



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/TOM HERDE

The illustrated mansion

A Newport couple turn their ground floor into a museum of American artworks

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GLOBE STAFF

NEWPORT, R.I. — Imagine living in a mansion here on Bellevue Avenue. You dine in a ballroom on a table made in 1880, conduct business in a library decorated with original Norman Rockwell paintings, and greet guests in a foyer with a marble floor and sculptures carved in the mid-1800s.

For most people, that would be a fantasy. For Laurence Cutler and Judy Goffman Cutler, it's what they call home.

The Cutlers' mansion, Vernon Court, and their collection of illustrations are so striking that the couple turned their home into a museum. Their ground floor is now the National Museum of American Illustration.

Laurence Cutler, 60, an architect, and Judy Goffman Cutler, 58, an art dealer, launched the museum last year to showcase their collection of 2,000 illustrations by Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish, N. C. Wyeth, and about 75 other American artists.

The Cutlers are childhood sweethearts who reconnected after a divorce apiece and wed in 1995 on the 40th anniversary of their first date. They decided to open a museum in Newport to combine their careers. He concentrated on renovating the mansion, and she developed the exhibit.

Now the duo spend their days conducting tours of their museum for anyone who calls and makes reser-

Laurence Cutler and Judy Goffman Cutler in their museum (above).

Norman Rockwell's 1943 oil painting "Miss Liberty" (middle left).

Maxfield Parrish's 1920 oil painting "Griselda" (bottom left).



In their home: a great American picture show

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vations.

"These aren't just paintings to look at," Laurence Cutler explains, as he begins a tour. "This is American history visually portrayed."

Indeed the 135 paintings on display were all commissioned to serve as art for magazine covers, books, and advertisements in their day, primarily 1880 to 1950.

Walking into Marble Hall, Cutler points to "Miss Liberty," a Rockwell picture that depicts a woman striding forward with a wrench, a hoe, a bus driver's coin holder, a compass, a milkman's carrying case, a pilot radio headset, and other tools.

The piece appeared on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post in 1943. "This was an icon for women going to work for the men who went off to World War II," says Cutler. "The war changed women's place in society. They hadn't worked as riveters and bus driv-

ers. They had to during the war. This was the first woman's liberation painting."

Moving on to the Treillage gallery, Cutler approaches a work by J. C. Leyendecker called "Bellhop with Hyacinths." The painting, which shows a bellhop holding out a pot of flowers, appeared on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post in 1914 in recognition of the first official Mother's Day. "This is what started people buying flowers," Cutler maintains.

Walking across the room, Cutler points out another Leyendecker painting, "Flight Over Manhattan (When Shall We Fly?)," showing a man flying over

the city in a shaky wooden contraption. The 1907 illustration appeared on the cover of Collier's The National Weekly. "People were exploring flight then, but no one had flown yet in the way you and I think of flying today," Cutler says. "This was Leyendecker's image of what it would be like."

Cutler smiles as he points to a painting by Howard Pyle called "Red Coat Soldiers Toasting the Ladies of the House." The picture, which appeared in Harper's Weekly in 1895, depicts a group of British soldiers in the Revolutionary War who have taken over a Colo-



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Laurence Cutler, an architect, and Judy Goffman Cutler, an art dealer, combined their careers with the museum they opened in their mansion.

rial family's house. "The soldiers had the nerve to toast the owners with their own wine. Can you believe that?" says Cutler.

Wrapping up the tour in the Grand Salon, Cutler comes to a 1949 advertisement for the movie "Samson and Delilah." The Rockwell painting, "Samson Tearing Down the Temple," is a portrait of actor Victor Mature in chains before he knocks over the temple.

"I remember that movie as a kid," says Cutler. "It was like 'Star Wars' today. It was an important movie then."

Vernon Court was empty when the Cutlers bought it in 1998. "The mansion had been a private home until the 1950s," says Cutler. "Then it became a private school. Then an administration building for a junior college. It changed hands a number of times."

The mansion was built in 1898. Its 17th-century French chateau design was created by the New York architecture firm Carrere & Hastings, which also designed the New York Public Library and the US Senate Office Building.

The Petit Salon and ballroom

were modeled after Marie Antoinette's suites at Versailles in France. The garden houses (tool sheds) are also a copy of those built at Versailles. The Cutlers brought in sculptures and fountains from Europe as well as furniture from American auction houses.

They also brought Judy Cutler's collection from her years as an art dealer and collector in New York, where she specialized in American illustration. In 1968, she founded the American Illustrators Gallery, which has built collections for such public figures as Steven Spielberg and Ross Perot.

Laurence Cutler found-

ed the firm Ecodesign International Inc. and became a professor of architecture and urban design at Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Rhode Island School of Design.

For more information about Vernon Court, contact the museum at 401-851-8949 or www.american-illustration.org. Tickets are \$25 for general admission or \$12.50 per person for a group. The museum will place individuals in large groups upon request.