Architecture

Art of the illustrator in a proper grand setting

Rockwell, Parrish, Pyle, Nast and their 'most American' art

By Robert Campbell
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NEWPORT, R. I. — It's one of my favorite museums in New England, or anywhere for that matter, yet hardly anyone has heard of it.

Imagine a beautiful formal gift box which, when you open it, turns out to be filled with wonderful toys.

That's the best way I can think of to describe the National Museum of American Illustration here.

The gift box is the museum building itself. Known as Vernon Court, it began its life in 1898 as one of the great mansions, or so-called "cottages," on Newport's famous Bellevue Avenue. The toys inside are hundreds of works by the so-called American Illustrators — artists who created images primarily for publication, as illustrations in books, magazines, or advertisements. Norman Rockwell is the best known.

Let's start with the building, which opened for the summer season this weekend. Vernon Court is a classic example of the kind of architecture that pleased newly rich Americans who were trying to live like the aristocrats of Europe. It's an imitation of an 18th-century French country chateau. The architects, Carrere & Hastings, were second only to McKim Mead & White among the architects of what Mark Twain called "the Gilded Age." Among the firm's other gems are the New York Public Library and the Frick mansion, now a museum, on Fifth Avenue.

The house itself is worth the visit. Pure white in color and looking like rare marble (actually it is white paint over smooth stucco), it immediately suggests a kind of innocence often sought by the heirs of the robber barons. It is as if the immaculate architecture were saying, "My hands are clean."

Indoors, the highlight is a garden pavilion, once open-air but now enclosed in glass, in which the walls and ceilings are covered with Tiffany murals of birds and cupids cavorting among pergolas and greenery.

The house, like other Newport mansions, was intended as an enduring family seat but soon fell into decline. It was vacant when, in 1998, it was purchased at a bargain price by Laurence and Judy Cutler. They filled it with their personal collection of American illustration art and opened it as a public museum in 2000. The Cutlers still run the museum themselves, full time and more. There is no advertising budget.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION

Vernon Court in Newport, R.I., one of the Gilded Age "cottages" built for summering millionaires, was acquired by Laurence and Judy Cutler and now houses their collection and the National Museum of American Illustration

For anyone who loves the art of the American illustrators, this museum is a feast. The Cutlers define "The Golden Age of American Illustration" as 1850-1950, an era before the omnipresence of photography. It was a time when the best way to help a reader visualize a scene, in a book, magazine, or wherever, was to hire an artist and publish a picture. Illustration was a vernacular art, a practical art, not a self-consciously fine art, and the highbrows looked down on it. But it certainly had its masters.

No fewer than 148 artists are listed in the catalog. All of Rockwell's 322 actual printed covers for the Saturday Evening Post magazine are here, each handsomely framed. These are images that don't need a text; they tell a story by themselves. The Post was a magazine that once was in almost every American home, the way a TV is today.

There are dozens of original Rockwells in oil, too, as well as original works by the other great names, most now forgotten, of the illustration movement. They include Maxfield Parrish (whose most popular image, "Daybreak," is said by Cutler to have once adorned a fourth of all US homes, and whose 17-foot-wide mural, "Florentine Fete," is one of the museum's masterpieces), N.C. Wyeth (whose bold illustrations for boys' books make a fascinating contrast to the frozen, understated works of his son Andrew), Charles Dana Gibson (inventor of the fashionable Gibson Girl), James Montgomery Flagg (who did the "Uncle Sam Wants YOU" recruiting poster), Howard Pyle (founder of the first school of illustration), Thomas Nast (editorial cartoonist), Frederic Remington (western art), and many more.

Whatever you think of the work as art, and I like a lot of it, it's impossible not to be impressed by the command of craftsmanship. Rockwell and others studied at fine art academies. Some of the best things in the museum are Rockwell's painstaking black-and-white charcoal studies for what later became finished color paintings.

Last year the museum sent an exhibition, "Norman Rockwell's America," to the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, normally a venue for traditional art. How did the Brits react to what the Cutlers call "the most American of American art"? An e-mail to the Globe from Ian Dejardin, the Dulwich's director, says the show went "triumphantly well," that it got a lot of press ranging from the "ecstatic" to the "dizzyingly snobbish," and that it drew the third highest attendance in the gallery's long history.

Some of that success may be the result of the Noble Savage tradition, in which intellectual Europeans are often fascinated by American folk heroes such as cowboys and gangsters. I suppose the illustrators can be seen that way, as home-bred, do-it-yourself creators, as opposed to the snotty world of academic art.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION
492 Bellevue Ave., Newport, R.I.
Open Sat-Sun 11 a.m.-5 p.m., through Sept. 4. Guided tours are given Fridays at 3 p.m.; the museum is open Wed-Thu by reservation.
401-851-8949, ext. 18,
www.americanillustration.org

"Rockwell's America" is back in Newport now, where it will remain all summer. Also on view, besides the permanent collection, is an exhibit of cartoons and caricatures by the writer Tom Wolfe. Wolfe gave a talk at the museum last year in which he praised illustration and dissed contemporary art.

Some people, as Dejardin notes, are snobs about illustration art. They think it is too popular, too sentimental. That was especially true in the heyday of modernist abstraction in the mid-to-late 20th century. Since then, though, there has been a revival of interest in the vernacular in almost every field of art, music, and literature. At Harvard there is now a course on Bob Dylan. And the high price to date for an original Rockwell oil is a respectable $15.8 million.

It is well to remember that many famed artists, from Winslow Homer to Andy Warhol, began their careers as commercial illustrators. And some greats in other fields, say Shakespeare and Dickens, were regarded largely as pop artists in their day. Neither hesitated to present characters that were cartoon spoofs of reality. And of course an artist such as Japan's Hokusai (1760-1849), like the American illustrators, created work primarily to be reproduced.

The museum has its own fan club. Among its members are filmmaker George Lucas, Yale historian Vincent Scully, actress Whoopi Goldberg, and former Globe cartoonist Paul Szep, all of whom are trustees or advisers.

Illustration art fell victim to the rise of other media. It's fascinating to remember it or discover it, depending on your age, at Vernon Court.

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