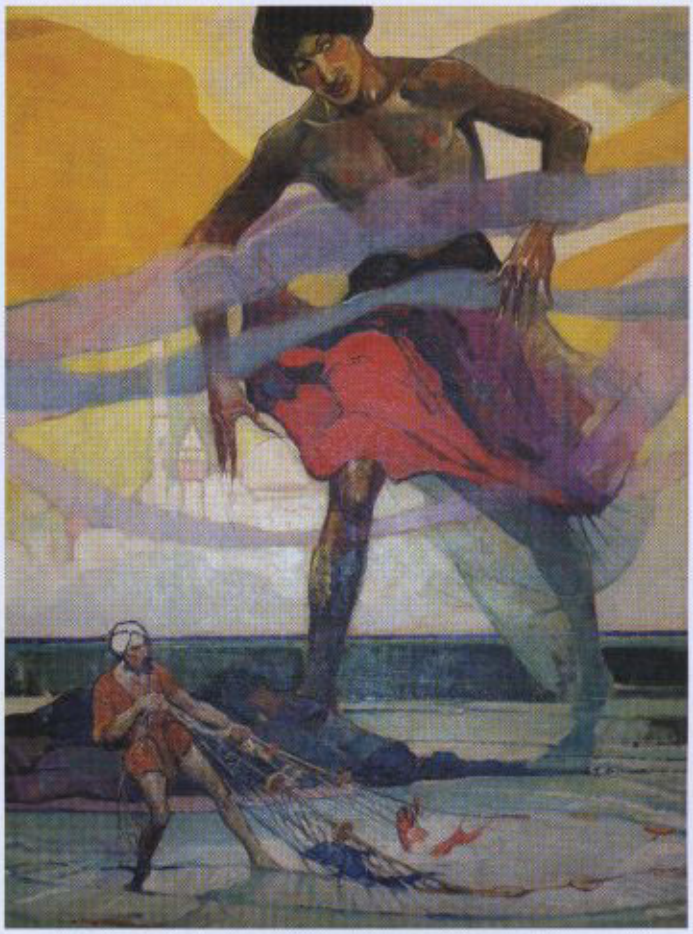
Students League with George Bellows and John Sloan, but found her niche to be drawing caricatures of celebrities and illustrating over sixty books. She showed her work at the Art Association of Newport many times.

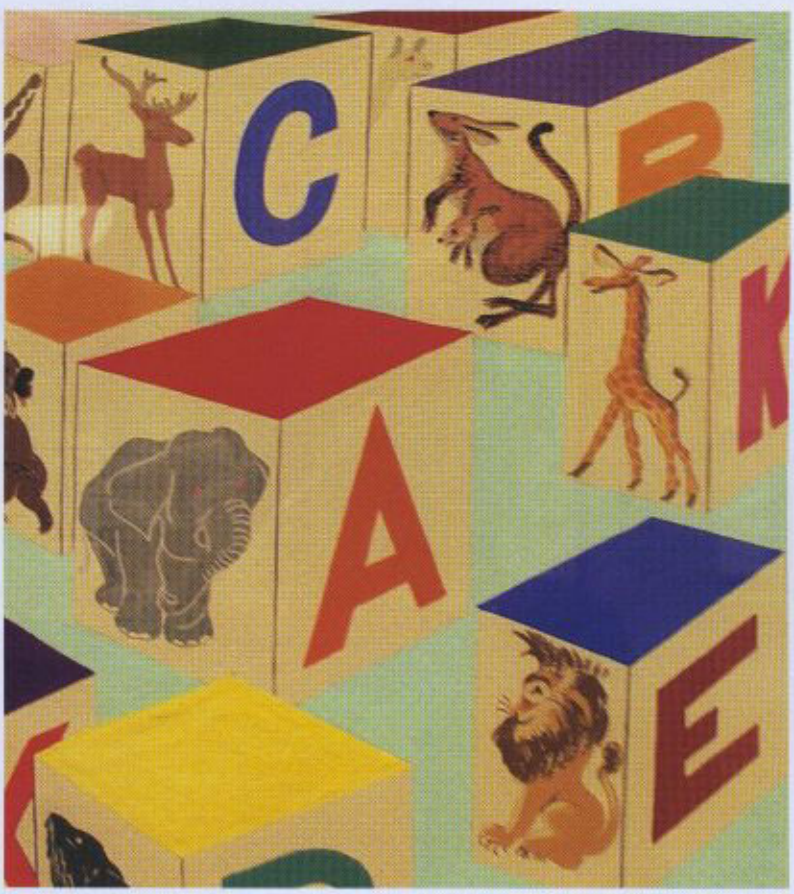
With the onset of the Great Depression, priorities changed in the world of illustration. Social realism replaced the flights of fantasy, adventure and romance that had dominated the previous decades. Newsworthy events like parades, funerals and political campaigns were now photographed, not illustrated in the weekly magazines. Illustration increasingly faced competition from film and radio in terms of entertainment, and illustrators found themselves in need of work. The illustrated poster continued to prosper. During the Works Progress Administration under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, two million posters were produced, using the techniques of lithography and silkscreen. Topics varied, but reflected programs sponsored by the federal government: health and safety, cultural events including art exhibitions and musical performances, travel and tourism. During World War II

posters issued by the Office of War Information were important motivational factors, as they had been in the previous war. Many of the posters reflected European modernism in their designs. However, the posters that set the tone for the American middle class were Norman Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*. Ironically, the ideas behind these phenomenally popular works were directly related to a speech by FDR. Rockwell was able to do what other artists failed to do: take abstract ideas and show how they affected the lives of ordinary citizens.

The heirs of Rockwell continued the







narrative, story-telling approach to illustration. Wilderness and firearms were the priorities of Philip Goodwin, from Norwich, Connecticut, a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, the Art Students League and of Howard Pyle. He spent his career in New York, where he worked for *Scribner's, Harper's* and *Everybody's* magazines. He was the illustrator of Teddy Roosevelt's *African Game Trails*. John Clymer, from Washington State, predominantly did western scenes but in his illustration of the design and construction of the first power driven factory machinery in America, in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, he demonstrated his strengths in accuracy and detail.

George S. Eisenberg, still working today in Marblehead, Massachusetts, produced one of the largest bodies of work (*Sailor's Diary*) of World War II illustration while serving on a Navy combat destroyer, illustrated covers for the *Boston Post Magazine* in the 1950s, and created the prototype for Rhode Island's Hasbro Toys' GI Joe action figure.

The Rhode Island School of Design Department of Illustration has contributed many talented illustrators to the field, begin-

RIGHT: Thelma Cudlipp Grosvenor, *Sweet Adeline*, c. 1920s, gouache, 17 x 12, Newport Art Museum and Art Association.
LEFT: Frank Schoonover, *The Fisherman and the Genie*, 1932, o/c, 32 x 25, illustration for *Stories from the Arabian Nights*, by Lawrence Housman, (Grand Central Publishing Co., 1932), National Museum of American Illustration.
FAR LEFT: Robert Brinkerhoff, *Covetousness*, 2004, o/c, 10 1/2 x 6 1/2, courtesy of the artist.
BELOW LEFT: Ruth Forrest, End page for *The Elephant and the Kangaroo*, c. 1940s, gouache on paper, 10 1/2 x 10, courtesy of Bert Gallery, Providence, Rhode Island.

ning with its founding in the 1940s. Thomas Sgouros, David Macaulay and Robert Brinkerhoff have all served as department heads. Sgouros graduated from RISD in 1950 and commenced a successful illustration career in New York, working for major advertising agencies and on accounts for Ford, TWA, General Electric and Coca-Cola. He then returned to RISD, where he chaired the department for two decades, influencing an entire generation of illustrators, including the well-known Macaulay and Chris Van Allsburg. Macaulay continues his quest to convey the mysteries of design that captured both critical and popular acclaim in such classics as *Cathedral, Pyramid* and *The Way Things Work*. Van Allsburg, like Macaulay the winner of numerous awards including the Caldecott Medal, has seen his classic books *The Polar Express*, *Jumanji* and *Zathura* become films.

Currently the department head at RISD, Robert Brinkerhoff respects and learns from his predecessors, but finds the emerging and established younger illustrators like Jon Foster, Melissa Ferreira and Jesse Lefkowitz exciting to witness as they explore the realms of fantasy, science fiction and the comic strip. Mary Jane Begin and Christopher Denise, graduates of RISD and the creators of enchanting children's book illustrations for new and older works, remain in the area and teach illustration at their alma mater.

The "stepchild" of fine art, "second-rate" art: illustration has not always received due respect. There are legitimate reasons—embraced by many illustrators themselves—why their discipline can be said to differ from fine art: illustration is narrative; it accompanies text; it is mass produced; it is commercial; it has deadlines; its necessary restrictions stifle creativity. And yet art patronage has imposed conditions on artists for centuries, beginning with the powers of Church and State. Portraits are considered fine art; however, portraitists as celebrated as John Singer Sargent railed against the demands of his sitters. Indeed, within the art of illustration are multitudes of anonymous portraits. Illustration affects culture in untold ways. Jesse Willcox Smith defined motherhood for a generation; Winslow Homer and Charles Dana Gibson created the ideal for feminine beauty which American women still find reflected in the popular press. Norman Rockwell and Maxfield Parrish are iconic personalities whose work is now exhibited and collected in prestigious art museums. Hopefully future generations will uphold this legacy of artist-illustrators, continuing to alleviate the gap between what is perceived as fine art versus illustration.

[1] George Marsh quoted in letter to the editor, *Newport Herald*, August 22, 1922.

[2] Laurence S. Cutler, et. al., *Maxfield Parrish and the American Imagists* (Edison, N.J: Wellfleet Press and National Museum of American Illustration, 2004), p. 66.