

Illustrations showcased in museum

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

By Anne Kumar
Daily News staff

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 1998 — 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 1960, the pre-TV era when print was very popular. Most of the illustrations have been reprinted in newspapers, magazines and books.

The hour-long tour began in The Great Marble Hall, which was decorated with several statues and illustrations. The theme in the marble room was women of liberty. One of the illustrations, "Liberty Girl," by Norman Rockwell, portrays a woman 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, fire places 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.

The Rose Garden Loggia houses murals from



Laurence Cutler, owner of the National Museum of American Illustration, discusses the two paintings behind him during a tour of the museum Saturday. The top painting was an advertisement for Amoco. The one under it was a 1940 cover for the New Year edition of the Saturday Evening Post. Both were by J.C. Leyendecker.

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— Laurence Cutler

Right: Chris Singleton of New York stops for a moment during a tour of the Museum of American Illustration Saturday morning for a closer look at a few of the paintings on the wall.



Below: People on a tour of the Museum of American Illustration walk past a trio of early 20th century paintings. The two on the right are by Alber Herter, and the one on the left is by Mclellan Barclay.



Museum

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Parrish's "A Florentine Fete." About eight of the illustrations from this collection hang there, and they all show people dressed in Renaissance clothes. One large painting depicts the fete itself while the others show people walking downstairs, or on a walkway, on their way to the party. Judy Cutler said they plan to hang the rest of the paintings along the Romance Staircase in the marble room.

Vernon Court was built in 1898 and has changed hands many times. Laurence Cutler said it took a lot of time to repair the "summer cottage," as he fondly referred to it, but that it was worth it because they were bringing something important to Newport and New England.

The Cutlers faced some opposition to the proposal from neighbors, and their original application for a special-use variance was rejected by the city's Zoning Board of Appeals last year. In May, Superior Court Judge Melanie W. Thunberg overruled the zoning board's decision on the original petition.

Aside from founding the museum, the Cutlers said they have plans for improvements and additions to other parts of the property as well. The property adjacent to Vernon Court will eventually be made into the Fred-

erick Law Olmsted Park, which will honor the architects who designed significant buildings in Newport.

The museum is open for tours on a limited basis on Fridays and Saturdays by advance reservation. Guided tours will be held at 10:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. The cost is \$25 per person; discounts are given to groups with more than 20 people. For more information, call 851-8949.