Illustrations showcased in museum

Vernon Court on Bellevue Avenue proves to be an ideal setting for the American Imagist Collect.

By Anne Kumar
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NEWPORT — Laurence and Judy Cutler had been searching for years for a place to display the American Imagist Collection — and they found the perfect place at Vernon Court on Bellevue Avenue.

"It's the perfect combination of both of our careers," Laurence Cutler said to about 30 people waiting to tour the mansion Saturday morning. "We're so lucky to find a building to house our art that also has beautiful architecture."

Cutler, an architect, said he fell in love with the house because of its extraordinary design. On the other hand, his wife, an art dealer in American Illustration, said she liked the mansion because she could see exactly where each of their paintings would fit on the walls.

After many months of restoration and work on the mansion — which they bought in 1986 — the Cutlers have turned it into the National Museum of American Illustration, which contains about 2,000 paintings.

The first floor of the mansion is filled with a collection of paintings by Maxfield Parrish, Norman Rockwell, N.C. Wyeth, Charles Dana and many other artists. The illustrations were created between 1875 and 1966, the pre-TV era when print was very popular. Most of the illustrations have been reprinted in newspapers, magazines and books.

The four-year-long tour began in the Great Marble Hall, which was decorated with several statues and illustrations. The theme in the marble room was women in liberty. One of the illustrations, "Liberty Girl," by Norman Rockwell, portrays a women dressed in stars and stripes and carrying tools such as a shovel, a watering can and a hoe. It was the cover of the Saturday Evening Post in 1943, during the time women began to move into the work force and took over many of the jobs men normally held while the country was at war, Laurence Cutler said.

The South Loggia Gallery was the next stop on the tour. The room has white marble walls and several doors that open into a courtyard. There were several prints in this room, including an illustration created for Jack London's book "To Build a Fire." There is also an illustration of British redcoats taking over a Colonial home.

"We call this the American Imagist Collection because these artists really created images," Laurence Cutler said as he described to the group the history of the paintings.

Throughout the tour, Laurence Cutler explained the architecture of each room, while Judy Cutler, the museum's director, concentrated on the history of the paintings.

The walls in the Grand Salon were made with Italian paneling and a marble table sits in the middle of the room, featuring the first-edition books in which the illustrations were printed. Many of the rooms are decorated with Tiffany lamps, fireplaces and statues.

There are several Rockwell illustrations hanging in each room. The Grand Salon houses one of the more famous Rockwells, "The Disabled War Veteran." The painting portrays a man in uniform holding a card discharging him from the Army — but upon closer inspection, the background shows the same soldier in several stages of battle.

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