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Judy and Laurence Cutler were looking for an architectural masterpiece in which to set their immense collection of American illustration art. They found that at Vernon Court—along with a few disgruntled neighbors and a couple of missing door knobs.

A Museum of One's Own

By Susan Frith

Exterior view of Vernon Court

Laurence Cutler C'62 hangs up the phone, a bit disappointed, and returns to his chair in the sconce-lit library, surrounded by N.C. Wyeth's depiction of Daniel Boone, an illustration from Treasure Island by Norman Price, and several paintings infused with the deep, dreamlike blue of Maxfield Parrish.

He has just gotten word that tonight's meeting of the Newport, Rhode Island, zoning board should be an uneventful one. He had expected a fight. This time, over a property sign.

It took a year and a half, after all, for the retired architect and his wife, art collector Judy Goffman Cutler CW'63 GEd'64, to get permits to convert Vernon Court, a Gilded Age mansion they bought and restored, into a museum displaying her immense collection of American imagist art.

Although, as Laurence explains, the National Museum of American Illustration (NMAI) had support from most of the community, a handful of neighbors along Bellevue Avenue hired attorneys to block the project. Then the couple got under the bark of the local tree committee with their plans to build a small park on an adjacent lot – even though they promised not to disturb a single twig.

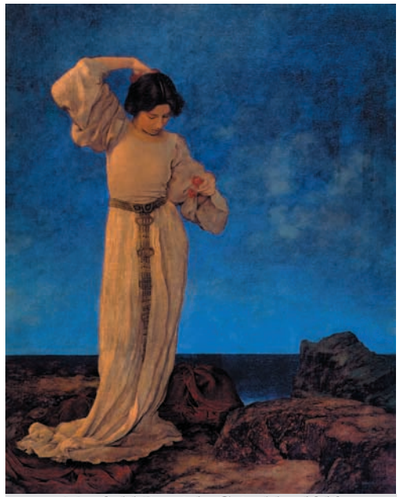
N.C. Wyeth, Frontier Trapper

But, for all the headaches, the opposition produced plenty of ink for the fledgling museum. The free press has been "absolutely terrific for Vernon Court," Laurence says. "Everybody wants to come here."

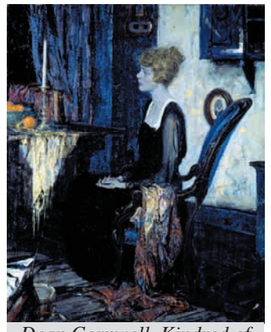
Here is also where the Cutlers happen to live: a 52-room house now filled with works of art created during the golden age of American illustration,

which they define as 1870 to 1965. Vernon Court has been open to the general public, by reservation only, for guided tours since last July. This summer, the Cutlers plan to open it on weekends for self-guided visits. And a grand-opening party will be held in August or September.

The museum (www.americanillustration.org), which displays in rotation a portion of Judy's 2,000-painting collection at a time, boasts the world's largest holdings of works by Maxfield Parrish and J.C. Leyendecker, and the second largest collection of Norman Rockwell, to name just a few of the artists represented. More than three decades ago, when Judy began acquiring the original works that were reproduced for magazines like Town and Country and Saturday Evening Post, they were hardly considered art. Today such works are recognized as valuable markers of this country's cultural history – and aesthetically pleasing in their own right – selling for thousands, and in some cases, millions, of dollars.



Maxfield Parrish, Griselda, 1910



Dean Cornwell, Kindred of Dust, 1920

"I am overwhelmed at what you have created, both the collection and also the restoration of Vernon Court," wrote Richard Guy Wilson, host of A&E Network's America's Castles, after visiting the museum. "Your collection takes my breath away."

Judy Cutler often catches herself running down the grand, curving staircase – modeled after the Petite Trianon's at Versailles – in her sneakers. "We kind of take [living inside a museum] for granted," she admits, "so when people do come in and marvel about it, it brings me back to reality, because I then look at what we've done, and I think it's pretty amazing. You don't get the full impact of paintings in a quick run through a museum," she adds, "but living with and looking at them all the time, you're always seeing something new that makes them more special."

The Cutlers spent seven years searching for the perfect place to display the works before they came across a notice that Vernon Court was for sale. "I wanted something to frame Judy's life endeavor," Laurence says, "and I wanted something that was an architectural monument, something with a milestone significance."

The project put their combined expertise – and persistence – to the test, as the Cutlers attended to the many details that go into preparing a museum for the public, from satisfying insurance companies' security requirements (all visitors must sign in), to setting up the non-profit American Civilization Foundation to oversee it, to shelling out nearly $700 for a pair of door knobs from Paris.

As a museum converted from a home, the NMAI is not unique. (See accompanying story on the newly opened Neue Galerie New York.) What is striking about Vernon Court, however, is how well images commissioned for magazines, storybooks, wartime propaganda – even movie advertisements – fit into these elegant surroundings.

Meade Schaeffer, Threesome Hiding in Alleyway

Against the Italian black-walnut paneling of the Grand Salon glares a bare-chested, temple-breaking Victor Mature in his 1950 movie portrayal of Samson – as painted by Rockwell in sumptuous browns and golds. The light-saturated Rose Garden Loggia, by contrast, hosts several panels of Parrish's whimsical Florentine Fete – which once decorated a dining hall of Philadelphia's old Curtis Publishing Company.

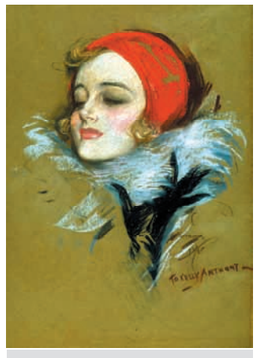
And what Laurence calls "iconic images" from this country's history – both familiar and strange – can be found in every room. The pale marble entrance hall pays tribute to American patriotism with works such as Rockwell's colorfully painted Miss Liberty, depicting women's entry into the workforce during World War II. "We still feel the same way about protecting our freedom," notes Judy.

Maxfield Parrish, Villa Chigi, 1903

Another timeless, yet nostalgic, image – and one of Judy's favorite Rockwells – is of a milkman meeting a couple coming home late in the morning. "It's so 1930s," she says. "She's so innocent and naïve, and he's so dapper, and the milkman's just holding out a big clock like a pocket watch showing them that they should have been home long ago. Today most folks don't even know what a milk bottle looks like, but they still know that when they get home too late, there's always somebody there."

It was the idea of another illustrator, J.C. Leyendecker, to commemorate the first of each year with a Baby New Year on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post. In a different Post cover image, marking congressional approval of Mother's Day, Leyendecker depicts a young bellhop presenting a pot of hyacinths, thus launching the tradition of sending flowers on that occasion. "They're images from our history," Laurence says.

Growing up in Woodbridge, Connecticut, Judy and Laurence were childhood sweethearts and prom dates. They dated again at Penn, where Laurence was majoring in American civilization and Judy was studying art history and American civilization. Both went on to marry others and later divorced. Years later, while Laurence was making trips to Philadelphia from Boston in preparation for his 25th-year reunion – it was he who came up with the idea of the Ben on the Bench gift to the University – he contacted Judy, who was at the time living in the Philadelphia suburbs. They married in 1995, on exactly the 40th anniversary of their first date, which had been Judy's 13th birthday party.



Harrison Fisher, Red Cap, 1932

From the museum's standpoint, it was certainly a successful pairing. "I've been a curator and I've done many traveling shows," Judy says. "But this was a major undertaking, and fortunately Laurence's experiences in architecture and in building and engineering and design are so incredible that it was a perfect match."

Their partnership is also marked by a fair measure of mutual teasing. For Laurence's 60th birthday party, Judy took pictures of paintings in the collection and scanned in photos of him. Laurence bought a bust by Hiram Powers, entitled America, for the museum's entrance hall, because it reminds him of his wife. "I have always called Judy, 'Judy America,' because of what she's done for American art." Plus, he adds, pointed to the coiffure beneath the sculpture's star-topped tiara, "Judy has crazy, curly hair like this."

Howard Pyle, Herr Volmer, 1913

Judy began collecting American illustration art in the 1960s, putting an ad in the paper that led to her purchase of five black-and-white charcoal drawings by Howard Chandler Christy at a cost of $100 apiece. Today each piece would be worth $10,000, she estimates. At the time no one really considered them to be art, but Judy, who had come across textbook images while teaching courses in American studies, thought otherwise. Before too long, she found herself in the role of art dealer and started the American Illustrators Gallery.

Since those early days, Judy says, a deeper appreciation of illustrators as fine artists has developed. In the past, she says, "If you were paid to do something, it was not considered art, which was supposed to be totally unencumbered." People also were judging most popular artists – unfairly – by small, flat reproductions in books or on magazine covers. Judy says, "They weren't ever having the opportunity to look at the original paintings."

Laurence, a retired professor of architecture and urban design who has taught at Harvard, MIT, and the Rhode Island School of Design, wanted to be an artist when he came to Penn. At his first football game, he happened to chat with a bow-tie-clad gentleman by the name of Louis Kahn Ar'24 Hon'71, who

was sitting next to him. As his freshman year progressed – and he watched Kahn's Alfred E. Richards Medical Research Laboratories go up across from his dorm – he began getting more interested in architecture. Later, while pursuing his master's degree in architecture at Harvard, Laurence would return to Philadelphia to get Kahn to critique his thesis.

Southern view of the Treillage Loggia

Figuring that "no one can design a memorial to Louis Kahn, but Louis Kahn," Laurence plans to recreate an arch that his late mentor designed in India on a property next to Vernon Court. If the local arborists can be assuaged, the arch will be part of a memorial park honoring 19th-century landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.

Vernon Court was built in 1898 for Anna van Nest Gambrill, a young, Dutch-American widow whose parents were so wealthy they dismissed the Vanderbilts as "nouveau-riche upstarts" and, adds Laurence, refused to allow her and her sister to be bridesmaids in a Vanderbilt daughter's wedding.

Mrs. Gambrill's sister had just built a summer cottage in Lenox, Massachusetts, and Anna decided that she, too, wanted a place to entertain. So she hired the acclaimed architectural firm Carrére & Hastings, creators of the New York City Public Library and many other American landmarks, to design a place in Newport.

Frank E. Schoonover, Only Jules Verbeaux, 1905

In keeping with the fashion of her day, Vernon Court was modeled after a 17th-century French chateau. At the same time, however, it featured a modern, functional floor plan that was a dramatic departure from most mansions (whose owners saw nothing wrong with positioning their pantries and kitchens far from their dining rooms – especially since servants were doing all the work). French designer Jules Allard created the interior, basing much of it on Versailles. The property fell out of the family's hands – and into a state of disrepair – from the middle of the last century until the Cutlers bought it in 1998 and undertook a massive restoration project: installing insulated glass, replacing roof tiles, installing air conditioning, replacing the copper flashing, and more. The object, Laurence explains, was to make it look as though nothing had changed since Anna Gambrill's day, while also preparing it for the long-term storage of millions of dollars worth of art.

Fixing up the place wasn't the only challenge. Neighbors fought against an "institutional use" for the property. "We knew we'd win, and they knew we'd win, but they put us through the wringer," Laurence says.

Those were the large issues of museum ownership, but the Cutlers also found themselves consumed by some of the smaller details – which brings us to the door knobs.

Visitors passing through the ballroom at Vernon Court would no doubt notice Maxfield Parrish's famous Griselda adorning the wall. But chances are they would overlook a couple of finely wrought, deadbolt knobs mounted on the room's doors. When the Cutlers moved in, they found most of the original hardware was intact except for these two knobs, Laurence explains. And since one doesn't go to Home Depot to replace hardware in a Gilded Age mansion, the Cutlers tracked down a museum in Paris devoted to the designer of these knobs.

Judy stayed outside in the cab – while Laurence went inside the museum with precisely measured drawings, rubbings, and photographs to show what they were looking for. The museum staff brought out a match and said they could cast two knobs just like it. Returning to the cab, Laurence told his wife what happened. "She said, 'Well you ordered them, right?' I said, 'Judy, there were $300 each. Are you crazy? We pay $600 for two knobs?'

"After a year and a half of fighting over it," Laurence says, "Judy finally convinced me" to order them. "And a friend of ours went from Monte Carlo to Paris to pay the bill" – plus a $75.00 shipping fee – "because they didn't want to take a credit card."

Though the Cutler's don't agree on everything – including costly hardware – Judy says, "The two of us complement each other so well. I couldn't have done [the museum] without him, nor could he have done it without me. It's an amazing blend, or combination. I think that is something you always hope for" when launching a project like this, she says. "But you never quite know it until you try it, and it works so beautifully." •