

Going Places

Painting and architecture, the perfect blend

By Florence H. Allen

American Imagists flourished between 1860 and 1960. These artists painted pictures that would be reproduced in magazines, newspapers and books, depicting all phases of life in America. At the time, these artists and illustrators were not considered creators of fine art. That opinion is no longer valid and a visit to the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport, Rhode Island, will show you why.

Vernon Court, built in 1898, is one of the Gilded Age mansions on Bellevue Avenue. It is a Beaux Arts adaptation of a French chateau, often referred to as one of the ten greatest mansions in America. A more perfect place could not have been found to house the collection of over 2000 original paintings of over 50 artists, including Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish, N. C. Wyeth, Charles Dana Gibson and Howard Pyle, to mention only a few in the collection. The work of all these creative and talented artists would appear on magazine covers, advertisements and other forms of print. However, the originals were paintings and these are what fill the beautiful rooms of Vernon Court.

Many of the artists had commissions to furnish paintings weekly, monthly or on an individual basis. Therefore, hundreds of original paintings were supplied from which the printer would make the reproduction. What happened to the originals? Fortunately their value was appreciated by a few and Judy Goffman Cutler was one of those who recognized the artistic talent

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Vernon Court in Newport R.I., one of the grandest mansions in America, houses the American Imagist Collection, artwork that is today considered grand as well. (All photos courtesy of the National Museum of American Illustration.)

IF YOU GO

■ The National Museum of American Illustration is located at Vernon Court, 492 Bellevue Avenue, Newport, RI 02840; 401-851-8949, Ext. 18; www.americanillustration.org.

■ Vernon Court is 10 miles southeast of Providence/TF Green Airport. In Newport, follow signs to Bellevue Avenue Mansions. The museum is located on the left side of Bellevue Avenue, one mile from Memorial Boulevard. Pedestrians enter at the main gate on Victoria Avenue.

■ Advanced reservations are required. Admission is \$25 and this is a guided tour. Group rates are available. Phone ahead for information on disability access. The museum is a smoke free, pet and food-free environment. Cell phones, photography and baby strollers are not allowed. Dress code is proper casual.

■ There is a museum shop. A library is open to scholars by written request to the director of the museum.

■ The National Arts Club is the founding institution for the museum.

and wanted to preserve them. Over the years she collected many paintings and these are displayed on a rotating basis. Her background in art history was valuable when in 1960 she started collecting illustration art. As a result of placing an ad in a newspaper she bought five charcoal drawings by Howard Chandler



Architecture and furnishings work together to complement the art displayed at the National Museum of American Illustration. Here Norman Rockwell's "Disabled Veteran (Soldier and U.S. War Bond)" is flanked by furnishings and lighting in keeping with the restored 1898 mansion.

Christy. Soon she was adding to her collection, and as it grew, she became an art dealer and then opened the American Illustrators Gallery.

Laurence Cutler wanted to be an artist but became an architect instead. Years later, when the couple bought Vernon Court, his training was invaluable for the massive restoration that took place to update the 52-room house that would become their home, and, later, their home and

the museum. This was accomplished in such a fashion that Vernon Court looks like it did when it was built in 1898. All the necessary modern improvements were accomplished without losing an iota of its original beauty and charm.

It is almost impossible to describe the impact the combination of wonderful art and beautiful surroundings has on you. Entering the marble-lined foyer you are drawn to the works of Parrish, Rockwell and Gibson. Where to pause first and how long to stay with so much ahead to experience?

The placing of the furniture and the art seems to be perfect, each complementing the other. Each room has its own feeling of the ideal setting for the paintings displayed. The ballroom is the exquisite backdrop for Parrish's "Griselda." Seeing this painting triggered a childhood memory – Griselda looking down at me from the wall of a friend's home. She retained that place of honor until many years later when the house was sold. Parrish was such a popular artist it was estimated that a reproduction of his work could be found in one out of every four homes in this country during the period around 1925.

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Parrish's Florentine Fete, 18 murals he originally painted to decorate the dining room of the Curtis Publishing Company, are now at Vernon Court. Some of the panels are hung in the loggia and in the entrance hall, along the staircase. Try to find the face of his mistress and model, Susan Lewin. Her features appear over 200 times in the panels as both male and female characters.

The collection of Rockwell's work is the largest of any museum with the exception of the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Mass. His "Disabled Veteran," a young soldier holding a savings bond, was a reflection of the feeling to support the war effort, as was his well remembered Saturday Evening Post cover, "Liberty Girl."

Paintings by Charles Dana Gibson, creator of the famous

"Gibson Girl;" N. C. Wyeth and his well-recognized "The Dory Man;" James Montgomery Flagg; J. C. Leyendecker, who created the "Arrow Collar Man," and the works of so many other artists have been preserved here at Vernon Court. Along with the actual paintings, this collection has preserved a time in America that no longer exists. As it is not possible to exhibit all of the collection at one time, the plan is to probably change the selection of paintings about twice a year.

While visiting, take time to walk through the doors under the north loggia and view the gardens. Continue across to where a house once stood on three acres of land, with gardens designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted in 1884. The Cutlers plan to restore Olmsted's acreage, and a brick arch, designed by architect Louis Kahn in 1962, will be part of this restoration. ❖

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