

K

SECTION

August 1, 1999

HOME

THE PROVIDENCE SUNDAY JOURNAL

OUTDOOR DECOR

Decorating efforts
are moving outside,
where the living is easy

PAGE 2

ILLUSTRIOUS FIX-UP

*The couple who looked
at a derelict mansion
and saw a museum*

By CHANNING GRAY
Journal Arts Writer

Laurence and Judy Cutler had just one requirement when they went looking for a new house — room enough to hang their art collection.

The thing is the Cutlers are anything but your average art lovers. Over the years they've amassed a couple of thousand paintings valued at \$150 million. They needed space in a big way.

So when a real estate agent showed them Vernon Court, a rundown 52-room mansion on Newport's Bellevue Avenue, they knew they'd found the right place.

"It was two or three times more than I planned to spend," said Laurence, who'd looked in vain for suitable properties in Maine and Georgia. "But when I saw Judy's face, I knew this was it."

"I never saw a more perfect space," said Judy, who owns an art gallery on New York's upper East Side. "It was love at first sight."

The Cutlers, childhood sweethearts who married five years ago, have spent the past year and pots of money restoring Vernon Court, plugging leaks in the roof, rebuilding chimneys and installing new heating and air-conditioning systems — with 24 zones.

Now they plan to open the ground floor of their home to the public as the first museum dedicated to the heyday of American illustration. Starting late next month, visitors to the National Museum of American Illustration will be able to stroll through marble-floored loggias and ornate salons filled with paintings and drawings by the likes of Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish and N.C. Wyeth.

The Cutlers are also planning to turn a vacant lot they own across the street into a public park honoring famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. The grounds, once the site of Stoneacre, a lavish mansion that burned, were designed by Olmsted in the 1880s. The mammoth beeches he planted still stand.

"Most of the good art that was once in Newport was sold off years ago," said Laurence. "We're bringing a lot of it back in a museum setting."

But for all its grandeur, its high-security fences, 13 fireplaces, dozen baths, and 31,500 square feet, Vernon Court is just plain old home to the Cutlers.

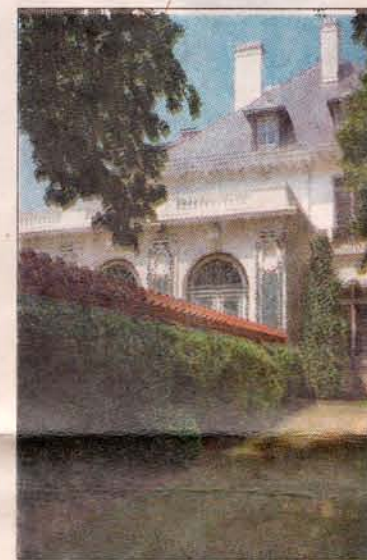
When guests dropped by the other night, Laurence flicked on the fountain in the rose garden and cracked open a bottle of barolo. Judy retreated to a kitchen outfitted with the kind of high-end, heavy-duty appliances you'd expect to find in a restaurant, and whipped up a simple meal of pasta and grilled chicken.

The only ripple in an otherwise placid day occurred when Laurence had to chase away a group of French tourists he found poking about the grounds.

"Everyone says this is the time in life to downsize," said Judy, 57. "But we thought why not try it. You only live once."

Laurence, a 58-year-old architect who once taught at RISD and has had offices the world over, took an immediate shine to Vernon Court, which is next door to Chateau sur Mer. As Newport mansions go, he said, "this is one of the best."

Built at the turn of the century in the 18th-century French chateau style, the main house is beautifully proportioned, giving it a livable feel, despite 25-foot-high ceilings and 10-foot-high doors.



THANKS to an art-collecting couple, Vernon Court on Newport's Bellevue Avenue has been restored to its former glory.



Journal photos/SANDOR BODO

PICTURE-PERFECT: Florentine Fete by Maxfield Parrish finds a home in the soon-to-open National Museum of American Illustration in Newport.

Turn to **THE CUTLERS**, Page 4

FROM THE COVER



DESPITE ITS 52 ROOMS AND 25-FOOT CEILINGS, Vernon Court is a Newport mansion with a livable air. Above, the south loggia has large arched glass doors and a collection of Maxfield Parrish paintings.

The Cutlers are at home with a vast art collection

Continued from the cover

It was the noted firm of Carrere and Hastings, designers of the New York Public Library, that created Vernon Court for Mrs. Richard Gambrill Sr., the wealthy widow of a prominent lawyer. The two architects were trained at Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, and their work reflects a faithful adherence to the French notion of balance and elegance, unlike some of the overblown homes along mansion row.

The grounds, three acres dotted with reproductions of Michelangelo and Bernini sculptures, are fashioned after the gardens Henry VIII built for Anne Boleyn at Hampton Court.

A modern, in-ground pool and two tennis courts are the only features that look out of place.

The century-old chateau's interior is the work of Jules Allard et ses fils, a Parisian firm that took its inspiration from the Marie Antoinette Suite at Versailles.

The building served as a model for the New York home of business magnate Henry Clay Frick, who also turned part of his residence into a museum, which today houses the Frick Collection.

But time was not kind to Vernon Court.

Back in the 1970s, it served as headquarters for a junior college. Once-handsome bedrooms became classrooms; the 5,000-square-foot



ARCHITECT Laurence Cutler took an immediate shine to Vernon Court.

carriage house was converted into a biology lab and dorms.

Earle Cohen, the late pediatrician who owned the Viking Hotel, lived in Vernon Court for a while, as well as a Connecticut couple, who used it for weekend getaways. Then it sat empty for years.

The Cutlers bought the property last August for an undisclosed sum from British yachtsman and entrepreneur Peter deSavery, who considered turning the place into a private club. DeSavery also sold the Cutlers the three-acre lot across the street, at Bellevue and Victoria Avenues.

Although Vernon Court may have been just what the Cutlers were looking for, it needed a ton of work. That's not uncommon for an older home, especially one that has been vacant.

But in this case, the fix-up effort had to be multiplied by 52 rooms and a scale of gigantic proportions.

The roof slates, many of which had to be replaced, measure 2-by-2½ feet. Eight stucco chimneys jut 80 feet from a steep hip roof. When one had to be rebuilt, the estimate came in at \$100,000.

Workers cutting through the floor to install new heating grates encountered almost a foot of marble and concrete, turning what should have been a simple task into a herculean one.

New, weather-tight windows were installed on the third floor. Laurence said he had to pay an extra \$700 per window to add 1½ inches to the center mullion, or \$1,600 per window.

"My cousin just did all the windows in his house for \$3,200," he said.

The Cutlers' art collection made the restoration all the more costly.

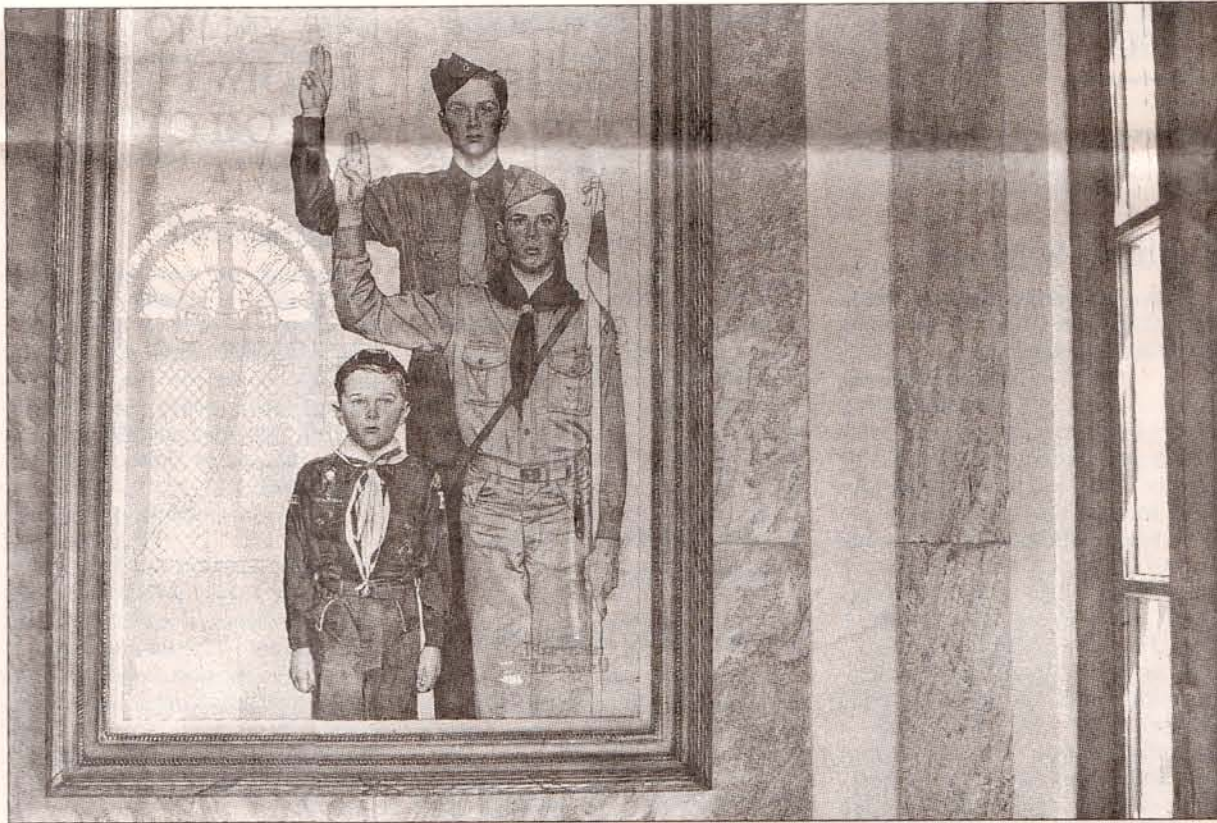
To protect the paintings from the elements, tinted windows were installed on the first floor, along with a climate control system, which meant duct work had to be snaked throughout the floors and ceilings.

"We wanted it hidden," Laurence said of the air conditioning, "which was really hard for me, because I can't see where all the money went."

Judy and Laurence, who grew up outside New Haven, Conn., were both married before, then got together 40 years after their first date. They have collaborated on four books about Maxfield Parrish, whose luminescent images were found in many a book, calendar and magazine during the first half of this century. A fifth volume on Parrish is due out soon.

Although the Cutlers received overtures from several museums interested in their art, they wanted to keep the collection intact, yet share it with the public.

The couple, who keep homes in New York and New Hampshire, plan to live for the most part on the second floor of Vernon Court, at least during museum hours. The 14



A DRAWING OF SCOUTS by Norman Rockwell is on display in the north loggia of the museum.

rooms on the third floor will be used for storing art, a library and office space for the museum.

Their collection boasts the largest number of Rockwells in private hands, 120 canvases, and the biggest block of Parrishes anywhere, 55 paintings and some 800 prints, studies and assorted memorabilia. They

also own some 70,000 prints.

A series of 10-foot-high panels from a Parrish mural, *Florentine Fete*, form the centerpiece of their holdings. The painting, which shows a carnival-like scene, once hung in the headquarters of the Curtis Publishing Company in Philadelphia.

"This is the most American of

American art," said Laurence. "It's significant stuff."

Paintings won't be for sale at the museum, although a museum shop is planned in the basement. The opening is set for late next month or early October, although more formal opening ceremonies will take place next March and on the Fourth of July, 2000. Information on the museum is available over the Internet at amerillus.com.

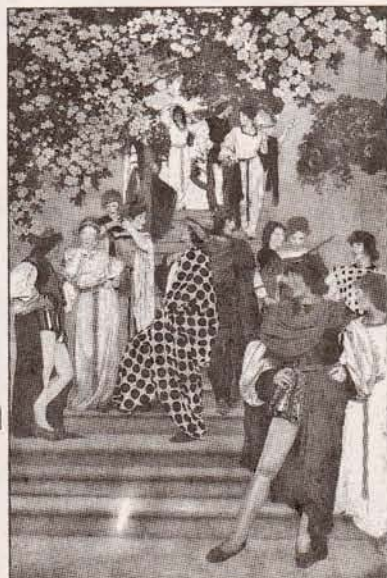
The Olmsted Legacy Park, situated on the vacant acres across the street, will probably be open next spring. The Cutlers also plan to erect a monument on the site to famed architect Louis Kahn. That will be in the form of a brick arch Kahn designed for the India Institute of Management in Ahmedabad.

Laurence Cutler envisions the park as a place for meditation and reflection, where people can stroll along paths that wind through a field of wildflowers and imposing trees.

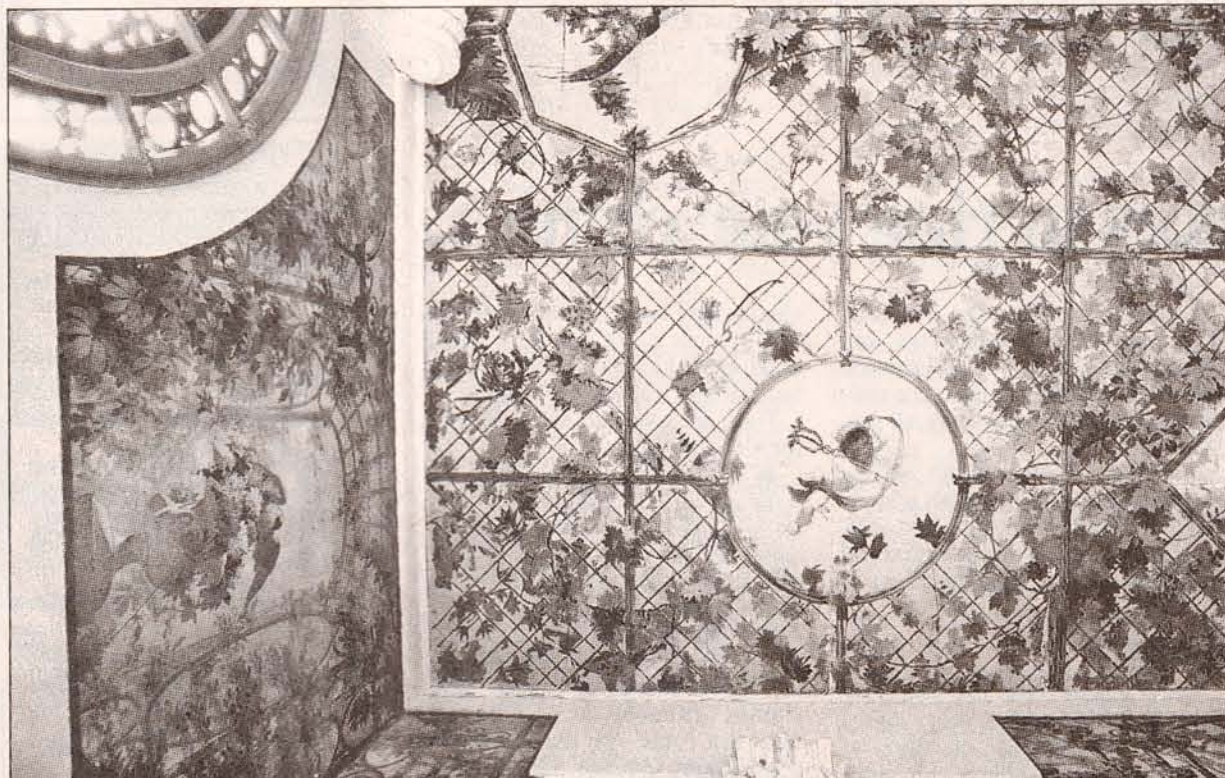
"It's the first national memorial to a landscape architect," he said. "Usually monuments are to politicians and generals, so it's nice to honor designers."

Taking on Vernon Court — fixing up the house, opening a museum and park — has been daunting project, but the Cutlers said they have no regrets.

"I can't tell you how lucky we feel to have found a place like this," said Laurence, "where we can house a major collection in a significant piece of architecture."



A DETAIL from one of the many Maxfield Parrish paintings.



WALLS AND CEILING in the south loggia have trompe l'oeil latticework laden with flora, fauna and cherubs.