

# A huge sprinkling of visual pixie dust

Like most people, my first encounter with the work of Maxfield Parrish was on the printed page.

That was way back in — well, never mind. The point is that Parrish remains one of America's most popular

## ART SCENE

Bill Van Siclen

illustrators, a dream weaver whose glowing Never-Never-

Land landscapes once graced everything from children's books to chocolate boxes.

But Parrish didn't always work small. In fact, he produced a number of large-scale works, including the famed *Old King Cole* mural that still greets visitors to New York's St. Regis Hotel.

Now the best and biggest of Parrish's murals has been reassembled at the National Museum of American Illustration on Bellevue Avenue in Newport. Titled *A Florentine Fete*, it consists of 18 10-foot-high panels, each depicting a scene from a Renaissance-style garden party.

About half the mural was installed when the museum opened in 2000. The remaining panels, several of which required extensive cleaning and restoration, arrived over the holidays.

"It's great to have it all together again," says museum chairman Laurence S. Cutler. "The individual pieces are wonderful, but having them all here in one place is absolutely the best. Now you can see why many people consider *A Florentine Fete* to be Parrish's masterpiece."

**PARRISH BEGAN WORK** on the mural in 1910 at the request of Cyrus Curtis, publisher of *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Ladies Home Journal*. Six years later, it was installed in the women's dining room of the Curtis Publishing Company in Philadelphia.

There the mural remained until the 1960s, when it was taken down and put in storage. Cutler and his wife, Judy Goffman Cutler, bought the work in the late 1990s.

"This is really the first time that all 18 paintings have been together since the '60s," says museum director Judy Cutler, a specialist in American illustration. "Over the years, a couple of the panels have been exhibited separately. But now the whole series is back



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION

**THE VIEW FROM THE BALCONY** at Newport's National Museum of American Illustration, which has just finished installing Maxfield Parrish's 18-panel mural, *A Florentine Fete*. *A Call to Joy*, below, is part of the mural.

together."

Together, perhaps, but not necessarily in one place.

Because the paintings are so large, the Cutlers decided to exhibit them in different parts of the museum. Seven panels, including the mural's billboard-size central section, have been on display in a first-floor gallery since the museum's opening 2½ years ago.

Last month, nine more panels were installed along the grand staircase that leads to the museum's second floor. (For the uninitiated, the museum is housed in a Gilded Age mansion designed by Carrere and Hastings, the same architects responsible for the Fifth Avenue branch of the New York Public Library.)

As for the remaining two panels, one is in the museum's lobby, at the base of the stairway. The other is in Judy Cutler's office.

"We just ran out of room," she says. "Still, I'm not complaining. Having a Maxfield Parrish painting hanging in your office is a great motivation for coming to work."

The Cutlers' solution isn't perfect — looking at 10-foot-high paintings on a curving two-story

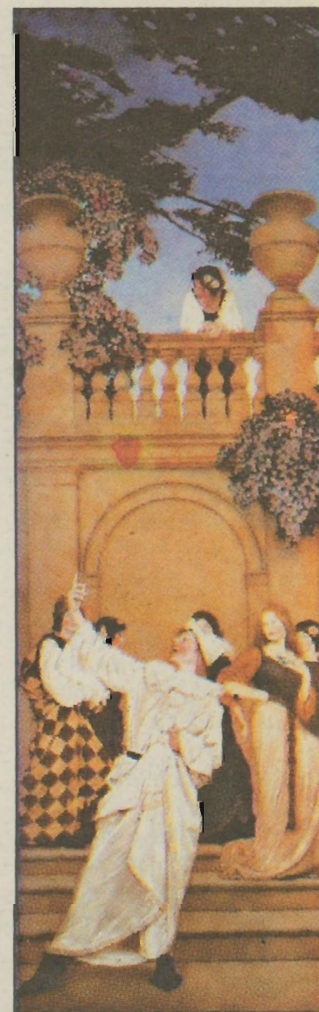
stairway is an invitation to vertigo — but at least it puts one of the masterpieces of American decorative painting back on public display. Parrish may not have been much of an innovator, but as a purveyor of visual pixie dust he's as good as it gets.

**ACCORDING TO** the Cutlers, Parrish conceived *A Florentine Fete* as an illustration of "beautiful youths having a good time in a beautiful place."

Getting the place right was easy: After all, Parrish had collaborated with novelist Edith Wharton on *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, a popular 1904 guidebook to Italian architecture.

For the "youths," Parrish created a fanciful, Hollywood-ready version of a Renaissance garden party, complete with strolling minstrels, costumed servants and dozens of rosy-cheeked couples, all of whom look like they just stepped out of a Merchant and Ivory production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Parrish himself appears in one of the panels, dressed in the white cap and cloak of a Pierrot. But by far the majority of the figures, both male and female, are based Susan Lewin, an elfin-faced model who became



Parrish's muse and mistress.

"We've never actually counted them, but the story is that she appears more than 200 times," says Laurence Cutler. "Most people don't notice until you point it out, but then it's like, 'Oh, yeah, they all look alike.'"

In all, the museum owns 68 Parrish paintings, including the largest, *A Florentine Fete*, and the smallest, a tiny landscape painted on a woman's coat button. The museum also owns major works by Norman Rockwell, N.C. Wyeth and other giants of American illustration.

For the time being, museum visits are by advance reservation only. But that's due to change this summer, when the museum plans to institute regular visiting hours on weekends.

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. Admission is \$25, with discounts for groups of 20 or more. Children under 12 are not allowed. Phone: 851-8949.

## Landscapes by Bannister

January is usually a slow month at local galleries. But Newport's Roger King gallery is bucking the trend with a handsome exhibit of 19th- and early 20th-century landscapes, including several works by African-American artist Edward M. Bannister.

Most of the Bannisters are small, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Bannister loved working outdoors, and many of his best works have the small size and quick calligraphic brushwork of paintings done on the run. Certainly that's true of works such *Twilight* and *Passed Storm*, both of which record fleeting effects of light and atmosphere.

The show also features works by a number of women artists, notably Anna Richards Brewster, daughter of famed 19th-century painter William Trost Richards, and Molly Luce, a one-time Little Compton resident known as "the American Breughel."

Through March at the Roger King Gallery of Fine Art, 21 Bowen's Wharf, Newport. Hours are Mon.-Sun. 10-5. Phone: 847-4359.