The illustrated mansion

A Newport couple turn their ground floor into a museum of American artworks

By Suzanne C. Ryan

NEWPORT, R.I. — Imagine living in a mansion here on Bellevue Avenue. You dine in a ballroom on a table made in 1880, conduct business in a library decorated with original Norman Rockwell paintings, and greet guests in a foyer with a marble floor and sculptures carved in the mid-1800s.

For most people, that would be a fantasy. For Laurence Cutler and Judy Goffman Cutler, it's what they call home.

The Cutlers' mansion, Vernon Court, and their collection of illustrations are so striking that the couple turned their home into a museum. Their ground floor is now the National Museum of American Illustration.

Laurence Cutler, 69, an architect, and Judy Goffman Cutler, 58, an art dealer, launched the museum last year to showcase their collection of 5,000 illustrations by Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish, N. C. Wyeth, and about 75 other American artists.

The Cutlers are childhood sweethearts who reconnected after a diverse alice and wed in 1995 on the 40th anniversary of their first date. They decided to open a museum in Newport to combine their careers. He concentrated on renovating the mansion, and she developed the exhibit.

Now the duo spend their days conducting tours of their museum for anyone who calls and makes reserv-
In their home: a great American picture show

Laurence Cutler, an architect, and Judy Goffman Cutler, an art dealer, combined their careers with the museum they opened in their mansion.

Vernon Court was empty when the Cutlers bought it in 1998. "The mansion had been a private home until the 1950s," says Cutler. "Then it became a private school. Then an administration building for a junior college. It changed hands a number of times."

The mansion was built in 1898. Its 17th-century French chateau design was created by the New York architecture firm Carrere & Hastings, which also designed the New York Public Library and the US Senate Office Building.

The Petit Salon and ballroom were modeled after Marie Antoinette's suites at Versailles in France. The garden houses (tool sheds) are also a copy of those built at Versailles. The Cutlers brought in sculptures and fountains from Europe as well as furniture from American auction houses.

They also brought Judy Cutler's collection from her years as an art dealer and collector in New York, where she specialized in American illustration. In 1968, she founded the American Illustrators Gallery, which has built collections for such public figures as Steven Spielberg and Ross Perot.

Laurence Cutler founded the firm Ecodesign International Inc. and became a professor of architecture and urban design at Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Rhode Island School of Design.

For more information about Vernon Court, contact the museum at 401-851-8949 or www.americanillustration.org. Tickets are $25 for general admission or $12.50 per person for a group. The museum will place individuals in larger groups upon request.