

Cover Story

• A small painting of Revolutionary War soldiers by Howard Pyle, considered the dean of American illustration.

• A rare study for a movie poster by Rockwell. The painting was commissioned by the producers of the 1950 film *Samson and Delilah* and depicts the movie's star, Victor Mature, rattling the pillars of a temple.

• *The Wounded Veteran*, also by Rockwell. Like many of the museum's holdings, this portrait of a wounded soldier holding a U.S. Savings Bond was inspired by America's war efforts.

Yet as good as many of these works are, the Cutlers have saved the best for last.

In the museum's final gallery, visitors are treated to one of the masterworks of American decorative painting—Parrish's *A Florentine Fete*. Commissioned by a Philadelphia publishing company for its ladies' dining room, the series of 18 panels (only a few of which are on view) depicts a fantasy

Live's Hot Picks

Hungry? Before or after you visit the Museum of Illustration, our restaurant reveiwer, Meridith Ford, suggests you try these restaurants in the area:

Asterix & Obelix Cafe
Castle Hill Inn and Resort
Flo's Clam Shack
Restaurant Bouchard
Sea Shai

See our Dining Guide beginning on Page 25 for brief reviews.

and female — are modeled on Parrish's muse and mistress, Susan Lewin.

"She appears more than 200 times," Cutler says, prompting several minutes of Where's Waldo-style scanning from the tour group.

'I'm married to a genius'

While the Cutlers are serious about building a world-class museum, complete with traveling exhibitions, museum catalogs and ties to local colleges and universities, they're not averse to having fun along the way.

A good example is an incident in the Grand Salon, a kind of upscale family room decorated with carved-wood moldings and other details taken from an Italian villa. As Laurence Cutler points to a painting in the corner, he notices that a small light fixture attached to the painting isn't working.

"It's too dark," he says. "Let's try something else."

As the tour group starts to turn away, Judy Cutler begins fiddling with the fixture's electrical cord. Suddenly, the light flickers on.

"See, if you just wait a minute, you can get these things to work," she says. "You're always in such a hurry."



Journal photo/FRIEDA SQUIRES

JUDY CUTLER and her husband, Laurence, as she describes artwork Alan Foster did for the Saturday Evening Post.

"You know, I had an electrician in here yesterday and he couldn't fix it, Laurence tells the group. "Obviously, I'm married to a genius."

"You mean you just noticed that?" she replies.

It's a small moment, a bit of Borscht Belt dialogue inspired by a balky light fixture. But it also says a lot about the Cutlers that they can easily turn a potential embarrassment into a punch line.

"We really love what we're doing," Judy Cutler says later, after a reporter comments on how relaxed the two museum-founders are. "Getting the museum off the ground has been a huge undertaking, and there's still a lot to do. But when you love something as much as we do, you don't really mind. You just do it."

Laurence Cutler agrees.

"This is something we've had in the back of our minds for a long time," he says. "The big problem was finding the right place, which we solved when we found Vernon Court. Hanging the paintings, giving tours, talking to the



National Museum of American Illustration

BELLHOP WITH HYCINTHS by J.C. Leyendecker (Saturday Evening Post cover, May 30, 1914).

people who come through the museum—that's the fun part."

Zoning nightmares

Fun, however, is not the way the Cutlers describe their relations with Newport's hard-nosed Zoning Board of Review.

"It was completely crazy, Laurence Cutler says of the couple's two-year battle to win the board's approval for the museum. "Most cities would be thrilled to have a museum with this kind of collection in their midst. Here, all it took was a few people with a grudge to nearly stop it dead in its tracks."

Among the project's most vocal critics were members of the Bellevue-Ochre Point Neighborhood Association, a group of local property owners who objected to the Cutlers' plans to transform a private residence into a museum. They also complained that buses and tour groups would clog the streets around the museum.

Last year, the zoning board sided with the neighborhood association and rejected the Cutler's plans to open a museum. That prompted the Cutlers to file suit in Newport Superior Court.

In May, the court ruled in the Cutlers' favor, dismissing virtually every objection raised by the museum's critics. That, in turn, paved the way for the museum's "soft opening" on July 4.

"There was no way we were going to back down," Laurence Cutler says defiantly. "This place — Vernon Court, Bellevue Avenue, Newport —

was just too perfect. We also knew we had the law on our side. We knew that if it went to court, which it ultimately did, we would win."

Now that the Cutlers' zoning battle is over, the couple is looking forward to a traditional "hard opening" next year.

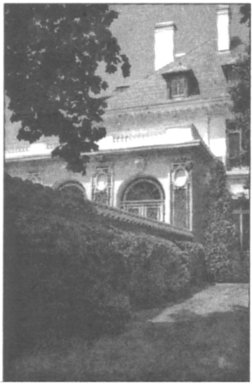
"We still have some parking issues to resolve, but basically we're moving forward," says Laurence Cutler. "We hope to have a formal ribbon-cutting ceremony for the museum by next summer."

A memorial park

In the meantime, the Cutlers have assembled a high-powered advisory board that includes former Rhode Island Sen. Claiborne Pell, ex-National Gallery director J. Carter Brown and RISD president Roger Mandle. Other museum supporters include celebrities such as actress Whoopi Goldberg, director George Lucas and television host Matt Lauer.

The Cutlers also own an empty lot across the street from Vernon Court, at the corner of Bellevue and Victoria Avenues. Laurence Cutler, who is an architect by training, hopes to develop the land as a memorial to 19th-century landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.

The three-acre park will also feature a memorial arch dedicated to another of the Cutlers' heroes — 20th-century American architect Louis Kahn.



Journal photo/SANDOR BODO

THE SOUTH LOGGIA of Vernon Court; the Cutlers have devoted part of the building to their museum of illustration.

The National Museum of American Illustration is at 492 Bellevue Ave. in Newport. Guided tours are held Fridays and Saturdays at 10:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. Reservations are required and visitors are requested to arrive 15 minutes early.

Admission is \$25 per person, with discounts for groups of 20 or more. Children 12 and under are not admitted. (Note: The main entrance for the museum is off Victoria Avenue.)

Information about the museum and its collection is also available online at www.americanillustration.org

The Providence Journal

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One-stop dining in Newport.
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Carmen

Grand opera with gypsies, soldiers and bullfighters.
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Firefighters' parade

100 firetrucks, 16 bands, 30 antique cars and a dozen floats in South County.
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WaterFire

This time it promotes recycling. Page 33



Drawing attention to a new museum

Among its other attractions, Newport can now boast that it's the home of the National Museum of American Illustration, which bills itself as the first museum devoted to America's greatest visual art form: popular illustration. LIVE



Norman Rockwell

Fine-tuning the picture

A major museum of illustration opens quietly in Newport

Fine-tuning the picture

After a bruising battle, a major museum of illustration had a quiet opening two months ago in Newport. Now its owners are ironing out the kinks.



HOWARD PYLE'S PAINTING *Red Coat Soldiers Toasting the Ladies of the House* at the National Museum of American Illustration on Bellevue Avenue in Newport. The work was published in Harper's Weekly, Dec. 14, 1895, page 67.



DETAIL from one of several Maxfield Parrish paintings on display in the south loggia of Vernon Court.

By BILL VAN SICLEN
Journal Arts Writer

NEWPORT — First, they looked in Savannah, GA. Then Charleston, S.C. Then Kennebunkport, Maine.

Finally, they found it a house so perfect in a place so right that they knew immediately their search was over.

"It was love at first sight," says Laurence S. Cutler, recalling the day he and his wife, Judy, found Vernon Court, a turn-of-the-century Beaux-Arts mansion on Bellevue Avenue. "We walked in, took a look around and basically said: 'This is it. We're home.'"

But the Cutlers — he's an architect-turned-entrepreneur, she's a successful art dealer weren't just well-heeled house hunters looking for a fancy address in a fashionable neighborhood.

Instead, two years after discovering Vernon Court, the couple has opened the National Museum of American Illustration, which bills itself as the first museum devoted to America's greatest visual art form: popular illustration.

"Wherever you go, people love American illustration," says Laurence Cutler, who serves as the museum's chairman, chief tour guide and all-around booster. "Even in Europe, where you might think they'd turn their noses up at something as mundane as illustration, Norman Rockwell is huge."

Nevertheless, the museum, which owns more than 2,000 original works by Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish, N.C. Wyeth and other giants of American illustration, isn't rushing things.

Two months ago, and virtually without notice, it began offering tours two days a week. The Cutlers say they deliberately played down the opening while they fine-tune the museum's exhibits and upgrade public amenities such as parking and rest rooms.

"We call it a 'soft opening,'" Laurence Cutler explains during an interview in his office, a converted sitting room on the museum's first floor. "We're not really ready for a full-blown opening, but we are far enough along that we can let in smaller groups a couple days a week."

"In fact, it's better that way. By watching how people move through the house and finding out how they interact with the art, we've learned a lot about how to make the museum more people-friendly."

Despite the Cutlers' go-slow approach, word of the museum's opening has spread quickly.

Calls have come in from as far away as Russia and Korea. And tours, which are by reservation only and cost a hefty \$25 per person, are already booked through mid-November.

"We're very happy with the level of interest in the museum," says Cutler. "It only proves what we've been saying all along: that people are ready for a museum that treats illustration as an important art form, indeed the quintessential American art form."

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Kudos and kinks

During a recent tour, both the museum's strong points (name-brand artists, memorable images, opulent settings) and occasional kinks (still-evolving exhibits, lack of wall labels and other background information, a balky electrical system) were on display.

In the museum's marble-lined entrance lobby, for example, visitors are greeted by paintings by Rockwell and Parrish and a drawing by Charles Dana Gibson, creator of the famed Gibson Girl.

(Note: Most of the works on display at the museum are paintings. Until the mid-1960s, it was common for book and magazine illustrators to produce full-size drawings and paintings, which were then reduced and copied for publication. Photographs, and more recently digital images, have since replaced these handmade illustrations in many publications.)

Tucked under the staircase to the right of the entrance is another gem: a small watercolor by James Montgomery Flagg. Flagg, whose name proved to be prophetic, is best remembered today for the famous World War I-era recruiting poster showing a finger-pointing Uncle Sam accompanied by the words "I Want You."

Other highlights soon follow:

- A glowing landscape by Parrish that the artist reportedly considered his finest work.

- A series of paintings by J.C. Leyendecker, an illustrator who changed styles depending on what magazine he was working for and whose creations include the Arrow Shirt Man and the diaper-clad New Year's baby.

- The Dory Man, a painting of New England fishermen by N.C. Wyeth, father of Andrew Wyeth and perhaps the greatest of all American book illustrators.