

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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# NEWPORT NEWS

## AN ILLUSTRATION MUSEUM DEBUTS IN RHODE ISLAND



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**E**IGHT SLENDER chimneys rise tall against the sky; the chipped blue-stone is smooth on the paths, and the manicured lawns stretch away to Bellevue Avenue. At Vernon Court, a chateau-style, turn-of-the-century Newport "cottage," all is elegant and serene and, except for the discreet signage directing visitors to the ticket seller in the south loggia, little different from the days when its first owner, Mrs. Richard Gambrill, could be glimpsed

Above: The National Museum of American Illustration, the creation of Judy and Laurence Cutler, will open in March in their Newport, Rhode Island, house, Vernon Court.



ABOVE: Norman Rockwell's *Liberty Girl*, 1943, hangs in the marble hall. LEFT: The Cutlers in the north loggia before *A Florentine Fete*, 1916, by Maxfield Parrish.

alighting from her carriage and giving orders to the butler for tea. But today's visitors can expect a treat of a different order—a new museum, which is scheduled to open in March 2000, presenting seventy-eight important works of American illustration against the opulent background of a recently restored Newport mansion.

The National Museum of American Illustration and its grand, historic venue are the product of an inspired husband-and-wife collaboration. She is New York art dealer Judy Goffman Cutler, the undisputed doyenne of the

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TOP: *The Disabled Veteran*, 1944, by Rockwell is featured in the grand salon. ABOVE: The French-inspired space also holds N. C. Wyeth's *The Doryman* (Evening), 1933.

American illustration market. He is architect Laurence S. Cutler, a former professor of architecture and urban design at Harvard, MIT and the Rhode Island School of Design.

Together the couple had acquired over two thousand stellar American illustrations (specially commissioned paintings by artists such as N. C. Wyeth, Norman Rockwell and Maxfield Parrish, which were meant for reproduction in books, magazines and advertisements, and date from about 1875 to 1960) and were seeking a permanent home for their collection. Fortunately, an advertisement for the sale of Vernon

Court caught their eye. "We went up to Newport," Laurence Cutler remembers, "and as soon as we walked in, we knew we had found our museum. Vernon Court was designed by Carrère & Hastings, the great Beaux Arts architectural firm that built the Fifth Avenue home of Henry Clay Frick in 1914. That house was intended to be turned into a museum one day, and some of its features are similar to



ABOVE: THE DINING/BALLROOM DISPLAYS ROCKWELL'S 1945 *YOU'LL MARRY ME AT NOON*. ALLARD ET SES FILS DESIGNED THE 1898 BEAUX ARTS MANSION'S ORIGINAL INTERIORS.: The dining/

Vernon Court's. The proportions of the earlier house were exquisite, the size perfect. We saw it in April 1998, and by August we were the new owners. With its classic lines and

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well-preserved ornamentation, the Cutlers' acquisition seemed largely untouched by time—but only if one didn't look too closely. Since leaving the Gambrill family, the house had passed through several hands, including a now defunct junior college of the same name, and little serious repair work had taken place along the way. "There was no heat, no air-conditioning," says Laurence Cutler ruefully. "Dangling wires were everywhere. Not a single door closed properly. The pipes leaked—so did the roof—and there were sixty-one broken windows." The three-acre garden, originally designed by the firm of Wadley & Smythe after a garden at Hampton Court Palace, now boasted a modern swimming pool and two tennis courts, but its elegant terra-cotta-topped brick walls were crumbling, and a one impres

RIGHT: Parrish's *Love's Pilgrimage* and *A Call to Joy* (both from the *Florentine Fete* series) are in the glass-block-floored north loggia. BELOW: The garden facade.



sive rose sive rose garden was sadly neglected.

Laurence Cutler moved into the house and took charge, with the help of Newport Collaborative Architects, of a restoration designed to replicate the aesthetic atmosphere of 1898 in an ultramodern, technically sophisticated museum environment. "After everything was done," he says, "we wanted the house to look as if we'd done nothing at all." Accordingly, the roof was repaired with the same massive, hard-to-find two-by-two-foot slate tiles used by Carrère & Hastings; missing corbels and decorative garlands were carefully cast and reapplied to the stucco façade; replacement hardware was bought from the French firm that made the originals while, taking as their model a single extant decorative grate, American artisans cast sixty more for the state-of-the-art heating and air-conditioning system. During that installation (which entailed jackhammering through three-foot-deep concrete walls and floors), Cutler uncovered an 1898-style high-tech relic—the house's original junction box, with handwritten tags identifying every one of its fifty-two rooms. (Another relic—a workman's twenty-nine-cent luncheon receipt

thy, even distracting, background. They were designed by the exclusive French firm Allard et ses Fils, decorators famous for the reinstallation of paneling and other historical elements from European houses and for the commissioning of elaborate work in metal, stone and wood.

At Vernon Court, the designers focused on eighteenth-century France—the period that enthralled much of fashionable Newport—with selected Italian pieces thrown in. The south loggia is a bower of flowering vines, painted by Louis Comfort Tiffany's associate James Wall Finn after a mural at the Villa Giulia in Rome. The grand salon boasts intricate eighteenth-century Italian walnut paneling, while next door in the petit salon, a Carrara marble mantel with ormolu mounts is set off by mauve Rococo paneling. The dining/ballroom features two massive marble sideboards and a memorable fire surround ornamented with stylized ormolu acanthus leaves.

As Vernon Court is also the Cutlers' residence, parts of the first floor, including a modern kitchen, an intimate paneled library and the marble hall, will be off-limits to museum visitors. Upstairs, seven private bedroom suites house the family

Olmsted's contoured, pastoral landscape as well as install a monumental brick arch designed in 1962 by architect Louis Kahn. Although the juxtaposition may seem unusual, Cutler believes that the classical spirit that pervades the work of each man will produce a fitting monument to them both.

American illustration and the determinedly French Vernon Court may also seem an odd combination, but as Judy Cutler notes, this artistic genre and haute Newport have much in common. Both flourished during the early decades of the century, when, in an age before television, everybody from the Vanderbilts to the scullery maid at The Breakers avidly perused the illustrations in *The Century*, *Harper's Weekly* and *Scribner*. No longer dependent on old-fashioned engraving, such periodicals were using the new offset printing process to produce colorful, evocative images of all kinds. J. C. Leyendecker (who painted the Arrow Collar man) and Charles Dana Gibson (the creator of the Gibson Girl) immortalized well-born American youth, and Maxfield Parrish created his own fairytale world. N. C. Wyeth brought hard-driving adventures to life, and Norman

## Maxfield Parrish's mural *Florentine Fete* reminds us of why, by 1925, one out of every four American houses sported a Parrish reproduction.

gathering dust in the box.) To ensure an art-worthy environment, Cutler went on to install a humidity control system, with twenty-three different zones, and tinted the windows and glass doors in the gallery areas to provide UV-ray protection.

With these technical improvements in place, Vernon Court will prove a natural in its new role. Museum visitors will enter through the south loggia, circle easily through the grand salon, petit salon, dining/ballroom and north loggia, viewing the paintings on display, and exit the way they came in. Although only partially furnished ("We're an art museum, not a house tour like The Breakers," Cutler points out), these lavish spaces are a wor-

and their guests. A private third floor has been refurbished to provide a library and office and storage space. Museum-goers may visit the gardens, complete with mature plantings, revitalized roses and classical statuary. Access is through French doors, under the north loggia in the former servants' dining room—a space that has turned out to be the perfect place for a small museum shop and public restrooms.

Garden lovers can stroll across to an adjacent, three-acre plot designed in 1884 by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted for a now demolished house called Stoneacre. The Cutlers own the property and are planning to restore

Rockwell told human stories-at-a-glance. The illustrators themselves also fired the public imagination, becoming celebrities whose doings were chronicled as eagerly as those of Newport socialites (Leyendecker's Arrow Collar man received seventeen thousand letters, gifts and marriage proposals during a single month in the early 1920s). Nearly a century later much has changed, but American illustration and Vernon Court now have something else in common: Both represent a lost, beloved version of America—a place we would all like to visit.

We can do so with paintings such as Harrison Fisher's 1912 *Bride Getting Groomed for the Wedding*, in which a

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crisply uniformed maid hovers respectfully around a society bride. In the north loggia, Maxfield Parrish's compelling mural *Florentine Fete* (1916) reminds us of why, by 1925, one out of every four American houses sported a Parrish reproduction. As a nod to Newport's illustrious Colonial past, Judy Cutler has also included a number of works like Howard Pyle's 1899 *Washington at Mount Vernon*. Later decades (until about 1960, when illustration lost its audience to television and photography) are represented by such works as Norman Rockwell's World War II-era *Saturday Evening Post* cover *Liberty Girl* and by N. C. Wyeth's *The Doryman (Evening)*, a hauntingly beautiful book illustration from 1933. The display is impressive, and with such a large collection at her disposal, Judy Cutler plans to change it approximately twice a year and may also mount theme or single-artist exhibitions.

All are likely to find a ready audience. Although still eschewed by much of the art-historical establishment (which objects to its commercial antecedents), illustration is wildly popular with the American public. The Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, attracts nearly two hundred thousand annual visitors, and collectors ranging from Steven Spielberg to Ross Perot now pay millions of dollars for choice examples. Aficionados will welcome the new National Museum of American illustration as a much-needed center for the study and appreciation of this art form. But even unsuspecting tourists, attracted by the grandeur of Vernon Court, are bound to be captivated by the display within: "Illustration is magical," says Judy Cutler. "It can tell an entire story with a single image. It can capture not just a moment in time but the state of fashion, of society, of America itself. It's our history, illustrated."

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