

Newport, Rhode Island

The National Museum of American Illustration

by Lita Solis-Cohen

There is a new museum, the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport, Rhode Island, and its architecture, garden, state-of-the-art restoration, and paintings are dazzling. This private museum at Vernon Court, 492 Bellevue Avenue requires reservations. Tickets are \$25 each and worth every nickel.

It is the creation of Judy Goffman Cutler and her husband Laurence Cutler. Judy is the New York City dealer who made the market for America illustration art over the last 35 years. Laurence, an architect and city planner, saw Vernon Court as an architectural masterpiece and, acting as general contractor, masterminded the conservation of this Beaux Arts adaptation of a 17th-century French chateau while creating a state-of-the-art museum environment.

The house was designed in 1898 for Mrs. Richard Gambrell by the New York firm of Carrere and

Hastings, the architects of the New York City Public library the U.S. Senate Office Building, Alfred L. du Ponts house Nemours in Wilmington, Delaware, and the Henry Morrison Flager house in Palm Beach, Florida, now a museum Carrere and Hastings used the plan of Vernon Court for the 1913 Frick Mansion on Fifth Avenue that now houses the Frick Collection and Art Reference library.

The formal gardens designed by noted New York garden designers and florists Wadley & Smvthe, were inspired by the Pond Garden at Hampton Court built by Henry VIII for Anne Boleyn. The design of the garden houses was inspired those built for Louis XIV at Versailles. The adjacent property, Stoneacre, laid out in 1884 by the first American landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, will be restored as a park dedicated to Olmsted and honoring architects whose work can be found

in Newport, including Peter Harrison, H.H. Richardson, Richard Morris Hunt, Stanford White, Horace Trumbauer and, of course, Carrere and Hastings. It will also include a replica of an arch designed by Louis Kahn for the Indian Institute of Management at Ahmedabad, the Harvard Business School of Asia. Laurence thinks Kahn was the greatest architect of the second half of the 20th century.

"People involved in museums often become art dealers when they retire. Judy went in the reverse direction. She was a dealer first, and now she is a museum director," said Laurence.

Judy has not closed her New York City gallery, her daughter Jennifer is running the day-to-day operations. Judy has had a good deal of experience putting on art shows. In the early 1990's she was the first to take illustration art on world tours organizing exhibitions in Paris, Rome, and Tokyo. Her Norman Rockwell show, a Maxfield Parrish show, and a 'Great American Illustrators' show each traveled to several cities in Japan. When Parrish's masterpiece *Daybreak* returned from its tour in Japan, she advised it be sold at auction and an American collector bought it for a record \$4.29 million at Sotheby's in May 1996.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1963 with a major in art history and American civilization and completing a master's program in education in 1964, Judy began buying illustration art at a time when few people paid any attention to it. She restored the paintings, framed them, and sold them first at Sanford Smith's Fall Antiques Show's at the Pier, and from her house near Philadelphia. In 1978 she opened her American Illustrators Gallery at 18 East 77th Street in New York City. Over the years she has put together collections for Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Whoopi Goldberg, and advised Ross Perot and Malcolm Forbes, among others.

In the 1980's she was paid record prices: \$75,000 for a J.C. Leyendecker, \$250,000 for a Rockwell, and more recently \$660,000 for N.C. Wyeth's *The Doryman (Evening)*, which now hangs in the grand salon at Vernon Court. She was the first to collect



Judy and Laurence Cutler were childhood sweethearts in Woodbridge, Connecticut. Laurence took Judy to his senior prom, and she followed him to the University of Pennsylvania. Larry wasn't ready to get married, so I married Alan Goffman and had two children, a girl and a boy, said Judy. Larry married an architect and city planner he met at Harvard and had two boys. We both divorced and married each other five years ago on the fortieth anniversary of our first date.

In 1966 Laurence Cutler founded ECODESIGN International Inc., Architects/Engineers/Planners, as an interdisciplinary ecology based consultancy. He subsequently formed subsidiary companies in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. In 1972 ECODESIGN was acquired by Combustion Engineering Inc., and as president of CE Tec International Inc., Cutler built the division into a 1750-person professional services group with 37 offices in seven countries. In 1980 he reacquired ECODESIGN to regain its independent status in order to undertake private ventures. He walked away from his architectural business in 1990 and in 1994 founded ARTShows and Products, exhibition coordinators, fine art publishers, licensors, and derivative art product developers. He is now cofounder, CEO, and chairperson of the National Museum of American Illustration, Judy is co-founder and museum director.

Howard Chandler Christy, and she has kept together Maxfield Parrish's masterpiece *A Florentine Fete*, which once decorated a dimming room on time top floor of the Curtis Publishing Company. It is now installed in the loggia at Vernon Court.

"It was in the Jack Merriam estate, and for years I'd been looking for a museum to house it. When we found Vernon Court, I knew it would fit in the loggia. It tells a story, and it should stay together. It was Parrish's greatest commission; for five years he worked on the eighteen paintings."

In 1994 the Cutlers founded ARTShows and Products (ASaP) to produce exhibits and to represent artists' estates in licensing images for cards, calendars gift products, and limited-edition art prints. The estates of Maxfield Parrish and Paul-Cézanne are just two estates for which ASaP generates income, and in time the products will stock the muse-

um shop at the National Museum of American Illustration.

One of the unwritten rules of art dealing is never collect what you sell, but Judy collected before she became a dealer and can't seem to stop. To get some idea of the breadth of the collection log on to the museum's Website (www.americanillustration.org) and take a virtual tour.

The collection includes over 2000 works by American illustrators, all created for reproduction in books, magazines, and advertising. There are 124 Norman Rockwells, only the collection of 400 at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, is larger. It includes the largest collection of Maxfield Parrish works, 68 in all, and the largest holding of the work of J.C. Leyendecker, illustrator of 322 *Saturday Evening Post* covers and best known for his Arrow Collar man.

There are many works by N.C. Wyeth, the greatest of book

illustrators, and masterpieces by Howard Pyle, who is known as the father of American illustration. There are major works by Howard Chandler Christy, creator of the Christy girl, which set the criteria of feminine beauty for the Miss America Pageant. The companion piece to James Montgomery Flagg's World War I Uncle Sam poster "*I Want You*" depicts Columbia embracing a soldier and sailor it hangs in the grand marble entrance hall. There are paintings for World War I and World War II posters by Charles Dana Gibson of Gibson girl fame and paintings by Jessie Willcox Smith, the first successful female illustrator of children's books. The books are also there, and lots more.

Judy likes to call these artists who captured the national persona "the American imagists," and the years 1860 to 1960 "the golden age of American illustration." Leyendecker created the image of the baby that rings in the new year, Thomas Nast created the image of Santa Claus as we know him, and James Montgomery Flagg created our image of Uncle Sam, she points out. "This is a movement with a history, but until it has a name, it doesn't exist," she said.

She emphasizes that the artists who created these images were trained at academies in the United States and at ateliers abroad. They created some fine paintings, though often under deadline and commissioned for a specific purpose. This is not art for art's sake, but the paintings are of high quality.

Once disparaged by art historians, American illustration is getting a second look from scholars and curators. A traveling Maxfield Parrish show opened at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts last fall and recently closed at the Brooklyn Museum. In 2001 an exhibition of Norman Rockwell's paintings now on tour will arrive at the Guggenheim in New York City, founded as the bastion of abstract art! The Norman Rockwell Museum reports a growing audience of several hundred thousand visitors each year.

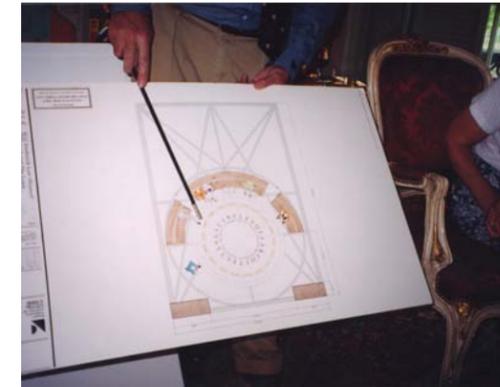
Before establishing their museum, the Cutlers formed an alliance with the National Arts Club in New York City to sponsor educational programs in Newport and New York. Laurence and Judy are both members. "The National Arts Club is an educational institution founded in the



Most of the 18 panels of Maxfield Parrish's *A Florentine Fete*, which once decorated a dining room on the top floor of the Curtis Publishing Company, are now installed in the loggia at Vernon Court. Other panels will be hung on the staircase in the entrance hall.



The plans for the house and gardens and the three-and-a-half-acre park across Victoria Avenue from Vernon Court were drawn by Laurence Cutler for the zoning hearing.

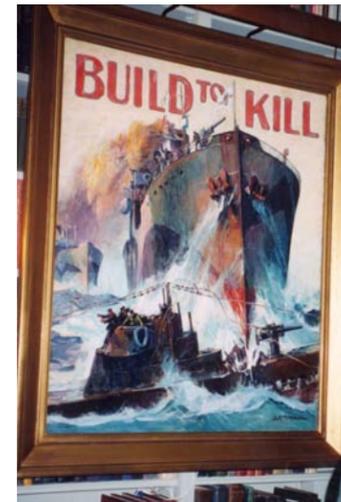


This plan shows the Circle of Architects and benches near the center of Olmsted Park. The footprint of the Louis Kahn arch is shown at the bottom of the plan.

same year Vernon Court was built. The architect Thomas Hastings was a member, along with Cornelius Vanderbilt, who built The Breakers around the corner, Stanford White, who designed the house next door, and George Wetmore, who built Chateaux sur Mer, which can be seen from the loggia. Artists Louis Comfort Tiffany and Howards Chandler Christy were also members," Laurence pointed out.

The Cutlers have also assembled an impressive group of trustees. The honorary trustees include J. Carter Brown, director emeritus, the National Gallery of Art; Martin Meyerson, president emeritus, University of Pennsylvania (both Cutlers went to school there); retired Senator Claiborne Pell; and Vincent Scully, professor emeritus, Yale University. There are 21 members on the national council of the boards of directors, including movie producer George Lucas, author Tom Wolfe, entertainer Whoopi Goldberg, and television host Matt Lauer. On the New England council are Ralph Emerson Carpenter, Hugh Auchincloss III, and others involved in art museums, restoration and conservation.

For the operation and administration of the museum, the Cutlers established the American Civilization Foundation, a 501 (c)(3) organization. "We are going to raise thirty-five million dollars for an endowment so the museum can last forever," said Laurence. The Cutlers volunteer their time now, but they know that one day they may need to hire a paid



Build to Kill, a painting for a World War I U.S. Shipping Board poster by J.O. Todahl, hangs in the library, which is off-limits to tours, but the painting can be seen from the salon. The powerful image shows a U.S. ship ramming a German submarine.



Norman Rockwell's *Miss Liberty* was painted for the September 4, 1943, *Saturday Evening Post* cover. The 42" x 32" oil painting depicting a woman going off to do a man's job during World War II hangs in the marble entrance hall.

director. Another foundation has already set up a purchase fund for the museum, and a collector has given a group of Stevan Dohanos paintings.

As remarkable as the finished product is the speeds with which the museum was put together. After seeing the house in April 1998, the Cutlers had purchased it by August. Laurence gave up other business interests in architecture and advertising to direct the restoration. With unsolicited help from distinguished Newport residents who believed in their project, they won a zoning fight brought by neighbors who testified that they shouldn't have their residence in the museum. Using the precedent of English country houses, which are open to the public and lived in by the owners amid the fact that some family members also stay at other Newport "cottages" the zoning board approved the museum. Knowing that Newport is the fifth-poorest city in Rhode Island, the real estate is owned by a corporation called the Alliance for Art and Architecture so we pay real estate taxes," Cutler volunteered.

It had taken the Cutlers seven years to find the right place for their museum "We had put a bid on the Wedding Cake house in Kennebunk [Maine], but it wouldn't have worked," said Judy. "We were at a sale at Christie's in the spring of 1998 when we saw a flyer for an Ogdan Codman house in Newport and decided to go up to look at it. It was not right, but the realtor said Vernon Court was for sale. When I found out that Peter de Savary owned it, and I knew him from my days work-



The three-and-a-half-acre sunken garden once had pond. Now there is a swimming pool and two tennis courts.



One of two giant fern beech trees that flank the loggias.



The Disabled Veteran by Norman Rockwell, oil on canvas, 43" x 34", traveled with *The Four Freedoms* to raise money for war bonds and was used as a *Saturday Evening Post* cover for the July 1, 1944 issue. It hangs in the grand salon against Italian walnut paneling installed by Allard et ses Fils in 1898.



The entrance to the National Museum of American Illustration at Vernon Court on Bellevue and Victoria Avenues, Newport, Rhode Island.

ing in London, I called him and learned he also owned the next block, which had been the parking lot when the house was a junior college. He wanted to sell it all."

Finding themselves with a 52-room Newport cottage with slate tiles missing from the roof, glass missing from 61 windows, and in need of heating, air conditioning, weatherproofing, UV protection on the windows, humidity control, plaster, and paint, the Cutlers employed 50 to 60 local artisans every day for two years to make the house look as if they did nothing at all to it. The interiors, designed by Jules Allard et ses Fils, decorators who worked in a number of Newport cottages, include a

marble entrance hall and Italian walnut paneling in the salon. Allard commissioned James Wall Finn, an associate of Louis Comfort Tiffany, to paint vases of flowering vines on the walls and ceiling of the loggias. In the south loggia this painting remains in fine condition, but the painting was gone in the north loggia where the Cutlers have installed most of Parrish's *A Florentine Fete*. "When I walked in and saw at once *A Florentine Fete* would fit, I knew this was the right place for the museum," said Judy.

For reservations, call (401) 851-8949 ext. 16 now, or the dates you want might not be available.



In December 1998 Laurence Cutler bought Hiram Powers's *America* at Sotheby's for the niche in the entrance hall at Vernon Court. I have always called Judy Judy America. When that bust came up for sale, I had to have it, said Laurence. She has Judy's nose and her curly hair and stars in her tiara. We always say American illustrators are the stars on our flag.



The garden statuary are reproductions of Classical and 18th-century statuary. In the Gilded Age much of the garden statuary was reproduction. We had period photographs, so we went to Italy and bought replacements, Laurence said.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION

