Art of the illustrator in a proper grand setting

Rockwell, Parrish, Pyle, Nast and their ‘most American’ art

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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 details are exquisite.

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 145 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 DeJaardin, the Dulwich’s director, says the show went “triumphantly well,” that it got a lot of press ranging from the “ecstatic” to the “dizzingly 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 illustrations can be seen that way, as home-bred, do-it-yourself creators, as opposed to the snotty world of academic art.

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