A major museum of illustration opens in Newport

By enjoying the following pleasures, Newport can now better that it is the home of the historical Saturday Evening Post. Judy Cutler’s collection, which lies half at the site of the museum and others dedicated to America’s greatest artists. 'We love it when people come through the museum—that’s the fun part.'

This weekend in Newport:

Live’s Hot Picks

A Florentine Fête

The South Loggia

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

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

“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.

“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.”

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.)

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